

Drawing the unspeakable (unspoken)

A visual tool for exploring grooming, targetting and the maintenance of secrecy in childhood sexual assault

While preparing for a workshop on “Responding to child sexual assault”, we wanted to better capture the ‘whole picture of abuse’ and to answer often asked questions - by workers, mothers, victims and others - “How did this happen?” “Why didn’t I see it?” “Why didn’t I stop it?” “Why didn’t she tell anyone?” and “Why didn’t anybody notice?”

As sexual assault counsellors we believe in the importance of exploring and naming grooming and targetting techniques. In this article we are proposing a visual tool that can be used with clients and as a training tool. We will begin by discussing how we use this tool with our clients.

‘Targetting, grooming and the maintenance of secrecy’

In this article we will refer to the range of tactics and techniques commonly used by those who sexually offend to choose a child, set up situations, families and even communities. Child sexual assault is not always made possible through obvious threats and intimidation. It may begin with strategies of careful engagement and even offers of friendship and care.

A child might be shown favoritism by being given gifts, money or special time. A family might be convinced that the interest in the child is a positive and something to be encouraged. The child is often convinced by the offender, that if they were to tell someone about the abuse, they would not be believed.

Only after the trust of the child is gained is it possible to sexualize the child’s world by showing pornography, using sexual language, progressive sexual touch and sexualized games.

After the abuse has taken place, a range of tactics are commonly used to ensure the secret is kept. These might include threats to hurt the child or the child’s loved ones and ensuring the child believes they were participating in the abuse, or even to blame for the abuse taking place.

In this article we will usually refer to the offending adult as ‘he’, as in the examples we are drawing upon, the offenders are male.

Drawing the diagram

When using this tool with a client, we begin by producing a simple diagram that uses stick figures to represent the child and the adult who sexually abused the

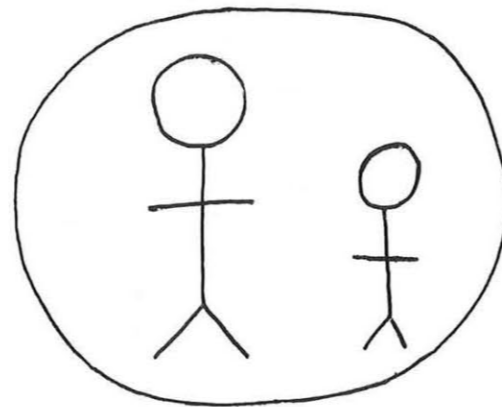
child. We put a large circle around these two figures and explore the specific behaviours, words and techniques that are used by asking questions such as; "How did you know you weren't allowed to tell anyone?" "What were the

events that tricked you into thinking you wouldn't be believed?" "Did you get presents or treats?" "Did you ever feel scared of him?"

A client might offer: 'He always used to tell Mum that I made up stories' or 'if you say that about me, people will think you are crazy' 'he'd say I wanted it to happen', 'He'd give me money after it', 'I thought if I told anyone he'd be so angry I didn't know what would happen', 'I got all confused because he was right... I did take the money' or 'when it happened he made me have an orgasm so then I thought I must have been sick to enjoy it so I couldn't tell'.

We then draw a larger circle around these two figures and include the significant carer. We explore the overall atmosphere in the house asking questions like "What were the unwritten rules?" and "How was the family's behaviour shaped by his moods?" or "who made the decisions in your home?" "what did 'getting in trouble' look like?"

(diagram 1)



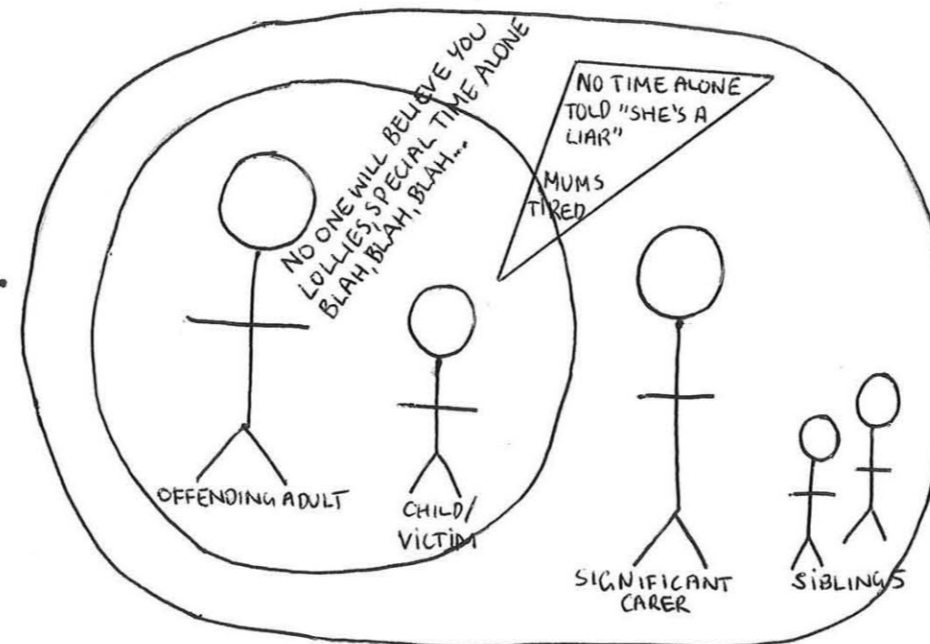
One mother described the atmosphere in the house as one of "...angry, fights, checking out, nitpicking, contradictions and confusion."

We continue exploring the effect of this atmosphere and how this can isolate the child from their significant carer, often their mother.

The idea of 'driving a wedge' between a child and mother has been used as a descriptor of this dynamic, so we draw a wedge (triangle) between them.

We fill this space with the words and ways the child and significant carer are separated, by asking questions such as; "What did the offending adult say to you about your mother?" and "What stopped you from saying something then?"

Answers to these questions often include; 'she is really stressed' or 'you know she will believe me more than you' or 'Dad was always around so we never spent any time together any more' or 'I knew Mum was scared of him too and didn't think she could do anything.' (diagram 2)

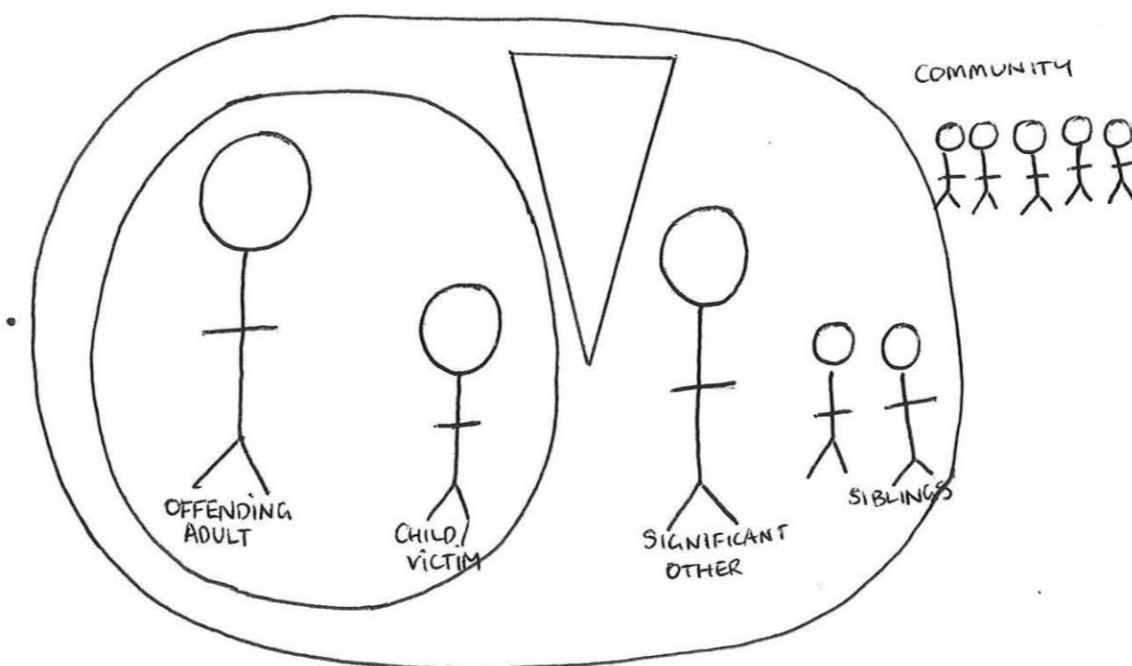


To this picture we add siblings, extended family and other significant people, such as teachers, neighbours, boyfriends or potential boyfriends.

We draw more wedges and fill in the details as stories emerge of boyfriends chased off, excessive questioning after dates, feelings of humiliation and exclusion during and after family events', the offending adult being seen as a 'great guy', or others being afraid of him too.

Around all of these figures and wedges we draw a big circle, to then make it possible to explore the societal context in which abuse happens. We ask questions such as; "What do you think society says and thinks about abuse?"

"Who, would society say, is most likely to be an abuser?" "What ideas does society have about children and lies?" "Who is more likely to be believed, a child or an adult?" (diagram 3)



Some of the feedback we have received when using in counselling include; "when you draw it you actually see what's happening", "It made it real, and if it was real then I wasn't going mad by still reacting to it" and "I could see, as a child, what I was up against". Young people also spoke about how this diagram helped them to see why it was so hard for them to stop the abuse or to let anyone know what was happening. This helped them to challenge and shift some beliefs about their responsibility for the abuse.

We have since used this gradual build-up drawing technique with both mothers and daughters. We have found that by documenting the story using a visual representation, we have been able to use their words, examples and stories to

illustrate ideas and patterns of grooming and targeting without getting into heavy theoretical explanations and definitions.

One young woman described the diagram as "...helpful, because... there's a lot of stuff there... a lot going on." Another commented; "It made me see how carefully he planned it". One mother said; "... before it was too hard to talk about this... it helped break the ice a bit, it gets me in her shoes". Another commented, "When you draw it you could really see what was happening in a way that I couldn't see at the time... it really made me understand how she felt and why she didn't tell me".

The complexity of the situation, the silences and the assumptions become clearer as the picture is gradually revealed. Because we ask different questions, a fuller story can emerge.

It is important to hold an awareness that this exercise is 'taking' the person back into the detail of the traumatic events, so this must be done with care and attention to timing and pacing and safety. The questions are oriented to expose the actions and thinking designed to entrap the young person, significant carers and others and to highlight the limited choices available to the young person in an abusive context. In this we hope to reveal the detail of the abuse of the adult's position of power and authority over the young person.

During the exercise, we are often aware of the many opportunities to follow particular therapeutic pathways, and explore, for example, feelings of guilt or shame however we recommend staying with this process and note these discussions and themes for further conversations, once the context and responsibility for the abuse has been fully explored.

Used in a workshop setting

In our training we have the aim of educating about the 'dynamics of abuse' and the specifics of grooming, targeting and maintaining secrecy, we found it useful to run through this same exercise with participants. We asked them to respond to these questions from clients they knew.

In our experience, the exercise is more successful when we use a specific story rather than speak in generalities.

Workshop participants are given a story involving sexual abuse and asked "What might the adult do to silence 'Mary'?" "What might the atmosphere in the house be like?" "What are the unspoken rules?" "How might the offender speak about the child/victim to their other significant carer (often mother)?" "How does he access the child alone, and how does he divert other adult attention from the abuse?"

In doing this, we need to draw quite heavily on the detail of our own examples of specific statements/responses from clients and ask workshop participants to

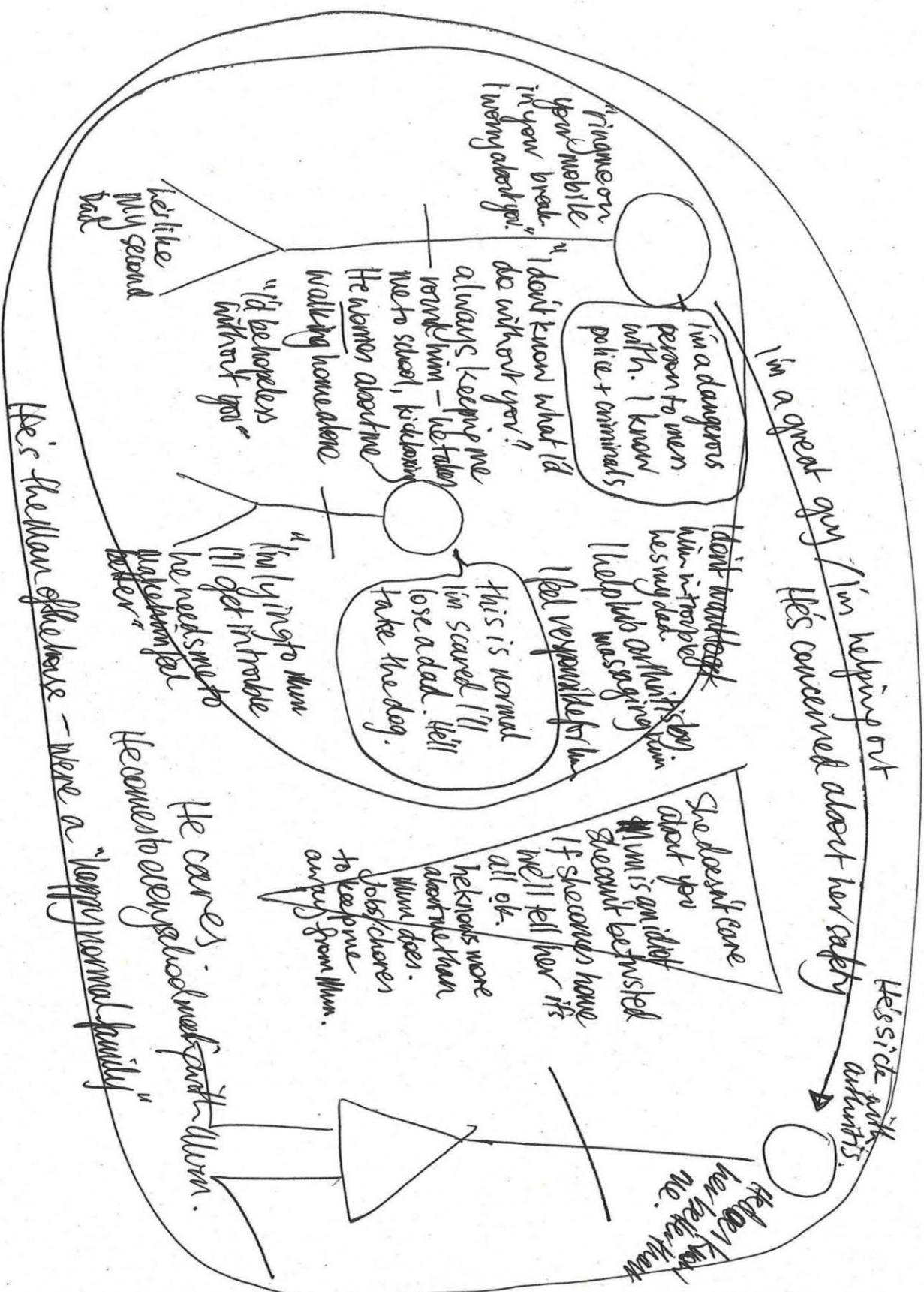
do the same. This is done to gain a rich picture of the web of events. What we often end up with is likely to be a combination/collection of tactics and themes from different stories of abuse.

Workshop participants have said; "It just suddenly made so much sense when we did the picture on the whiteboard." and "The picture is fixed in my mind and it will help me to see where the victim is placed in the story of the abuse"

We have included a finished drawing as an example.

(diagram 4)

If you would like to discuss these ideas further, please contact Jacqui at Childwise and Linette at WestCASA via email on the following addresses: jacqui@childwise.net or linette@westcasa.org.au



gym
 "He's great"
 "He's involved as a dad"
 "a good loving dad"
 but also
 Me R
 was suspicious.
 She asked me "is he touching you?"