



RESEARCH REPORT

2008 Evaluation of Bravehearts' Sexual Assault Disclosure Scheme

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About Bravehearts

Bravehearts has been actively contributing to the provision of child sexual assault services throughout Australia since 1997. As the first and largest registered charity specifically and holistically dedicated to addressing this issue in Australia, Bravehearts exists to protect Australian children against sexual harm.

Our Mission

To prevent child sexual assault in our society.

Our Vision

To make Australia the safest place in the world to raise a child.

Our Guiding Principles

To, at all times, tenaciously pursue our Mission without fear, favour or compromise and to continually ensure that the best interests, human rights and protection of the child are placed before all other considerations.

Our Guiding Values

To at all times, do all things to serve our Mission with uncompromising integrity, respect, energy and empathy ensuring fairness, justice, and hope for all children and those who protect them.

The 3 Piers to Prevention

The work of Bravehearts is based on *3 Piers to Prevention: Educate, Empower, Protect* - Solid Foundations to Make Australia the safest place in the world to raise a child. The 3 Piers are:

Educate Education for children and young people

Empower Specialist counselling and support

Training for adults, professionals, business and community

Risk Management 'ChildPlace Health & Safety' Services

Community engagement and awareness

Protect Lobbying & Legislative Reform

Research

Abstract

Research has consistently demonstrated that prevalence rates of child sexual assault across the country continue to be alarmingly high. There are many barriers to disclosing child sexual assault on individual, family, and external levels, with these barriers impacting on the reporting of these crimes to the authorities. Bravehearts' SADS was created with the two broad aims: (1) the intent that this scheme could assist as a vehicle by which individuals could notify the police in an anonymous, non-threatening manner and (2) the provision of information to police which would assist in identifying ongoing and repeat offending behaviour. The present study is an evaluation into the practicality, usability, and personal impact of participation in the SADS. Findings suggest that participants were reporting child sexual assaults not previously brought to the attention of the police. Results show a positive impact of participation on individuals' ability to talk about their childhood experiences with significant others in their life, and importantly, contributed to a reduction of negative perceptions of the police by participants.

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Introduction

The crime of child sexual assault is considered an abhorrent act by the majority of the population, however it is an unfortunate truth that the sexual assault of children is, and has been, alarmingly prevalent (Ullman & Filipas, 2005; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis & Smith, 1990), with prevalence estimates ranging between one in five children (Australian Institute of Criminology, 1993) to one in seven children experiencing some form of sexual assault before they reach the age of 18. (James, 2000). Despite its prevalence, and the fact so many individuals and families are affected by sexual assault, it is still often surrounded by felt experiences of shame and, by nature, is entwined with the issue of secrecy on individual, family, and historically, on societal levels.

Secrecy and shame around discussing sexual assault can not only allow offences to continue while children are young, but can also contribute to individuals not reporting the offences in adulthood. One particular theme of secrecy which has remained constant over time is that child sexual assault most often goes unreported to the authorities (Abdulrehman & De Luca, 2001; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). Perhaps this could be because the crime of child sexual assault is more than purely an assault. The sexual nature of the crime adds the complex dimension of invading and violating the physical and psychological boundaries of the child; most often by an individual the child, and their family, knows, trusts, or loves (Kogan, 2004). Betrayal, confusion, guilt, and many other interplaying facets contribute to maintaining the secrecy around disclosing sexual assault.

It is well known that the vast majority of individuals do not disclose their abuse until they reach adulthood, with most findings reporting that only one third of women disclose in childhood (Jozon & Linbad, 2004; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994). Unfortunately, the likelihood of males disclosing in either childhood or adulthood is substantially lower (Orsoli, Kia-Keating & Grossman, 2008; Alaggia, 2005). In childhood, the main factors influencing non disclosure to family and friends are: when the offender is known to the child (Smith et al, 2000), when the offender is a family member (Crisma, Bascelli, Paci & Romito, 2004), or when the child perceives there may be more negative outcomes (e.g. not being believed, family break-up), than positive outcomes (e.g. the abuse stops, safety) (Jensen, et al, 2005).

One of the most commonly expressed reasons for not disclosing child sexual assault is a fear of not being believed. Both children and adults report that this fear of non-belief is a major barrier to them disclosing to either trusted others or support services (Crisma et al, 2004). In fact, we know that even if a child has one or more supportive parents this does not necessarily increase their chances of disclosing their abuse history (Alaggia & Kirshenbaum, 2005), such is the pervasive nature of the fear the child experiences of not being believed about their experiences. In the case, as so often it is, where the abuse is from a parental figure, loved family member, or trusted family friend the perceived likelihood of belief of the child is also severely compromised.

Fear of not being believed or supported extends beyond reactions from friends and family. Many individuals fear the process of reporting the offences to the police.

Given that the societal perceptions on reporting to the police is quite a negative one, coupled with the invasive nature that is inherent in police interviews regarding sexual assault reporting, it is

understandable that individuals can find the prospect of reporting their experiences to the police a daunting task. In fact, it is well known that individuals seldom report sexual assault crimes to the police, (CMC, 2003; CJC, 1999).

Despite there being many obstacles to disclosing child sexual assault, many individuals report receiving valued support and positive outcomes after their disclosures in both childhood and as adults. Although disclosures made in childhood have often been found to be accompanied by more negative reactions and consequences (Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler & Weissmann-Wind, 1994), including parental marriage breakdown, difficulties at school, with peer relationships, and depression (Crisma et al, 2004), many young people also report to receiving belief, support, encouragement, and understanding after their disclosures (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004). Adults have also expressed that their disclosures in adulthood were a much more helpful and positive experience than their childhood disclosures, citing benefits such as increased intimacy with their partners, emotional support from friends, greater feelings of control over their situation and reduced feelings of responsibility (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004).

In recognition of the varied difficulties in disclosing child sexual assault, Australian child protection group Bravehearts sought to find ways to reduce the barriers to reporting such assaults to the authorities. Bravehearts Sexual Assault Disclosure Scheme (SADS)¹ was initially created as a way to provide a safer and less confronting way for individuals who had experienced child sexual assault to report their experiences to the police, providing a reporting avenue that did not require giving a detailed statement, nor direct police contact. It was hoped that by giving people who had experienced child sexual assault a non-confronting reporting avenue that this would help create an opportunity to reduce the silence and shame that can be experienced by individuals when they disclose, and at the same time increase the number of offenders being reported to the authorities, which might otherwise not have come to the attention of the police. In addition, and in recognition that offenders typically never offend against just one child, the SADS aims to assist police in ‘joining the dots’ and identifying patterns of offending by the same perpetrator.

The SADS provides individuals an anonymous avenue to report their experiences to the police, while giving them complete control over any possible future police contact in relation to their information. Due to the nature of child sexual assault, individuals often feel a sense of powerlessness over their situation. The SADS was designed with the hope that this avenue may help reinstate some of the power back to the individual, and in turn, help to increase the number of assaults reported to the police.

The aims of the present study were to evaluate the effectiveness and usefulness of the Sexual Assault Disclosure Scheme in relation to the reasoning behind its’ inception. It was hoped that through this evaluation we could determine whether participation in SADS was helpful for participants in increasing their communication of their experience of sexual assault with significant others, if

¹ SADS was developed with the support and assistance of the Queensland Police, Queensland Crime Commission, Criminal Justice Commission, Attorney General’s Office, Commission for Children and Young People, the Public Defenders and the Department of Public Prosecutions.

participation in SADS had a positive effect on participants feelings of power and control over their sexual assault, and whether participation in SADS has been beneficial in their healing in relation to their sexual assault history. This study also aimed to assess whether participation in SADS had any positive impact on participants perception of the police through their involvement. .

Method

A total of 106 individuals have participated in the SADS since its development in 2001. Phone calls were made to each of the phone numbers provided for the SADS participants, however as participation has spanned a number of years, a large number of people had moved or their number was disconnected. A total of 47 individuals were able to be contacted and were asked to participate in this study and of these, 46 agreed to participate.

A questionnaire specifically designed for this study and an information sheet outlining the rationale for the study were sent to each participant, along with a stamped return envelope. As participation in the study was anonymous, participants were informed that their consent would be given by the return of their completed questionnaires. A total of 28 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 61%.

The questionnaire was designed to measure a number of different aspects about the SADS, using both qualitative and quantitative questions. Questions ranged from being asked about the usability and satisfaction of the forms, demographic information, assault variables, offender information, disclosure information, police involvement, and felt experiences and usefulness of the SADS.

Results

Participant information

Of the respondents, 82.1% were female (n=23) and 17.9% were male (n=5). Age of participants ranged from 28 – 75 years, with a mean of 47 years. The majority of individuals who requested SADS had done so for themselves, n = 19 (73%) followed by those requested for their children n = 4 (15%), other family members n = 2 (8%), and friends n = 1 (4%); and two participants did not report this information.

A total of 19 participants (67.9%) chose to fill out the SADS forms and send them back in. Nine participants (32.1%) chose not to return the forms, with half of these individuals reporting they were not ready to contact police at this stage. The majority of participants (94%) reported that the forms were useful and easy to complete and understand. A further 75% of participants were highly satisfied with the accompanying material sent out with the SADS forms.

Sexual assault information

Eighty percent of participants were reporting historical child sexual assault (n = 16), while the remaining were reporting both child sexual assault as well as sexual assault in adulthood. For 5% of participants, the time since their last experience of sexual assault was less than five years ago, for 20% it was more than five but less than 10 years ago, while for 75% of the sample, the assault happened more than 20 years ago.

Age of first sexual assault ranged from 1 – 16 years of age with an average of 7 years. Age of last sexual assault ranged from 7 – 53 years with an average age of 15.21 years. Average age at the first disclosure of their sexual assault was 23.4 years, with a range of 10 – 58 years.

The most reported offender was a father or father figure (40%) followed by another family member (30%), family friend (20%), neighbour (5%), and other (5%). Only one reported offender was female.

Disclosure issues

Participants were asked their reasons for not disclosing their assault experiences during childhood. Table 1 outlines the most frequented responses for this enquiry.

Table 1.

Most Frequent Responses for Not Disclosing Sexual Assault in Childhood

Reason for not disclosing	Number and percentage
I felt ashamed	19 (95%)
I did not have enough support to deal with it at the time	18 (90%)
I thought I would be blamed	18 (90%)
I was too young	16 (80%)
I was afraid something bad might happen	16 (80%)
No one asked me directly about it	16 (80%)
I feared my mother would not support me	15 (75%)

Impact of SADS participation

All participants, including those who chose not to complete and return the forms, were asked whether their involvement in the SADS had been of benefit. Participants were asked if this involvement had helped them to increase the communication of their childhood experiences with their family, friends, and within their community. They were also asked if SADS has contributed to their healing, and were asked to elaborate in a qualitative fashion.

Table 2 reports on the responses to these outcome questions, separated by those who did and did not return the forms.

Table 2.

Responses to Outcome Questions Grouped According to Those Who Did and Did Not Return and Compete the SADS Forms.

Questions	Did complete SADS		Did not complete SADS	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Had you previously told anyone about the sexual assault (SA)?	13 (87%)	2 (13%)	3 (60%)	2 (40%)
Has taking part in SADS helped you talk more openly with your family about the SA?	11 (65%)	6 (35%)	6 (75%)	2 (25%)
Has taking part in SADS helped you talk more openly with your friends about the SA?	10 (58%)	7 (42%)	6 (75%)	2 (25%)
Has taking part helped you talk more openly in your community about the SA?	6 (37%)	10 (63%)	5 (63%)	3 (37%)
Has this increase in talking been a useful experience?	13 (86%)	2 (14%)	5 (71%)	2 (29%)
Did you feel power and control in relation to the SA before participation in SADS?	11 (65%)	6 (35%)	0 (0%)	6 (100%)
Did you feel power and control in relation to the SA after participation in SADS?	14 (83%)	3 (17%)	5 (84%)	1 (16%)
Do you feel power and control now in relation to the SA?	13 (93%)	1 (7%)	5 (84%)	1 (16%)
Has participating in SADS contributed to your healing?	15 (83%)	3 (17%)	4 (80%)	1 (20%)
Was SADS a safer option for you to disclose/	16 (100%)	0 (0%)	5 (72%)	2 (28%)

When asked the question “Has participation in SADS helped to increase your communication with friends, family or in your community?” respondents answered in the following ways: “(this) helped me tell my mother”, “Before this I had not spoken about it in 20 years.”, “I could open myself up for help and comforting.”, “I don’t discuss it ‘in-depth’ with friends as they tend to pity me. I don’t need pity because I am not a victim – I am a survivor.”, “I am not ashamed anymore”, “I have shared with others who have had similar experiences”.

Participants responses to “Has SADS contributed to your healing?” included: “I think the turning point was reading the Bravehearts literature. All my thoughts and feelings re: this issue were validated – this was HUGE for me.”, “Yes, it helped me face reality and walk away.”, “I think participating in SADS, even though I did not return the forms, made me deal with the abuse and seek help. It started my healing process.”, “Helpful to put the information on record, and not to be dismissed or told to ‘prove it’.”, “You have been a wonderful part on my journey.”, “I feel safer.”,

“Bravehearts assisted with healing more than counsellors at the sex assault unit. I felt strength from SADS, not alone from stories written in the booklet, like others really understand the way you feel.”

As one third of the sample chose not to complete and return the SADS forms, independent t-tests were run on the outcome variables listed in table 2 to assess any differences between participants who did and did not complete and return the forms. No significant differences were found in any of the t-test performed.

Police perceptions

To understand participant’s reasons for not contacting the police directly about their experience of sexual assault a number of questions were asked in relation to their perceptions regarding contacting the police over sexual assault matters. For a large number of questions the views were evenly divided, allowing no opportunity to make inferences, however table 3 provides the most frequent responses to questions where differences did lay.

Table 3.

Most Frequent Responses for Not Contacting the Police Directly About Sexual Assault

Reason	Number and percentage
I did not want to talk about my experience in detail	17 (81%)
I did not want to go through the court system	16 (77%)
I had heard about other people’s negative experiences	15 (72%)
I thought they would not believe me	11 (55%)

Participants gave a range of information to the question “Was SADS a safer way for you to disclose to the police?” including: “It can be a bit bewildering making your way to Roma Street. Most would avoid it.”, “It would have been very daunting to do it face to face with the police.”, “Not safer as such, just less embarrassing and confronting than talking to someone with no understanding of child abuse.”, “I had contacted local police and one was caring but suggested I keep quiet and the other was ‘If you tell me I HAVE to report it so don’t tell me’”, “I and my daughter have been threatened, even recently, if we talk about the incident. Especially as the offender’s son, my cousin, is a police officer. I felt very unsafe. Confidentiality was essential.”

Of the sample, eleven participants had been contacted by the police in relation to their SADS involvement (48%). A further four participants had contacted the police themselves directly (19%), while seven participants (30%) had no contact from the police. One-way ANOVA’s were run to determine whether having been contacted by the police in relation to their SADS participation increased feelings of power and control in relation to their sexual assault over those who were not

contacted by the police. No differences were found between groups that were and were not contacted by police $f(2,17) = .353, p = ns$.

One-way ANOVA's were also run between groups of participants who were and were not contacted by police to determine if there were differences in their experience of being able to communicate about their assaults with their family $f(3,18) = .342, p=ns$, friends $f(3,18) = .370, p=ns$, and in their community $f(3,17) = .600, p=ns$, or if their SADS participation had contributed to their healing $f(3,17) = .526, p=ns$. Again, no differences were found.

Participants who were contacted by the police were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of the police and the judicial system before and after the police involvement. Table 4 outlines feelings before and after participant's involvement with the police.

Table 4.

Perceptions of Police Belief and Support Before and After Police Involvement

Questions	Before SADS		After SADS	
	I felt this way	I did not feel this way	I no longer feel this way	I still feel this way
I did not want to talk in detail about my experience	75%	25%	60%	40%
I was afraid the police would think I was to blame for what happened	66%	33%	80%	20%
I did not think the police would be supportive of me	60%	40%	70%	30%
I have heard about other people's negative experiences in going to the police	34%	66%	40%	60%
I did not want to go through the court process of giving evidence	75%	25%	50%	50%
I have heard about other people's negative experiences in going through the court system	59%	41%	10%	90%
I did not think the police would believe me	50%	50%	80%	20%

When asked “What are your perceptions of the criminal justice system?”, respondents said: “Very drawn out in getting justice.”, “Victims are treated poorly by the court.”, “Justice system needs to be more vigilant in their sentencing in any effort to eradicate unwanted sexual activity.”, “I think it is difficult but I think it can be changed. I know that the police are very helpful.”, “So hard to prove, so hard to be heard, so hard to get justice.”, “I don’t have a great deal of faith in the court system.”, “I have recently lost faith in the justice system as a close friend of mine’s daughter was badly sexually abused for 6 years (6-12). He only got 4 years. He did unspeakable things to this little girl, 22 charges in all. What hope is there for the rest of us? Punish the offenders appropriately”, “A long answer is needed. I think the ‘justice’ system is VERY unjust towards victims in the handing down of light sentences and considering the ‘good character’ of the offender. Don’t they know these people set up ‘good characters’ for their own evil goings on?”, “The sentences are too lenient.”, “The court appears to blame the victim.”, “Where is the victim’s justice? There is none. Most don’t even get to court.”

Discussion

The current evaluation provides encouraging information into the usefulness of the SADS. An overwhelming majority of participants found the forms practical and easy to use, and reported that the accompanying information provided with the forms was informative and powerful in and of itself. The majority of individuals requesting SADS did so to report a crime which was committed on themselves in childhood. Most participants were reporting historical assaults, with the majority of offenses occurring more than 20 years ago. In line with findings both recent and past, the vast majority of offenders were males from within the family, or closely related to the family.

The most common reasons participants cited for not disclosing their abuse in childhood related to feelings of shame, punishment, fear of not being believed, and not having enough support to deal with the negative consequences of a disclosure. These findings are consistent with the existing literature regarding non-disclosure in childhood (Jensen, et al 2005).

As expected, participation in SADS was reported as being helpful in increasing participants communication about their sexual assault across their family, friends, and within their community. A surprising finding was even when participants chose not to complete and send in the forms they too reported positive benefits regarding communication. We could speculate reasons as to why this may have occurred, one being that when participants called to request the SADS they may have been at a stage where they were more willing and able to engage in dealing with what they had experienced as children. Perhaps their experience through their phone contact with Bravehearts staff was positive, reaffirming and supportive, and this experience of knowing there are people out there who will listen, support and validate their experience made a difference. Further, additional information is provided to individuals when they request the SADS forms. These booklets cover areas such as the criminal justice process, as well as information about reactions and common experiences of individuals sexually assaulted in childhood. In the qualitative responses, a number of individuals mentioned how important and validating the additional information was to helping them understand their experiences, and perhaps this also contributed to these positive outcomes.

Although most participants reported they would gain closure of their sexual assaults by having the offender jailed, even those who did not return the forms found that the simple request of asking for and receiving help and support was enough for them to feel better about their experience. In terms of increasing participant's ability to talk more openly, the benefits appeared to be as great for those who did not return the forms as those who did. The majority of all participants reported that requesting the SADS did increase their ability to communicate with others in their lives, regardless of whether they completed the forms or not. It could be posited that being offered support, and given an avenue of relief that something could be done, and that there were people who were there to help, was sufficient to cause a positive shift within them. Although the original reasoning for the SADS was to give people an option of disclosing to police without having to go through the potentially confronting experience of giving a formal statement.

No differences were found between groups of participants who were and were not contacted by the police in relation to any of the outcome variables measured, meaning that, regardless of whether the police opened an investigation into their disclosures, participants reported their SADS participation to be beneficial. To date there have been no convictions and no arrests as a result of any information

provided by individuals through the SADS scheme, even though half of this sample had been contacted by the police for further information.

Despite the fact that there have been no formal charges laid from disclosures through the SADS, this evaluation does show that disclosing to the police via the SADS can be a safer option for individuals when notifying the police of their assault history. Further, it may also be a powerful way of helping to change some of the negative perceptions and stereotypes surrounding the police handling of sexual assault cases. This evaluation showed that participants' perceptions of police support and belief in their childhood experiences were positively impacted upon as a result of their participation.

Approximately half of this sample had police contact as a result of their SADS participation, and both qualitative and quantitative data from this evaluation reveal that participants' original fears and concerns about how the police would respond to their disclosures had significantly changed through their subsequent involvement with the police. These are very encouraging findings for how the SADS process can be beneficial on a number of different levels, particularly in helping to change negative perceptions of the way police handle sexual assault cases, which in turn may help to increase the number of future reports to police.

Although SADS participation had a positive influence on individuals' perception of the police, this involvement did not assist in changing negative perceptions of the criminal justice system. This could easily be explained by the fact that although half of the sample had been contacted by the police, to date not one conviction has occurred as a result of these disclosures. Although this is not a positive finding, it is in line with current research showing that the majority of child sexual offences do not result in a conviction (Wundersitz, 2000).

Recommendations

In line with the original objective of the SADS, which was to help increase the reporting rate of child sexual offences to the police, it would be a recommendation of this evaluation that a process is established to contact those participants who have not returned the SADS forms within three months. By implementing a process of contacting those who had not returned the forms within three months and discussing their reasons for not completing the SADS, we may help to increase further numbers of reports to police. It is possible that individuals have requested SADS and through this request, coupled with the information Bravehearts provides on the criminal justice processes and the validation and encouragement received over the phone, they may have then chosen to contact the police directly. If this is the case then there may be unknown statistics on actual investigation, charges and convictions that have eventuated as a result of the request of SADS. A follow-up process could help to discover if this is indeed the case.

This evaluation also supported existing research, showing that public perceptions of police can be quite negative (Abdulrehman & De Luca, 2001; Bagley, 1992; Finelhor & Browne, 1986). This provides an avenue for Bravehearts to perhaps become more involved in providing callers with further information into the positive and supportive manner in which the police handle sexual assault cases, which may in turn help to alleviate some of the fear and stigma before individuals' initial contact with the police.

Limitations

There are limitations to the current study that require mention. Firstly the sample size of the current study was not large enough to run parametric tests to observe differences in the descriptive statistics. Although ANOVA's and *t*-tests were performed to try to explore these differences, no significant variances were found. It is possible that a larger sample size may have shown if differences lay between the investigated groups. Therefore, the non-significant findings of these analyses should be interpreted with caution.

A further limitation to this study lay in the incomplete responses given on some forms. Not all questions were answered by each participant, with this explaining some variances found in the overall N totals in the results section.

Lastly, as this study sought to contact individuals who had participated in the SADS since it's development, the sample varied between individuals who had recently requested these forms to those who had participated as many as six years earlier. It is not known whether these participants had engaged in counselling or other supportive ventures since they initially requested the SADS and therefore we can only speculate as to the role their participation in SADS has played as a function of their responses.

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