

**THE MOTHER OF THE VICTIM AS POTENTIAL
SUPPORTER AND PROTECTOR:
CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES**

Anne Morris

Senior Project Officer, The Maternal Alienation Project

A partnership initiative of Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service,
University of Adelaide, Women's Health Statewide

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Much has been spoken and written about the phrase, 'breaking the silence', as an expression that captures the experiences and struggles for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse speaking what had, till then, been unspeakable (Breckenridge 1999). In the 1970s and 80s the public accounts of child sexual abuse by those who had been subject to it were greeted with shock, disbelief and sometimes denial. At a personal level, similar responses to the disclosure of child sexual abuse within families and communities still occur. Some writers have commented that the real taboo against sexual abuse is about speaking about it (Armstrong 1978).

From my work with adult survivors of child sexual abuse, I've been aware of how the boundaries of the unspeakable move according to the context in which the person speaks, and according to the attitude of the listener. I have become aware that the borders between the speakable and the unspeakable are constantly governed and monitored by those who have the power to define what is true and untrue. Jan Breckenridge discusses this as the interplay of "silences and subjugation". She explains subjugation as "processes that subordinate or discount certain types of experiences or sources of information, by either ignoring or reinterpreting the content... In relation to domestic and sexual violence, subjugation occurs when various professional 'knowledges', and their ways of talking about violence (discourses), are privileged over the knowledge that victims hold about their own experiences" (Breckenridge 1999 7-8).

Yet from this monitored territory of victims' experience, from the unutterable and the incomprehensible, various aspects of child sexual abuse have emerged to become named and described (Kelly 1988). But how such insights have been taken up by communities, professionals, services and institutions is another matter.

One such insight is the understanding of the centrality of the child sex offender in the life of the child he has abused or is abusing, and in that child's family. There is a growing body of evidence that describes the tactics used by offenders to constantly and actively shape the realities, beliefs, and relationships of his victim and those people surrounding the child. The sexual abuse of children is just one part of a system of trickery and abuse created to maintain secrecy, isolation and the offender's absolute power over the child and all the actors in the child's life. The offender sets up a web-like structure of traps, lies and distortions to isolate the victim and to re-create the child as problematic in the eyes of siblings, the mother, friends, family and neighbours. In particular, offenders admit that their prime target is to destroy the child's relationship of trust with the mother. In this paper I will focus particularly on the effects of the offender's campaign on the child and mother, and what can be done about it.

Laing & Kamsler describe "the offender's power in shaping the perceptions of his victim and the mother" (Laing and Kamsler 1990, 169). They argue that mainstream theories of abuse, such as the 'dysfunctional family' approach camouflage this powerful role of the offender. These discourses, they maintain, mask the reality that "the relationship problems between mother and child victim which are so commonly seen after incest is disclosed, are more likely to be the result of a campaign of 'disinformation' orchestrated by the offender, under the cover provided by the secrecy which he imposes on the victim. The offender's actions create a context in which the mother and child are blind to his role in creating the difficulties in their relationship" (Laing and Kamsler 1990, 169).

Laing's later research adds further detail to the offenders' "extensive array of tactics by which they had planned and implemented the sexual abuse and attempted to avoid detection" (Laing 1999, 147). She found that the most common tactic acknowledged by the men was that of dividing mother and victim (Laing 1999, 147). The research I carried out in 1999 found that similar tactics to attempt to destroy the mother-child relationship are used by men within a broader spectrum of abuse against women and children, including domestic violence. I have named these tactics of abuse 'maternal alienation' (Morris 1999). I found that the tactics of maternal alienation comprise

relentless campaigns that continued for years, even decades. The messages and actions against the mother with which children were bombarded were forceful and shocking. For example, 'Sharon' discovered what her daughter had been told by her father, who was sexually abusing her:

"There was one thing that he used to say to her. He used to give her money, and he used to tell her that I had given him the money to give her so he could have sex with her. A lot. That gave him permission to do what he wanted with his daughter. And that was the thing that Dads did to their daughters to show their love. That Mum doesn't do it because Mum doesn't love you." ('Sharon', in Morris 1999, 68).

In the face of the evidence that illustrates offenders' use of deliberate and manipulative tactics to destroy a child's relationships of trust, it is curious that this is often ignored. What tends to replace this knowledge is a pervasive mother blaming within mainstream literature and practice concerning child sexual abuse, as a number of researchers and writers in the last decade have emphasised (Humphreys 1990; Hooper 1992; Johnson 1992; Freer 1995). Catherine Humphreys has written much on this subject, and, like many other writers, emphasises that such mother-blaming shifts our focus from the offender to the mother, in a search for someone to blame.

"Denial of responsibility is a central feature of the behaviour of child sexual assault offenders. Their search for excuses and rationalizations, and a tendency to project blame onto others, particularly the women and children in their immediate environment, are recognizable aspects of their behaviour.... However, these processes are characteristic not only of child sexual assault offenders; the sexual assault literature contains many examples of professionals engaging in a similar process of shifting responsibility for the offence from the offender to others." (Humphreys 1994, 49).

It is remarkable that, within the area of child sexual assault, where it is generally accepted that 95 per cent of offenders are male there is such extensive blaming of women within professional discourses. I wonder how much this mother blaming derives from maternal alienation itself, whereby offenders manage to convince not only the children they abuse but many others within their orbit, that they are the victims, not the perpetrators of abuse, and the mothers, vindictive, malicious, vengeful and dangerous, are the true perpetrators.

Whatever the cause, if we are to find a way of undoing the harm caused by the offender, we need to place him centrally, and understand how he has manipulated these relationships. As Cathy Humphreys emphasises, "Crucial information from offenders, such as how the abuse was set up, what things were said to the child about the mother, how the secrecy was maintained, what steps were taken by the abuser to make sure that the child would be disbelieved, can be asked when the role of the abuser is centralised and understood" (Humphreys 1994, 52). For women I interviewed about maternal alienation, understanding the strategies used to alienate them from their mothers was very significant. It allowed them to reclaim their own memories and knowledges that had been subjugated by the stronger voices of the alienator. They also began to reclaim their relationships with their mothers, and to reframe their understandings of the abuse they had suffered....As a result of exploring these strategies, one of the women in the study saw the loss of her relationship with her mother as the greatest tragedy of her life, overshadowing even the horrendous sexual abuse she had suffered. Furthermore, "in reclaiming loving memories of her mother, she also reclaimed a knowledge that she was loved and was lovable and worthwhile, and reclaimed knowledges and memories of her abuse that acknowledged her own experiences, not the victim-blaming, mother-blaming, abuse-denying versions of the perpetrator that had been privileged over any others" (Morris 1999, 119).

This is the basis for the work of the Maternal Alienation Project, operating within Adelaide - to value and restore the relationship between children and non-offending mothers, who have been alienated through these tactics of isolation, lies and distortions, and to help victims/survivors lay claim to their own experiences and memories of their childhood, not the version seen through the eyes of the offender. The mother of the child who has been sexually abused could be the child's most important resource for support and prevention of further abuse. However, we need to develop ways of uncovering the tactics used to damage this relationship when there is no way to discover them from the offender himself. The work of exposing these tactics is being undertaken with offenders and their families at Cedar Cottage in NSW. Offenders are required to admit how they isolated and entrapped the child and maintained the secrecy. Mothers and children have usually been unaware of the extent and sophistication, the planning and the thoroughness of these tactics. Knowing how they have been set against one another, and understanding where their difficulties come from, they are able to rebuild trust and understanding, with the mother becoming an active player in protecting and supporting her child.

Where there is not access to discovering the tactics used by the offender, this is a much more difficult task. We then need to start at the beginning, as it were, and examine whatever we do have access to. These are our own knowledges, beliefs and values, and how they impact on our work with survivors of child sexual abuse. If we examine the principles we work from against the evidence I've described, we can begin to discover some of our own tendencies that can work for the offender, against his victims. These are the source of many of the barriers to enabling children and families to recover from the impact of child sexual abuse.

Some of these habits in our thinking and practice have been outlined already, such as the tendency for the offender to disappear in the picture, and his tactics to become invisible with him. If we lose sight of the offender we tend to look for others, usually the mother, to become the brunt of our blame and intervention. Professional interventions often become caught up with a belief that the mother knew, or should have known, or that the mother should have protected the child. This is commonly the belief of the child as well. It is helpful to be aware of the wider cultural expectation that mothers will always know what is happening to their child, as though mothers have a sixth sense that others don't have.

Research tells us that in the vast majority of cases mothers do not know, and it is important to appreciate just how active the offender's campaign is to stop her finding out. The offender may use tactics such as undermining her confidence in her own judgements, convincing her and others that she is a bad mother, and is to blame for her children's problems, while also convincing her of the importance of his influence on her children, and his importance to her. Offenders work hard to be seen as the ideal father or uncle, grandfather or brother, or as a trusted family friend who is wonderful with children.

Mothers also believe they should have known, and continually punish themselves for not picking up the clues, which in hindsight they may remember. But, as Ray Wyre, from the Gracewell Clinic in UK points out, in the light of how terrorised a child is, "It is just heroic when women and children are ever able to tell when they are sexually abused." (programme on Gracewell Clinic, U.K. (ABC 1993). Knowledge of the offender's tactics to conceal and divide can finally give women insight into why they didn't know. However, unless this unfounded expectation that the mother should have known is addressed by practitioners, mothers continue to blame themselves, and child and adult victim/survivors of child sexual abuse are likely to harbour a sense of betrayal by their mother.

Another unhelpful practice is the tendency to believe the offender's propaganda of denial and minimisation, and to take up his story that he is basically a nice guy who happens to have an occasional weakness - wanting sex with children. This is a dangerous belief, and ignores the

evidence that child sexual abuse is perpetrated as part of a planned system of terror and subjugation, and includes abuse and manipulation of others within the child's orbit, to maintain the secrecy and the offender's power and control. It is a dangerous notion as it allows the offender to continue his abuse unchecked, and works against the idea that perpetrators of abuse are responsible for their actions. It also works to disempower his victims even further, as the offender's ploys to isolate all those involved continue to erode any support they might have found. The tendency to think he is a nice guy is a very real possibility as offenders are adept at gaining the sympathy of others - even their victims - and convincing others of their point of view.

Another barrier to supporting mother and child is our preference to work separately with our clients, and forget that beyond our own intervention, they have significant ties with their family that, if family members are not abusive, should be supported and nourished for the ongoing wellbeing of our client. Since becoming aware of these issues, I have noticed how little the child's relationships with others, particularly the mother, are considered and nurtured by service providers. To the contrary, often, as practitioners, we actually widen the gulf between mother and child. Given an appreciation of the importance of these relationships, we may work in ways that create opportunities for mother and child to talk together, and build an alliance. Tools and activities can be used which open space for coming together in positive and nurturing ways, and to begin to talk through the difficulties, misunderstandings and miscommunications to build new bridges.

If we are willing to be self-aware and deconstruct beliefs and practices such as these, we will find ways to support a child's relationship with their mother and other family members. When we can't know specifically some of the strategies that were used to entrap and alienate, we can still use an understanding of the dynamics of maternal alienation to throw light on these processes. I have found that this knowledge offers a framework that enables practitioners, women and children to move beyond blaming, anger and a sense of betrayal to a new place of understanding in their relationships. When child and mother are enabled to see the full picture, then from a position of knowing rather than not-knowing, the mother is positioned to truly become the supporter and protector of her child.

It is so important that these insights and changes in our practice are not subjugated or silenced by those who govern the borders of what is considered true and untrue. If those who have the power to make positive changes are willing to hear these matters, believe and act, this will be a powerful step forward in survivors' journeys of healing.

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