

# Speaking out saves lives

After years of community complacency and with statistics on the rise, every single one of us is able to do something to combat child abuse, **Lucy Baker** writes

This week is National Child Protection Week, and it's time to be a stickybeak of the highest order. Last week we learned the shameful figure – that 67 per cent of Australians would prefer to bury their heads in the sand rather than report suspected child sexual abuse happening at a mall, in a car, over the back fence, or even worse, in one's own family. "By conservative estimates there are more than two million Australian adults who suffered abuse or neglect in childhood," says Cathy Kezelman, a childhood abuse survivor and author of *Innocence Revisited – a Tale in Parts*.

The recently released survey by the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect found that just 34 per cent of 22,000 respondents would call police if a child told them that sexual abuse was occurring.

This mentality when it comes to child abuse of any kind does little to change the statistics.

According to the latest NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics, from April 2009 to March 2010 there were more than 20,458 violent assaults against children; 70 per cent of them committed by someone known to the child.

It's not a lucky country for our youngest Australians, and over the years it has become worse, not better – thanks in part to the determined denial of neighbours and timid family members. During 2007-08, there were 317,526 reports of suspected child abuse and neglect made to state and territory authorities across our wide brown land.

And, despite our coming together as a community in the worst of times on a natural disaster level, on a domestic level, community spirit is diluted and tentative.

The main fear seems to be that people may get it wrong, that abuse never happened, and that children are just being dramatic.

However, better to have egg on one's face than allow violence to happen with our tacit consent.

A "reasonable" belief is all the authorities need to know. You do not need to have proof to report any concerns you have about the safety of a child or young person.

Some Canberrans have a mandatory duty to report, but even then there may be procrastination or inactivity among doctors, dentists, nurses, teachers, police officers, counsellors, child carers and public servants who, in the course of employment, work with, or provide services to children and young people or families.

Easy to imagine that someone else has already noticed. All too often, however, you will be the first and only caller.

When one person does nothing, it creates a ripple effect for generations to come. Silence brings with it a special and deep kind of regret, as local man Rob Brown discovered. Back in the early '90s, Brown used to live in Oakland, California. One day, he visited a yard sale to look at some tools on offer. "As soon as I walked up the driveway, I had this horrible feeling and I couldn't shake it," he says. "There was a man there tending to his motorbike, and a young boy. The man spoke roughly to the boy, who dodged a blow in front of me. It was clear something was happening."



Brown recalls sitting in his car for ages down the road, wondering what to do. He had noticed bruises but had no proof, other than his own instinct.

"I just knew. That's all I can say. There was something bad happening to that child – and God knows, perhaps other kids in the house."

That day, Brown says he chose to do nothing. Now, an active volunteer, he lives with that regret every day.

"I read in a paper about a child dying in that street about six months later, and I froze," he says.

"I don't know to this day if it was the same child, but for me, it was a real lesson – that I had been placed in the right place at the right time to report something my gut told me, that this child had needed a hero – and I lacked the courage to be that hero."

Now he has a steely reserve and considers it a serious commitment.

"But I won't do that again. I will

never walk past a child who is trying to tell me something in his eyes again. It tears you up inside, knowing that you could have been 'the one', you know."

Brown now has the number of Child Protective Services in his phone, ready to call them if his guts or eyes tell him anything else.

The authorities here are required, by law, to investigate all calls of suspected abuse.

For those who want to be leaders, rather than followers and not only prevent but report possible cases of abuse, there's a whole range of options you can choose from, to be part of the solution.

If you think a child has been abused or neglected, phone your local child protection authority or the police.

In order to help prevent getting to such a tragic situation in the first place, there are lots of things you can do to help protect children.

Look out for children. Most

importantly, keep the lines of communication open between you and your child. As they get older, the keyword is "safety" – not whether there are dirty socks on the floor.

Educate yourself. Learn about child abuse and neglect and the warning signs.

Physical signs of sexual abuse include pain, discolouration, bleeding or discharges in the genital or mouth areas, or persistent or recurring pain during urination and bowel movements. If you see these signs, take your child to a doctor.

Signs more typical of younger children include regressive behaviour like bed-wetting or thumb-sucking, using new words for private parts, resisting removing clothes at bath time or bed time, asking other children to play sexual games, mimicking adult-like sexual behaviours with toys, and wetting and soiling accidents unrelated to toilet training.

## How to help

■ Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800 or [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

■ Report child abuse and neglect on 1300 556 728 or 1300 556 729

■ Parentline (telephone counselling service to parents and carers): 6287 3833 or [www.parentline.com.au](http://www.parentline.com.au)

■ The Australian parenting website: [raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au)

■ ASCA (a national organisation which works to improve the lives of adult survivors of child abuse): 1300 657 380 or [www.asca.org.au](http://www.asca.org.au)

■ ASCA Canberra Workshop, October 29: one-day workshop for health professionals including doctors, social workers, psychologists, mental health nurses, counsellors/therapists, psychiatrists and others. Cost: \$210, phone 1300 657 380.

Signs more typical in adolescents include self-injury (cutting or burning), inadequate personal hygiene, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, running away from home, depression, anxiety, fear of intimacy, compulsive eating or dieting, and suicide attempts.

The next most important skill as an intervener is to listen. The majority of abused children will try to tell an adult several times before somebody hears them. Listen to, reassure and believe children.

If you're worried about a child in your family, there are lots of things you can do.

Be one of the adults he or she can trust. Reach out to help parents of young children in your extended family. Parenting is hard and all parents will benefit from help at times.

Know that, when you are reporting suspected abuse, you are doing this on behalf of the child, who needs your voice. There are worse things than not being talked to by some family members. Much worse.

Be an useful neighbour – take the time to notice what is happening along your street.

Another option is to become a NAPCAN advocate.

Doing something is far better than doing nothing it seems, as survivor Kezelman says.

"I was not nurtured and protected as a child, as every child needs and deserves," she says. "I had no adult to whom I could go for care; no one reported my abuse. No one helped. I was isolated and abused for a decade. It is only now that, in my mid-50s, after a lot of good care and support, I have been able to speak about what happened to me. I have worked hard to process the effects of my abuse and put it to rest."

"I have no doubt that had someone reported my abuse early on, had someone reached out to me when I was still a child, I would not have had to go through as many years of bare bones survival. I would have learnt how to live well so much sooner."