

# Helping children tell

Rosaleen McElvaney

Principal Psychotherapist

St Clare's Unit, Children's Health  
Ireland at Connolly



Continuing Professional Development

## Helping Children to Tell about their Experiences of Sexual Abuse

Rosaleen McElvaney ✉

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## Helping Children to Tell about their Experiences of Sexual Abuse

### Introduction

This continuing pro  
of what we have  
of disclosing sexual

### Continuing Professional Development

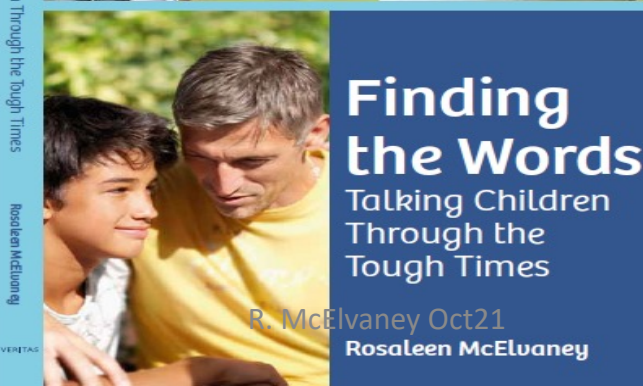
Rosaleen  
McElvaney\*

School of Nursing and Human

### Finding the Words Talking Children Through the Tough Times

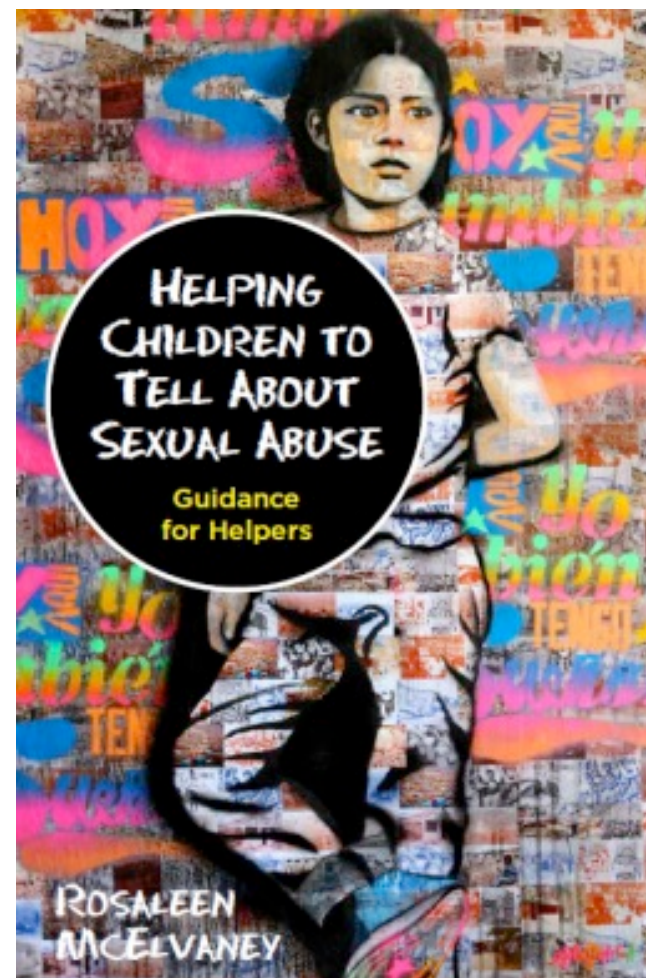
We know that talking about our thoughts, feelings, wishes and desires is good for us. Some of us are better at talking than others. Some of us talk too much but say very little, while some of us can't get the words out or have no one to talk to. This book emphasises the importance of self-awareness: how we need to reflect on ourselves and the way we are with our children before we can engage with them in meaningful conversations. It emphasises the importance of knowing our own child's uniqueness – we, as parents and carers, need to tailor our conversations, taking account of their individuality.

Drawing on the author's professional experience, this book also focuses on some key areas that may be difficult for children to talk about, such as parental separation, death, bullying and sexual abuse.



### Finding the Words Talking Children Through the Tough Times

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# 6 key strategies

- ① Raising awareness about child sexual abuse
- ② Creating opportunities for children to tell
- ③ Sharing concerns about individual children
- ④ Responding to children's attempts to tell
- ⑤ Supporting children's and young people's social networks
- ⑥ Promoting children's resilience and sense of agency following disclosure

# Keeping in mind...

- **Minding oneself**
- **Facilitating awareness**
- **Facilitating expression**
- **Facilitating action**



# 1. Raising awareness about child sexual abuse

- Professionals are well placed to educate others: types of sexual abuse, how common it is, who children are most likely to tell, importance of having access to a trusted adult, the importance of accepting a child's story and not asking too many questions, how difficult it is to tell and how each child may have unique thoughts and worries about the consequences of telling
- Tener & Sigad (2019) - Interviews with 20 educators
- 3 strategies for coping
  - “lone rider” (self-coping)
  - “layperson” (experiencing themselves as lacking the ability and knowledge to cope)
  - “buck-passer” (rapid shifting of responsibility).



# Recognising the signs

- **Stigmatisation**
- **Betrayal**
- **Traumatic sexualisation**
- **Powerlessness** (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985)
- **Sense of self**
- **Emotional regulation**
- **Relational capacity** (McElvaney, 2017)



## 2. Creating opportunities for children to tell

- **Paying attention: noticing changes in children's behaviours, commenting on these changes**
- **Children rarely spontaneously disclose – professionals and other adults need to create the opportunities – conversations about wellbeing, media coverage, prevention programmes**
- **Professionals must address their own discomfort in talking about and hearing about abuse**
- **Message to child needs to be: we believe you, we will not be overwhelmed by what you tell us; we will do something about it**



# Asking questions

- Many children tell when asked
- Asking about distress is giving them an opportunity to tell
- Children can feel they should be asked
- Children can deny
- We can get it wrong





# 3. Sharing concerns about individual children

- Many high profile inquiries and reviews have highlighted systemic failures in sharing information about children at risk
- Professionals need to work together to protect children
- Noting concerns e.g. self harming, oppositional behaviour; listening to what the child is trying to communicate, discussing these concerns with relevant others – it may take time to build a picture of recurrent ongoing concerns before abuse can be detected; disclosure is a process



## 4. Responding to children's attempts to tell

- **Professionals' anxieties about what to do if child discloses to them – importance of clear policies and protocols**
- **Skill of open questioning – gathering information in non-leading manner**
- **Role play exercises – learning about our weak points**
- **Children need to be reassured that it was worthwhile taking the risk to tell**



# Believing children

- **Children can doubt that it really happened**
- **Children are threatened that no one will believe them**
- **Children fear that they will not be believed; sometimes they are not believed**
- **Others can respond with doubt – moving between believing and not believing**
- **Delay can undermine credibility**
- **Children can recant when not believed**
- **Children can forget they were abused**
- **Children can lie about abuse**



# 5. Supporting children's and young people's social networks

- **Significant proportions of children/adolescents tell a friend first**
- **Good quality peer relationships is protective factor**
- **Friends provide support and help young people tell**
- **Friends not always supportive**
- **Disclosing to friend may delay telling an adult**





# 6. Promoting children's resilience and sense of agency following disclosure

- **Children's need to stay in control as much as is possible and within appropriate limits**
- **Fear of the unknown; what will happen next**
- **Inviting their views and input into decision making process**
- **Not making false promises**
- **Offering choices where possible**
- **Sharing information as much as possible**



# Challenges for parents

- **Noticing...and knowing when and what to ask...**
- **Relationship: negotiating dependence and independence in adolescence**
- **Partner as abuser**
  - **What does this say about me?**
- **Sibling abuse**
  - **Parenting both children**



FAMILY PROCESS



Parents' Experiences of Their Child's Disclosure of  
Child Sexual Abuse

ROSALEEN MCELVANEY\*   
ELIZABETH NIXON† 

R. McElvaney Oct21

# Take home messages from today...

- **Child protection is everyone's responsibility**
- **We can play our part in helping children tell**
- **We can help create a culture whereby we ask questions about children's wellbeing and create an expectation that they come and tell us when something is wrong**
- **What one change can you make in your practice that draws on what you heard today?**



- **Go raibh mile maith agaibh!**
- [Rosaleen.mcelvaney@nchg.ie](mailto:Rosaleen.mcelvaney@nchg.ie)
- [Rosaleen.mcelvaney@dcu.ie](mailto:Rosaleen.mcelvaney@dcu.ie)