

Response to Essex and Gumbleton

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Congratulations to the authors for taking a courageous position in challenging a dominant discourse in the area of sexual abuse and violence. They have offered a technique that apparently works in breaking down long established patterns of distrust between particular families and workers, thus facilitating important conversations amongst adult family members about the issues of abuse. Essex and Gumbleton's controversial position lies in disputing the requirement that the alleged offender face up to his abuse and accept responsibility (and that his partner/the child's carer needs to overtly attribute the abuse to him) in order for ongoing safety to be established. This requirement has been central to all intra-familial abuse work since the late 1970s (Giarretto, 1979). However, as the authors point out, there are families where this cannot be attained and the workers risk losing the family and any influence toward ensuring ongoing safety of children, in their attempt to achieve acceptance of responsibility.

In reading this paper, I liked the technique developed by Essex and Gumbleton. It is engaging, creative and playful but also allows an entry for the two parents into a serious conversation about the complexity of an abuse situation. However, I also struggled with trying to clarify the attributes of a family with whom they would choose to use this approach. This critical issue is not made clear. Their case study indicated that there was considerable ambiguity about whether the father had sexually offended against his children. Other statements suggest that their approach is used when children have disclosed abuse, yet wish to remain with their offending parent, and where the offender is not admitting to the abuse.

My criteria for using this approach would be much narrower, I suspect, than those proposed by Essex and Gumbleton. Firstly I would never use this technique if a child in the family had disclosed abuse (even if he/she had later retracted). In this situation, I believe that it would be damaging to sidestep the issue of responsibility for the abuse. Essex and Gumbleton focus upon the goal of making children safe and free of abuse in their family in the present and the future. While this is an extremely important goal, their focus on this aspect of the abusive relationship neglects the other factors associated with trauma for a victim. For example, victims of abuse suffer from symptoms such as hypervigilance, flashbacks and nightmares, which are often triggered

by the presence of the perpetrator, which itself reminds them of abuse (Finkelhor, 1990; DSM IV, American Psychiatric Association, 1994). If the perpetrator is not acknowledging the abuse and gaining an awareness of these experiences for his victim, then he would be unwilling to accommodate to help his victim with his/her distress, and the victim would have to suffer in silence in order to keep the family together.

Victims often also have internalised feelings of shame and responsibility for the abuse (embedded by the grooming processes of the perpetrator) (Finkelhor, 1990; Berliner and Conte, 1990). It is the offender's action in owning up to the abuse and fully acknowledging this grooming and his responsibility for all aspects of the abuse that most helps young victims to shed these damaging cognitions and feelings about themselves (Miller, 1996). I would be concerned about the long term consequences in regard to these feelings and cognitions for victims living in families where they have been abused but where the perpetrator does not accept full or even partial responsibility for his actions.

I would also be concerned about the long term consequences for the victim in their intimate and close relationships if the abuser has not acknowledged the abuse (Mullen and Fleming, 1998). What is the message to victims about their role in relationships if they can be abused but the relationship then returns to normal without any admission of the profound wrong that has occurred? I believe that a new pattern of relationship with the perpetrator is sometimes possible. It can be immensely useful for the victim to learn healthy interactions with her parent that do not involve abuse of power and inappropriate sexual and emotional intimacy. However, I do not believe that this new pattern of relationship is possible without the acknowledgment of the abuse by the offending parent.

Robyn Miller and I conducted research where victims were given the opportunity to confront their offenders after long term family therapy work. It was profoundly beneficial to victims to see for themselves the perpetrator acknowledge the abuse, see his remorse and pain, experience a reversal of the power differential and to recognise that their abuser had an understanding of the impact of his abusive behaviour upon them (Miller, 1996; Welfare, 1996). I would be very concerned about the long term prognosis of child victims of abuse who continue to live with their offenders without the perpetrators acknowledging the abuse.

My second criterion for not using this approach would be when there is a high level of certainty that the parent has abused the child. My concern in this situation would be that the therapists would be inadvertently colluding

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with the denial, minimisation and cognitive distortions of the perpetrator. Perpetrators of sexual and physical abuse often deeply believe that they did not commit the crime(s). They create ways of thinking about the acts that either minimise their responsibility or attribute all responsibility to the victim or to others (Salter, 1988). They can even dissociate in the act of committing the abuse.

While I strongly advocate the need for perpetrators to have empathy for their victims in order to stop future abuse, I also think that offenders need to understand their cycles of abuse and their cognitions around the abuse. Without these additional factors, I believe that they are still at risk of reoffending. In a way, there is no place in this situation for postmodernist ideas. The offenders' constructions around their behaviour are faulty and it is important to give them the opportunity to understand this. For some men it can take many months for shifts to occur and the changes are often facilitated by new perceptions in other parts of the family. The process does not have to be blaming and confrontational but can be nonblaming, sensitive and respectfully challenging.

Having outlined my narrower criteria (and reasons) for the use of this technique, I suspect that the authors would respond by arguing that there still exist families who would be lost unless the requirement of the perpetrator's accepting responsibility is abandoned and Resolutions' less direct method is employed. I would like to counter-argue that there exist other very sound ways to engage these families without sidestepping the responsibility issue. I will briefly outline some of the ways that have been developed by the Sexual Abuse Team of The Bouverie Centre.

1. The context of counselling

The legal-social context of the counselling agency is crucial in engaging the families involved in symmetrical battles with protective services. If an agency is clearly separate from the legal and protective issues, it is more likely to be able to engage in a different and productive way with the family (Sheinberg, 1992). It is our experience that families with horrendous reputations can be engaged with and can work toward accepting responsibility for the abuse and toward safety for their children because of this different context and the therapist's freedom to take a non-punitive position.

2. Avoiding cementing the couple's denial

Couples who present to our centre united in denial of the abuse are generally seen separately as soon as possible in order to begin to strengthen the non-offending parent–victimised child(ren) relationship. It has been our experience that if couples continue to be seen together, little leverage can be found to help them face some of the issues. The non-offending parent places her emotional energy with her partner rather than with her child(ren).

The non-offending parent is less likely to be open to the possibility of the abuse and the alleged offending parent is consequently safe in continuing not to face up to the abuse. Therefore the technique presented by the authors, which involves a couple based activity, would inadvertently be cementing the denial of responsibility of the abuse.

3. Mother–daughter work prioritised

It is usual for the non-offending parent and victim child relationship to have been contaminated by the abuse. It is our belief that this relationship must be healed for shifts to begin in the family (Dwyer and Miller, 1997). In terms of the therapeutic work, this relationship must be prioritised. Essex and Gumbleton state that this is an aim of their work, yet it appears that the focus is upon the non-offending parent gaining an understanding of the children's position through the role plays with their offending partner present. If it is possible, direct non-offending parent–child work would achieve a strengthening of this relationship and allow for a shift in the understanding of the non-offending parent.

In summary, I think that the technique offered by the authors is creative and sound but should only be applied in situations where there has been a thorough investigation, the children are not disclosing any abuse, and where it is assessed that there is a medium to low probability that the alleged offender has committed an offence.

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