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Child protection in independent schools

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Abstract

Given the relationship between a person’s emotional development, their faith development and the experiences during the early years of their lives, it is vital for the Christian school to do all it can to ensure that students are kept safe from all forms of abuse. This paper analyses research on the psychological effects of child abuse and gives practical ideas for teachers and schools on how to protect their students, themselves, and their colleagues from allegations of reportable conduct. It considers the value of a person to God and the responsibility that sits with school staff to protect children.

Why this topic is important

Christian schools express God’s love for children by enabling His invitation “Come unto Me”. As a consequence, these schools make child protection a foundational element of their culture because of at least three significant observations. Firstly, children are the most precious commodity any community, including a church, has today and the most vital commodity this world has in securing its future. Damaging them potentially limits their future as well as their relationship to God and to their community. Secondly, educators recognise that staff members in independent schools are not immune to involvement in predatory behaviours towards children. Finally, school communities are challenged by William Glasser’s statement made in 1997 that paedophilia was the “public health problem of the decade” (Glasser, 1997, p. 1). In 2010 the issues and stories of abuse from inside and outside the Christian sector indicate no improvement in this risk in this new century. What does God think?

What God thinks

There is no escaping the highly valued relationship God has initiated with us as human beings. Zephaniah reveals God’s heart when he says: “The Lord your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.” Zeph 3:17 (New International Version).

The apostle Paul further highlights our value to God when he says: “Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!)” Eph 1:4–5 (The Message).

Considering children and their importance to Him, Jesus goes one step further and actually admonishes adults to make sure children are treated in a special and caring way: “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Matt 19:14 (New American Standard Version).

Nobody knows like our Creator the impact abuse has on the developing mind and emotions of the child. In considering his extensive practice of psychotherapy Erikson (1959) was able to identify 8 consecutive stages in human social-emotional development (see Table 1), and in each of these stages, abuse in one form or another will have an impact.

Building on Erikson’s stages of development, Cloninger (2006) believes that rather than the stages being discrete and consecutive, “such development can be visualised as a spiral of expanding height, width, and depth as a person matures or increases in coherence of personality” (p.2). As a person reaches

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Table 1: Social-emotional development

Stages in social-emotional development		
Trust	versus	Mistrust
Autonomy	versus	Shame
Initiative	versus	Guilt
Industry	versus	Inferiority
Identity	versus	Diffusion
Intimacy	versus	Isolation
Generativity	versus	Self-absorption
Integrity	versus	Despair

each stage of development, they will take with them the previous stage also and continue to develop and broaden it. This adds importance to the impact teachers can have on students at each stage of development but also raises concerns over the impact abuse can have on the emotional maturity of that child.

Fowler (1981 as cited in Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener & Benson, 2006), based his faith development theory on Erikson's stages. The moral, social and cognitive aspects of a person's emotional development parallel their faith development. Fowler believed that faith is independent of religion as such, but it is a "person's way of responding to transcendent value and power in such a way that the trust in and loyalty to the source of transcendence integrate our identity and give our lives unity and meaning" (p. 7). Given that faith development in students is a vital part of the program of a Christian school, it is important for teachers to realise that anything that interferes with the emotional development of the young person, will also interfere with that person's faith development.

By studying Table 1, and considering the more negative outcome at each of the stages of emotional development, it can be found that each of these are characteristics of children who are victims of some form of abuse and they will carry these outcomes into adulthood. Mistrust, shame, guilt, inferiority, poor sense of identity, isolation, self-absorption and despair are found either singly or in collection in children who have suffered abuse.

As evidence of the impact of sexual abuse on children, Wonderlich (2000) reports a series of facts that confirm the impact of child sexual abuse on emotional and moral development. He reports that approximately 31% of women in prison stated that they had been abused as children. Further, it was identified that approximately 95% of teenage prostitutes had been sexually abused. Finkelhor and Browne (1986) add more specifically to the evidence in stating that: "Long term effects of child abuse include fear, anxiety, depression, anger, hostility, inappropriate sexual behaviour, poor self esteem, tendency toward substance abuse and difficulty with close relationships" (p. 69).

Parents and significant other adults such as teachers and church leaders are those entrusted with the development of an emotionally balanced child. It can be imagined how seriously God sees any act of an adult that would prevent a child coming to Him and securing their place within His kingdom (Matt 19:14).

Teachers therefore, need to scrutinise carefully their behaviour towards children and in addition be always aware of the signs that may indicate that a child's development may have been interfered with

in some way. These orientations to professional practice can firstly protect both the teacher and the children and secondly provide opportunity for referral, potentially enabling support and restoration. Being informed about forms of abuse and understanding the consequences becomes essential for current teaching practice.

Types of abuse

Sexual abuse is just one type of reportable conduct suffered by children. Physical abuse and psychological abuse are also damaging for children but are not considered as newsworthy by the media as sexual misconduct, consequently the community is less aware of the incidence of these forms. Historical incidents in prominent church organisations have placed sexual abuse in the headlines on numerous occasions over the last two decades, but in the eyes of child protection agencies, the other two forms of abuse are equally serious in their impact.

Research shows that combinations of any of the types of sexual abuse indicated here lead to a more complicated set of mental health issues for the victim as they move into adulthood (O'Leary, Coohy & Easton, 2010). The severity of the sexual abuse and the way it may be combined with physical and emotional abuse are indicators of the level and form of complexity of future mental health issues.

How teachers can protect themselves and students

It is vital that teachers do not put themselves into positions or situations where their motives or actions can be questioned. It is equally important that teachers observe other teachers and their behaviour with students.

Outside of the immediate family, teachers are the ones who spend the most time with students. This means that they are most able to notice changes in student behaviour that may indicate some form of abuse (Briggs and Hawkins, 1997). Teachers are also in a position to notice the sort of emotional malfunctions noted earlier when students are being interfered with (Finkelhor & Browne, 1986). As pointed out by Walsh, Rassafiani, Matthews, Farrell & Butler (2010), these emotional malfunctions can also include: "low self-esteem...dissociation, and self-harming behaviours" (p. 336).

Teachers can protect themselves, their colleagues and their students by observing some simple precautions. The main ones summarised below are based on the Association of Independent Schools of NSW suggested code of professional conduct (2004).

1. Teachers should never be drawn into conversations with students that include

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inappropriate sexual content or use suggestive overtones. This includes jokes and stories that are marginal in their implications. They should never discuss their own sexuality, relationships or desires with students.

2. There is very rarely a situation where it would be appropriate for a staff member to touch a child. This of course is age specific. An early childhood teacher comforting a hurting pre-school student using touch is a different situation to a secondary teacher comforting a senior student in the same way. In cases such as demonstrations in physical education, or in the application of first aid, touching may be necessary. Permission should be sought from the child however before they are touched.

3. A teacher needs to be very careful to avoid sexual exhibitionism—especially at the swimming pool, any changing room or on overnight excursions. In the same way they need to ensure they cannot be accused of watching children undress in the change rooms. They also need to ensure that students are not being exposed to the sexual behaviour of others. This includes exposing them to movies that have such scenes. Teachers should make sure they know the school's policy on movie censorship. Most schools have a policy of not showing any movie classified higher than PG.

4. Teachers should not include students in their social networking 'friend list'. Emailing, texting, skypeing and chatting online are also activities that are considered unwise. Increasingly schools and state departments of education are creating policies that ban teacher/student electronic contact except for academic communications that are specifically designed for that purpose. As a result of inappropriate communications between teachers and students, the Queensland Department of Education and Training has created a revised code of conduct for teachers prohibiting contact by teachers with students on social networking internet sites (Ninemsn staff, 2009).

5. While the use of pornography in any form by a teacher while at school would normally be called a breach of professional ethics in the school's staff handbook, the possession of child pornography is illegal. If found in an electronic format the school would need to provide the teacher's computer (or ICT device) as well as the name of the teacher to the police. The way teachers use photography also needs to be dealt with carefully, especially photo opportunities at all school events, including camps and swimming carnivals. School protocols should be clear, known and adhered to.

6. Teachers know that they are not to have 'favourites' in their classes. This is very difficult

because naturally some students are easier to relate to than others. Special attention towards certain students can however be construed as 'grooming'. It can be interpreted by others in this way when they perceive teachers are attempting to convince the child of their 'special relationship', are spending inappropriate 'special time', giving gifts, showing favours, and allowing the student to 'overstep the mark'.

7. Every teacher is aware that physical force used against a student, except where the teacher is trying to prevent harm or injury, is unlawful and the teacher could easily lose school employment due to a complaint of physical contact with a child. It is probably fair to say however, that not every teacher would be aware that even if a teacher threatens a student, and the student believes that physical aggression is possible, that behaviour is also reportable.

8. Also categorised as physical abuse is the area of excessive punishment or ill-treatment which also includes lack of treatment or neglect. This could be the refusal to provide first aid or transport to medical professionals if the need exists.

9. Finally there is the area of psychological harm where the words of a teacher can have profound effects on a student. This may include constant yelling, sarcasm, belittling, and the use of 'nick-names'. If a teacher's arsenal of student management techniques contains the constant use of any of these, there is cause for concern.

What does a 'groomer' look like?

Smallbone and Wortley (1999) report research carried out in Queensland amongst convicted and imprisoned child sex offenders. The participants openly reported many details that help to profile a person who is intent on grooming a child. The average age of an offender when they first offend is 31 years, 78% were Australian born who were not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders and 37% had no previous convictions. Only 19% of offenders reported their father as being affectionate. Having a violent, abusive or dismissive father was reported by 37% and 55% had themselves been sexually abused. Pornography had been used by 86%, including 10% who used child pornography.

This profile of offenders represents normal Australians who became experts at grooming children. Their motivation for grooming fell into two broad categories: those who had a preference for abusing children and those who were opportunists. In a school situation, a person who is so inclined will have many opportunities to exercise their power over children, but concern should extend to all school age

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associated group activities including sport, outdoor activities, electronic gaming, religion, and cultural pursuits such as music, dance, and other arts.

As pointed out by Smallbone and Wortley (1999), it is a mistake to believe that girls are more susceptible to abuse than boys. While perpetrators of sexual abuse are 3 times more likely to abuse females, males are 3 times more likely to be abused. This is because the few serial offenders in the group were more likely to target male victims.

What observations would specifically point to an adult who may be intent on grooming a child? In the same study by Smallbone and Wortley (1999), data revealed that 67% of offenders reported their method of grooming as touching non-sexually. For 59% it was giving potential victims lots of attention while for 56% it was spending lots of time with them. A similar proportion (56%) made sure they did things that the child wanted to do.

It is the role therefore of each person in the school community to advise colleagues if, in their opinion, the colleague's behaviour could be perceived to be inappropriate and suspect, but also to report colleagues or others if they believe a child could be at risk.

Being fair to the alleged victim and the alleged perpetrator

The only fair way to deal with allegations of reportable conduct by a staff member is to carry out a thorough, unbiased investigation into the allegation. It is not fair on the student who has reported the event not to take their evidence seriously and investigate. It is possible that the allegation will be vexatious, false, or misconceived, but in some cases it may be factual. There is precedence of child abuse in independent schools and any allegation needs to be taken seriously.

A properly carried out investigation will always include a risk analysis that considers both parties, their families, the wider school family and any other affected parties. Both chaplain and counsellor help should be offered to any involved party who desires it.

While a teacher may feel 'not supported' when the principal asks for an investigation into an allegation about their conduct, it is in fact better for them to cooperate with an investigation. When the facts are retrieved, an innocent teacher will have their name cleared. Without an investigation there will always be questions over that particular allegation.

A caring Christian school needs to have a plan of action to help with the considerable residual hurt that will be generated when a staff member is accused of some form of reportable conduct. The hurt affects the alleged perpetrator whether the allegation is fact

or otherwise. The students making the claim will also experience extremes of emotion and the families of both parties may suffer trauma at different levels.

Education and communication are key ingredients in helping the parties understand the process. This education for staff may include prior information on areas of policy content, case studies of past incidents, details of the investigators, availability of the counsellor and chaplain, what the financial and employment implications may be, and what the timeline for the investigation is.

No matter what information and factual details are given, there will still be significant emotional hurt to deal with at the time of an incident. It is particularly difficult for the rest of the staff who observe what is happening, but who are not privy to the facts of the case because of privacy issues. These persons need continued understanding and should be offered counselling also.

What issues does a Christian establishment have in dealing with this?

A Christian establishment should be very well equipped to deal with sensitive and emotive issues such as abusive type behaviours. Caring should be inherent and support should be plentiful. Unfortunately however, the past indicates that institutionalised culture and traditions can cause a different set of circumstances to prevail in a Christian setting that create organisational difficulties.

There can be the tendency to minimise any initial allegation of sexual abuse or at least to trivialise the allegation and hope it will go away. There is also precedence of alleged victims being discouraged from reporting alleged assaults. There can also exist an inbuilt culture and doctrine of specific roles for the different sexes that support patriarchy.

Other relevant issues are that, in many cases, the community and even families are polarised by the allegations and sides are taken.

Any allegation of abuse is a time when leadership is tested and school morale has to be intentionally nurtured. Weak leadership and uninformed action can make these situations more difficult than they need to be. Systems and organisations are demanding appropriate behaviours in leaders and require accountability with increased expectations of informed, professional, respectful attitudes associated with just processes.

How does 'teacher caution' affect pastoral care

In previous decades, school administrators were satisfied to see teachers mixing with students in the breaks rather than reading the paper over a hot drink in the staff room. On reflection, the revelation

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of many school-based cases of reportable teacher conduct indicates the need for cautious observation of interactions and the need for careful collegial council. School administrators appreciate the mentoring roles their teachers take on in the school, but are more aware now than in the past of the potential for allegations of reportable conduct to be made. Profiling indicates that the young, popular teacher has often been the one who may have an issue with child abuse involvement, or may be the one who is the victim of a misconceived allegation.

Pastoral care needs to protect the teachers as well as the students. The caring school will keep constant reminders before the teachers of their legal and spiritual duty of care for the students, for themselves and for their colleagues.

There are many positive ways that child protection can be kept before the teaching staff. A small item on the staff meeting agenda each week as is usually done for Occupational Health and Safety, is a proactive way of addressing issues and potential issues. This would emphasise the importance of child protection and keep it before the teachers regularly rather than a single training session annually. These regular items of information could be varied and may include the following: the review of a policy, a case study, a role play, a visiting professional, or a confidential discussion of a specific student.

Though this paper highlights many of the more negative aspects of the area of child protection, it would be a disappointing outcome if teacher/student relationships that serve to mentor students academically and spiritually were in jeopardy because of over zealotry in the child protection area. The relationship between students and teachers in Christian schools has long been a feature of the school’s pastoral care program and is

particularly vital for students with dysfunctional or single parent families. Education, care and mutual accountability should be optimised to ensure the safety of students and staff. **TEACH**

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