

Stop Institutional Abuse

Intervention and Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse in Health Care, Social Care, Educational and Other Settings.

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Abstract

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The congress headline «towards a caring and non violent community» underlines the importance of society's role in preventing child sexual abuse. In particular, the community must guarantee that children are safe when staying in institutions, especially those providing care. Institutions must be considered as high risk places for sexual abuse – due to the high number of opportunities given to professionals as part of their role and duty. The structural situation is comparable to the intrafamilial sexual abuse. Sexual and other forms of abuse in institutional settings is the complete opposite of providing the secure base for children in need; especially if they were abused in their families of origin and are now admitted to an institution which is supposed to be taking care of them. According to affected survivors sexual abuse in institutional settings happens every day in all environments, whether a hospital, a place of social care, an educational setting, leisure time activity, or other settings. Often these victims suffer in silence, because they assume that nobody will believe a word of it. We need to address this challenging and disturbing issue and talk about intervention and prevention of sexual abuse in institutions, committed by professionals, like us. This is not an easy task. The author discusses experiences and possible strategies, including offence-focused treatment of affected professionals. There is a responsibility for all of us to provide safe conditions for all children! The silence covering this topic must be overcome. It's time for action and to stop sexual abuse committed by professionals.

It happens every day in all environment

The risk of sexual abuse in institutions is considerably high due to the many existing opportunities given to (potential sex-offenders) part of the staff. Affected children can be compared to the intrafamilial abuse of children, when these persons who are expected to take care for their offsprings became their offenders. Anton Bentovim (1992) has described the "Trauma Organized Systems" offenders implement to groom (potential) victims and to create the structure for both the abuse and the silence which covers the offence.

One must ask oneself: Are children safe in institutions? If the answer is not a clear yes, something must be done to improve the situation. 181 nations have signed the Un-document of the CRC from 1989, and are

therefore obliged to protect all children from sexual abuse while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child (Article 19 CRC).

One of the most shocking news report covered the situation at “Haut de la Garenne”, one of the many institutions for children with behavioral problems. In a BBC report on February 26, 2008 details about the horrible story were revealed to the public. Jersey's deputy Police Chief, Lenny Harper, has said officers are investigating why so many complaints were not dealt with in the past. Mr Harper said: *"Part of the inquiry will be the fact that a lot of the victims tried to report their assaults but for some reason or another they were not dealt with as they should be"*.

Under the following headline, the Guardian published more details about the story (June 12, 2008): «Fourth man arrested in Jersey child abuse inquiry». An 50-year-old ex-police officer was arrested in connection with allegations of child abuse at a former children's home in Jersey. He was arrested in connection with "serious crimes" both at Haut de la Garenne, and elsewhere on the island. The man is the third to be arrested in relation to alleged offences carried out at Haut de la Garenne but the fourth to be arrested as part of the wider inquiry into historical abuse in Jersey. The man is a former police officer who later worked for Jersey's children's service. More than 100 people have claimed they were abused at Haut de la Garenne while dozens more have come forward to say they suffered abuse elsewhere on the island.

More than 30 bone fragments have been found at Haut de la Garenne and 27 milk teeth. Police are awaiting the results of tests to identify when the finds date from which will determine whether a murder inquiry is launched. Police have identified around 70 suspects, or "people of interest", who they want to question. Two men have been charged in connection with alleged child abuse at Haut de la Garenne. Gordon Claude Wateridge, 76, originally from London, is charged with three offences of indecent assault on girls under 16 between 1969 and 1979 when he was a warder at the home. Michael Aubin, 45, who was born in Jersey and lives in Southampton, is accused of sodomy against a boy under 16 and indecently assaulting two other boys under 16. The allegations relate to incidents that took place between 1977 and 1980. A third man, 68-year-old Claude Donnelly, of St Brelade, Jersey, has been charged as part of the wider abuse inquiry. He is accused of raping and sexually assaulting a 12-year-old girl on the island between 1971 and 1974.

Clearly, the Haut de la Garenne is just one case – but how can it be possible that such an amount of abuse can remain undetected for such a long period of time? This implies a clear warning: When this is possible at one place within Europe, then it is possible everywhere in Europe. As long as professionals can not imagine such things, they will neither detect such cases, nor will they hear affected victims. It is simply outside their understanding and awareness. Please remind 9/11 and the lessons we have learned.

Can it happen to my kids?

You may think that your children are safe and that you provide them with the best possible conditions to grow up. However, when they go to meet professionals, and it comes to a sexual abuse committed by a teacher, by a sport teacher, by a physician, by a nurse, by a community social worker, by a clergy – then the child will have no chance to defend her-/himself against the trusted and well regarded person. Of course do offenders target and choose their objects of abuse – they are testing the waters before they committed a sexual offense. They want to be sure that everything remains undetected and that nobody will believe a word in case the child discloses her/his experience.

The same with babysitters. Parents are often somehow naïve, to whom the handle over their children for babysitting.

Are there after-effects, if any?

The majority of children are silenced after sexual abuse takes place, especially in close relationships. The number of reported incidents is considered as small; in most published studies it lays below ten percent (see for example SAVI Report 2002). Children are told by their abuser, that nobody will believe them a word, and that they will face horrible consequences should they disclose a word about the incidence. The silencing of the children is part of what Arnon Bentovim (1992) has described as “Trauma Organized Systems”:

Are there warning signs?

An irresponsible and negligent institution has no policy in place for the prevention of sexual abuse by professionals. Part of the risk management by an institution is also a clear philosophy on the personal selection process and mandatory background checks with the last employer about behavior problems. A place to report incidents is available and all clients/patients/students including their relatives know about. Staff get regular training in boundary issues and how to handle dilemmas and difficult situations in the professional-client relationship.

Co-workers in the institution should have the opportunity to share their concerns, without a following action. The institution should react calm and investigate the allegation; does the level of evidence suggest that the pal code is violated, the case is reported to the management, who then report it to the police. There should be no worry that the climate of the institution will develop towards a hostile environment – I compare this with the firebrigade, which is present in our daily life, and does not create a fearful atmosphere simply due to the fact of their existence.

It's time for action!

Institutions must be considered as high risk places for sexual abuse. A negligent institution does not take this warning for serious and defends the institution from all accusations – similar to the self-defense mechanisms of pedophile offenders. ISPCAN as a worldwide network for the prevention of child abuse and neglect can help overcoming the taboo which still covers the topic. We all need to address this challenging and disturbing subject and talk about prevention of sexual abuse in institutions, committed by professionals, like us. Even when this is not an easy task, there is an urgent need to address this issue and to stop sexual abuse committed by professionals. It's time for action!

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