



A Better Way

Review: *For the Sake of a Child*

**CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION BOOK AIMS TO PROTECT CHILDREN,
BUT FALLS SHORT IN KEY AREAS**

By Amanda Crist & Hope Anne Dueck

For the Sake of a Child by Allen Hoover and Dr. Jeanette Harder, published in 2019, delves into the issue of child abuse in Amish and Mennonite communities. The book celebrates a rich cultural heritage while at the same time moving Plain readers toward a better understanding of how to prevent and deal with abuse.

Hoover is a member of the Old Order Mennonite Church, Groffdale Conference, and a part of the Conservative Crisis Intervention Committee (CCI), which handles abuse cases in various communities. Harder is a social work professor at the University of Nebraska, who travels throughout the country, educating law-enforcement on how to best relate to Amish and Mennonite culture. She is a member at the First Mennonite Church in Lincoln, Nebraska.

We believe that a number of concepts in their breakthrough book will be helpful in protecting some of the most vulnerable in the community—children. Unfortunately, the book has several flaws in the area of dealing with and preventing child sexual abuse which we believe could put children at risk or impact survivors.

Due to our concerns, we contacted both authors and asked that since both of them have the best interest of children in mind, they change problem areas of the book. They were very gracious and took our concerns into consideration. We sensed their true care for the Plain community and for protecting the children within it.

Since many copies of the book are already in print, we feel that the community should be aware of

the issues in the book so they can better support those who read it and may be affected by certain statements. There are a number of child safety concerns discussed, but we will mostly limit our review to the subject of sexual abuse.

Commendations

There are many sections in the book which deal well with the topic. Harding and Hoover relate admirably to the intended audience and discuss the prevalence of abuse in Amish and Mennonite communities. It could be difficult for those in a faith community to imagine that revered and respected members of the church could commit such atrocities, but the book helps the readers to understand that this is truly happening.

It also discusses the harm that sexual abuse does to children and explains why children may not remember what happened to them. They also may react or be triggered by a number of situations, and they may have to deal with buried emotions in adulthood. A child may not tell what happened to them.

The authors explain a number of concepts that may not be well-known--i.e. abusers can be women, and that boys are often abused too. This information is critical for dispelling myths about sexual abuse.

The authors also list some signs of abuse and qualify these, stating that some of these signals may be part of normal development, and sometimes signs will not be present at all. They also discuss what to do if one sees some of these behaviors but there is no obvious evidence of abuse that needs to be reported. They suggest

trying to make sure that the children have a trusted adult to go to and that the reader can be a safe adult for a needy child. This is a key idea that could change children's lives forever if the community takes it to heart.

The authors also explain to adults how they can teach children concepts like safe and unsafe secrets, good touch and bad touch, learning body parts, and when it's okay to say no. The book relieves fears about children's social services and explains how to cooperate with them. It recommends going to civil authorities if there is suspicion of abuse, and explains in detail what that means.

Another important concept Hoover and Harder share is the difference between dealing with personal trespasses and heinous crimes, which seems to be a problem for a number of Christian faith communities. Churches seem to have a hard time understanding how to deal with sex abuse issues in relation to verses in Matthew 18. These verses lay out a map for confronting someone who has wronged you privately before taking it to others. Many Christian leaders take these verses out of context and feel the victim must privately confront abusers such as rapists! The authors ask, "Did Jesus also imply that if my brother murdered his neighbor or raped my wife that I would need to go to him and talk with him between me and him alone, and if he hears me, I have gained my brother? God forbid! Such a sin needs to be reported immediately to the proper civil authorities 'who do not carry the sword in vain.'"

Many churches have used verses in Matthew 18 concerning confrontations to justify handling child abuse cases without reporting to authorities. The authors do an excellent job of addressing the misconception that we should go and confront perpetrators of abuse privately instead of reporting to police. However, they also recommend going to committees in the Amish and Mennonite communities, which, as we will see below, creates some risk.

Concerns

Committees

In recent years, concerned advocates, including one of the authors of this book, have helped to set up Amish and Mennonite committees. These committees

help to oversee crisis situations such as sexual abuse or other serious issues. This is an amazing step forward, but we do have concerns. Our primary concern with using religious committees to handle cases of abuse is that committees may be vested in protecting the church, and committee members may still ascribe to harmful beliefs about child abuse.

Committee members are chosen by leaders in the church, so if those leaders are not well informed, or have conflicts of interest, there is no system to mitigate these risks. The Plain community is in many ways a closed system, and while this affords a variety of rich cultural and spiritual experiences, it also sets the community up for lack of accountability, unchecked abuse, and untold damage to victims.

Another possible problem is that abusers themselves can be on the committee. This is termed 'elite deviance' and happens in all facets of society. In a closed system with no outside accountability, elite deviants have a much better chance of controlling outcomes. The process could further abuse the victim, and also allow child predators to slip through the cracks and abuse again.

Finally, committees need to keep a clear boundary on their role. For example, if an offender or victims need professional counseling, this should be outsourced by the committee.

Recently, a Plain church blamed victims for their sexual abuse and told them to repent, even a girl who had only been six when the abuse started! The church clearly stated that they had been counseled by a committee for this abuse case. Could this egregious situation have been prevented if the committee had firmly educated the church on treatment of survivors and how abuse happens through grooming or fear? Did the committee itself shame survivors? We hope not. If the committee had properly counseled the church, and the church had listened, this additional damage to victims never would have happened.

Overall, the main risk of using committees is the lack of accountability, screening, and training of committee members, who could be abusive themselves or more commonly, uninformed. We recommend more vetting processes, accountability through various checks and balances, and education for committee

members. Survivors should be on committees whenever possible, and committees should create clear operational guidelines reviewed by outside experts.

Abuse Disclosure

In the book there is a section that talks about when a child discloses abuse where it suggests, “Sometimes a child will disclose abuse to an extended family member, such as a grandparent, aunt, or cousin. We encourage such extended family members to get help from the ministry or from a crisis team member outside the family.” The section then goes on to say that “we should first go to the home ministry.”

Not until the end of the section does it discuss going to authorities. We would strongly recommend that in any case of suspected abuse, people go to the civil authorities in relatively close timing with the committee. They can get support from the church home ministry or committees while simultaneously going to law enforcement.

Missing from the book is information about taking the child to a multi-disciplinary Child Advocacy Center, which is specifically designed to work with multiple authorities and experts and will provide child-friendly, forensic interviews which will hold up in court. The process is also the least traumatic for the child. Good Child Advocacy Centers are the gold standard and committees, advocates, and parents should find out where their closest center is located, and make use of it as needed.

Views on Survivors

The book gives several statements that could be misunderstood to mean that child sexual abuse victims become “impure” spiritually after their abuse. After discussion with both authors, we believe that they did not intend for the book to say this. We include examples here so that readers of the book can be aware of the authors’ intentions and can ignore some of these statements.

First, a phrase from a committee in the book says that victims need “to understand that Jesus can and does restore to wholeness and purity, to understand forgiveness, to find their voice . . .” The phrases, “restore to wholeness and purity” and “to understand

forgiveness” can be problematic if taken the wrong way. By saying that a child needs to be restored to purity, the statement could be implying that the child has become spiritually or morally unclean. In reality, the child may feel dirty, but this belief needs to be countered and worked through early and often by supportive adults.

The belief that the child is actually spiritually unclean due to the harm of another is disastrous and wrong. No child should feel that they are spiritually sullied from being abused by others. We would never say that a child that was stabbed with a knife was now spiritually defiled.

We know that as recently as 2020, churches in Plain communities are still asking young children to repent from being abused. This practice must stop, and instead churches should work hard to reassure the child that they are still valued and pure in God’s eyes, and the eyes of the church. No sexual violence or abuse should ever take away the value and worth of a child, which in this community is often associated with purity. The description should be removed from the book, and from the committee statement.

The concept of impurity is also illustrated in statements in the book like “the sacredness of the marriage bond has been defiled.” Basically, if a child is molested, the statement seems to imply it defiles their future marriage bond, or sex in marriage. The word “defile” has spiritual connotations that Bible readers would be aware of, and implies a loss of purity.

Some readers could also assume that this statement conflates sexual abuse with consensual sex, and that both acts equally taint a person. We have seen this misconception in multiple faith communities, and it needs to be addressed; faith groups need to educate their members on the concept of consent, and not assign rape and extramarital consensual sex to the same box. The statement again puts an undue burden and blame on the victim. After addressing this with the authors, they also agreed with our belief that there is no loss of purity.

The book also says that survivors can have a “seared conscience” and gives a story where two abused boys’ “consciences didn’t always bother them as much as they used to.” For those readers with a Biblical background, which is virtually all of the Plain community, this is a condemning idea. We would argue that it is the

perpetrators who have the seared conscience, not those they have harmed. The Bible verses in I Timothy 4 state:

1 Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

2 Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron;

3 Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

In these verses, those with the seared conscience speak lies and try to control others with rules that God did not create. This sounds very much like what abusers do--they lie and manipulate others, and do not feel guilt for their harmful actions.

To imply that young children who have been harmed have reached some kind of evil status and have departed from their faith is wrong and spiritually abusive to them. The belief could cause irreparable harm to a child. It is the perpetrators who do these things to children who have the seared conscience.

When asked, Hoover stated that he felt that a seared conscience is an unreliable conscience, one that might think that wrong things are right, and right things are wrong. We disagree that this interpretation or phrase should be used, and since these verses are frequently interpreted even more harshly, we feel that it would be best to remove the wording altogether.

We would suggest that in addition to removing any confusing ideas, the book should also give more empowerment and credit to survivors as agents of their own healing, and as brave speakers of truth who often risk everything to stand up for themselves, protect others, or bring justice. The book is sometimes lacking in portraying survivors in a positive light.

Ideas on Forgiveness

The book lauds forgiveness as a quintessential feature of Amish/Mennonite Christian culture. An example is given of how the parents of murdered Amish schoolchildren were able to work on forgiving the school shooter. While forgiveness is a noble topic that has been written upon for centuries, the book does not address the fact that the concept has often been foisted upon

survivors in many destructive and unhealthy ways.

Survivors are sometimes forced to 'forgive and forget' and are not allowed to work through or talk about the trauma and emotions that they are experiencing. This essentially silences victims, hinders their healing, and spiritually abuses them. Well-meaning people who wish to help actually end up putting the victim in a worse position than before. And it is often those conversations, rather than the abuse, which survivors talk about with agony and pain.

Children and other survivors may take years to work through the trauma and forgiveness process, should they choose to do so, and should not be rushed. Forgiveness generally comes as survivors are supported in healthy, healing ways, not because it is ordered or forced.

In addition, a shallow concept of forgiveness may also let perpetrators off the hook. They may allegedly repent and ask for forgiveness, and then the community may treat them the same as before, leaving vulnerable children and adults at risk of more abuse.

Hoover agreed, when the reviewers spoke with him, that this is a serious risk and suggested that communities should be careful with perpetrators even after they have repented, much like an alcoholic would be cautious around alcohol while recovering. Adding this kind of information to the section on forgiveness would ensure more safety in the community, although we would caution against taking the addiction analogy too far, as we discuss below.

Views on Abusers

The book speaks of child abusers being in bondage to addiction from which they can break free. This type of language is passive and separates the abuser from his or her actions. It does not address predation for what it truly is. Habitual molesting of children is not an addiction like trying to stop using alcohol. These men and women seek to consume innocent children, and their desires are often insatiable. They plan and execute. To speak of these evil actions as an addiction is to promote sympathy for abusers and to minimize crimes.

The authors also call them brothers. A fundamental misunderstanding in many Christian communities is that men and women who molest children

“fall into” sin just like anyone else. This is a great underestimation of the violence and deception that is being perpetrated, and what it takes to plan and execute these heinous actions. Many offenders molest multiple children, and on a lie detector test, convicted offenders admitted to committing sexual crimes against children 100 to 200 times before they were caught.¹

To call someone who is actively engaged in deceiving everyone and sexually violating children a “brother” is to label someone as good when he is harming others in one of the worst ways possible. Should we give this person a chance to repent? Of course. However, since it is well documented that child molesters are extremely talented at lying, church members should never assume that repentance has taken place. Instead, they should put safeguards around the abuser for many years, possibly for life. The authors agreed with our push for these safeguards.

Even conservatively, multiple studies show that at least 40% of sexual offenders will do it again in the long term, and these are just the ones who get caught.² It is imperative that communities understand this, and take it seriously lest more children suffer.

Other Issues

We know that the issue of physical punishment of children is seen as part of the Bible and so most likely not negotiable by some in this community. The authors delicately address this topic and advocate for parenting in love, and never harshly.

However, the book still allows for spanking. We would urge the authors, and the Plain community in general, to revisit the concepts of spanking in light of thorough Biblical study. We believe that through careful examination, scholars can show that the spanking of young children is not recommended in the Bible. Additionally, study after study shows the harms of spanking children, and many experts around the world are working to mitigate this practice.

While we believe that there are many other wiser, safer, less problematic methods of child training, we would like to point out that if someone who cares about the prevention of sexual abuse is going to discipline their child with corporal punishment, it must never be done on the bare buttocks. To do so breaks down

important boundaries, violates parental teachings on “modesty,” and will set the child up to be more easily preyed upon, especially by those who they consider to be in a position of authority over them.

A more minor issue in the book is the introductory story which focuses on stranger danger and obedience. The vast majority of abusers are not strangers, and sometimes obedience can lead to abuse if children are not educated to say no to certain things. We are hoping that in future editions, the authors will choose a different story, one that represents more common scenarios that can lead to abuse in Plain communities.

Finally, there is a section which recommends further reading. We strongly advocated for removing the book *Protecting their Purity: Protecting Innocent Children from Sexual Abuse* from the recommended list. The book included inaccurate legal advice as well as a disturbing chapter on the dangers of men, along with many other issues. Dr. Harder contacted us after our discussion, and assured us that they requested the book be removed from the list of recommended resources in future editions.

Summary

We believe that *For the Sake of a Child* needs to re-define how it views perpetrators of child abuse, as well as how child abuse should be dealt with in the community in some respects. We believe that one of the main problems in dealing with child sex abuse lies in denial and institutional/family protectionism and a lack of understanding and education, including sex education, to prevent abuse.

It is the community’s ability to mobilize a response through accountability, create prevention strategies, and embrace cultural and spiritual changes that will turn the tide. This book provides a foundation of education that could be a catalyst for just that.

We believe the authors are passionate about preventing abuse in the Amish and Mennonite communities, and that they are a dynamic team which has the influence and heart to do amazing things. We appreciated their willingness to dialogue with us, and look forward to seeing future work from these writers.

Endnotes

1 (Jensen, 2017)

2 Salter, Anna. *Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists, and Other Sex Offenders*. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003), p. 60

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