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When silence is not an option

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The Zone
July 18, 2011
OPINION

Comments 20



Tony Pitman is the CEO of OzChild and a champion of children's rights. *Photo: Rodger Cummins*

The effects of child abuse are so devastating, says children's champion Tony Pitman, that early education and prevention programs must take their place alongside mandatory reporting.

SOME topics are almost too painful and distressing to mention. Child sexual abuse tops the list but silence is not an option. Reticence unwittingly provides shelter for the perpetrators of this horror. And there is no way to avoid the shattering truth that up to nine in 10 such abusers are relatives of the victims or friends of the victims' family. The abuse of trust and power is not only criminal, it is evil.

The effects are heartbreaking. They can destroy lives. Many victims can go on to live full and happy lives but many do not. Support is there for those who need it, and the links below might lead you to help.

- **[Live chat with Tony Pitman for an hour from midday today - leave your questions here](#)**

I am mindful of the risk The Zone this week will cause pain by triggering memories that victims may have sought to bury or compartmentalise. For that, I apologise. The number of people who have told me, sobbing or with barely controlled fury, of their experience of abuse underscores its prevalence and impact.

The statistics are difficult to establish, because so much of the abuse is never reported. Australian Institute of Criminology figures suggest as many as one in four girls is sexually abused, and one in seven boys. Only one in three cases is reported at the time.

Many people simply do not want to accept that such an insidious thing is happening around them. But it is, and to combat it we must first acknowledge it. The aim is to help prevent even one extra occurrence of one of the most shameful elements of life. There are things we can do to prevent and protect.

- **[Multimedia: Tony Pitman in The Zone](#)**

Tony Pitman is chief executive of OzChild, an organisation that helps children develop their potential regardless of their previous experiences.

Pitman has been running the organisation since 1998. He has seen a lot.

"The range of sexual abuse is from coerced physical penetration, which can be very violent and can be very young, so that's at the most severe end of physical abuse. At the less invasive end it can be touching, it can be encouraging somebody else to touch you, it can be showing pictures of pornography. What else have we got in there? Basically everything that is inappropriate connection with the child's sexual organs, or yours by the child, can be regarded as sexual abuse ...

"The long-term effect is that there is a huge amount of inter-generational impact. A lot of people who have been reported as child abusers have themselves been victims of child abuse and I think that is out in the airwaves, but I don't think it is understood.

"There is a reduction of self-esteem and almost of optimism of life for some of them ... Most people who have had sustained sexual abuse will marry downwards from their family of origin and will aspire educationally to less. They will have, many of them, sexual relationship issues in their own mature relationships. And those may be promiscuity, although maybe withdrawal. One of the reported things is they often have less satisfaction, albeit that they may be more promiscuous."

A school and family psychologist, Pitman was awarded in 2002 the Equity Trustees National Most Innovative CEO Award for his leadership of the organisation.

These are some of the key things he advises parents and carers that might indicate a child has been or is being sexually abused:

- Sudden avoidance of a specific person.
- Sudden changes in behaviour.
- Withdrawal, and the seeking of greater privacy.
- Trouble sleeping.
- Lack of appetite.
- Inappropriate interest in or knowledge of sexual acts or body parts.
- Aggression.
- Physical discomfort and bleeding.
- Unwillingness to undress in normal environments; hiding clothes; locking doors.

Children who are most at risk include those who have been physically and emotionally abused, living in families with much marital discord, he says.

Seven large studies of child sexual abuse have been done in Australia. The average age at which abuse starts is 10. Most abuse begins before the age of 12. The abuser is usually male, with an average age of 32. People who have been sexually abused are twice as likely as others to have mental health problems and to attempt suicide.

They are also more likely to develop problems with alcohol and drugs. Pitman stresses, though, that victims should not live in fear that such problems will eventually "get them"; such anxiety is negative and can be self-fulfilling.

A counter-intuitive reality is that many victims themselves become abusers. "One would think that if you had been abused ... it would be the last thing that you would want to do. But it is a bit like the pattern in domestic violence; many people who have been victims of domestic violence also see that as the means by which you create order in your home.

"So I guess you've got a pendulum effect there, and I would think that's what's happening in inter-generational sexual abuse."

The key message Pitman has for young victims is to tell someone they trust. This is easier to say than do because so often the abuser is someone the child did trust and respect and may even love.

People you might want to consider telling include:

- Your parents.
- A teacher you like or trust.
- Your best friend's parents.
- A doctor or member of the police force.
- A trusted young adult.
- An online resource for young people.

Pitman is advocating a national education campaign, and a national commissioner to coordinate support and protection for children. The people who most influence children - parents and carers - have not previously been targeted for education and change. Like Pitman, UNICEF Australia chief executive Norman Gillespie is calling for a national commissioner for children. For Pitman, it is overdue.

"I do not think there is enough information about the long-term effects of this and that would be the next stage that we should probably work towards. We have got things like mandatory reporting, and teachers are trained in mandatory reporting. They are given early warning signs. So the child might not need to disclose. There can be signs of any form of abuse. A teacher or a doctor is obliged to do something with that. It is done anonymously.

"So there is a pathway to people who work with children to try to deal with that. The only problem with the preventive programs is that you have already got to have some indicators to go in and start working with that family. I would rather that we were educating people before the indicators arrive.

"We don't have a model for how to create a healthy family and the healthy childhood and its implications for a healthy lifetime. And because we do not have that model, we are forever running around putting out the bushfires. We need to be out in front saying these are the things that contribute to health, these are the things that families can do.

"We need a picture of how to create the healthiest possible child that we can. And I think there is a role for a national commissioner for childhood, for healthy childhood."

Meanwhile, we can act ourselves to start talking about it to bring some light to this dark place.

<http://ozchild.org.au>

<http://facebook.com/yawcrc>

<http://au.reachout.com>

<http://beyondblue.org.au>

<http://stopchildabuse.com.au>

<http://aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs1/rs1.html>

20 comments

The one thing that most kids lack is the trusted adult they can confide in. The one thing adults need to understand is that if they are seen as that trusted adult, they are going to have to be well outside their comfort zone- they're going to have to be what they are seen as.

They're going to have to suspend disbelief and focus on what they are being told, to question in such a way that the facts are found out but the child is not damaged further. They are going to have to try to persuade the child to approach the authorities and tell their story- and to be aware that this in itself has risk. Not all approaches elicit a positive response from those charged with the responsibility of helping.

When the accusation is against someone they know, they're going to have to accept that the world has changed and it can never go back. That they will make new enemies and few friends. Abusers are frequently more powerful, secretive and manipulative. The trusted adult can find it pretty lonely and tough. Trusted adults can be the bridge that brings the kid back to normalcy. It'd be nice if they had some idea of what to do and who to turn to. An online service would be a good first step

David | Leongatha - July 18, 2011, 8:01AM

I think you have touched on something significant in what we are striving for here, that is, for Mr or Mrs ordinary person to know how to be most supportive, the issues, complexities for the child and how to best support that child. The first focus needs to be the child's future healthiest development, ie moving forward towards a constructive remaining lifetime. This will be different for every child. Some of this training is available to professionals but not much is inculcated in our non professional adult world.

Tony Pitman - July 18, 2011, 12:03PM

Thank you for focusing on such a hidden problem in our society and for emphasising the need for prevention.

However, I would like to see your research on victims of child abuse becoming abusers as adults. This is a sensationalist claim that relates to some victims of sexual abuse (some of the ones who are charged with child abuse) but certainly not most. Current research in fact does not confirm that this is a likely outcome for those who have been abused. How are victims supposed to admit they have been abused if you label them as possible perpetrators? You keep people in the shadows and make it impossible for them to reveal abuse unless you focus on the damage done to victims and treat them as victims instead of potential deviants. Making broad statements that are not backed up by research and are likely to be incorrect is harmful. I can tell you that one person today is less likely to speak up for fear of being cast as someone with the potential to abuse and that is a sad outcome.

Grace - July 18, 2011, 9:01AM

We may be saying the same thing here. Certainly the research does not suggest that every victim will offend- far from it, in fact most who have been abused do not become abusive. If you have read it that way then so may others so thank you for the opportunity to correct. Rather what I hope is clear in the article is the need not to make someone a victim twice. I support your intention that we do not send messages that assume one condition automatically leads to another.

Tony Pitman - July 18, 2011, 12:09PM

just another waste of time, more talking will do nothing! only just read today that a man walked free after fathering a child to an 11 year old. all problems in society can only be changed with sentencing. Australias pathetic laws that protects these evil people will continue and become softer, all the talk in the world will not change a thing. it would not surprise me to learn that peodophiles are moving to australia to take advantage of our weak judges. while we all elect politicians on how our pay packet is affected by a few dollars. the real problems are ignored. cant you see nothing will change! an enormous wave of peodophiles are about to be released back into the community. what is julias message to the next victim of one of these monsters. i hate this country and its so called leaders. this is no democracy if we are kept in the dark!

brad - July 18, 2011, 10:29AM

Thank you to the Zone - I welcome any public forum which sensitively approaches the issue of childhood sexual abuse (csa) and looks carefully at what silences victims and how as a community we can support them to speak out. I am interested in Tony's comment that "many" victims become abusers themselves and the evidence base for this opinion? Is the data taken from convicted pedophiles only? What about the many thousands of victims who have not yet reported their own abuse never mind been part of any data collection regarding offending behaviour. It is my understanding that a small number of victims go onto offend and therefore to say "many" feeds into one of a number of destructive myths regarding csa and can be highly distressing for victims to hear. In response to David (comment posted) I agree the trusted person can find themselves in a complex and daunting role (often with little preparation) especially if they are not a professional working with children. They also play an integral role in the healing & recovery process for the child/person who has placed their trust in them. Whilst support is limited they may contact one of 15 Centres Against Sexual Assault services in Victoria or the 24hr Statewide Sexual Assault telephone helpline and receive sensitive and knowledgeable assistance.

kasparo - July 18, 2011, 9:25AM

The article refers to "victims of child abuse...." not specifically sexual. The research does link various forms of abuse and does indicate clear links to physical abuse. The evidence about CSA inter generationally is " mixed "(NCPC) so we have not made that claim here because of the research uncertainty and methodological issues. Hope it has not been misleading and appreciate the comment. Strongly support the publicity of CASA as a reliable resource

Tony Pitman - July 18, 2011, 12:18PM

To quote Dr Martin Luther King.....

"Bad things only happen when good people do nothing,.
There comes a time when Silence is betrayal."

Even if the it is the victim that is silent. The betrayal is to the self and any other victims that may follow.

Any one reading this who is on the verge of breaking silence be rest assured there are many out there who are here for you.

Never go into the the dark knight quietly.

Trent | Melbourne - July 18, 2011, 11:12AM

I think the biggest problem is that there are no consequences for the sexual abuse of a child. It is often difficult to prove, and when it can be proven, peodaphiles either get off lightly or escape sentence entirely.

The sexual abuse of a child is a heinous act, not just because of the coercion and abuse of power involved, but also because it affects children developmentally - which can have consequences their entire lives.

I want to know why it isn't treated as the very serious crime that it is.

Anon | Melbourne - July 18, 2011, 11:19AM

I'd like to acknowledge Tony from Ozchild for continuing to be such a stand for children. I have had the absolute pleasure of recently working with Tony and his team and was so blown away by their commitment to making a difference.

What I noticed throughout our conversations is that Ozchild have a different approach to the welfare of children. It's not always about focusing on 'fixing what's broken' (although this often seems the case) but focusing on the prevention at an everyday level. And we're not just talking about sexual abuse; all forms of abuse to neglect to mental, nutritional and lack of education.

We tend to focus on the negative such as abuse however I think the approach OzChild is taking to create programs that prevent the harm should be focused on and appropriately funded / sponsored as well as continuing to provide support to those who do come into harm.

Knowing numerous people in my own life who have suffered such abuse, I am truly thankful that Tony is bringing this topic to the surface so it can be dealt with.

Emmy | Melbourne - July 18, 2011, 11:25AM

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