

The horror behind closed doors

AN epidemic of distress, guilt, horror and fear is sweeping through Britain. It lurks unseen, behind closed doors, and its victims become the innocent made guilty.

The sexual abuse of children is a topic swept firmly under respectable living room carpets. A taboo subject, something which is dirty and odd — and one which is deliberately misunderstood.

No less than 75 per cent of reported cases concern an adult within the abused child's immediate circle, a friend of the family — or, often, a member of the family.

Richard Johnson is in his early 30s. He's one of 13 children — and all of them were sexually abused by their alcoholic father.

But Richard grew up at a time when there was little help available for such cases — his brothers and sisters were treated as problem children not children with a problem.

Now there is growing pressure for action to be taken to clamp down on a crime which has such horrendous, long-term effects.

In the next few weeks, crime prevention officers and chief police officers from all over the country will be shown a video Kids Can Say No which aims to help children to help themselves.

The film has been made by and features Rolf Harris, already a firm favourite with children.

Future

For the Richard Johnsons of this world, the video has come too late — but he firmly believes that it will help families like his in the future.

Richard is now actively involved in London's Incest Crisis Line, giving direct help to both children and adults who get caught up in this distressing crime.

The problem for children who have been sexually abused is learning to trust, he says. "I'm fortunate. I can now trust my wife and all the people I work with.

Over the next few weeks, crime prevention officers and police chiefs will see a video on child sex abuse. Rowena Mathron reports...

"But as a child I felt like a freak — different from the rest.

It would have been easy to just settle for second best, because I felt damaged and dirtied. It was as though, as a victim, I carried all the world's guilt and wanted to run away from society.

Many of Richard's brothers and sisters turned to prostitution and crime — a road down which many sexually abused children travel.

Rolf Harris — who made the film with Jessica Skippin and Carolyn Okell Jones — admits that at the start of the project he was terrified about getting it right, hitting just the right note without unnecessarily alarming young children about their relationships with adults.

"We agonised over it for more than two years before we were sure," he said.

Judgement

"We wanted to explain to kids that touching can be delightful — people don't touch enough. But there's a yes feeling and a no feeling to touches and they should be able to trust their own judgement about that.

"If they get a no feeling, then the film gives them the ammunition they need to express that — and to deter abuse."

Because of its subject, funding for the film was difficult to come by — many of the sponsors who were approached were concerned that their image would suffer if they got involved in the project.

In the end, the technical facilities were provided by Barclay's Bank Video Department and the rest of the money has come from a private trust which has asked not to be named.

"There is ambivalence, fear and resistance from agencies, professionals and parents themselves," says Carolyn Okell Jones.

"There is still a stigma, a sense of dirtiness which affects even those involved in the helping process."

"There was even concern that the film would enable children who had been abused in the past to come forward and disclose what had happened — and that the help services would be overwhelmed by the numbers and unable to cope.

But it is the most fundamental right of a child to be safe, either in our community or behind closed doors.

"We need more professionally trained people, more information and more funding — to acknowledge that children have rights and needs."

It's a difficult line to walk, though. In America the fears about children's safety has already become big business.

Firms are selling worried parents microchips to be fitted into their child's teeth so that there could be easy identification of murdered victims across State lines — and electronic alarm belts, which sound off if a child strays outside a given area.

Reaction

"This is an hysterical reaction," says Carolyn — and not one we want to import.

"But we can't put the full responsibility on children themselves — the whole area is a major public mental health problem, and the sexual images in the media don't help."

One of the worrying trends among the rising number of reported cases — seen as only the tip of the iceberg — is the falling age of the victims.

The problem then is to get children to unlearn the experience they have had

at home, and if treatment is sought early then the results can be very good.

But many children do not have the courage to come forward, sometimes until years have passed. For them the trauma of abuse can lead to overwhelming guilt and emotional confusion, deep depression, marriage problems and even suicide.

The Kids Can Say No video is designed to be shown to groups of children only in the presence of an adult who has been primed by the teaching notes which have been especially prepared to help stimulate discussion and answer children's questions.

It is hoped that in many areas of the country the caring professions will get together to arrange screenings and to monitor the results.

Police

"We are very gratified by the police interest in the video," says Carolyn. "At last the professional awareness of the problem of child sexual abuse is increasing."

"I had a very good childhood," Rolf Harris says. "I was surrounded by love and affection."

"Sadly that isn't true for all kids. But if we can prepare them, make them aware that their bodies are their property and that they can say no — then they will have learned a lesson which can protect them."



■ Rolf Harris... "We agonised over it for two years before we were sure."