

## Loss of affection through fear

By Ruth Ostrow

THERE has been an enormous outpouring of grief from men in the wake of my recent story about Simon, a male friend who raised the suspicions of a group of women when he innocently played with their kids by a swimming pool.

In my column (Review, February 5-6) I said it must be a terrible time in history to be a man, when even the most innocent gestures can be construed as paedophilia.

As a concerned mother and a woman who, as a child, experienced what I now consider inappropriate behaviour from a couple of men, I asked whether we condemn all men for the acts of a small, sick few. Can women ask men to step into the role of nurturing care-givers on one hand but question their motives on the other? And doesn't this fear and suspicion leave women back in the kitchen holding the tea towel?

Lynne Segal highlights the dilemma of mothers in her letter. "I have a nine-year-old daughter who cannot talk. We're in the process of teaching her to go out there in the world. Part of this process involves her carrying a note with a brief statement about her disability and our phone numbers.

"Yesterday I found myself instructing her that if she got lost she was to approach a woman to help her. My husband was aghast. But I just don't know of too many women who have assaulted or murdered children. It remains an extraordinarily difficult question."

Michael Robertson gave a sad and heartfelt male perspective. "I heartily agree with the essence of your article. The overwhelming feeling among my male friends is that open displays of affection toward their own or others' children seems to indicate paedophile tendencies.

"A male friend once told me that he would not change his baby daughter's dirty nappy as he feared that others may think that he was deriving some sort of sexual pleasure from this act, although he was willing to change nappies that contained only wee, as this did not require personal 'cleaning' of his little girl.

"With both my wife and I previously being shift workers, I have spent considerable amounts of time with my children as a lone parent. This has meant that I've had to take my daughter into toilets. I've often felt 'that' stare, as if I was doing the wrong thing."

He goes on to talk about the trauma of being a male health-worker with 18 years experience: "Many years ago I worked as a nurse at a large metropolitan hospital in Melbourne. While on the children's ward, the charge nurse shadowed my every move. This became very apparent while I was washing my patients in the bathroom.

"When I spoke to other male nurses regarding this behaviour, they all confirmed that this had also occurred to them whenever they worked on the children's ward. The message was clear: males were not to be trusted with the children."

Aileen Walsh, a history lecturer and Aborigine, says "almost every other Aboriginal person I meet has been a victim of some sort of child abuse, especially sexual abuse". But she warns that her studies have shown it is not so much the stranger we should be wary of. Rather, we should look closer to home.

Meanwhile Dermot Buckley tried to explain the joy he gets from children. "Amazingly enough I read your article at the local pool, listening to that wonderful, wholesome, fun-loving giggling of children enjoying a good splash. That laughter leaves me with a glow that lasts for days.

"Your article really struck a chord as I'm aware of parents' looks when children choose me to clamber over at the pool, or to drag off at the barbecue to play cricket.

"I'm middle-aged and single, and am fortunate enough to love interacting with children, particularly teenagers. Maybe I see a reflection of my rebellious self from a past life. To watch the complex transition from a child into adulthood never ceases to amaze me.

"When will it be realised that it's okay to allow oneself to be child-like, and to show affection for young people? Children can give us so much if we care to open up all of our senses and just absorb their good fun."

Surprisingly, there were no letters condemning my call to tolerance. One reader wrote: "I happen to live with a psychologist who works for [the Department of Community Services] and I hear the horror stories about men and children. Many, many men are falsely accused.

"There are some wonderful men out there who would love to spend time teaching or caring for children but because of these accusations they have decided to choose other career paths."

Ron McBeth, a grandfather who lives a "bohemian artist's lifestyle" in an old brick and stone studio in Woolloomooloo, Sydney, says he often attracts odd looks and hostile body language when playing with the neighbourhood kids. But many kids in his area come from single-mother homes and need the "rough and tumble" of male company. He says: "I am determined to continue putting my faith in the majority of moderate mothers by knowing I have nothing to hide by being myself."

Maaikje Sjollemma writes: "I have lots of happy memories of my childhood -- freely playing with my dad, grandad and uncles -- which still bring a smile to my face.

"We are all well aware of the fact that not all men have the correct sense of play in mind around young children but why do we have to punish the real caring men and the children around them. No wonder we are all becoming very isolated from one another."

Photographer Doug Stealey writes: "[When I'm] walking my dogs, children asking if they can pat them should not make me nervous. But I must be careful. In a theatre with a cold child, I am scared to put my arms around the child for warmth.

"As a stepfather it was difficult enough. Now my children have left home and I enjoy the company of children, as they enjoy a trusted adult friend ... But society no longer believes in 'innocent until proven guilty' and with that has gone

innocence itself.”

Steley seems to be summing up my own point in his poignant closing remark, as well as those sentiments expressed in the avalanche of mail I received: “Abuse is a terrible thing and must be prevented. But so is living in fear.”

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