

Mum's boyfriend - the worst sexual risk to children

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Public attention is riveted on the tragic stories emerging from the royal commission into child sexual abuse, but this is not the main game when it comes to the risks to children. The most likely perpetrator of sexual abuse on children lurks not in public institutions, but in the family home.

The villains are sometimes fathers or other relatives, but the rapid increase in the proportion of children who do not live with their two biological parents - now more than one in every four (27 per cent) - has opened the door to dangerous strangers, to mum's new boyfriend.

We are regularly exposed to sad news stories of children battered by men passing through the lives of sole mothers. What we rarely hear about is the increased risk of sexual abuse by men who lack the constraints that protect most children from incest. That risk is spelt out in great detail in a new research report by the Centre for Independent Studies. Research fellow Jeremy Sammut cites reviews of more than 70 research reports providing overwhelming evidence that girls living in non-traditional families are sexually abused by "stepfathers" - partners of their single, remarried or repartnered mothers - at many times the rate of abuse by biological fathers.

One such study, the 2010 US Fourth National Incidence Study of Abuse and Neglect, found that children whose single parent had a partner in the home were 20 times more likely to be sexually abused than those in a two-biological-parent family.

Step and single-parent families accounted for only one-third of all children in the US, but more than two-thirds of all children who experienced child sexual abuse. There is research from Britain and many other countries showing similar results. Sammut is rightly critical of the fact that in Australia we are denied the statistics likely to show comparable patterns.

Data on child abuse published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare fail to distinguish between fathers and "stepfathers".

Sammut argues this reluctance to publish relevant statistics is because of politically correct attitudes towards family diversity - "namely the fiction that the traditional family is just one amongst many equally worthy family forms".

The increased risk of child sexual abuse is simply one illustration of the fact that a child's life prospects are greatly influenced by the type of family they live with. Yet that is an unpalatable truth many people are determined to deny.

A Perth researcher working on a major longitudinal study on the mental health of children once told me he shuddered when he heard I had called to inquire about their latest findings.

They had found that a key variable was family structure, with children in single-parent families most at risk, followed by step-families, and those with traditional two-biological parents least at risk. The researcher had been hoping the findings would slip under the media radar.

The silence on these issues is driven by nervousness about offending the many people in these non-traditional families who are doing a great job raising their children. But given the widespread public concern about child sexual abuse, it makes no sense to allow such sensitivities to prevent public discussion on a risk that far outweighs the chances of a child being groped by a Scout leader or molested in YMCA after-school care.

So many children now live with single mothers who regularly invite strangers into their homes. Working as a dating coach, I've been astonished to hear from male clients who report often being allowed to stay in the homes of mothers while children of all ages sleep in nearby bedrooms. The excitement of a new lover encourages reckless behaviour.

That's hardly surprising. The early "in love" phase of a relationship can bring with it profound emotional and physiological changes, known for impairing good judgment. The lovesick lack insight or proper evaluative assessment of the true characteristics of the object of their attention - they see only the good and ignore the bad in their lovers. It's a mighty dangerous state for someone caring for children.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of this risky state of affairs concerns the biological father - the divorced dad who fears his child might be at risk from new men in his former partner's life.

I've heard so often from men in this situation who desperately report their concerns to the government departments supposedly protecting children, only to be dismissed as jealous nutcases.

And yet fathers still are regularly accused of child sexual abuse in Family Court battles, while dangerous strangers are allowed unlimited, unmonitored access to their children.

Sammut calls for a public education campaign to end the silence on this issue. Let's bring it on.

Bettina Arndt is a social commentator.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/mums-boyfriend--the-worst-sexual-risk-to-children-20140213-32n3s.html>