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## Just who is assaulting our children?

Protection of our children should be every parent's priority, but unfortunately many parents, once separated resort to allegations of child abuse ranging from emotional or physical abuse to sexual assault.

Many of these allegations are false and are raised to give the parent an advantage in securing "residency" of their children, which will in turn lead to a greater share of property settlement and high levels of child support. The pursuit of sole residency may also result from a need to validate their status as a parent<sup>1</sup>, or because a genuine, but illogical fear has arisen as a result of the social panic that now surrounds the issue of child sexual abuse. On the other hand, maybe it is just simply plain vindictiveness - the "the weapon of choice" for angry mothers embroiled in bitter divorce cases. As a result many children are prevented from maintaining contact with the other parent, usually their father.

Popular myth would have us believe that most child abuse is perpetrated by the child's father and many studies have clouded the issue by failing to properly define which 'parent' is responsible or the relationship identity of the 'man' or 'male' included in the findings. Whether they are a father, grandparent, sibling, uncle, mother's defacto, mother's boyfriend, stepfather or a non relative is not defined in many studies.

Some studies however, both here and overseas, have defined the perpetrator of child abuse by gender and relationship to the child.

### **Emotional, neglect and physical abuse:**

An Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report<sup>2</sup> found 22% of physical abuse, 32% emotional abuse, 41% neglect and only 5% sexual abuse comprised Queensland's substantiated cases of child abuse.

The report also found that 24% of substantiated abuse occurred in two parent natural families, 22 % in two parent other (blended) families, 42% in single female parent families and 4% in single male parent families.

Other Australian states and overseas figures provide similar results.

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In the US, the Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3) Table 6-3<sup>3</sup> shows that natural mothers are the perpetrators of 93% of physical neglect, 86% of educational neglect, 78% of emotional neglect, 60% of physical abuse, and 55% of emotional abuse.

Table 6-3<sup>4</sup> also shows when the perpetrator is a non-natural parent, that males [read: non-biological fathers] are the perpetrators of 90% of physical abuse, 97% of sexual abuse, 74% of emotional abuse, and 82% of educational neglect.

The UK National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty for Children<sup>5</sup> overturned a number of common stereotypes about child abuse in the largest ever study of child maltreatment.

The study found that children are seven times more likely to be beaten badly by their parents than sexually abused by them and violent acts towards children are more likely to be meted out by mothers than fathers.

### **Murder of children:**

Information contained in the same US (NIS-3)<sup>6</sup> study more accurately reflects the truth about the participation of the sexes or parents in child murder:

In 1993, 1500 children were fatally assaulted; 1,200 were killed by their natural parents; 300 killed by non-natural parents; 1170 killed by females; 476 killed in mother-only households; 300 killed by males - 20% of those are identified as 'Others' (66), 86% by 'non-natural fathers' (227) and 14% by 'natural fathers' (37). There were 14 deaths in 'father-only households.

The New South Wales Child Death Review Team<sup>7</sup> has for the first time identified the primary perpetrator in 60 child murders that occurred between January 1996 and July 1999. Forty of the deaths could be described as 'family' murders where the primary suspects/perpetrators were identified as follows: 25 mothers, 5 mother's boyfriends, 1 boarder (living in) and 6 biological fathers. In three cases more than one child was killed – two mothers killed 2 children each and 1 father killed two children.

Clearly NSW mothers are four times more likely to kill their children than biological fathers.

### **Sexual Abuse:**

UK research in the NSPCC<sup>8</sup> found that father/daughter incestuous relationships were rare, less than four in a thousand cases and that the most likely relative to abuse within the family is a brother or stepbrother.

Sociologist Bettina Arndt commented in a recent article<sup>9</sup> "It hasn't helped that so many professionals remain wilfully ignorant of the statistical realities. International research<sup>10</sup> now shows that less than 1 per cent of children are sexually abused by their fathers. So it is shocking that a recent survey commissioned by the Department of Family and Community Services showed 35 per cent of female health, education and welfare professionals believe up to 24 per cent of fathers abuse their children."

A third of children are sexually abused by adolescents<sup>11</sup> and women, in their attempts to find a mate, may unwittingly be putting their children at greater risk for sexual abuse from the men they date. If the mother remarries, according to a survey done by Russell,<sup>12</sup> the "stepdaughters are over eight times more at risk of sexual abuse by the stepfathers who reared them than are daughters reared by their biological fathers." "As some researchers have begun to suspect, it may be the case that a growing number of stepfathers are really 'smart paedophiles', men who marry divorced or single women with families as a way of getting close to children."<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand child sexual abuse by women is a taboo subject because there is a general unwillingness to believe that women can be perpetrators of such abuse.<sup>14</sup> It has been estimated that 5 per cent of the abuse of girls and 20 per cent of the abuse of boys is perpetrated by women.

### **Domestic Violence:**

Magistrates in both NSW and Queensland have identified the misuse of domestic violence orders to gain an advantage in Family Court proceedings.<sup>15</sup> Anecdotal evidence supplied to MRA by police officers and court staff, who are scared to reveal their identity, believe that only 5 per cent of DV applications are genuine. It is not in the best interests of the domestic violence industry to acknowledge the level of female on male abuse for that would destroy the myth that has been created i.e. only men are perpetrators and only women victims.

Statistics prove otherwise. In Victoria, police statistics show 20% of domestic violence applications are from men seeking protection. When the Queensland Department of Family Youth and Community Care last distributed gender based statistics in 1999 it was found that 17 per cent of DV applications were from men. These statistical definitions have not been available since that date despite Minister Judy Spence's assurance they would be forthcoming.

Many more men would apply for protection from their violent and abusive wives if the police and courts were more receptive and helpful towards men who are abused. Male callers to MRA often relate that they have been ridiculed by taunts from the police asking typically, 'Can't you handle your woman' or 'What are you, man or mouse?'

Over 122 international and Australian studies<sup>14</sup> demonstrate that women are as physically aggressive, or more aggressive, than men in their relationships with their spouses or male partners.

The aggregate sample size in the reviewed studies exceeds 77,000. Too many to ignore!

Children must be protected from abuse, but first we must define just who is abusing the children! It would appear from this evidence that biological fathers are the least likely to abuse their children. This must be taken into account when unsustainable allegations of abuse are made against fathers in the Family Court.

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