

## Of Nightmares and Sexual Monsters: Struggles Around Child Abuse in Australia

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Since the 1970s, the issue of child abuse has been high on the political agenda in Australia. In 1975, the first Australian Conference on Child Abuse was held in Perth. In 1977, The Royal Commission on Human Relationships reported that the abuse of children was a serious and widespread problem in Australian society. While the incidence of child abuse is difficult to determine, recent research conducted in one state indicates that, on the basis of official data, approximately 9% of children in New South Wales will be confirmed as victims of child abuse before they are 16 years of age (Young & Brooks, 1989).

This paper will examine the major trends in the management of child abuse in the most populous Australian State: New South Wales. We will review the response of the legal, medical, and welfare agencies to the victimisation of children in society. In particular, we will investigate the similarities in the conceptualisation of child abuse within the medical and welfare systems; for example, the perceived role of mothers in instigating or committing the abuse. This will be compared and contrasted with lay views about child abuse, especially those articulated within media accounts of child victimisation. In this section, we will focus upon a recent court case in which many of the tensions surrounding child abuse have been displayed.

### **Legal Regulation of Child Abuse**

Despite the plethora of government inquiries into the problem of child abuse in Australia (Family Law Council, 1988; Furler, 1986; Heath, 1985; Hewitt, 1986; New South Wales Child Sexual Assault Task Force, 1985; Sturgess, 1986; Western Australian Advisory and Co-ordinating Committee on Child Abuse, 1982), very few of these inquiries have resulted in substantive law reform in the area. The exception to this is the case of New South Wales, where a significant number of legal amendments have been enacted over the last five years. Legislation pertaining to child abuse in that state was extensively revised in 1985 and 1987. A new package of legislation became effective in New South Wales in 1986 and 1988; this consisted of amendments to the

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