

Adopted at the IFSW 2014 General Meeting, Melbourne

Guiding Principles for Social Workers Working with Others to Identify and Protect Children From all Forms of Sexual Abuse

This policy statement has been drafted in response to the following resolution of the General Meeting 2012:

That this General Meeting:

Acknowledges that in every sector of society in all corners of the world significant numbers of children are sexually abused, that the majority of such children go unrecognised as they are too frightened, unable, not listened to or prevented from revealing what is happening to them and that such an experience is likely to affect their health and well-being for the rest of their lives.

And

calls upon IFSW as a matter of urgency to publish a set of Guiding Principles for Social Workers concerning their responsibility to work with others to identify and protect children from all forms of sexual abuse and to unite member organisations in a global campaign asserting the right of all children to have access to a safe place where they can disclose concerns about the way they are being treated and be assured that support will be forthcoming.

Objective

The task is identified as:

1. To prepare a set of guiding principles for social workers to use in whatever setting or part of the world they are working in
2. To develop a campaign with member associations to create safe places for children to disclose their concerns about the way they are being treated.

Context

This policy statement has been developed in response to growing public and political concern about the sexual abuse and trafficking of children and young people. This has arisen from publicity about the growth in abuse connected with the internet (grooming and pornography), media interest in a small number of notorious cases involving the disappearance of young children and growing awareness about the vulnerability of young people following major natural disasters and in conflict situations (Wisner 2004; European Union 2005; Pittaway, Bartolomei et al. 2007; Blackburn, Taylor et al. 2010; Cronin and Ryan 2010; United Nations Development Program 2010; Pearce 2011; Clarke 2012; Clayton, Krugman et al. 2013; Busch-Armendariz, Nsonwu et al. 2014; McIntyre 2014; Onditi 2014). It is suggested that cross-border activity is a significant feature in many cases.

New policy initiatives have been proposed by the United Nations, European Union (European Union 2005; European Union 2011; European Commission 2012) and other global and regional bodies (African Child Policy Forum 2006)(references and examples) and there have been calls for the police and professionals (including social workers) to be more active in these fields and to be more aware of the global risks.

Whilst many of the principles of social work practice with children and young people in other contexts are equally relevant to these cases, there are also new features which requires new skills

and new practices. It is therefore appropriate for IFSW to provide a global approach to these forms of abuse.

Guiding principles for Social Workers when children or young people may have been sexually abused

Children at potential risk of Sexual Abuse

There are many ways and many different types of environment that children are harmed through sexual abuse in all regions of the world. For example, abuse can happen in the intimacy of the home, school or community, in sexually permissive and promiscuous environments. Children can be seen as objects of desire and therefore treated as objects of trade rather than vulnerable, inexperienced human beings. In such situations they may be trafficked at the hands of people who are involved in organised criminal activity. It is also well documented that, in some parts of the world, parents living in extreme poverty hand over one or more children to others, some of whom are subsequently forced into the sex industry.

The core elements that increase risk of child sexual abuse include the factors that are known to place children at risk of abuse, alongside the motivation and techniques used by offenders to ensure that their behaviours remain hidden from the world outside that abusing relationship.

The Child

Research indicates that victims of sexual abuse are not small grown-ups, they are not able like most adults to recognise the sexual motivation of an offender's approach to children. The ability to decide the difference between an adult concerned about their well-being or that affection comes from the adult's desire to prepare them for an abusive sexual action is affected by their level of maturity.

Often children who are insecure or without trusting supports and that their search for a sense of belonging is attractive and lays them vulnerable to the person intent on having a sexual relationship with them. They may be children who are not emotionally secure in family relationships, they may be children who are without families, they may be in children's homes, looked after in other families or living on the streets.

Many children who are trafficked and sexually abused have parents who are themselves struggling with absolute poverty and cannot satisfy the physical and emotional needs of their children. The parents may believe that, by allowing someone else to care for them, they are ensuring their continuing life and healthy development, this may include selling their children.

Not all children who live in these kinds of environments are sexually abused. Some children are forced into the sexual acts and some are able to escape. There is a growing body of research into what creates personal 'resilience', the ability to overcome disadvantage and exploitation (Knight 2011; Levine, Pain et al. 2012; Nix-Stevenson 2013).

The factor that is probably most significant in the abusive relationship is the *power and control* that the adult or older child is able to exercise over the victim. This is preceded by a 'grooming' process where the child is flattered, allured and intimidated. It is therefore equally important for the social worker to understand how the child is experiencing the relationships around them.

The Offender

The motivation in the offender to behave in such a harmful and powerful way against a vulnerable child has been explored in qualitative research in criminal justice which suggests there are a number of different motivators along a spectrum:

- The offender who is themselves low in self-esteem and mood and responds 'instinctively' when the opportunity arises to have a sexual relationship with a small and weaker partner, later an intimate and sexual relationship with the child. This can happen in families and communities.
- The offender who actively seeks and grooms children to satisfy a sexual drive. For example, they may find a vulnerable family to move in with, or may be kind and loving to a lonely single parent but the real target is her children.
- Offenders who either see no harm in sexually abusing children or who deny that they are abusers.
- Offenders can be a part of a criminal gang profiteering from organised child sexual abuse.

The common factor for many of the abusers is that they themselves have had very poor, emotionally neglectful childhoods and continue to have low self-esteem.

A helpful tool to think about the effects on the victim is to think about the type of person who committed the offence. RAPID (Random Abusers, Paedophiles, Incest and Deniers) is a useful guide, developed by researchers at Edinburgh University, to think how the abuser went into the offence and how then we can then understand how to help the victim. However other factors have to be considered like the environment in which the abuse happened, social competence of the offender, family context and household or institutional relationships.

The long-term effects of sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is a very serious crime against a child with lasting consequences. The child not only is intimately harmed and abused in the most intimate and painful of ways but they are also subject to emotional abuse from the power and control used by the abuser leading up to, during the course of the abuse and afterwards. This abuse can continue to cause harm well into adulthood because of the scars left by the trauma and damage caused to the ability of the victim to make and sustain appropriate relationships. The damage will be physical, emotional and psychological.

Too many of the victims of sexual abuse in childhood later seek support and sanctuary in mental health services and institutions and are frequently found in criminal justice systems. Often it is not until adulthood that they gain enough trust to share their childhood experiences with another, this may be a peer or a professional – it gets increasingly difficult as people grow older to make that initial sharing with a family member as the 'secret' has become so buried and part of 'that which is not spoken about' in families.

Research from victim reports in developed countries suggest that most sexual abuse is committed in the family or home by another member of the household or by a family friend or acquaintance and that the grooming of a victim prior to the actual offence is part of the on-going issue that the victim has to deal with often at critical points throughout their life. There is growing evidence that this may be but the tip of the iceberg as children are trafficked across the globe, often without birth registration papers and fall under the radar of many child care services. Children who are born into the shadows of our society will often remain there as they grow into adulthood

Organised Crime

Increasingly social workers are becoming involved in working with children who have been harmed and exploited by organised criminals. This can happen in a residential home or with children on the street who are targeted by paedophiles or by criminals who traffic children across international borders to be exploited. These children often do not have birth registration documents and are further 'hidden' from the communities in which they live. Social Workers need to be careful of their

own safety in working in these areas as people in these situations are often in themselves insecure but ruthless in the pursuit of maintaining their power and control. Team working, including multi-disciplinary teams, can be a more safe way to work and solo working should be discouraged.

Continuing Contact

In many cases the victim, as they grow up, may well have continuing contact with their abuser either in person or through family and community contacts throughout the rest of their lives. This in itself is a huge hurdle for the victim to deal with and often leads to unforeseen rifts in the family or community as the 'secret' may still be hidden from others. So social workers need to not only consider the immediate protection of the child but how the offence will affect that person right through their adult life.

The role of the Social Worker

- Social workers need to recognise the situations when children may be vulnerable to neglect, harm or exploitation
- Social Workers need to listen to children however they choose to communicate
- Social Workers need to understand who are the adults who may be offenders
- Social workers need to develop their skills, knowledge and expertise in understanding how child sexual abuse happens
- Social workers need to make contact with specialist services for advice and guidance not only in how best to collect evidence but to seek guidance of the best methods of intervention
- Social workers need to work in close cooperation with police, education, health and other services that can intervene to stop child sexual abuse
- Social workers need to recognise all forms of sexual abuse in the family, in institutions and in the community, this includes gathering information on whether the child has been photographed by her/his abuser, if other adults were involved and if the child has any information on whether the abuser took advantage of other children.
- Social workers need to campaign for and develop services that prevent the child being exposed to dangerous environments. This should include breaking down organised child abuse rings and working in cooperation with international agencies to prevent child pornography and trafficking.
- Social workers need to make sure that children have safe environments to prevent abuse
- Social workers need to make sure children have safe places to be when they need to talk about what has happened to them; children need to know and trust adults to share their fears when they fear other children may be in danger
- Social workers need to think not just about the immediate protection of the child but the long term effects of the crimes they have been subjected to, even to the end of their lives.
- Social Workers need to plan how they work in these areas to keep themselves safe to continue the work in this very complex and at times dangerous area of work.

Campaign suggestions for IFSW Members

- In developing how we protect our children we need national associations working through IFSW to bring together our global knowledge, skills and expertise.
- IFSW at global, regional and national level needs to work with other agencies, the media, policy and political groups to raise the knowledge about the extent of child sexual abuse and how it can be prevented.
- IFSW members need to make sure that the members of their associations have quality training to equip them for this very complex area of work

- Action needs to take place at local, national, regional and global level with clear strategies from the collective voice of social workers
- This is not only an issue for social work, but victims, health, criminal justice, the police, education and policy makers; we need to connect with partners to develop joint work that will not only expose the extent of these abuses but work towards protection and recovery for the victims and eradication of the conditions in societies that encourage and hide the roots of abuse and violence against children.

Join our global campaign asserting the right of all children to have access to a safe place where they can disclose concerns about the way they are being treated and be assured that support will be forthcoming.

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