

Social workers' use of heuristics in risk assessment and decision making in cases involving sibling sexual abuse

Dr. Peter Yates, Edinburgh Napier University
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Some statistics...

- NIBRS data: Juveniles account for about 35% of those known to police to have committed sexual offences (Finkelhor, Ormrod and Chaffin, 2009)
- General population survey: Nearly 66% of contact sexual abuse reported by children involved perpetrators under the age of 18 (Radford et al., 2011)
- Between 1/3 to 1/2 of victims of children with HSB are siblings or close family members (e.g. Beckett, 2006; Ryan 2010)



These cases raise particular challenges

- Living arrangements
- Contact



Some practice literature

- Remove and assess (e.g. Costin, Schuler et al. 2009; Ballantine 2012)
- Take each case on its merits (e.g. Fahy 2011, Caffaro 2014)
- “The current emphasis on the wishes of the child victim of abuse cannot always be privileged, nor in our opinion, are of more importance than the needs of the offending sibling. After all, this young person is also a child.” (Keane et al., 2013:248)

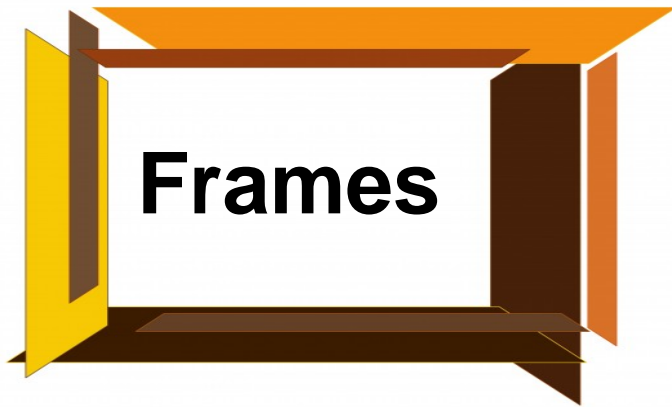
What I did



- 6 local authorities in Scotland
- Interviewed 21 social workers regarding 21 families
- 54 children involved in sibling sexual behaviour
- Full or half siblings under 16
- 3 examples of sexual behaviour regarded as mutually initiated
- Constructivist Grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2006)

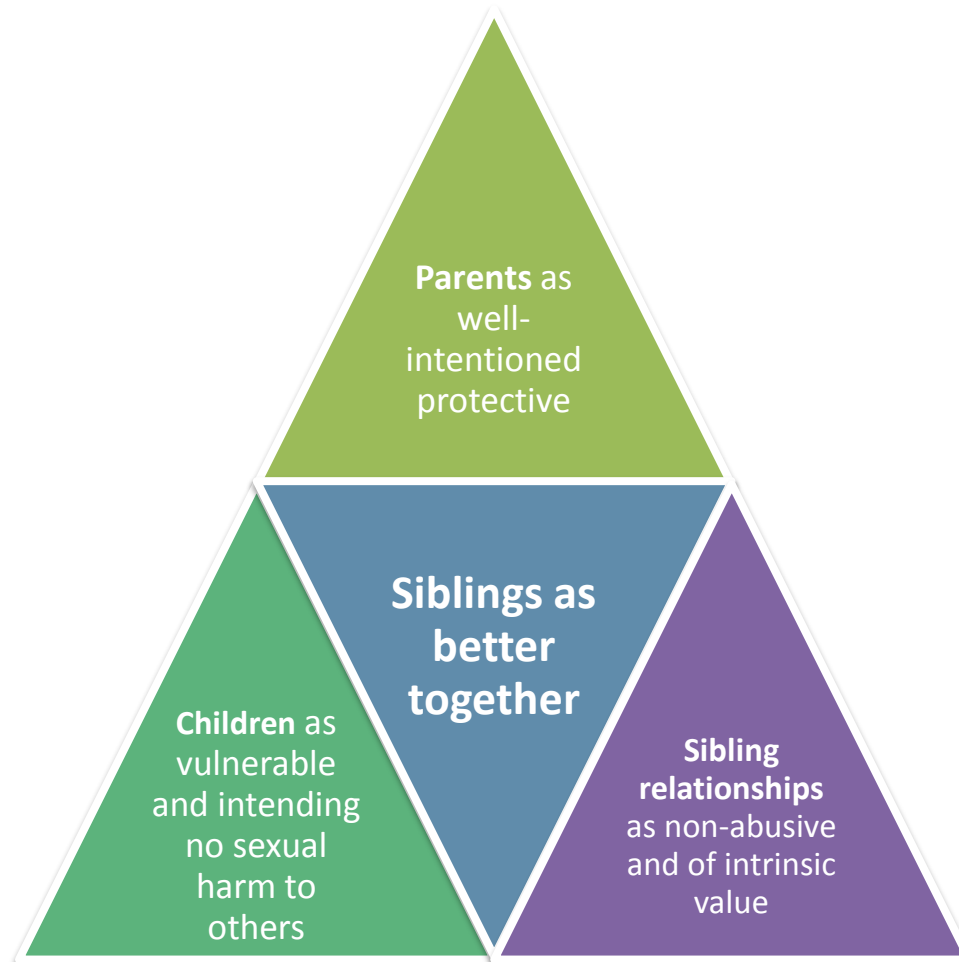
Hammond's (1996) Cognitive continuum





A frame is like a mental filter. The world is not perceived directly but through a mental filter, comprising of templates of interpretations of prior experiences, concepts and constructed knowledge.

The social workers' practice mindset



Children as vulnerable and intending no sexual harm to others

- Doubting whether the behaviour happened
- Resisting labelling the behaviour as abuse
- “But I always kind of felt that it was more ex-, experimentation than, sexual abuse as such...And it did seem, well, maybe it wasn't a one-off, we don't know
- ...I know it's sexual abuse but it did still seem more, I don't, I think in her wee [little], in her head, I'm not sure whether she'd got any satisfaction out of it as such.” (Liz)

Sibling relationships as non-abusive and of intrinsic value

- Requiring a second incident
- Focusing on immediate safety

“There was a woman here who ticked all the boxes in terms of, at that stage, in terms of the immediate safety for both boys but especially [victim], ...so I kind of think in my own view, it was very much, on balance certainly over the next few days up until the case conference, let’s keep the boys kind of at home.” (Fiona)

Parents as well-intentioned protective

- ‘On board’:
 - Someone I can work with
 - Having a shared understanding of the problem
- Did they report the incident?
- Are they willing to accept support?
- Do they show commitment to both children, but seem willing to prioritise the victim?

- “Er, the parents. And I think it was the fact of the parents were fully on board... They were the ones that went ahead to social work. They didn't have to disclose that, who would know? They were the ones that went ahead with the information. They wanted support. They fully wanted support. They recognised that he might be accommodated, but they wanted to try at least attempt to have him at home.” (Mary)

When under pressure and faced with considerable complexity, social workers tend to reduce decision making processes to a limited set of manageable strategies (Platt and Turney, 2014)

Some key heuristics

- Parents reporting the behaviour and being willing to accept social work support
- Incident believed to be the first and only incident
- How old is the abusing child?
- Do they express remorse?

Recommendations (1)

- No evidence that assessment-based decisions are better than intuitive decisions
- Need to hold these important decisions to the highest standards of accountability (Munro 2008)
- Raise reflexive awareness of the practice mindset ‘Siblings as better together’, its constituent frames and influence upon decision making

Recommendations (2)

- Bring an analytical and assessment-based approach to decision making, which includes (amongst other things) an exploration and consideration of:
 - The victim's voice
 - The possible emotional impact of the behaviour
 - The risks of future sibling sexual behaviour
 - The quality of the sibling relationship
 - The protective abilities and capacities of the parents

Contact

Dr. Peter Yates



p.yates@napier.ac.uk



+44 (0)131 455 2762

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