Police and Social Workers:
Joint Work with Youth in England

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In February and March the author had the opportunity to visit the United Kingdom and study the joint investigation of child abuse by police and social workers. The visit demonstrated the operations of the metropolitan police component of joint teams operations at Shooters Hill (Bexley), Hillingdon and Putney, Manchester, Lancashire and Cheshire.

It also gave the author the opportunity to interview social workers employed by social services departments, as well as members of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

The visit showed that excellent and pioneering work has been done in various parts of the United Kingdom. This work was the subject of the so-called 'Bexley Project'.

The Bexley Project

The Bexley Project as it came to be known grew out of a working party established in 1984 by the metropolitan police 'to review methods of conducting and recording interviews with children who were alleged to be victims of sexual assault'.

Traditional methods of police interviewing, including the taking of a written statement, presented obvious difficulties. Even where the interviewer was able to develop sufficient rapport with a child to discover the nature of the offence, transposing the child's words into an acceptable form of written statement had evidential shortcomings, particularly where the child's vocabulary did not extend to recognised adult terminology.

Police officers were often accused by defence lawyers of putting words into the child's mouth and interpreting the child's language incorrectly.

These established methods did not protect the child from repetitive questioning by various agencies, all of whom had and have an equally important role to play, whether investigative, protective or rehabilitative. The initial purpose of the police review was to study specifically whether or not the police investigative role could be improved by adopting new interview practices, including the use of anatomically correct dolls, line drawings and video recordings, which could subsequently be made available to other agencies.

The police working party, having looked at the issues, reached the view that where an alleged sexual assault on a child involved sexual abuse within the family, or by any individual acting in the caretaker role in respect of the child, the police service could not deal with the complex issues alone. The working party therefore sought and obtained authority to widen its study to include joint investigation of child abuse within the family.
The Bexley London Borough was approached and agreed to take part in the development of new approaches.

Both organisations have a clear duty to investigate allegations of sexual abuse against children, and both organisations give such investigations high priority. Neither organisation had a specific policy about the method of the investigation of sexual abuse and both considered that their existing systems were adequate. However, experience strongly suggested that children who were the subject of alleged sexual abuse were often unable to use the only form of communication that some investigating officers could offer that is, the use of adult spoken language. They were often interviewed repeatedly by officers and other professionals who were not able to discuss sexual matters comfortably. Improved interviewing techniques used by trained and sensitive investigators were seen as means of reducing the trauma for children and of enabling them to give a more comprehensive picture of the abuse in their own words. The Bexley Project attempted to bring coherence to random practices.

The fundamental principle that must be understood and accepted by personnel in both organisations, is that the primary aim of joint investigation is the welfare and protection of the child/victim. Other specific aims, such as arrest and/or prosecution, although important, are secondary.

Open communication and close cooperation between police and social services is essential if joint investigation is to be effective.

Selection criteria

The working party decided that each organisation would select its own staff for the project, and that this selection would be made by senior managers or officers at local level. Both organisations agreed that the project workers should:

- be confident in their respective professional disciplines and roles;
- have sufficient professional confidence to adapt established techniques and practices and learn new ones;
- be experienced in child abuse work and interested and sensitive to the needs of children;
- be willing volunteers given the nature of, and training for, the work to be undertaken; and
- be selected from male and female members of each organisation.

For this project the metropolitan police changed its criteria for the rank of investigating officers of sexual offences from the rank of Detective Inspector or above, to Detective Constables. Detective Inspectors and Detective Chief Inspectors still retain responsibility for supervising the investigation. This decision was agreed by the police for the following reasons:

- As the project widened the scope of police involvement, that is, police would respond to referrals based on suspicion, concern, vague allegation, as well as on direct disclosures, and would conduct investigations that would not necessarily result in prosecution; there were insufficient Detective Inspectors (DI) and Detective Chief Inspectors (DCI) to ensure their availability for investigating all child sexual abuse referrals.
Use of Detective Constables would provide a broader base of cover; and with their level of training they would be able to provide the standard of investigation required.

The working party decision to select male and female social workers and police officers to act as the investigative team was based on the desire for the project to provide:

a) a recognised parenting model for the child

b) an element of choice for the child in the disclosure process as some children may find it easier to talk to an investigator of a particular sex or profession.

c) A model for the child of a non-abusing man who can take responsibility for protecting him or her against further abuse (McLean & McAndrew 1987).

Although both organisations attempted to recruit both males and females, the majority of police project workers were male and those from social services, female. Participation in the project did not mean a release from other duties because it was important for the newly trained staff to pass on their new knowledge and skills to their colleagues.

Aims of Project

The aims of the Joint Investigative Project were to reduce the trauma for children in having to suffer several interviews, and to develop a closer working relationship between police and social workers. For the purposes of briefing prospective project workers these aims were developed and stated more explicitly by the trainers as:

• reducing the number of occasions children are interviewed;

• providing group support for difficult decisions and actions and enhancing morale and commitment;

• establishing a deeper understanding of individual roles which in turn leads to an enhanced understanding of child sexual abuse and how to deal with it;

• increasing effective communication between professionals about child sexual abuse—the sharing of information builds up more accurate and comprehensive knowledge of individual cases and broader general knowledge; and

• enabling services to be delivered to the victim and family in a coordinated manner.

A further list of aims has been prepared more recently. They are to improve the quality of service to victims of child sexual abuse and their families by:

• enhancing coordination, cooperation and communication between social services and police (joint investigations);

• providing specialist training for investigators;
• increasing the awareness of child sexual abuse and professional roles and responsibilities;
• removing interview repetition;
• removing medical examination repetition;
• providing improved interview and medical examination facilities;
• introducing interview techniques with enhanced communication to aid disclosure;
• providing at all stages of an investigation
  (i) protection for victims
  (ii) child and family care;
• providing effective materials for suspect interviews; and
• improved decision making.

'The joint investigative project was born out of research into new methods of recording police interviews with suspects of any crime' (McLean 1987, p. 71).

Following the success of the initial project at Bexley, it was decided that such joint investigation would be utilised in a number of areas throughout the region policed by the metropolitan police and where the local authority was prepared for its social security workers to be involved. The visit to Putney and Hillingdon allowed the author to see such teams in operation and speak to staff who had undertaken such training and who were involved in putting the theory into practice.

The development of the Bexley Project might best be summarised by the words of one of the police officers involved: 'lots of meetings, lots of frustration, lots of procedural brick walls in trying to find a working interface between the police and social services' (McLean 1987, p. 73).

Training

The working party developed a package to include four elements thought to be essential for training in this area of work:

• self-awareness in attitudes to joint working;
• self-awareness in attitudes to sexual abuse;
• procedural and legal aspects of child sexual abuse; and
• technical skills of interviewing.

Procedural elements of the project were covered by the project trainers as were aspects of self-awareness. These included exercises in stereotyping and the recognition of respective professional roles, in making disclosures of a sexual kind, the experience and understanding of sexual abuse within the family, and alternative terminology for different parts of the body. Outside speakers were brought in to cover the nature and manifestations of sexual abuse, skills in interviewing children and the use of technical equipment and aids to interviewing such as video, dolls, line drawings (McLean 1987, pp. 73-4).

The effects on participants in these training courses can be judged by their comments:
There was a gulf in training between the two professions. They chat, we make decisions straight away and act on them. In the police you're told what to do, training wasn't like that. The exercise of describing a previous sexual experience and being questioned about it showed you how difficult it must be for a child.

I was always dubious about child sexual abuse, but now I realise, when you talk to kids about small abuses, the large ones must be happening too.

It's the best social work course I've ever been on. The self-awareness worked very well. There was a certain closeness at the end and respect for each other's role. I still have some reservations about some police, and some social workers.

It was enlightening to see police officers as vulnerable as me. They were able to share stereotypes and we accepted our different roles.

Exercises of getting to grips with your own feelings about sex and putting your own feelings about sex and putting yourself in the position of the child are invaluable. The matching of four police officers and four social workers was vital. We became closer over the days and gained a mutual awareness of each others role.

**Training for Supervisors**

It was generally agreed that the issue of training for project supervisors was not adequately addressed. No specific training course was provided for supervisors before the project became operable and although they were free to attend parts of the workers' training course some did not. A one-day course for supervisors was subsequently arranged when it was clear that this had been a significant omission (McLean 1987, pp. 77-8).

**Actual Investigation**

A satisfactory investigation requires a solid base from analysing background information from all available information sources. These have included the NSPCC, the Probation Service, Schools, Education Welfare Services, Health Visitors, GPs, the Clinic of Child and Family Psychiatry, Senior Clinical Medical Officers, other local authorities to whom the family have been known, Child Abuse Registers and police records.

The sequence of events in any investigation undertaken by these teams depends upon the nature and circumstances of that individual case. However, there are a number of areas that are relevant to most investigations. These are as follows:

1. Interview the referrer or informant to determine the exact nature of the referral and the grounds on which it is based. This person may be able to suggest corroborative sources. The informant may request anonymity and this request must be a consideration balanced against not receiving the information. In any event, identity of the informant is kept anonymous initially even though they may be asked to provide a statement and later give evidence. The informant should always be told of the outcome, even if only in broad terms.

2. Visit the family. Speak to the guardians and always speak to the child and any other children there.
3. If the alleged abuse is or may have been recent, an early medical examination should be considered. Forensic evidence is important and may be lost if there is any delay in this part of the process. Medical examination should always be considered, but is less urgent forensically, if the above took place sometime in the past. Usually the medical examination and interview should be linked (see 6 below). In ideal circumstances, plan the medical examination to follow the interview. The facts revealed may influence the examination and the interview may build the confidence of the child and allow an examination to take place without undue trauma.

4. Seek consent for: interviewing the child; a medical examination; the use of video recording by other agencies or for training purposes; and ensure that a written consent form is provided for this purpose.

5. If consent is refused (for example the parent may be the abuser) consider the removal of the child to a place of safety and take legal advice on medical examination.

6. Interview the victim in a specially equipped recording room.

7. Interview any witnesses and obtain written statements. Any child witnesses, particularly those in the family may be interviewed using the video room, remembering other children in the family may have witnessed abuse or been victims themselves.

8. Interview the suspect. Usually this will occur at the police station but interim interviews may take place elsewhere, such as at home. (McLean 1987).

**Coordination phase**

Within three working days of the appointment of the joint investigators, the progress of the investigation must be coordinated. The responsibility for this phase of the investigation lies with the Team Leader, Central Child Abuse Service, and involves the investigators and their supervisors. The purpose of the coordination phase is to review the case, discuss what further investigative action may be needed and what recommendations are to be made if a case conference is called. Some other areas for discussion at this phase are:

- arrangements for the victim and others at risk;
- action to be taken regarding the offender;
- the supervision of the family;
- any further enquiries which may be necessary;
- determining whether a further coordinating meeting is needed before the case conference; and
- what recommendations are to be made to a case conference if called.

The advantages of the coordination phase are:
• to ensure that all necessary action has been or will be taken;

• to provide a briefing for and review by the Team Leader (Central Child Abuse Service) and the investigator's supervisors;

• to ensure that all decisions take account of the views of both agencies; and

• to ensure that police and social services' approach to the case conference is determined.

Coordination meetings do not necessarily involve individuals meeting at a particular time in a particular venue, as this would often present logistical problems and delay decision making. Coordination meetings can often be conducted through telephone discussions. Formal coordination meetings appear to be particularly necessary in cases where:

• the agreed procedure has not been adhered to, thus leading to difficulties;

• there is disagreement between police and social services during the initial investigation;

• there is disagreement regarding future action; or

• the cases are complicated and difficult (McLean 1987, pp. 13-14).

Workers spoken to who were involved in joint investigations were very positive in their support for this approach. The comments shared with the author included the following:

Police on the scheme are more open with their view than other police officers. Perhaps it's the training and working with the social workers, it rubs off after a while.

All the workers have been very 'feeling' with children. You're inclined to think that police go in with two left feet, but I think they've been very caring. It's very comforting to know you have a policeman to protect you in aggressive situations.

Joint work has been a good experience. It's given credibility and trust. We have complementary skills, and legal and statutory rights. The police find it easier to speak to hostile people, they provide a scene for you to do your work. They haven't gone off doing their own thing.

It's working well. It takes longer but it enables a fuller investigation and better feedback. There are very good relationships at ground level. At the end of the day you may not get any more evidence but we may get a case history which is helpful. I'm impressed with the dedication of social workers who get appalling pay for the hours they work.

You get a second opinion. On your own you might not have made the right decision. Now you get the caring side as well. Before, the police were out to prosecute the offender and Social Services to look after why has this person done it. Now there's a compromise. I'd rather work with a social worker than a second police officer because you get a different angle. It does take a lot longer, but you do the job much more thoroughly.
It would be better to work with the same social worker to build up joint working skills. There's not quite the same relationship with people from the other course.

Most workers spoken to acknowledged the impact that the Cleveland incident, and the Report of Justice Butler-Sloss (1987), had on their work. There was consensus on the positive impact that the joint policy document 'Working Together' had on their work (Department of Health and Social Security and the Welsh Office 1988). This document is a 'guide to arrangements for inter-agency cooperation for the protection of children from abuse'. It recognises that 'in every area there is a need for a close working relationship between social service departments, the police force, medical practitioners, community health workers and others who share a common aim to protect the child at risk. Cooperation at the individual case level needs to be supported by joint agency and management policies for child abuse, consistent with their policies and plans for related service provision' (p. 38). The release and implementation of this document has certainly greatly assisted in creating a climate for 'working together'.

**Manchester and Yorkshire**

In Manchester and Yorkshire joint investigations and training initiatives have been in place for some time.

Anne Bannister and the staff of the Manchester Child Sexual Abuse Unit have done some excellent work in demonstrating the benefits of adopting a child-centred philosophy in dealing with child sexual abuse.

The unit considers that it is important at the investigative stage to be clear about a child-centred philosophy and to keep it in mind throughout the investigation. In their view: 'the key person in an investigation, the only person, apart from the abuser, who has all the evidence, and the person who is most likely to tell the truth about what happened, is the child. Even a pre-verbal or severely mentally handicapped child may be able to demonstrate with the help of dolls and puppets, what has happened. The medical evidence will be another part of the jigsaw, an additional piece of information that may confirm what the child is saying. The police, who are also a protective agency, must be informed as soon as a definite complaint occurs. Then a full assessment of safety must be made.

The Manchester Child Sexual Abuse Unit look at nine factors, all considering the child:

- The safety of all the children of both sexes if the abuser lives in or near the home;
- If the abuser lives elsewhere with other children, their safety must be assessed;
- If the abuser is arrested and given bail, conditions not to visit the home should be imposed;
- If this happens can the non-abusing parent be relied upon to protect and supervise the child?
- Can the non-abusing parent resist pressure or persuasion from the abuser?
- What is the non-abusing parent's attitude to the abuser and how will this affect the child?
- What is the non-abusing parent's attitude to the disclosing child?
• Has the child a protective ally for support?
• Is the vulnerable abused child at risk from other adults?

A case conference is called and local guidelines followed. This conference delineates a core group, a small number of people who can work directly with the child, the siblings, the non-abusing parent and the abuser. The questions to be asked on assessment will already have indicated some treatment areas, for example, the necessity for a protective ally for the child. The questions also point to the need for work with the siblings and the non-abusing parent and for work to be done on the abused child's relationship with her mother, but the primary focus must be on the abused child' (Bannister 1988).

The work done by Anne Bannister and Bobbie Print (1988) in developing a model for 'Assessment Interviews in Suspected Cases of Child Sexual Abuse' is most impressive.

The flow chart of their three phases interview approach can be found in Appendix 1.

The Rockdale scheme represents a good foundation for the development of child centred practice and the minimisation of secondary victimisation of children who have been sexually abused. Principles of intervention have been clearly formulated in the development of their protocols, in their training course, and in the monitoring of practice.

The value of this scheme lies in the skills, energies and commitments of police officers and social workers 'on the ground'. The Manchester experience has led to the development of good working relationships which minimise inconsistent responses to children. As a result, children on the whole do not have to repeat their stories to personnel from different agencies, are not interviewed insensitively or in inappropriate locations and are not subjected to repeated medical examinations. Disclosures are occurring more often and retractions are not. Children are being believed.

Whilst Cleveland and its approach has certainly had major effects on child protection, it has also heightened awareness of the need for, and a commitment to, working together.

If we in Australia are to improve child protection, the key will be cooperation between agencies and networking and this can be enhanced by joint training.

Select Bibliography

Morrison, T., Shearer, E. & Waters, J. 1987, Surviving in Teams, NSPCC, Rockdale, UK.
Appendix 1 - Assessment Interviews

Information gathering prior to interview
↓
Introduction to child
↓
Non-threatening engagement
↓
Clarification of family details
↓
Using play to understand child's world
↓
Reassurance and Confirmation
↓
Focus on Disclosure
↓

↓ ↓
Fear, anxiety, no disclosure, resistance shown by child
Expression of feelings by child
↓
Address the issue of threats and allay
↓
Fear, anxiety, resistance shown by child
Expression of feelings by child
↓
Use play to enter child's world and be more specific
↓
More direct questions and play
↓
Reassurance, rehearsal for future, verbal applause, end interview

Source: Bannister & Print 1988