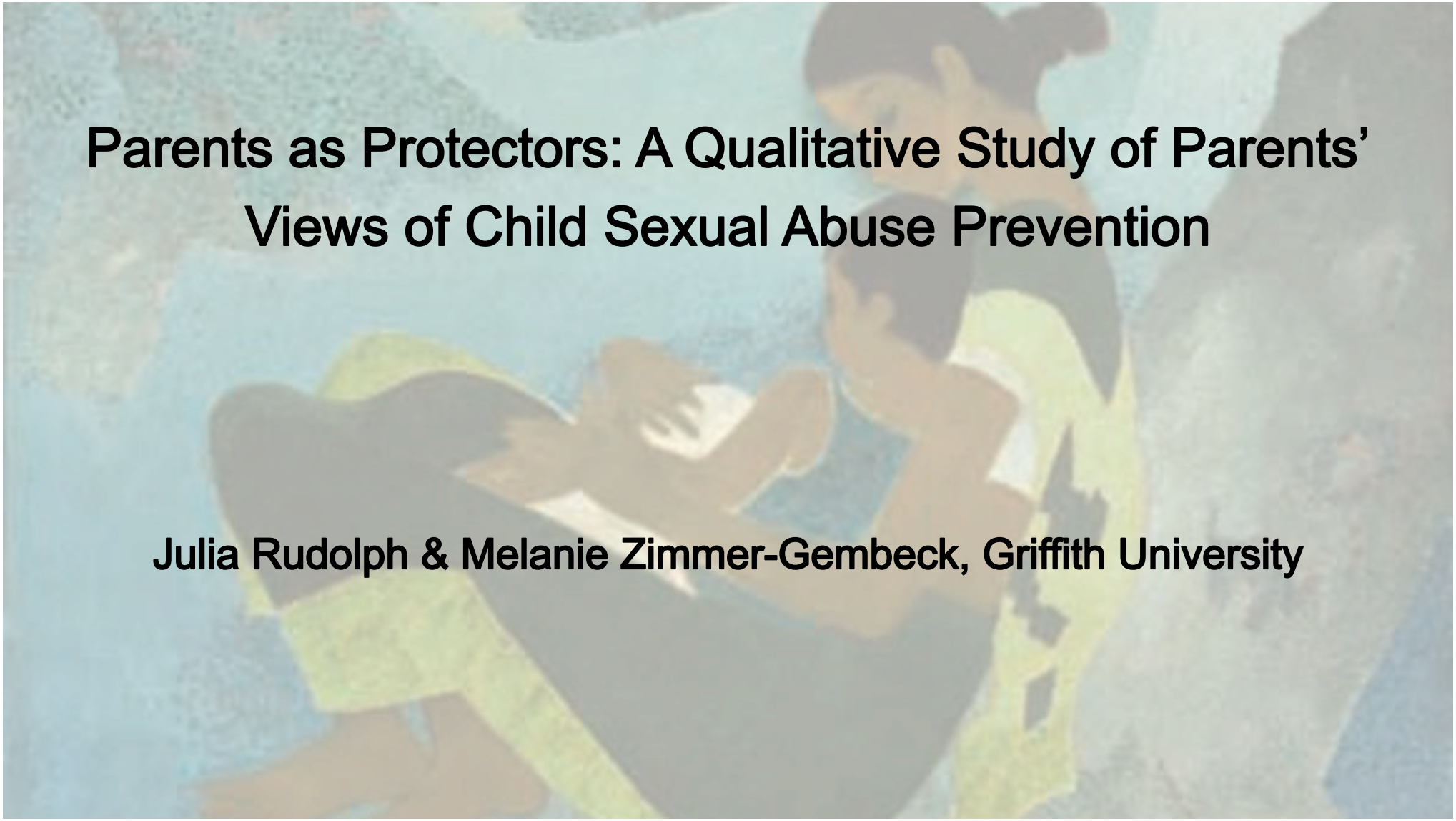

Parents as Protectors: A Qualitative Study of Parents' Views of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

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Parental Involvement in CSA Prevention

The main sexual abuse prevention method is child-education.

- Recognise
- Resist
- Report

Parents are protective if they have discussed, often and from a young age:

- specific abusive behaviours
- perpetrator identities
- protective actions for the child to take

(Deblinger et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2012; Wurtele, Kvaternick and Franklin, 1992).

Do parents educate their children? 30 years of research.

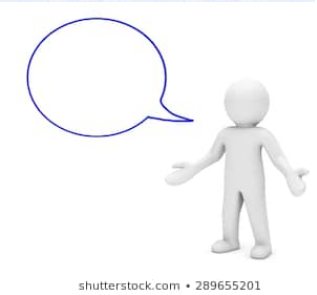
- **1984** - 23% warned someone might try to touch the child's genitals. 15% said it might be a known adult and 6% a family member. (Finkelhor, 1984)
- **1987** - 22% said they had discussed CSA 'a great deal' (Binder & McNeil, 1987)
- **1992** - 59% warned someone might try to touch the child's genitals. Perpetrator could be: strangers {53%}, known adults {36%}, relatives {21%}, parents {12%}, siblings {11%} (Wurtele et al., 1992).
- **2010** - 64% warned someone might try to touch the child's genitals. Perpetrator could be: strangers {73%}, known adults {50%}, relatives {34%}, parents {21%}, siblings {19%} (Deblinger et al., 2010)
- **2012** - 41% told their children when its ok and no ok to have their private parts touched (Walsh et al., 2012).
- **2018** - 51.6% said someone might try to touch the child's genitals. Perpetrator may be known {39.5%} or a family member {35%} (Rudolph et al., 2018).

This Study

The aim of the current study was to capture parents' views on:

- CSA understanding
- Child-education as a prevention method
- Other forms of prevention (including protective parenting)
- Parental role in prevention

24 Gold Coast parents {17♀,7♂} were interviewed in 2016.
{75% Caucasian, 12.5% Asian, 4% Aboriginal, 4% Hispanic, 4% Middle Eastern}



Findings

Discrepancy 1: “Stranger Danger”

Discrepancy 2: Belief ≠ action

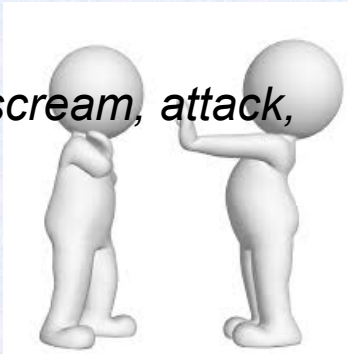
Discrepancy 3: Ineffectiveness and Harms

Discrepancy 4: Child Vs Parent responsibility

Discrepancy 1: “Stranger Danger”

Although parents knew that CSA occurs within children’s close social networks, 83% warned their children about abduction and/or strangers:

- “*The risk is quite low […] they are never alone with strangers*” {P04}.
- “*I’ve taught them what to do if they are grabbed*” {P11}.
- “*If a stranger touches you there you need to tell me*” {P18}.
- “*Children need to know about the things that strangers will do and things that can happen*” {P18}.
- “*Like, if someone tries to take you…these are the things you should do…. scream, attack, whatever*” {P05}.



Discrepancy 2: Belief ≠ action

50% {12} said child education was the most effective method
75% {18} said child education came to mind first when asked about prevention methods

BUT: None gave their children comprehensive sexual abuse prevention messages as recommended by CSA organizations/researchers/activists.

Of the 50% a small minority met one or two of the recommended guidelines.

- 2 started from a young age {4 or younger}
- 2 mentioned family member
- 0 mentioned teenager/older child
- 0 mentioned incentives {in the context of abuse rather than abduction}
- 3 mentioned specific behaviors {e.g., someone might touch the child's genitals, someone might ask the child to touch their genitals, someone might ask the child to shower with them}

Recommended that children are told often, & from a young age, about CSA, using concrete examples and reinforcing that perpetrators can be trusted others, family members and teenagers/ other children, with a description of the incentives offenders may use.

Discrepancy 2: Belief ≠ action

Even the parents who felt most strongly about education did not give their children adequate information.

"I've not been specific. I've not kind of said, you know about sexual acts or anything like that. I've just talked about being comfortable and not being pushed into something you don't want to do. Basically, I've not gone into great detail." {P12}.

P19 raised the topic on a single occasion when her daughter was 8 by telling her about the parts of the body and asking: "*has anyone ever done anything that you weren't happy with and she said no. And I said, well, if anyone ever does you need to tell a teacher or me or dad or an adult that you trust*." P19 admitted she was "*probably a bit vague.*"

Recommended that children are told often, & from a young age, about CSA, using concrete examples and reinforcing that perpetrators can be trusted others, family members and teenagers, with a description of the incentives offenders may use.

Discrepancy 3: Concerns of Harms and Doubts about Effectiveness

83% had concerns that telling their children about the specifics of CSA has negative side effects.

- Fear/anxiety
- Loss of trust
- Damage to relationships
- Loss of innocence
- Hypervigilance
- Negative body image

58% of parents were skeptical that child-education would help their children avoid/resist CSA.

"*No, I don't think so. Because information alone is not enough. A child saying no is not effective. The child has been groomed, and it's in a vulnerable situation*" {P03}

Discrepancy 3: Ineffectiveness and Harms

Of the 12 parents who thought it was the best method, only 4 thought it would actually help their child in an abusive scenario.

Of the 5 parents who gave the most information:

- 2 had doubts about effectiveness
- 3 were concerned about harms
- Only 1 out of the 5 thought it was effective and there were no harms.

"*it depends how good that person's psychological hold over the kid is. How well-groomed they are. […] So, knowledge might not actually prevent it…. coz its more about protecting that child …. I mean, they are just children, so they can't be responsible for that sort of thing, at that age. So, knowing about it, might even just make them more paranoid and even a bit more withdrawn from adults and might even prevent some good relationships with adults*" {P07}

"*And I don't want them to miss out on anything in life. Because, especially if it's to do with love or affection or someone caring for them. Yeah, I guess they will reappraise some relationships after what I said, but again, if that's the downside […] missing out on a little bit of affection or losing trust in people…. if that's the downside, I would still keep doing what I do*" {P21}

Discrepancy 4: Child Vs Parent responsibility

Half of parents said good parenting practices are the most effective prevention method.

- Supervision/monitoring
- Involvement/engagement
- Open communication
- Decisions about care/contact with others.
- “Being there”
- Parent-child relationship
- Love

“*If you have a kid, you parent it. And there’s a level of parenting that you need to adhere to. And vigilance is at the top. Being involved in your child’s life, taking an interest*” {P18)}.

“*For me, it comes back to parents being vigilant. Being aware. Being active. Being involved in their kids' lives. That’s the only way […] that anything can be done”* {P07}.

“*Good parenting would stop it earlier than the child saying ‘no’ could*” {P03}.

“*I think probably 99% of it lies with the adult providing a safe environment and being protective and vigilant. I feel like the adult is the one more armed to do that, more than the child would ever be”* {P03}.

Discrepancy 4: Child Vs Parent responsibility

Almost all parents {86%} suggested children must be able prevent CSA by making decisions and enacting certain behaviours in social interactions to avoid or prevent an abusive encounter occurring.

Parents felt that children as young as 3 or 4, should be ‘aware,’ ‘prepared’ and ‘vigilant,’ and should know when things are ‘wrong’ or feel ‘uncomfortable.’

- *“..even if it’s with someone you know, even if it’s your parent, sibling, cousin – No, it’s your body and this is what you need to do to protect yourself. […] you […] don’t let that happen. You prevent that before it happens…”* {5 y.o son}.

- *“…at least, he’ll know that he could prevent it from happening. If he sees that coming into action, and someone is making a move, then he knows how to stop it. […] I constantly remind him that he has to resist, that he has to say no*. {5 y.o son}

- ..“*know and recognize and try not to find themselves in possible situations... […] to see from afar what could possibly happen…*” and they “*need to make sure that these things don’t happen” and “see that there is something not quite genuine in a relationship with a person that is a close person…”* {5 & 7 y.o. sons}.

- “…*don’t put yourself in that situation where you are alone with someone*” {3 & 7 y.o. sons}.

Discrepancy 4: Child Vs Parent responsibility

"*… it's just such a lot to ask of a small child, isn't it. It's such a lot to ask. It can't be just them,... It won't prevent it*" {P12}.

"*Abuse is usually about manipulation and control and children don't understand that. That really can't be taught. People don't realise that until they are fully grown adults. And even adults can be manipulated.*" {P03}.

"*The rest is up to me and [my wife] to make sure their environment is as safe as is reasonably possible. But it's not their responsibility. It's my responsibility to look out for them… As much as I can"* {P01}.

Questions

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