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Social support, empathy and ecology: a theoretical underpinning for working with young people who have suffered child sexual abuse or exploitation

Pat Dolan and Caroline McGregor

Introduction

It has been argued that while factors such as respect and compassion are critical to good practices in working in child welfare, they may sometimes be overlooked, assumed to be present or more simply, taken for granted. More specifically, while cultivating the promotion of positive and helpful social interactions among young people, their parents and the services who work with and for them is gaining momentum, it may still be seen as 'soft' and in need of a more declared theoretical justification base. This is particularly the case when one focuses on child protection and maltreatment and the requisite socio-legal response from both judicial and social work systems.

The particular area of child sexual abuse (CSA), which includes child sexual exploitation (CSE) under its definition, is the way this abuse can raise challenges around secrecy, shame and stigma. Often there can be reluctance for families and close relatives to want to talk about the issues because of this. Moreover, workers who support young people who are abused can themselves also struggle with the intensity and emotion of the work. We argue that the functions of empathy, social support and socialisation, and ecological theories can offer a theoretical framework to deal with these challenges and offer improved guidance for practice. In this chapter, these three interrelated approaches are explored in respect of child and youth safety, prevention of exploitation and as intervention in the sexual abuse of children. We argue that there is the need for an increasing paradigm from passive empathy, which is static, (understanding only) to activated empathy

(understanding coupled with compassionate acts of support) on the part of professionals working with those who experience abuse. Alongside this, we argue that use of the theories explored enables an approach to CSA that maximises the potential of the informal and formal social network as an intervention and support mechanism.

Our overall argument is that given the delicacy of the topic of child abuse, it rightfully focuses on the cessation, the legal and or preventive elements, but sometimes implies a cooling off of social support or even a lack of willingness to intervene by others during this time. Conversely, it is strongly recommended here that there is a need to open up discourse on understanding how active empathy can act positively in the lives of those children and youth who suffer violent harm or neglect. In this chapter, we present the three proposed theoretical frameworks that can be usefully applied in working in the field of CSA and from this we outline three possible practice examples that could emerge from such an approach. In the discussion, we consider how these three theoretical considerations can come together to offer direction for improving how CSA is understood and responded to with an emphasis on improving outcomes for children who experience sexual abuse. Our discussion also looks at how these theoretical approaches can promote a preventative approach that tackles social and cultural as well as individual factors that result in such harmful abuse of children that it often has life-long negative impacts.

Social support and social networks

Since the early pioneering work of Cassel (1976) and Berkman and Syme (1979) in the 1970s, the importance of social support as a buffer to stress and as a crucial aid to coping with health and social adversity and negative life events has been well proven. In a wide-ranging set of studies over decades, from the field of physical healthcare such as cancer research (Cutrona 2000) to mental healthcare such as depression (Lewinsohn et al 1998), the importance of social networks as key to helping others overcome illness and trauma has been well established. Social support can be neatly defined as ‘acts of assistance between human beings’ (Cutrona 2000). In terms of sourcing support, social networks are key and have been described by Garbarino (1983:xii) as the bread and butter of relationships. Within our networks, informal supporters such as family and friends (those who are not paid to provide support) are key and are generally preferable to formal supporters (professionals). The reasons for this are threefold, first, they are a natural source of support (normative), second, they generally

provide support at all times such as at weekends when professionals are hard to access, and finally, they save the state in terms of funding, albeit at a personal cost to carers. Whereas social support is important in our daily living (maintenance support) and in times of extreme adversity (crisis support) what is even more crucial is the conditions under which our social networks offer us real and useful help.

Social support should not be perceived as utopian, however, not least because not all families get on all the time, family-based relationships can be the cause of stress and strain and the division of labour for caring responsibilities within the family may be gendered. Similarly, it is often assumed that a large network equates with more support, but it may often be the case that a lower density of social network contacts actually provides more help.

Despite the early and very well made case by those who have advocated to ensure that the role of social support is not overlooked in child protection, including CSA and physical maltreatment (see Thompson 1995; and Burnham et al 1999), for many families and professionals the concept of basic support provision during and post disclosure of abuse is often bypassed. The need for specialist therapeutic intervention from the point of disclosure in CSA can inadvertently shut out other important supports at this time. This lack of support provision may also come from a sense of awkwardness and or embarrassment.

Within Family Support more directly, family members may feel a sense of shame, guilt and regret towards the victim. This essentially has the double negative effect of victim isolation post revelation of their experience(s) of being harmed (Feiring et al, 2002). Ironically, in such instances, social support may be most needed even in terms of the provision of emotional reassurance. Sadly, for the reasons listed earlier, this is unlikely to be provided. Also, in some cases of abuse, family members, both nuclear and extended, who are not directly party to or fully informed of the allegations, can become essentially 'uninformed' or 'paralysed' in terms of being able to support.

Whereas literature on the role of social support highlights that professionals should associate their supportive interventions with families in terms of better outcomes resulting in families being capable of solving their own difficulties (Wadsworth et al 2005), it has also been stressed that social support has a 'coping' function as well (Dolan and Pinkerton 2007). One could argue that in the case of CSA, particularly in the early stages post disclosure, support that enables coping from day to day for all parties, is key. The timing of this support is significant to ensure that an abused child or youth who might experience an

initial ‘honeymoon’ period of support from caring family and friends, receives continued input. It is known that over time this ‘moon of support’ can also wane and that it may be years later that the impact of the harm takes effect on the victim and that by this time there is less support available to him or her. In sum, timing of the provision of help is an essential factor in social support (Tracy and Brown 2011) and for both informal supporters such as family and for professionals as formal helpers. They must know when, where and how to support best.

Empathy

Whereas Barr and Higgins-D’Alessandro (2009) remind us that empathy is a multidimensional concept, for our purposes here empathy can be most simply described as the ability to understand and identify with another person’s experience of adversity. There is also a strong consensus that empathy has two core dimensions. First, cognitive empathy – the understanding of another person’s mental state; and second, affective empathy – the possession of an emotional response to another person’s plight when in need of support (Ferguson 2016). These two aspects mirror neatly with the concept of static empathy: ‘I understand what you are experiencing’ and active empathy which goes further: ‘and here is what I am going to do for you’.

What is important is that from the perspective of supporting a young person who has experience of harm, including sexual abuse or exploitation, or from the perspective of supporting their caregiver(s), typically their parent(s), three core factors on the part of the supporter are crucial. First, the demonstration of empathy is human and relational, so this requires a positive relationship and an emotional response towards the experiences of the other person. Second, it requires ability within the supporter for perspective-taking in relation to the person in need. Third, it requires an ability to regulate one’s own emotional response to the experiences of the other person in a way that allows for putting in place compassionate helpful acts of assistance. So, empathy is a complex relational process that involves understanding the feelings and perspectives of another person as well as taking action that is experienced by that other person as being responsive to his or her needs. What is important across a range of disciplines, is that research has conclusively shown that the presence of empathy is related to positive academic, social, psychological and personal developmental outcomes (van Noorden et al 2015). Other evidence suggests that lower social empathy appears to be associated with higher levels of interpersonal and psychological difficulties (Miller and Eisenberg 1988).

Empathy is closely associated with prosocial behaviours and social responsibility (Benita et al 2017). Whereas over the last decade there has been increasing interest in neuroscience on the brain development and its connection to empathy (Kliemann and Adolphs 2018) in what is now being termed the ‘social brain’, others such as Segal (2011), highlight the sociological aspects of empathy in what she distinctly terms ‘social empathy’. This can also be seen as linking to core aspects of resilience theory and Ann Masten’s (2015) well-known ‘ordinary magic’ for resilience-building through daily living supportive acts which enable those who experience adversity to not feel alone, to bounce back and recover, and essentially, to thrive. This concept of social empathy which is a community and relationship-based resilience builder is further supported by a distinct body of research which evidences that social and educational interventions developed to promote empathy among children and young people can be very effective.

While it is known that one’s set of moral principles relating to empathy and social responsibility, such as caring, respect, compassion, perspective taking and concern are key to social connectedness and the betterment of society, it may often be assumed as ‘always present’ among professionals who work with and for those who have been sexually abused or exploited (Howe 2012; Wagaman 2011). However, there may often be cases where the difficulty in continuously doing such difficult work and an accumulated sense of burden for the caregiver might over time impair their capacity to care. It may be the case for some who work with children and young people who have been subjected to sexual abuse or exploitation, that they experience (often unknowingly) their levels of capacity to care wane.

Whereas Thompson (2018) suggests that reflective practice and core caring for the carer through consistent professional supervision is key, he does also state that reflective practice involves the ‘phenomenology of phenomenology’ (Thompson and Thompson 2018). This requires strong quality assurance particularly for those in helping professions working with the very sensitive issue of CSA. Similarly, for some professionals the ‘elephant in the room’ aspect to the work lies in the simple fact that he/she may themselves have had past abuse experiences in their own lives which can have a negative impact on their capacity to care. In some cases, this can lead to being over involved or under involved in working with and for those for whom they care (Will 1999).

Working with children who have been harmed is often reliant upon the worker and young person having a strong personal connection and

real relationship. We know that for any young person to be resilient it is key that they see at least one of those adults who care for them or work with them as demonstrating 'real caring'. Lynn Jameson neatly disaggregates this as the difference between those (family friends and professionals) who 'care for and not just care about' the young people with whom they engage. For professionals working with young people, particularly those who have been harmed, sexually abused, trafficked or exploited in some way, being empathic and caring for them and not just about them needs to be defended as core relational practice (Howe 2012). The ever-increasing focus on better outcomes working through fidelity to proven evaluated intervention programmes needs to be counterbalanced (Fives et al 2017). The importance of everyday relationship-based working through supportive acts including the provision of active empathy and compassion is core to enabling a young person simply to cope and should be valued as highly as any programme based work (Pinkerton and Dolan 2007; Dolan et al 2017).

Social ecological theory

Ecological theory for human development and the social environment derives from the work of Uri Bronfenbrenner who focused on various aspects of the relationship between the individual and their environment through his theory development and research from the 1970s to the end of the century. The ecological 'framework' is well known and applied across many domains. Richard et al (2011), for example, consider how ecological models have been used in health promotion fields specifically and many authors make a strong connection between the ecological model and public health approaches (for example, Kenny and Wurtule, 2012). Indeed, Chapter 4 in this volume draws on the ecological framework for understanding Contextual Safeguarding.

The ecological framework is traditionally presented by Bronfenbrenner in concentric circles, fitting into each other like Russian dolls. The micro system (the individual's inner world) is situated in the meso system (the individual and their family and close connections) which in turn sits within the exo system (direct community and social network). This was originally surrounded by the macro system (law, culture, policy and procedures) in his work on Ecology of Human Development (for example, Bronfenbrenner 1979) and later by an additional chrono system (for example, Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998) relating to trends over time.

A major contribution of the ecological theoretical framework is that it provides a way to consider both the inter-familial and extra-

familial factors affecting a child (see Bronfenbrenner 1986), and the internal psychological and wider social context within which the child is positioned. Ecological systems can also be seen as bio-ecological on the one hand and socio-ecological on the other. Tudge et al (2009) and Rosa and Tudge (2013) provide very helpful critical analyses of the application and development of the ecological model over time.

Moran et al (2017) have added another useful dimension to this model in that they suggest that often young people – such as those who are in foster care – have, in fact, two overlapping micro and meso systems that they are attempting to manage and negotiate around. This work encourages us to advance the notion of a neatly fitted set of concentric circles to capturing the more dynamic, complex and sometimes contradictory layers of processes and interactions at different levels of the eco-system. Recently, there has also been research that has sought to connect ecological theory more strongly with theories relating to resilience, empowerment and social capital, much of which touches on some of the work on empathy as outlined earlier. For example, Ling and Kwok (2017) consider the general area of working in the field of child abuse and argue that western applications of ecological model pay insufficient attention to resilience. They propose ‘An integrated resilience and ecological model of child abuse (REC-model)’ and emphasises the importance of taking account of certain cultural parenting values that were mediators against risk of child abuse. Peeters (2012) also associates an ecological approach (referring to sustainable development) with an approach based on strengths, resilience, empowerment and social capital. This is something we come back to later in the chapter.

Moving specifically to the application of the ecological model in relation to CSA, there are a number of relevant publications to note that can guide this work. As Kenny and Wurtule (2012) argue in their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* devoted to addressing CSA via an ecological approach: ‘for CSA to be eliminated or reduced, a spectrum of approaches at all levels of the ecology must be employed’ (2012:366). Indeed, as shown throughout this book the need for intervention across a range of systems, from psychological to structural, is well established.

Allagia (2010) is one of the main authors who provide an analysis of CSA disclosure specifically from an ecological perspective. She argues that ‘(m)ulti-level intervention is recommended at the individual, community and macro levels. Future investigations should focus on how to identify and measure the impact of community and macro level factors on disclosure, aspects that have received much less attention’

(2010:32 and see Firmin, Chapter 4 in this volume). Later work, such as Martin and Allagia (2013) highlight how CSA and cyberspace/internet abuse adds another dimension to the ecological context for children. Collin-Vézina et al (2015) also examine the individual, relational and social factors that have an impact on disclosure and they argue for the importance of using a broad ecological framework:

to understand the factors that inhibit disclosure of CSA, as barriers to disclosure do not constrain solely the victims. Results are discussed in light of their implications for research, prevention and intervention programs, and social policies and media campaigns, as the burden is on the larger community to create a climate of safety and transparency that makes the telling of CSA possible. (2015:123)

Mooney (2017) has recently applied and adapted an ecological model specifically to look critically at policy and processes for responses to retrospective disclosure of CSA.

Indeed, in the special issue of the *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* referred to earlier, Kenny and Wurtule (2012) argue that addressing CSA via an ecological approach is very compatible with a public health model. They cover themes focused around prevention that focuses beyond the individual to the wider social context and address interventions focused on youth, parents, community, organisational and policy level. They identify the importance of education for parents, young people and professionals as well as the development of community-based prevention programmes. However, the relationship between understanding disclosures or intervening with CSA, and use of the ecological framework is not straightforward. Pittenger et al (2018), for example, in their longitudinal study of CSA victimisation using ecological theory, found that the most prevalent factors were individual and interpersonal. Limited evidence was found to justify a wider ecological explanation. Ecological theory can helpfully be used to deflect from this continued focus on the individual alone. For example, Terry and Freilich (2012) focus on understanding CSA from a situational and ecological perspective.

In summary, the complexity of CSA is such that while we have had the tools for considering CSA within a wider ecological perspective for some decades now, 'explanations of the etiology of CSA remain focused on isolated cause-and-effect models prioritising interpersonal factors and interactional dynamics' (Martin and Allagia 2013:403). Martin and Allagia go on to refer to other adaptations of

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework. This led to the use of an ecological model to emphasise child abuse as being 'by forces at work from the most proximal (for example, individual and family) to the most distal (for example, community and culture) dimensions of a child's ecology' (cited in Martin and Allagia 2013:403). They emphasise the usefulness of the ecological model, specifically noting how it assists assessing and working with the impacts of child abuse while at the same time reminding us of the complexity inherent with this. They also present an excellent adapted model of the ecological system from micro to chrono with a focus on CSA and cyber abuse and call for the extension of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to include the level of cyberspace (see 2013:404).

There is clear potential to expand the use of ecological theory beyond offering a tool for mapping levels and relations between individual, relational and social factors. We can look in depth at using this theory to examine how interactions within an ecological system can constrain or enable interventions and responses to CSA. It is important given the scope of the work and range of research developed from it, that we move away from a generalised referencing to the ecological model and are more specific in terms of what aspects specifically are drawn from for certain topics. For example, Bronfenbrenner (1986) considers how this ecological approach can be used to specifically work with families, asking questions of how inter-familial approaches are affected by extra-familial conditions. For CSA, this interaction between inter-familial and extra-familial is highly significant. In the following practice examples, we use this chapter specifically to apply it to responses to CSA.

Two practice case examples

In order to give additional meaning to the theories of social support, social empathy and social ecology, we now provide two case examples as illustrative of how they can be seen and/or utilised in the context of work with children and adolescents who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing sexual abuse and exploitation.

Practice example 1

As discussed earlier, one of the greatest challenges in supporting children and young people who have experienced CSA and exploitation is having an approach that maximises their support network to wrap support around them. This requires

those engaging with and supporting the young person to empathise actively with their experience even if that may be distressing for those involved. Taking extra-familial abuse as an example here, this can include working closely in partnership with family and close social networks to build the resilience and supports around the child and young person. The Meitheal model of family support developed recently in Ireland and aimed at preventative practice in child welfare offers a set of principles and approaches that could be adapted to working with children and their families where CSA has occurred using the theoretical approaches discussed here.

As explained in Rodriguez et al (2017) and detailed in the practice toolkit (Tusla 2015) the overall focus of the practice model is that the child and young person is at the centre. While not necessarily specifying the use of an ecological model, the underpinning assumptions and approach draw from the broad ideas inherent in the ecological approach. The 'My World Triangle' is used to ensure a:

focusing on the child's development, within their family and their wider community, the My World Triangle introduces a mental map which helps practitioners explore a child/young person's experience and identify the strengths, needs and challenges to a child's well-being in partnership with their parents/carers. These are recorded as strengths and needs. (Tusla 2015:20)

This means that all those involved with the child and their family work in partnership to produce the best intervention for the young person in a coordinated and strengths-based manner. The need to identify social supports to highlight strengths and areas within the community and around the family that pose risks (related to the source of the abuse and exploitation) is explicit here and one that can be adapted to support children. To activate this approach in relation to CSA, the value of an in-depth knowledge of social support systems and a critical reflective approach to empathy that recognises the investment and support needed to ensure professionals can do this in cases of CSA is evident. While not exclusively suitable for supporting families where there has been extra-familial abuse, the challenge of supporting a young person where the abuse has come from within the family is greater. This may then benefit from a more systematic use of the ecological model to build on the broad ethos and principles of the approach described here.

Practice example 2

As aforementioned, one guide we propose when using the ecological model is to be specific about which of Bronfenbrenner's periods of work are being focused on and what specific aspects are being applied. We also highlighted the way ecological model works well as a mapping tool and offer deeper development as a specific intervention tool. It works particularly well with social support theory and relies on an underpinning ability to empathise with the situation sufficiently to ensure the identification of dual processes of protection and empowerment for the person in their environment. In the example here, we draw from Bronfenbrenner 1986 specifically where he focuses on three core environmental elements – meso, exo and chrono – and considers how this relates to the micro level encompassing psychological and biological elements. His paper is about how to promote capacity of a family to foster healthy development of their children and is applicable to working with families where the child remains at home as well as with foster families. He asks the question how are inter-familial processes affected by extra-familial processes?

Clearly, depending on the particular case, significant protective measures must be in place with regard to inter-familial abuse and in most instances either the perpetrator or the victim are removed from the physical space if living in a shared home. We suggest here that whatever the internal in-depth judicial, social legal and therapeutic interventions, a number of support strategies can be considered from the wider system context that 'can sustain, enhance, and, where necessary, create environments that are conducive to healthy human growth' (Bronfenbrenner 1986:737). We can use the three elements identified by Bronfenbrenner regarding family work – social networks, family positioning in the community, and the parental workplace – to consider how specific supports may be developed to enhance the wider environmental supports alongside therapeutic trauma focused interventions. It seems we can draw from the theory on social support and linked to this, network analysis, to map out:

- the specific supports that can build strength, resilience and protection and
- the specific elements that are to be avoided and protected from.

It is useful to draw from Moran et al (2017) to suggest that these three elements are not necessarily mapped on to a neat nest of dolls but rather to a set of micro and meso systems that are disrupted, overlapping and possible in conflict or torn. Taking the notion of 'process–context–person' from Bronfenbrenner, we can emphasise that each mapping should be unique to the individual so that it is just not about process (individual) and context (environment), but also taking into account the specific feelings, personality, concerns and wishes of

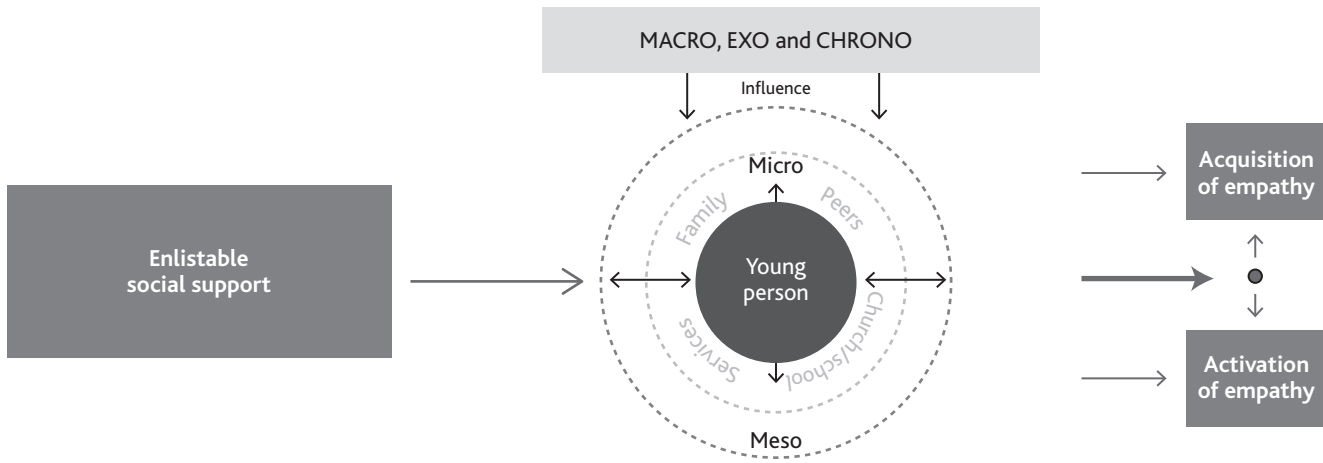
the individual (person) concerned. With this differentiation, we can then take on board the idea of proximal processes that Bronfenbrenner explains in his classic reader *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979) which can carefully map out the important networks and supports that can help a child or young person at a particular moment in time, or during a transition (chrono). This may include one family member being removed from the home, to specify who, what and where the positive supports are. The same process can be used to specify the who, what and where to protect from. Overall, one of the main contributions from an ecological approach is the capacity to emphasise a focus on strengths and capacities. As Bronfenbrenner suggests, 'for every study that documents the power of disruptive environments, there is a control group that testifies to the existence and unrealized potential of ecologies that sustain and strengthen constructive processes in society, the family, and the self' (1986:738).

Discussion and conclusion

Thus far, in this chapter the authors have presented and exemplified a triad of theoretical underpinnings, namely social support, empathy and ecology theories, which they see as having strong resonance to enhance existing approaches to working with young people at risk of or having experienced sexual abuse or exploitation. Essentially it has been argued that the provision of social support can only come from responsive networks and that this is key to coping. This has been contextualised positively as needing to occur within warm and caring relationships from adults who are either informal supporters (family and friends) or formal sources (professionals). These supportive contacts provide empathy, understanding and acts of compassion based, in part, on the social values and sense of social responsibility on the part of the support donor. Furthermore, it has been argued that such support and empathy provision does not occur in isolation but within a set of ecological systems that spans individual responses to active engagement at a societal level. The corrective effect of this contributes to the victim of abuse or exploitation having a sense that they are not being judged in some way but are being helped to become resilient and thrive in the face of adversity. This positive pathway is illustrated graphically in Figure 9.1.

Although helpful, however, theories and models, just like good social policy, are meaningless unless they are usable for practice and implementable in-service development and provision. We now discuss clear barriers which impair support provision.

Figure 9.1: Mobilising social support through an ecological framework for empathy acquisition



Whereas, rightfully, much attention is placed on accurate detection and assessment of CSA and exploitation, there are those who have expressed concern in relation to uniformity in assessment methods and judicial systems (Erooga and Masson 1999). For example, recently in an Irish context following a review of CSA cases and their treatment in the court system by the Childcare law reporting project, strong concern has been raised regarding the problem of lack of inter-agency working, complicated and delayed procedures, all resulting in further victimising children and exacerbating their traumatisation (Coulter 2018).

At a wider level this is also problematic in that, even allowing for the limitations of such procedures in CSA cases, the lack of therapeutic services and programmes for victims post assessment is particularly worrying (Waldfoegel 2009). The Barnahaus model, based on the childcare advocacy approach, offers a significant step forward in responses to CSA by developing a service that coordinates the judicial, investigatory and therapeutic services in a coordinated way to avoid the major problems of re-victimisation that can occur in the absence of a joined-up approach (see Herbert and Bromfield, 2016). The theories we have discussed here map readily onto such an inter-disciplinary and child focused model.

At a very basic level the matter of family dynamics in relation to CSA and CSE can be complicated, making the provision of support similarly complex. In some cases of CSA for example, many non-offending parents (most typically mothers) feel a sense of guilt in not having adequately protected their son or daughter from abuse. This may impair their capacity to receive the support on offer or more subtly may result in less support being available to them. Conversely, in cases of CSA and CSE there may be a sense of embarrassment or lack of knowledge on how best to approach such a sensitive matter for those familial supporters who want to help. This may result in them feeling inhibited in providing any help at all. Similarly, when children and/or adults are in need of support, other past tensions between family members (negative family history) can act as a barrier to any engagement in support. More obviously it has been well argued that it is easier to provide Family Support in cases of basic health needs such as cancer or following an accident, than in the case of the more sensitive issue of CSA (Canavan et al 2016). Churchill and Sen (2016) have also argued that in cases of CSA the support reaction is more polar. There is either plentiful empathy and support, or none at all. This can have the effect of 'unite or split' in family relationships.

For the tentative model outlined earlier to be effective, these other factors need to be considered. What is important is that levels of

burden on the caregiver or ‘wear and tear’, is a key issue in their ongoing capacity to empathise and turn such compassion into supportive acts. This factor alone is often overlooked by professionals who may assume that willingness to support is constant (O’Reilly and Dolan 2016). Furthermore, the lack of relationships of worth between family members may on the outside appear solid but, once tested under the stressful context of CSA and/or exploitation, they fall apart, resulting in escalating the distress for the victim and his or her immediate family.

Whereas there are both generic programmes who work with CSA as part of what they offer, and those who focus more directly on working with young people who have experienced all forms of abuse including CSA and CSE, they still clearly include ecological-based methods all with a view to resilience building. For example, the Youth Advocacy Programme developed in the US (Fleischer et al 2006) includes a ‘wrap around’ model advocating direct work but using the young person’s social environment to enable him or her overcome adversity which may be wide ranging in terms of its nature, but includes CSA.

For programmes working more directly in assessment and treatment of child maltreatment including CSA – such as the Australian Signs of Safety Programme based on a strengths-based approach to child protection work (Turnell, 2012) – the importance of the worker–client relationship is key and enabling the voice of the young person is strongly promoted. We concur strongly with this approach and advocate for the potential of giving voice to children and youth who experience CSA or exploitation. One could argue that many of the existing approaches, including those discussed in this chapter, derive from a paternalistic positioning of the child as victim and the subject of help rather than the co-producer of the best response to their own situation (see Chapter 2). Just as historically in youth development, generally professionals worked ‘for’ rather than ‘with’ young people. This has now changed drastically (Butterbaugh et al 2014), giving actual participation options to young people who experience abuse needs to be actioned (Kennan et al 2018).

Finally, we argue for the importance of taking a strong children’s rights approach in responding to CSA through activism that seeks to maximise the support throughout the eco-system to minimise further harm to children and youth and maximise support and legal and social protection for them. This is not just for the children and youth who need protection and support, not just in the interests of those who work with and for them, but for the betterment of all civic society – our global community.

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