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When silence is not an option

The Zone

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Opinion

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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](#)

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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 co-ordinate 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://stopchildabusenow.com.au>

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

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/when-silence-is-not-an-option-20110717-1hk36.html#ixzz1SQjhbzVE>