

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE PICTURE BOOK AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL TO PREVENT CHILD ABUSE

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate, analyze and explore the contribution of the picture book as an educational tool to the prevention of child sexual abuse. A distinctive aspect of our empirical research lies in the scarcity of children's books addressing this delicate subject within the Portuguese market. A primary objective of our project is to rectify this deficiency by comprehending the potential of illustrations in effectively communicating and raising awareness about child abuse in society. Initiating the project involved an analysis and collection of data concerning child sexual abuse at both national and international levels. Interviews with support and prevention organizations provided valuable insights into the challenges associated with identifying the problem and sharing information. Our analyses incorporated statistical data, firsthand accounts, and studies on abuse, encompassing methods employed by abusers for manipulation. Building upon this foundation, an exploration of existing children's books dealing with child sexual abuse and other emotionally charged subjects followed. The subsequent project phases concentrated on deciphering the symbolic value of images and the power of illustrations to convey informative and preventative messages. This was achieved through a thorough examination of various illustrated books, their styles, techniques, and interpretative approaches. The practical phase unfolded in five distinct stages: 1) collaborative writing of the textual narrative "Where do secrets live?" with a specialized psychologist, 2) development of the storyboard, 3) creation of illustrations, 4) book design, and 5) prototype development. The narrative crafted for the practical project addresses the common strategy employed by abusers—emotional manipulation through secrecy. The storyline distinguishes between good and bad secrets, illustrating the emotional toll of harboring negative secrets. A central character, the Monster of Secrets, embodies the abusers and their manipulative strategies. The character's visual evolution in scale and complexity throughout the story effectively conveys the lurking danger in each person's shadow. The other book's characters represent diverse children living in varied family structures to underscore that abuse transcends socio-economic conditions. Each child's unique experience with abuse is depicted, allowing readers to empathize and better identify abusive situations. Through visual expression and metaphors guided by specialists and utilizing the codex format's potential, "Where do secrets live?" aims to address different types of abuse, associated emotions, and ultimately inform, prevent, and encourage reporting.

Keywords: *Child Abuse, illustration, picture book, prevention.*

1. Introduction

The project, entitled "The Contribution of the Picture Book as an Educational Tool", was developed in order to obtain a master's degree in the fields of Illustration and Animation. The goal was to analyze and identify the potential of illustration in the communication and prevention of child sexual abuse. To achieve it, a picture book was created to act as an educational tool for the prevention of child sexual abuse.

This is a sensitive issue that is very present in society, although it may seem invisible. The Council of Europe's statistics (2012) show that one in five European children are victims of sexual abuse and it appears that at national level, according to the 2020 Annual Internal Security Report (RASI), 74% of offenders are family members or close ones. This is a number that is far too high and needs to be openly debated.

It is difficult for a child to protect itself from abuse when it is manipulated by the aggressor, with which it may even have a bond of trust. The victim doesn't know that something is wrong, because they don't know what is happening, as they haven't yet developed the cognitive and social skills to identify abuse. This makes children potentially vulnerable to abusers.

It is necessary to talk about child sexual abuse with the young audience, without having to deal with curricular content related to sex education that will only be dealt with later in school education. For this to be possible, it is essential to have access to educational material dedicated to children. There is a need to create support material, such as a picture book, that parents can use to address the issue and create a space for dialogue. Therefore, it is an object with great communication potential for children, as the combination of text and image can communicate any theme through various forms of reading.

2. Overview of child sexual abuse

Many parents think that this type of situation only happens in certain contexts and believe that children will share if something happens to them. The data, however, shows that this thinking is incorrect and that the path to sharing can be much more complex than society realizes: statistics from the Council of Europe (CoE) one in five program show that 70% to 85% of abusers in cases of child sexual abuse are people close to the family who have an established relationship of trust. In Portugal, in the 2020 Annual Internal Security Report (RASI), based on the number of cases reported, the figures show that 74.7% of abusers were people close to the family and 52.4% were family members. The figures show that abusers are close people who are generally trusted by parents. Experts believe that the number of reports is much lower than the actual number of cases and that most cases are not shared.

Many victims live in silence for most of their lives and may never share the abuse. The lack of information and dialogue on the subject in society means that many parents and victims are unable to access the information and support they need.

Conservative educational standards in which there is little opportunity for communication benefit abusers, giving them control over the situation. Families with more open educational standards, in which there is more room for freedom of dialog and sharing and without the abuse of hierarchies, reduce the possibility of manipulation by the abuser. Ângelo Fernandes describes in his book, *What we talk about when we talk about sexual violence against children* (2022), that it is important to emphasize that abuse does not only involve physical contact, and that there are various types of abuse in which the victim may not be touched, but is also exposed.

A young child is unable to identify the abuse because he or she has not yet developed cognitive ability, nor has he or she gathered the necessary information to be able to rationalize what has happened to him or her. They can't externalize the story of the abuse and may be hostage to the abuser's manipulation. Managing the emotions of guilt and shame are factors that silence many victims, as well as the fear of the possible consequences of sharing, which means that some victims may not know who to share it with.

Child abuse occurs when children are subjected to sexual activity that they don't understand. They are developmentally incompatible with it and can't give consent to it and/or it violates the laws or rules of society. As Robert explains, abuse leaves deep scars on its victims, "no child can endure an experience of repeated sexual abuse without being deeply disturbed." (Robert, 2003, p. 30)

In 1989, the article *What sexual offenders tell us about prevention strategies* written by Jon Conte, Steven Wolf and Tim Smith was published in the UK. The study shows the most common strategies of child sex offenders by interviewing some of them. The choice of the victim is based on the vulnerability and the pattern of communication with its parents. A more vulnerable child with a limited family communication pattern proves to be more easily manipulated as they will look elsewhere for the lack of empathy and affection.

Abusers establish relationships of trust with the child's parents to ensure a safe position without suspicion. They offer to be with the child, trying to isolate them and start introducing touches and "affection" that later evolve into gradual sexualization, trying to normalize them. Only when they feel they have total control over the victim, they move on to acts of sexual abuse in which they seek to satisfy their own pleasure without any consent from the victim. They manipulate them into believing that they are to blame and even threaten them. The threat usually involves harming the victim themselves or people close to them, such as their parents. Another form of manipulation is to make the victim believe that if they expose the abuse, they will be punished by their own parents and that they would never accept it. The abuser has absolute control over the victim.

3. Prevention methods and picture books

Some independent associations have developed prevention programs for schools and kindergartens. Their prevention programs are applied in various schools and kindergartens throughout the country. The programs are adapted to the age group of children. Picture books are part of these programs as a method of prevention. Children's literature stands as part of these programs as a method of communication and transmission to children. Some picture books such as *Don't touch me, you fool!* (Figure 1) by Andrea Taubman and Thais Linhares (2017), *Some Secrets Should Never Be Kept* by Jayneen Sanders and Craig Smith (2013) and *Your body is yours* (Fig. 2) by Lúcia Serrano (2023) address important themes such as consent, physical boundaries, and situations of hidden abuse.

Figure 1. "Don't touch me, you fool!"
from Andrea Taubman



Figure 2. "Your Body is yours!" from Lúcia Serrano



Picture books play an important role in childhood. Not only do they serve to tell stories, but they also provide learning and space for reflection.

According to Florindo (2009), "Children's books, in general terms, can be informative, poetic, narrative, abecedary or just pictures." (Florindo, 2009, p. 15). Among them is the picture book, which communicates in various ways and can be used for various purposes. The picture book not only tells a textual and visual narrative, it also allows the author and illustrator to transmit messages, teach important lessons, reflect on social issues, address our space as individuals and as a community. As Abramovich explains, "When reading a story, the child also develops a whole critical potential. From there they can think, doubt, wonder, question..." (Abramovich, 1995, p. 143). Rodrigues identifies the potential of the illustrated album in the development of children. "In the book, the illustration functions as a stimulating element in the development of the child's emotional and cognitive capacity." (Rodrigues, 2009, p. 5). The picture book can contribute in various ways to a child's development.

4. The creation of a prevention tool – The picture book "Where do secrets live?"

The practical process consists of creating a picture book that addresses the issue of child sexual abuse, but in a neutral way without going into the context of sex education. To do this, we identified one of the most common strategies of abusers: secrets. It is through secrets that they are able to manipulate their victims into keeping them quiet. Abusers threaten their victims, saying that if they share the abuse with anyone, they could hurt someone close to them.

As secrets are part of life and growing up, it is important to distinguish healthy secrets from dangerous ones. The textual and visual narrative focuses on the difference between good and bad secrets, as well as the presence of bad secrets and their impact on the daily lives of their victims. The book is designed as an educational tool and is divided into 5 parts:

4.1. Identifying the adults you trust

Before the textual and visual narrative begins, the young reader is asked to draw their two adults they fully trust, one of which should be from within the reader's family environment and the other from outside it. This way, the parents can see with which adult the child feels more secure.

4.2. The story *Where do the Secrets Live*

The narrative follows the presence of bad secrets in the lives of various characters. The secrets not only follow the characters, but also begin to grow and make their lives more difficult. They gain more and more size and weight in the daily lives of the characters, who try to find various ways of dealing with their monster of secrets. Eventually, they find the right way to free themselves from their burdens and become happy children again. Although the main character is the monster of secrets (Fig. 3), its shape is similar to

a human shape, metaphorically representing the aggressors. It is a shadow represented by several layers of scratches and lines. The layers, together with the variation in material, symbolize the various secrets that are accumulated and therefore build up the character.

Figure 3. *The monster of secrets*



Figure 4. *Picture Book "Where do the secrets live?"*



4.3. The difference between good and bad secrets, as well as good and bad touches

In the end, the idea was to create a space for reflection, in order to help the reader understand the difference between good and bad secrets, as well as good and bad touches. There is a double-page describing these distinctions of concepts that the child should understand.

4.4. Text for adults

From the interviews with the organizations, it became clear that the adults reaction plays an important role when it comes to victims sharing their abuse. For this reason, we decided to include a text dedicated to adults in order to alert them to its importance and explain that they should pay attention to their reaction when children are sharing cases of abuse. For this purpose, it was important to have the intervention of a professional. Psychologist Marta Oliveira developed the text for adults, including a guide about the topics discussed.

4.5. Support contacts

As the book seeks to be a support tool for communicating child sexual abuse and creating a space for sharing, reflection and communication, contact details for support associations have been included.

After a careful analysis of various picture books, the development of the practical process began with the construction of the textual narrative. During the writing process, some key words began to emerge in rhyme. It is not uncommon to find rhymes in picture books, as they are appreciated by children and facilitate memorization, contributing to learning. After finishing the textual narrative, we started dividing the text into pages, in order to create a reading rhythm.

At this point the book's storyboard is developed. It's a planification and sketching of the visual narrative and its application on each page. The illustrator develops a first sketch for each page, creating a reading rhythm from a visual point of view. The illustrations are the main element of the picture book's visual communication, as they play the most important role. Although the illustrations are present in all parts of the book, it is in the story that they stand out for their visual and fluid reading.

The main character in the story is represented by a shadow of a human shape. It's graphic representation contains layers of various textures, as well as an increase in the character's scale in each illustration. The intention is to transmit the accumulation of secrets and their psychological weight in the lives of the victims.

After finalizing the illustrations, the next step was creating the layout of the book and its editorial design, including the pagination. Finally, a mock-up of the book was printed to test the book with its audience (Fig. 4), in order to analyze if any adjustments or changes needed to be made. At the moment, the book is in the process of being tested.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the research and practical development of the project, we tried to identify how the picture book can be used as a teaching tool for the prevention of child abuse and contribute to communicating this message to different audiences. The illustration becomes an effective tool that, together with the written narrative, enables a new form of communication that is captivating for children.

This project resulted in a unique picture book, developed in order to contribute to the fight against child sexual abuse, with the potential to effectively reach a wider audience, including children and adults.

Child sexual abuse is considered to be a silent and invisible problem, but it is present within society. Silence only benefit the abusers. In this way, this project seeks to contribute to the fight against child sexual abuse, giving visibility to the problem and a voice to children.

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