

Child sexual abuse: has the ‘time of telling’ finally come?

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By the Research Team at the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

As researchers in child sexual abuse, it's been impossible not to follow the media and social furore around the issues of sexual abuse, especially in the entertainment industry. The #MeToo campaign highlights the growing strength of victims, survivors and whistleblowers in coming forward. However, it doesn't stop at the entertainment industry - think football and Barry Bennell, charities and Oxfam, not to mention religious institutions and schools. Victims and survivors must now be asking: Is now the time of telling, is now the time to be heard?

We've [published research](#) showing that the opportunity to speak out and be heard hasn't always been there.

The authors of the report, Jo Lovett, Maddy Coy and Liz Kelly from the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University, reviewed documents looking as far back as the 1940s to explore how child sexual abuse in England and Wales has been talked about and understood (discourses). We wanted to understand how social and political discourses have influenced the way in which institutions respond to child sexual abuse.

By looking through over 300 pieces of published research, serious case reviews, inquiry reports and guidance, the researchers identified no fewer than 37 different ways in which professionals in the legal, policy, clinical, social work and media field may have understood and responded to child sexual abuse. There has never been an agreed, universal definition of or explanation for child sexual abuse. For nearly 80 years, professionals have been looking at child sexual abuse from many different directions, and some have outright ignored it and denied that it is an issue.

Broadly speaking, these discourses fall into two groups: dominant discourses and counter discourses.

Dominant discourses

This formed the majority of the narratives and appeared to take for granted as ‘truths’ certain ideas relating to child sexual abuse. Some of the language used, deflected responsibility for child sexual abuse by labelling it as something that happened ‘in a different time’ when different standards applied, or as a problem caused by ‘a few bad apples’, or by ‘blaming mothers’ for failing to keep children safe. Other ways of talking about child sexual abuse denied the harm caused or the extent of it, for example by suggesting there was a ‘moral panic’ or ‘witch hunt’ and that claims of abuse against offenders were exaggerated. In another discourse labelled as ‘children lie’, there was an outright refusal to accept that child sexual abuse was happening. It appears that some of these narratives still persist today.

Counter discourses

Counter discourses started to emerge in the 1970s. These originated in feminist and survivor movements and challenged the dominant discourses. Here the emphasis is on believing, recognising and supporting victims and survivors and looking at power relations. For example, by looking at the context and factors that allow a person in a dominant, powerful or privileged position to take advantage of their victim.

At times change happened rapidly, usually in response to high-profile events, such as the 1987 Cleveland Inquiry into the sexual abuse of 121 children and the means by which they were medically diagnosed as having experienced sexual abuse.

The Swedish academic Ninni Carlsson describes two dynamics that need to come together: the 'time of telling' and 'sphere of listening'. The 'time of telling' refers to a space in which it is possible to speak about child sexual abuse and a 'sphere of listening' occurs when it is more likely for victims and survivors to be heard by institutions and people in positions of power. This sounds very much like the place that we'd want to get to as a nation and what the Inquiry is trying to achieve.

We have invited politicians, journalists and victims and survivors to a seminar on 26 February 2018 to discuss current discourses and how to create and maintain spaces of telling and listening. Please feel free to join the public gallery on the day or watch the seminar through the live feed:

www.iicsa.org.uk/live

To find out more about our research activities, click [here](#).

To find out more about the Truth Project, where victims and survivors can be heard and share their experiences of child sexual abuse in a supportive and confidential setting, click [here](#).