

## **MEER AS NOG 'N KLIP IN DIE BOS**

Richter, L, Dawes, A, & Craig-Smith, C (2004) **Sexual abuse of young children in southern Africa**. Cape Town: HSRC Press. ISBN 0 7969 2053 2. Pages 478.

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It is generally acknowledged that child abuse interventions need to be informed by an evidence-based approach to practice which requires more than a reliance on one or two studies to support interventions. Rather, what is required is a reliance on syntheses of available research findings in the context of other equally legitimate influences on decision-making. In this context, **Sexual abuse of young children in Southern Africa** represents a preliminary, and certainly timely, attempt to provide a locally relevant: "...resource for researchers, advocates, and service providers to better understand the phenomenon of child sexual abuse in the region and to translate this understanding into an integrated response." (pxi)

The text is divided into five thematically organized sections, with the first section focusing on definitional issues in child sexual abuse (CSA) and on media representations of the problem. Richter and Higson-Smith's chapter on definitional issues clearly highlights the difficulty of providing a coherent definition of CSA, as well as detailing the broad range of experiences that are subsumed under the term CSA; while Bird and Spurr's chapter on media representations of baby rape provides a systematic analysis of media coverage of the infamous "Baby Tshepang" case. I must admit, however, that I experienced a marked feeling of déjà vu while reading Bird and Spurr's contribution. Like many early (pre 1990) studies of media representations of CSA, this chapter: (a) focuses exclusively on an unusual and particularly gruesome case, which makes it difficult for the reader to "move beyond the horror and public outrage that can blind us to the detail required for systematic understanding" (Richter & Higson-Smith, 2004:34) and (b) is largely descriptive in nature, with little if any attention being paid to theoretical issues of meaning and interpretation. The approach adopted is, in other words, somewhat surprising, particularly given the fact that there is a relatively large body of literature (both local and international) which could have been used to more meaningfully contextualize the authors findings.

Section 2 of the text is given over to an analysis of the scope and socio-cultural context of the problem. The section begins with an excellent chapter by Townsend and Dawes on individual and contextual factors associated with CSA, with subsequent chapters addressing issues relating to the socio-cultural context of abuse (Guma & Henda), gender violence in South African schools (Brookes & Higson-Smith), CSA and HIV infection (Jewkes), and the commercial trafficking of children (Higson-Smith & Richter). The section concludes with a well-written chapter by Dawes, Borel-Saladin and Parker on the incidence and prevalence of CSA [although the reference to the work of Collings (p178) is incorrect] which highlights the fact that, while South Africa has one of the highest rates of CSA in the world, there are currently no reliable estimates of the full extent and nature of the problem.

The third section of the text addresses legal and policy responses to CSA in terms of legal definition and practices (Gallinetti), judicial services (Sadan), policy responses (Loffell), child advocacy (Ewing, van Niekerk), and legislative reform. A consistent concern, alluded to by all contributors, relates to the quality of services available for sexually abused children. As Loffell (p253) points out: "It is often noted that the South African child protection system is in a state of chronic disarray ... [This] is not to deny that there are pockets of quality in the system... However, accessing quality services is still a matter of who a child is, where the child happens to be, which individuals happen to be employed in the services at the time and how long they stay. What most traumatized children encounter in the protection system is a hit-and-miss, luck-of-the-draw affair."

In such a context, there is clearly a need for the development of child protection systems that are not only responsive to the needs of all children but that are also appropriate to the contemporary South African context. In attempting to address these challenges, Loffell cautions against the dangers of 'importing' ready-made solutions that have been found to work in first world countries, suggesting rather a need for a careful and critical appraisal of available options in terms of local relevance, and, where necessary, the development of new (and possibly creative) alternatives that provide a better "fit" for local circumstances.

The fourth section of the text addresses issues relating to therapeutic intervention with sexually abused children. Higson-Smith and Lamprecht provide an overview of counselling services at the Teddy Bear Clinic in Johannesburg, Mkhasibe and Brant describe the initiation of sexual abuse services in Soweto, and Killian and Brakarsh provide an overview of the psychological problems experienced by CSA victims and discuss different therapeutic interventions appropriate for use with sexually abused children. The section concludes with two contributions from outside the borders of South Africa: an overview of intervention services provided by the Family Trust Support in Zimbabwe (Rudd) and a discussion of CSA in the context of armed conflict in Mozambique (Junior). Although the primary focus of most of these contributions is on secondary prevention/intervention, the work of the Bara/Soweto group (as described by Mkhasibe and Brant) is clearly informed by a broader perspective which involves: (a) a view of the child as situated in a "particular familial and family context" (p357), as well

as (b) a perspective on intervention which embraces both primary and secondary prevention and which espouse and practices both community involvement and multidisciplinary participation. In reading this chapter I couldn't help but feel that the Bara/Soweto group have developed an approach to, and an understanding of, CSA intervention which is not only attuned to the realities of the South African context, but which could also usefully serve as a model for the development of similar initiatives in other regions of the country.

The final section of the text contains reflections and concluding comments by Ann Levett and by the editors. Provocative and insightful, as always, Levett questions some of our core assumptions regarding the nature of CSA and challenges us to think in new directions in our search for new responses to old problems; while the editors highlight the limitations of available research data and emphasize the need for additional, vigorous, and multidisciplinary research on the topic.

In sum, **Sexual abuse of young children in southern Africa** provides us with a valuable "sourcebook" of available South African research and practice initiatives, and as such needs to be regarded as essential reading for all researchers and practitioners working in the field.