DEFENDING INNOCENCE: Ideologies of Childhood

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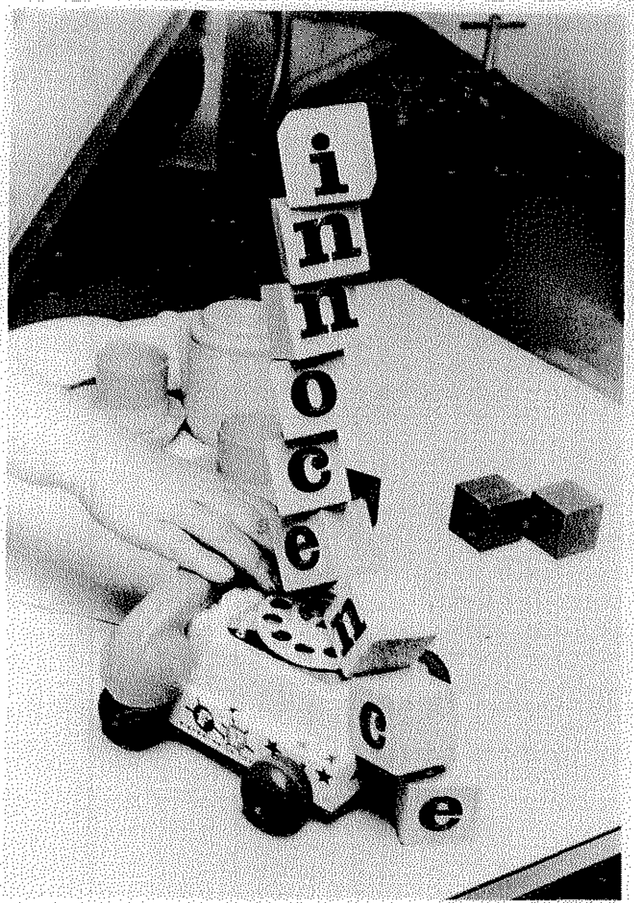
Over the last few years there has been a revival of public concern about child sexual abuse. A heterogenous child protection movement has evolved, promoting preventative work in schools and initiating projects such as the children's help line, ChildLine. There has been a major public information campaign, articles about child sex abuse have appeared in most women's magazines and there have been several TV documentaries. Central to all these branches of the campaign is the challenging of various miconceptions about child sex abuse: misconceptions about the nature and frequency of the abuse, the type of perpetrator and the role of the family (Adams and Fay, 1981; Justice and Justice, 1979). The movement seeks to replace old 'myths' with new 'facts'. The myth/fact scenario, however, serves to obscure the political dimensions of the 'new' approaches to child sexual abuse. Facts do not 'speak for themselves' and there are many questions to be raised about the images of manhood, womanhood, motherhood and family life that are emerging out of the campaigns. Some of these questions have been discussed elsewhere (Kitzinger, 1988), but here I want to focus on the images of childhood promoted in the public education programmes and the reporting of child sexual abuse in the media.

Most of us are now familiar with the images of childhood associated with discussions of child sexual abuse on TV, in newspapers and in child protection leaflets. The abused child is represented by an anonymous figure sitting limp and despairing with her head in her hands, or by the brother and sister gazing out wistfully from behind a window, or, sometimes, simply by a broken doll. These images can be objectifying and voyeuristic in themselves but, however 'tasteful', they invariably emphasize the child's youth and passivity.

When particular cases are documented, the pen-portraits of the victim always focus on child-specific attributes such as pigtails, hair-



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ribbons, her sailor-suit dress, her 'favourite plastic purse with the rainbow handles' or her Paddington Bear clock (*Sun*, 10.12.86; *Mirror*, 9.12.86; *Today*, 2.6.87). Even 'serious investigative journalism' documenting children's sexual exploitation may employ, as background music, the tinkling sound of a musical box (e.g. Cook, 1987). All these props accentuate the fact that the victim is a child – childhood itself is an issue; in case we are in any doubt, the sexual abuse of a child is often referred to as 'the theft or violation of childhood' (Barr, 1986; *Sun*, 13.12.86; Bradbury, 1986).

Implicit, then, in all such documentation is an assertion of what childhood 'really is'. Childhood is presented as a time of play, an asexual and peaceful existence within the protective bosom of the family. This image is both ethnocentric and unrealistic. Even while addressing some of the horrors of childhood, these reports confirm myths about the 'true

essence of childhood' which contradict the experiences of the majority of young people. Here I want to focus on the child protection movement's emphasis on two particular qualities of 'real' childhood – innocence and vulnerability.

Childhood innocence

The child protection movement is fighting against a long tradition which views the victim of sexual abuse as an active participant and which presents the child victim as a 'Lolita' or 'nymphette' (Nelson, 1987; Rush, 1980). The emphasis on children's innocence in part serves to counteract these negative stereotypes, but it has also become a fetishistic focus in itself. Books about child sexual abuse have titles like: *The Betrayal of Innocence* (Forward and Buck, 1981) or *The Death of Innocence* (Janus, 1981), and 'robbing children of their innocence' has become synonymous with sexual abuse (*Sun*, 13.12.86; *Mirror*, 10.12.86; *Star*, 15.11.86).

Innocence is a powerful and emotive symbol, but to use it to provoke public revulsion against sexual abuse is counterproductive. For a start the notion of childhood innocence is itself a source of titillation for abusers. A glance at pornography leaves little doubt that innocence is a sexual commodity. 'Kiddie porn' magazines specifically set out to highlight the purity of their child models (Rush, 1980: 164). Advertising produces images of young girls made up to look like Marilyn Monroe, with slogans like 'Innocence is sexier than you think' (Rush, 1980: 125), and the fashion industry cashes in with baby-doll nightdresses for adult

Ponytailed 'victim' accuses doctor on sex charges

The term 'ponytailed victim', rather like the phrase 'gymslip mum', serves to draw together and exploit the contrast between traditional understandings of childhood on the one hand (as signified by ponytails and gym-slips) and sex and violence on the other. From the Daily Mirror *9 December 1986*

women and T-shirts emblazoned with the words 'Forbidden Fruit' for girls. In a society where innocence is a fetish and where men are excited by the idea of defiling the pure and deflowering the virgin, focusing on children's presumed innocence only reinforces men's desire for them as sexual objects. As one child abuser said, 'It was so exciting, she was so young, so pure and clean' (*Star*, 4.12.86).

Secondly, 'innocence' is a suspect concept to employ in the fight against child sexual abuse because it stigmatizes the 'knowing' child. The romanticism of childhood innocence excludes those who do not conform to the ideal. A precocious child who appears flirtatious and sexually aware may forfeit her claims to protection because, if the violation of innocence is the criterion by which the act of sexual abuse is judged, violating a 'knowing' child is a lesser offence than violating an 'innocent' child.[1] It is this notion which allows abusers to defend themselves on the grounds that their victim was 'no angel'. One abuser, for instance, argued that his victim was no innocent – she drank, smoked and often failed to do her homework. He should know – he was her headmaster (*Daily Mail*, 14.12.85).

The notion of 'innocence' and, therefore, the potential for the loss of innocence can also facilitate further victimization:

> The sexually victimized child may be viewed neither as a child nor as an adult but rather as a piece of 'damaged goods' lacking the attributes of both childhood and adult . . . sexually victimized children may become 'walking invitations'. (Sgroi, 1982: 114).

A child who is known to be a victim of sexual abuse is often subject to further exploitation: 'a bizarre spin-off of the labelling process is the fascination the girl presents to others. . . . Publicly deflowered as she is, she is regarded as no longer deserving respect or protection' (Summit and Kryso, 1978: 244).

Innocence, then, is a problematic concept because it is itself a sexual commodity and because a child who is anything less than 'an angel' may be seen as 'fair game', both by the courts and by other men who will avail themselves of a child they know has previously been abused (Ward, 1984: 159; Sarnacki Porter *et al.*, 1982: 114). More fundamentally, however, 'innocence' should be rejected because it is an ideology used to deny children access to knowledge and power (Jackson, 1982).

In the name of 'childhood innocence' adults repress children's own expressions of sexuality, deny them control over their own bodies and 'protect' them from knowledge. Indeed it is the notion of innocence that stops some parents telling their children about incest (*Independent*, 28.4.87) because they do not want to 'corrupt the few years of innocence that should be every child's right' (Brown, 1986). It also leads to those working to expose child abuse being accused of destroying the 'age of innocence' by highlighting sexual exploitation (*News on Sunday*, 3.5.87).

Protecting the weak

Another theme running through much of the literature on the abuse of children is that of 'protection'. Children, it is pointed out, are weak, but there is little if any analysis of the structural power imbalances which make that so. An analysis of power is rejected in favour of a paternalistic approach. Parents are advised to step up surveillance over their children, and to avoid letting them out alone or at night (*Foster Care*, 1986). They can now even buy 'Toddler Minders', electronic tags rather like those proposed for prisoners under house arrest, which set off an alarm if the child strays outside a certain area (*Observer*, 17.8.86). Such siege mentality puts a huge strain on the mother. It also places children under curfew and encourages children to live in fear:

> What are acceptable limits on a child's freedom? The short walk to the newsagent's? The chip shop? A quarter of a mile? A hundred yards? No further than the front gate? In such a climate is it possible to foster the sense of personal independence that is as important as caution? (Brown, 1986)

There is another problem in that the focus is, yet again, on curtailing the freedom of the potential victims rather than curtailing the freedom of potential abusers. The child protection movement's focus on the victims evades the fact that vulnerability does not exist in a vacuum but only has meaning in relation to something – that is, a threat.

This approach is flawed from a short-term, practical as well as from a long-term and ideological point of view. A curfew on children will not protect them because most abuse happens in the victim's own home, or that of the offender (Finkelhor, 1979: 74). As one incest survivor points out:

> 'I was never afraid, when going home at night, of being raped or mugged, I knew what was waiting for me was infinitely worse'. (Quoted in Cogan and Caplin, 1986)

It is disturbing that many child protectionists persist in presenting the home as a sanctuary and warning children to 'Say No to Strangers' (the title of the Home Office film). Ironically, such advice increases children's isolation and confinement within the family (Barrett and Coward, 1985: 23) and suggests a need for increased parental control (Ennew, 1986: 69).

The call on paternal protection is particularly inappropriate given that the father or stepfather may well be the abuser. The father's role as protector is, on one level, quite compatible with his role as possessor – the notion of ownership lies behind both the duty to protect and the right to use. The father or brother who is assigned to defend a woman's

virginity and to 'give her away' in marriage may, by the same token, claim the right to use her sexually himself (Herman, 1981: 54).

'Protection' then is not a long-term (and often not even a short-term) solution to the exploitation of children, and similarly 'vulnerability' is not a useful focus for the debate. Indeed 'vulnerability' is an important ideological barrier against children's liberation and is a concept used to pre-empt discussion about structural oppression. Even some of the pioneers of feminist analyses of child sexual abuse have accepted, and been limited by, this emphasis.[2] Florence Rush, after her radical and detailed analysis of the historical and cultural context of such abuse, states:

> I believe the term liberation as it is carelessly applied to children is both dangerous and absurd. Born helpless and vulnerable, the young have always relied upon the greater capacity of adults for survival. . . . To equate the oppression of children with oppressed blacks and women is to confuse the nature of childhood. (Rush, 1980: 186)

She goes on to conclude that: 'Children have the right, not to equality with adults, but to considerate adult understanding, custody and protection' (1980: 186).

I agree with Rush that it is misleading to take the concept of liberation developed by one oppressed group and to transfer it wholesale to another. There are important differences between the oppressions experienced by people because of their stigmatized age and/or race, gender and/or class. However, this is not a reason for rejecting 'liberation' and retreating into some kind of protectionist philosophy. We can struggle to develop a more appropriate analysis of children's oppression instead of compromising into the reductionist position that, because children are 'helpless', they need protection rather than rights.

Oppressed groups have good reason to be suspicious of any theory which relies on biological determinism. There is a long tradition of explaining and excusing oppression on the grounds of biology as if we were confined by nature rather than by a man-made world. In the west, for instance, notions of innate biological weakness have been used to excuse the 'fair sex' (that is, white, middle-class women) from paid work and political power. Weakness is a criterion selectively applied – Black and working-class women have rarely been offered the privileges of protection and even white, middle-class women have forfeited any claims to fragility when they've become too uppity. In a similar way the 'vulnerability' accorded to children as a category is no protection for the child who does not 'fit' or who steps out of line.

It is important not to be seduced by supposedly commonsense interpretation of biological 'limitations' or by the promised offer of protection. Instead I would argue that the notion of children's innate vulnerability (as a biological fact unmediated by the world they live in) is an ideology of control which diverts attention away from the socially constructed oppression of children. As Jackson (1982) points out,

children in western society are kept dependent for much longer than is considered necessary in other societies. Young people are politically disenfranchized, economically restricted and denied the legal rights and responsibilities that are considered part of full citizenship. Their dependence is accentuated:

> A great deal of effort is spent in keeping children childish. . . . Children who behave like adults are regarded as at best amusing and at worst thoroughly obnoxious. If we were not so interested in nurturing immaturity, would the word 'precocious' have become an insult? (Jackson, 1982: 27)

This is an area where theories of children's liberation can usefully borrow ideas from other liberation movements which demand rights and resources rather than appealing for pity and protection (women reject chivalry and the offer of seats and demand maternity leave and crèches instead; the physically disabled reject the 'helping hand' in favour of a new architecture).

If we are to tackle the roots of child sexual abuse we have to think about the position of children in society. Perhaps the first step is to change the terms of the debate by replacing the concept of 'vulnerability' with terms such as 'oppression' or 'powerlessness' and by replacing restrictive notions of 'protecting' with liberating notions of 'empowering'.

Adult awareness, children's assertiveness: one step forward

In spite of such criticism, many preventative programmes in specific ways do link child sexual abuse to the broader position of children in society, even if they fail to develop a wider theoretical approach. These child protection programmes challenge the stereotype that children often lie, and question the techniques employed by adults to silence children and bully them into obedience ('Do as you are told', 'Because I say so', 'It's for your own good'). They make connexions between the way we refuse to listen to children generally and the way we fail to hear about abuse:

> 'We are too accustomed to regarding children as an irritation, a noisy messy nuisance. If we continue to believe children should be seen and not heard, their silence protects the molester.' (Paul Griffiths, quoted in Rantzen, 1986)

Many of the new writings draw attention to the ways in which we deny children control over their own bodies, whether by making them kiss Daddy goodnight or by hitting them (Adams and Fay, 1981: 14–15). They challenge us to reassess our own use of power in all areas, not only

as parents but as 'strangers', youth workers and teachers. As one headmistress says:

> 'You can't teach children that they are responsible for certain areas of their life and then expect them to sit in a classroom and force-feed them with information they are not encouraged to discuss or query. The compliant, conforming child becomes one who is at risk.' (Linda Frost, quoted in Aziz, 1987).

Such discussion helps us to become aware of the day-to-day way in which we relate to children and to change our own behaviour so that we minimize our collaboration with a social structure that is profoundly anti-children.[3]

Our treatment of children is not, however, simply a question of attitude; it is a reflection of our position of power over children.

> Childhood is not just a psychological state, but also a social status – and a very lowly one at that. Take one example: the frequency with which children are touched by adults. The amount of unsolicited physical contact people receive is a good indication of relative social position. It has been observed that bosses touch workers, men touch women and adults touch children much more than the other way round. To touch one's social superior without good reason is an act of insubordination. Think how frequently children are shaken off when they use touch to attract an adult's attention, and how that same adult can freely take hold of the child, adjust his or her hair, cut short his or her activities. (Jackson, 1982: 26)

Reconsidering our treatment of children is an important part of challenging the lowly social status of children, but it does not, in itself, solve the inequalities.

The preventative programmes are also trying to encourage children to change their behaviour. They are being encouraged to be assertive ('It's OK to say NO') to get in touch with and express their own feelings ('Feeling Yes, Feeling No') and to develop a sense of control over their own bodies. This is the positive side of the action taken in response to the ideology of vulnerability – here vulnerability is seen not just in terms of the need for adult protection but as something that children themselves can change by modifying their behaviour. Roleplays, games, stories and songs are being specifically designed to help children resist abuse. The message is, as one catchy song declares:

> My body's nobody's body but mine
> You mind your own body
> Let me mind mine. (*Kids Can Say No* video)

Such promotion of children's 'rights' is, however, cosmetic in so far as children are still supposed to obey legitimate authority. The preventative campaigns aim to increase children's self-confidence but adults are reassured that 'teaching children to say no' is not 'subversive' (Aziz, 1987). It 'doesn't mean they are going to say no to drinking milk or eating greens just for the hell of it' (Linda Frost quoted in Aziz, 1987). In other words, the child protection movement encourages children to express their opinions but in the end expects them to do what is 'for their own good' as defined by benevolent adults who make 'reasonable' requests.

Such isolated assertiveness training is hardly radical and, in any case, is unlikely to have much long-term effect. Even if a child is told that 'bodily autonomy' is her right, she is likely to be getting a different implicit message every day. 'My body', maybe *should* be 'nobody's body but mine' but children are subject to daily bodily invasion: they are not only raped and molested but their bodies are subject to laws which they are powerless to influence, their images are exploited in advertising, and adults control what they wear, what they can do and when they can do it. A child cannot develop some kind of abstract concept of bodily autonomy without any practical experience of that 'right':

> A child's right to her own body, autonomy and privacy is still a radical concept which would require the transformation of family power relations. (Liz, 1982: 217)

Assertiveness training is a start but it is not a solution and it is certainly a misnomer to call it a 'preventative' measure; training individuals to be assertive without challenging practical inequalities is no more 'preventative' of child sexual abuse than building nuclear bunkers is 'preventative' of nuclear war.

Child protection programmes which focus on helping children to change their attitudes in isolation are at best providing individualistic solutions. At worst they are creating the illusion that victims have powers to resist that in reality are negligible. While it is important that children are not terrorized into feeling they have no ability to protect themselves (and in some situations they will indeed be able to fight off an attacker), it is vital to recognize that a child can confidently shout 'No' at her father and still find that he rapes her because in the end it is he who has the power. The message that children can protect themselves if they are assertive can be misleading. It can also reinforce children's sense of guilt by making then feel somehow responsible for what has happened because maybe they did not say 'no' as though they *really* meant it.

To sum up, despite some encouraging individual aspects of the contemporary child protection movement, the mainstream campaigns conspicuously fail to take any overall stand against the structural oppression of children. They are, therefore, not only severely limited in what they can achieve, but they also often reinforce the very ideologies which expose children to exploitation in the first place.

Notes

Jenny Kitzinger was involved in setting up CHOICES, the Cambridge Incest Survivors Refuge where she has worked for the last three years as a volunteer counsellor and Jane-of-all-trades. Her paid work is at the Child Care and Development Group, University of Cambridge.

I am just starting work on a book about childhood sexual abuse and would like to interview women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse or whose children have been abused and/or who work in this field. If you would be prepared to fill in a questionnaire or be interviewed, please write to me at: CC & D, Free School Lane, Cambridge, CB2 3RF. Thank you.

1 The same notion of the deserving and undeserving victim has of course been used about adult rape victims. When Peter Sutcliffe raped and murdered women in Yorkshire, more concern was shown about his 'innocent' victims than about the prostitutes he attacked.
2 The mainstream child protection movement as discussed in this chapter is a set of ideas rather than a group of individuals. Some of the people quoted do not necessarily see themselves as 'mainstream' and indeed may also express quite revolutionary views. Some writers, such as Rush, discuss child abuse in terms of power and social structure and yet make statements which undermine more radical accounts, or, at the very least, lend themselves to liberal co-option. It is precisely these contradictions and the pervasiveness of mainstream thought (or the co-option of radical ideas) that make detailed analysis of these constructs so important.
3 In spite of women's direct personal experience of the oppressions of childhood, the feminist movement seems to have generally evaded this issue. Women's movement texts tend to discuss children only in relation to women (as sources of joy or sorrow, fulfilment or entrapment) or as objects of sexist conditioning. Out of the 175 references to children in *The Feminist Dictionary* (Kramarae and Treichler, 1985) and *The Quotable Woman* (Partnow, 1985) less than a dozen deal with children's social status.

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