

The Children Will Wait

Robyn Salisbury

No psychotherapist would disagree with the premise that providing the best possible conditions for children to grow is a springboard to the development of sound mental health.

Children will wait. They have been waiting for centuries for us to face up to child sexual abuse and take action to stop it. Do we want to force them to continue this waiting vigil? There are important and not so difficult steps we can take to prevent the waiting continuing to happen to so many.

In July-August 2017, after four striking incidents, I decided to edit and co-author a book which would gather wisdom about the need to address sexual abuse. I invited 15 contributors who wrote with perception and care. Consequently, *Free to be Children: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in Aotearoa New Zealand*, was published in March 2020.

Towards the end of editing this book I felt the raw pain of so intensively looking in the face of sexual abuse and sexually abused children. I had long been concerned about this as it was personally and professionally relevant for me.

The book had a strong impact. I was interviewed on national radio and television. Colleagues were enthusiastic and it seemed readers would choose to act regarding sexual abuse. Then the COVID pandemic hit and, like many publications at the time, the book became hidden in the shadows. Almost overnight the pandemic decimated the big spreadsheet of opportunities I had arranged to share the book with colleagues in all pertinent professions. At the time, I personally just rolled with the situation, aware that many thousands of people suffered more painful losses. Relief also played a role in my ready acceptance; I was exhausted leading up to this publication.

I was about to resurrect publicity regarding the book when Cyclone Gabrielle hit. Then an earthquake in my home region. None of this can any longer be a reason to slow the tackling of child sexual abuse prevention. It is crucial we build safety measures for children.

What has stopped me and others from addressing this serious problem in the past? Do we really need to confront this issue? Yes. The statistics make it clear. I do not need to quote them; you will know about the prevalence data. You will also have practice-based evidence of how frequently this experience features in clients with mental health, substance abuse, and relational problems, and of the ways the deeply harmful effects of sexual abuse disrupt the developmental process.

The afternoon before book release day, I flew from Palmerston North to Auckland for media interviews and a conference presentation. The man sitting next to me asked why I was travelling. He then proceeded to tell me that his partner had been sexually abused by her father and it had severely impacted her life, in ways that were ongoing. Then he gave me media coaching from his professional experience, because he wanted lots of people to become aware of this issue and to work together to address change.

The following morning following a breakfast TV interview, and before an interview on national radio with Kathryn Ryan, my phone rang in a cafe. I apologised to the woman sitting near me for my having a private conversation in a public space. She asked what I was doing and when I told her, she said she was a police forensic officer who often dealt with child sexual abuse. She was delighted to learn that some people were working to stop it happening. I could add hundreds more such stories but no doubt those reading this article will be well aware of the need to act urgently regarding this important social and personal issue.

Three years have passed since *Free to be Children* was published. People sent very positive feedback about the book and those who had purchased a copy were hugely impacted by the theme. With Aotearoa and the world experiencing so many challenges and losses back then it did not seem appropriate for me to add yet another issue, so I stayed quiet about child sexual abuse. Now, in 2023, I want to draw attention again to sexual abuse issues and no longer remain quiet.

I am, therefore, again promoting the wisdom written by the contributors to *Free to be Children*. Will this book be a worthwhile read? To sidestep my bias, I have cited excerpts from two of the reviews written. The first is from NZAP member and child psychotherapist, Joy Hayward:

“Despite my extensive reading this is a book like no other. Its contributors, with one exception, are all New Zealanders and its focus is very much on Aotearoa and our major problem with child sexual abuse. They are well informed, thoughtful, and passionate. For this reason, it is hard to pick out highlights. Each chapter adds to the whole. It starts with a survivor’s story and has perspectives from a paediatrician, Oranga Tamariki, a detective senior sergeant, a survivor advocate, an advocate for sexuality education, the chief censor of film and literature, the manager of psychiatric services at Kia Marama, a psychotherapist at Waikeria Prison, (Hinewirangi Kohu Morgan), and the manager of Wellstop Central. Dr Natalie Thorburn contributes a chapter on sex trafficking of adolescents in NZ, Sarah Beggs Christofferson on assessing risk and the shift towards prevention and Dr Shirley Julich on restorative justice.

What a triumph on the part of Robyn Salisbury to facilitate and edit this book. Her own contributions on the development of constructive and destructive behaviours and on the pathway forward are excellent. Her attachment framework to explore the impact on sexuality is extremely helpful.

...My anxiety in writing this review is that I may not do justice to this excellent book. It should be required reading for anyone training in a helping profession and will also provide vital insights and extend the knowledge of experienced clinicians. It is also unique in providing a way forward. Most of us are working on damage control, but, as the title suggests this book wants much more and challenges us all to think what else might be possible."

Bernadette Berry (NZCCP) writes:

"My first thought when I saw the subtitle of this book was 'that is a big ambition,' and I wondered how any book would manage to make any inroad to that aim. It is rare in a textbook that I bother reading the preface, but I did so with this text to see if it gave me any insight into the actual aims of the book. I was not disappointed. Robyn Salisbury clearly outlines the purposes of all the chapters and writers included ... and explains why this is a first step in reducing the prevalence of sexual abuse in this country. ... The book adds some relatively new areas (and different perspectives) for consideration.... I cannot recommend this book highly enough."

As reviewers have clearly identified, the book's concluding chapter, 'The Pathway Forward', can only be fully meaningful after becoming well informed of the rationale for each recommended step. And, of course, no one prevention measure is ever adequate. Effective action must be culturally informed, multi-factorial, and empowered by an unarguable depth and breadth of sound information. For these reasons, this article will not list or try to argue the necessary changes; rather, offers some free copies of the book. See below for details of how to access yours.

Collaborating with the contributors to this book taught me that worker ants operating as a team will collectively have more intelligence and be able to carry far more than their combined weight. Each of us can make a difference by getting well

informed, moving through and beyond our initial reactivity, then taking informed and perhaps collaborative action in our own domain.

Walking home through the Palmerston North Square early one evening in 2022, the Chinese Year of the Tiger, I was admiring a magnificent model tiger set on a frame some metres off the ground. Then I noticed I was not alone in my awe. On the other side of it was a tiny toddler, staring up, captivated. Suddenly they drew their arms backwards, flung them forwards and leapt perhaps two centimetres into the air towards the tiger. What better model for aspiration could we possibly have.

Massey University Press have gifted some copies of *Free to be Children*. If you would like a copy, please contact me:

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Include your postal address.

Salisbury, R. (Ed.). (2020). *Free to be children: Preventing child sexual abuse in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Massey University Press. ISBN 978-0-9951230-0-7

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