

Chapter 7

'The Bold and the Beautiful': Working with sexually abused girls

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This chapter gives some glimpses into the world of working with sexually abused girls.

It would not be possible to diagnose or treat other children based only on information in these notes. The methods described in this chapter cannot be transferred directly to any other child, however similar the situation may seem. Much depends on the child, the counsellor, and the relationship between them, as well as on the entire treatment programme. Especially when working with very vulnerable children, one should take care not to open a Pandora's Box of trauma without an adequate infrastructure. Deep-level work like this should not be attempted with children who are still on the streets, and who do not have an environment in which their feelings (upset, fury, etc.) can be adequately contained. The children need support - emotional, social, and practical - while they are coming to terms with their experiences. It could take many months of counselling for a child to get to the level of trust and insight described here.

Nombulelo, aged 11

Chapter 5 looked at how children usually talk about easier things before dealing with really serious matters, but 11-year-old Nombulelo was different. The first page of her life history book was set out like this - in big colourful letters, in the handwriting of a much younger child as she has been out of school for a long time, in struggling English, in the hope that she would be heard more widely. Her story leapt from the page.

I want to talk a rape. me I SLEEPING my auntys house.
 my aunty must go buy Beer. The Boyfriend of aunty
 say you must come to me you must. He rape me and
 put his hand in my mouth. He say you must. You must
 not talk. my aunty Look for me. I must not talking. I
 talk to my aunty. my aunty not help me. me I must go
 to my mommy. my mommy be drinking. me I again must
 go to aunty. He take me again. again I must have
 rape. my stakefather auntys Boyfriend. He talks me
 bad to go to the street and do the Bisness of dirty
 toilet Buckets. me I cant Listen to him. He say you
 come in the house. me I Look the man. He take me
 ruff. He put a knife in my neck. He must be talking
 ruff. He say SHUT UP. He say I must in the room. He
 put me in the Dress of aunty. He must rape me. In my
 dreams there is a man. I must not SLEEP at night.
 In my dreams the man say: no talking. come in my
 house.

What is child sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse involves a range of activities, including non-contact and contact offences. Sexual abuse occurs in *all* sections of society. In most cases, children are abused by someone they know and trust. Stranger abuse comprises only a small percentage of the total.

Sexual abuse is any sexual contact with a child, or the use of a child for the sexual pleasure of someone else. This may include exposing private parts to the child or asking the child to expose him- or herself, fondling the genitals or requests for the child to do so, oral sex or attempts to enter the vagina or anus with fingers, objects or penis. Abuse is not limited to actual penetration.

A few months after Nombulelo started her life story book, the following was noted in the Siviwe record book:

Today the girls reported that Nombulelo was trying to do 'The bold and the beautiful' with the smaller girls [a reference to the rather indiscriminate kissing and shifting alliances in the well-known soap opera].

It is not easy for any of us to speak about our own negative sexual and abusive experiences. It is especially difficult to speak about these experiences if we initiated the encounter, and even more so when we think that our own conduct can be criticised. When abuse has taken place within the family and immediate friendship circle, the experience of abuse is accompanied by feelings of ambivalence. There can be ambivalence about telling the secret because of the effect it will have on the family. If the perpetrator is also the breadwinner, his arrest may plunge the family into destitution. The child may experience both good and bad feelings. At first it may seem unlikely that a child could experience 'good' or 'rewarding' feelings, but children who are sexually abused are often given certain advantages (sweets, outings, treats, affection, extra attention), and can form special loyalties towards the perpetrator. As human beings we long for intimacy and belonging on an emotional level. As physical beings our bodies naturally respond in certain ways to certain stimuli. For example, when we see or hear something terrible, our bodies react to the shock with changes in our heartbeat, blood pressure and digestive systems. Or if we jump into cold water our breathing is affected. Similarly, our bodies react to the stimulation of sexual organs with arousal or even orgasm. A child does not have the experience to gain perspective on her emotional needs or on her physical arousal. The child hates being abused, but at the same time she is 'rewarded' with intimacy, and her own sexual responses. Longing for intimacy and experiencing sexual pleasure, it is not surprising that many children feel that they are to blame for the abuse. In the long journey to healing, an important aspect is gaining the understanding that it was not her body that betrayed her, but the perpetrator. All this makes it hard for children to talk about their experience of sexual abuse and hard for healing to begin. It also makes it very difficult to bring perpetrators to book.

In the entry from Nombulelo's life story reproduced above, she speaks about the rapes quite openly. It was only some time after she had written that page that she showed, through behaviour of the kind noted in the Siviwe record book, that she had not yet integrated and made sense of her experience. This is often referred to by the shorthand expression 'acting out'. Nombulelo and her counsellor were already working on her book, and the counsellor could return to what she had written in the book in order to help her make the link between what she had suffered and what she was doing. With the other two girls discussed in this chapter, Maria and Sandra, the counselling process followed a different pattern. The conversations with them were initiated because of disciplinary issues involving the wellbeing of other children, as well as their own. It was important that the girls be enabled to confront their own behaviour with understanding, in order to protect them and the other girls from expressing themselves inappropriately.

There are many ways to approach such a conversation. In these cases a depersonalised conversation was used. In a depersonalised conversation the counsellor invites the child to reflect on the issues as they pertain to a neutral third person. This approach opens the way for the child to test the reaction of the counsellor, to see whether it is safe to continue, and to share her own story as directly or indirectly as she can. In working with a depersonalised story, it is important to make sure to show that one understands the child in the story, and that one recognises and accepts the ambivalence of the feelings referred to. Guilt needs to be placed firmly with the perpetrator, while also expressing understanding that nobody is entirely bad, and that children can love the perpetrator and like the good things about that person.

In addition to depersonalised conversations, there are many other tried-and-tested ways to approach the issues. For instance, many children talk directly about their experiences, or disclose abuse in different counselling moments, such as with regard to their feelings. (Chapter 4, on counselling, covers some of these methods.)

What is important is for the counsellor to adopt a non-judgemental approach, while at the same time being clear about social norms that need to be affirmed. Most important is to help the child clarify for herself what is whole and good and builds her life, and what ultimately makes her miserable and weak. A child can gradually realise that even when she loves feeling special, or getting nice things as a result of the abuse, it ultimately leaves her feeling unclean and confused, causes havoc with her other family relationships, and makes it difficult for her to be free and open with other people.

Maria, aged 9

Maria was part of a group of five girls, all at first denying accusations, then trying to find a scapegoat, and then wildly accusing each other of 'starting first' with 'doing fingers'. A younger girl in the house had woken up and complained to the housemother that she did not want to share the room with girls who 'did fingers'. She said, "Please don't tell anyone this part of the story, because I will be in serious trouble with the other girls for carrying tales!"

We divided the girls between different staff members so that they could each be interviewed separately. This helps with the investigative and therapeutic aspects of the process. On the investigative side the children are prevented from corroborating each other's stories or bullying each other into denying what they have been doing. On the therapeutic side, each child is enabled to speak about her own perceptions and experience. At times this type of conversation provides the opportunity for the child to disclose important earlier experiences of rape and abuse.

There are no rooms in the house where one can sit privately, so Maria and I settled down in mild autumn sunshine in the corner of the yard. "Tell me what happened." "Nothing." We sat together in the stubborn silence for some time. After a while I sensed the quality of the silence changing.

I started telling her stories about 'other children', using the depersonalised approach. She loved gossip, and could not help but listen when I told her about 'things that have happened to girls'. I spoke in a conversational tone, but also with sadness, because these were sad things we were talking about. "Do you know," I started (she loved to be in the know), "that sometimes bad things happen to children?" I talked about children seeing bad things, hearing bad things, experiencing bad things - accidents, fights... I kept asking her if she thought the witness or victim was guilty of causing the bad thing to happen. She was unsure. I explained that children often feel guilty, feel bad, feel that things are their fault, whereas, as she could see, this was clearly not the case in any of the situations I was describing.

As I started with another tale she interrupted me with one of her own, about how she had once been travelling on a very full train when a woman was raped by men on the train. How she could see from between the people's legs. How nobody did anything to help the woman. How everyone just stood there, being too scared of the men to do anything. She described the rape in some detail. She started to shiver terribly, despite the pleasant sun. We talked about how scared she had felt, about how she felt on trains. She talked about what she could have done to help the woman, and she concluded that she could not have done anything, as a lone runaway 5- or 6-year-old, when all the adults together were frozen in fear and apathy. At the end of the conversation I realised that she had gone as far as she could, and that we could not immediately solve the problem of her role in the group 'acting out' situation.

When the staff team put together the information from our interviews, the other girls had mostly told on themselves, by describing their various roles in the 'acting out' situation. They had also told stories about other occasions on which Maria had acted sexually in the house.

We called a girls' meeting to remind them that it was important to report activities which were against the rules, and to remind them of the importance of helping each other not to do wrong things. The younger girls in the house took this seriously, and for the next few days we received endless reports that A took a biscuit last week without asking auntie, B ate the leftover chicken from Sunday lunch, C threw spoons in the bin rather than wash them up, D ran over the road on her way to school and the teacher saw her and shouted at her, E did not lose her crayons, she gave them to another child in exchange for her lunch and luxuries. It was also reported that "Auntie I can't sleep, Maria wants to play 'husbands' and I don't want to play."

Maria was furious, and denied wanting to do any such thing; she ended up threatening the child who had reported her. The next day I sat down with Maria. I reminded her about a child called Lee-Anne whom she knew in her home area. Lee-Anne was a relatively wealthy child living alone with her father. Maria used to play with Lee-Anne. I had heard, by complete coincidence, that another parent in the area had stopped her child playing with Lee-Anne because they thought the father was sexually abusing Lee-Anne, and that he also welcomed the visits of vulnerable children like Maria. Members of the community were suspicious of him. I suspected that Maria knew the real story, so I started a discussion about this child, mentioning that some children have different types of relationships with their parents from others; that Lee-Anne had so many presents from her father but always seemed sad. While Maria would never talk about her own experiences in Lee-Anne's house, and never talked about any experience of sexual trauma other than seeing the rape on the train, she became willing to talk about her own feelings. Bringing in the story about Lee-Anne provided the 'third person' focus on someone we both knew in reality. Perhaps out of loyalty to her friend, or perhaps to avoid uncomfortable memories, Maria did not continue talking about Lee-Anne's situation. But it was as if she accepted my acceptance and understanding of Lee-Anne as also an acceptance and understanding of her own situation. She acknowledged that she did sometimes want to play 'husbands', and that she did feel angry that nobody wanted to play it with her; that she did spy on other children to get their secrets so that she could get them involved or tell on them. She agreed that it was very difficult not to do it. She said that she did not like it when others wanted to play 'husbands' with her, that it did make her feel upset and confused as well as excited and powerful. She agreed to sleep downstairs near the housemother, so that she would not forget her good resolutions not to start playing 'husbands' again. Her counselling sessions continued, and in time she stopped 'acting out' with other girls, and settled into focusing on other priorities like her schooling.

The role of the childcare workers is crucial. The treatment plan for any child is discussed by the whole staff team. In this case the childcare workers made sure that Maria stayed downstairs. They kept 'an ear to the ground', observed dynamics between the girls



carefully, gave guidance and admonishment as appropriate. They sat with Maria when she was furious about the limits on her life. They woke up at midnight when she was crying in her deepening grief, overwhelmed by her feelings. It was the childcare workers who would just be there with her when she needed somebody, and who were there to give her a hug if she needed one.

Sandra, aged 13

Sandra and her cousin were at Siviwe, and having a fierce argument. "If our grandfather did not have sex with our aunt then you would not have been born!" countered by "If your mother did not sleep with our uncles then you would not have been born!" The other girls, confused and embarrassed by the exchange, reported to the childcare worker. In a culture where an insult to anybody's mother was a very serious thing, the girls calmed down remarkably easily, and tried to explain to the childcare worker how their family members were interrelated.

These girls were from the same farm community, kept in bondage for generations partly by the 'dop system' - a not entirely extinct South African practice of including portions of cheap reject wine as part of the farm workers' meagre wages.

A few days later, some of the girls reported to the childcare worker that Sandra and her cousin were 'doing bold and beautiful'. The childcare worker listened carefully, not wanting to label the children as 'sexually acting out' when they were perhaps just exploring their bodies, as many children do. But the details of the situation concerned her and she referred the children to me for problem-solving and counselling.

"Sandra, you have heard what the girls are reporting about you and your cousin. Can you tell me what happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"But your cousin said what the girls said was true."

"There was nothing."

I looked at the child in front of me. She looked forlorn, rather than rebellious or resistant.

"Can I tell you about somebody I know?"

Sandra seemed relieved at the change of topic. She did not reply but turned to face me, looking interested.

"It's about a girl, about 12 years old."

"Is she a Xhosa girl?" Sandra asked. I said, "No, she is a coloured girl." (This was not a conversation about race and ethnicity - what Sandra wanted to know was whether or not the child was like her.)

"Something bad happened to her. Something very bad."

Sandra remained interested. I told her the story in a conversational tone, expressing sadness and concern in my voice.



"There was a man who called her and made sex with her. And it made her very confused. She did not want to do it, but the man was sometimes nasty and sometimes nice, and she sometimes liked it and sometimes hated it. The worst thing was that it made her feel mixed up inside herself, and she did not want anybody to know because she felt that she was a really bad girl. But sometimes she would want to get the nice feelings, and then she would want to play sex, and then other children would say she is naughty and she would feel sure she is a bad girl."

Sandra asked, "Do I know that girl?" and I asked her in response, "Do you know a girl like that?" She said, "There is a girl like that. That girl also feels she is bad girl because of what her daddy did."

Sandra told me about the girl, in a detached, rambling sort of way, but it was impossible to stop her once she had started.

It started because of what her father did. He was drinking wine in the afternoon. When her mommy was out, he did sex things with her, he made her to touch him. And he told her not to tell anyone. She was very worried, but he was very nice to her afterwards, and bought her chips and told her she was a very special girl. The next time her mommy was out she wondered if he would buy her chips again, so she stayed in the house. He called her again, but this time he did other things that hurt her and she was bleeding. But she also felt nice warm feelings. He told her not to tell anyone. She felt horrible. Afterwards he was very nice to her, and bought her chips and chocolates, and told her she was special. She felt special again. But she did not want to eat the chips and chocolates. I hid it behind the cupboard.

The intensity and detail of what she was telling could be an indication that she was talking about herself. I made a mental note that she had just referred directly to herself, while I let her go on.

When her mommy came home, she did not want to look at her mommy. But she had a terrible tummy ache, and she said she was not hungry at supper time. After that my tummy was sore. When her mommy went out she went to play with her friends so she would not be alone with him. But she also felt lonely, because her mommy was always cross now. She wanted to know if other children also did this with their daddies. She did not want to ask them, but when they played house-house she pretended to be the daddy, and asked the girl playing baby to touch her. The girl did not want to play baby any more after that, so she did not find out about daddies, and she felt more bad inside, and her tummy ache was worse. Sometimes she did play with her daddy when her mom was out, because she so much wanted to be special and because she was so lonely.

She had trusted me with a very vulnerable story. I wanted her to know that she was understood, in terms of both the facts she had conveyed and the feelings she had referred to. I said tentatively, picking up the feeling she was expressing, "You are sometimes lonely?" She had the option of replying that it was the girl who was lonely. A counselling conversation can unfold in many different ways at any time, and one needs to be ready to proceed at the pace of the child. Sandra cried a little bit. "I miss my mommy," she said. And (nearly inaudibly), "I miss my daddy." She started talking in a detached sort of way, as if she was still talking about somebody else.

But my mommy found out about my daddy and took me to Red Cross Hospital. And they would not let me go home, they put me with a lady I did not know with lots of children. But I ran away there and I went home because I missed my daddy. But when I got home my daddy was very cross with me, hitting me. My mommy had found all the sweets behind the cupboard, and they were shouting at me saying I am a thief and I will get them into trouble with the farmer. My mommy was shouting I am a whore and a thief and she will hit it out of me, sleeping with her husband. I went to sleep at my auntie next door. Sometimes my daddy would let me in the house when my mommy was working, and I would feel special again. But my mommy came when I was there and he started hitting me in front of her saying I was stealing again. Then I ran away with my cousin because she went away before, and she knows how to ask money and sleep under bridges.

She said all of this without much feeling, but then went on, "Sometimes I want to die, but sometimes I dream my daddy comes, and I feel happy with nice feelings, and no pain, and when I wake up I want to play house-house."

Over the next few weeks Sandra kept her talk-time appointments with me. She was able to talk about feeling happy and feeling bad. Deep down she felt that she was a really bad child, and that was why she did bad things. She struggled with the fact that she could not go home, and that her daddy was not allowed to visit her. In time, her mother kept some counselling appointments, and they slowly got to know each other better, but her mother was never quite at ease, and neither was Sandra.

Sandra spent the next few years in a children's home, going to school. In many ways she felt more at home in the children's home than she had ever felt in her own family and community. She has completed her schooling, and has remained friends with children from the home. She is closer to them than to her own family.

