

Press Release



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Eastenders' decision to feature childhood sexual abuse is brave – but where next for real-life victims?

The Survivors Trust welcomes the decision of the Eastenders' production team to cover the issues of childhood sexual abuse and child rape through a major storyline. However, we have a strong concern that the issues raised over the coming months in Eastenders will stir emotions in viewers who have been affected by sexual abuse, but who have nowhere to turn for advice and support due the Government's lack of commitment to helping victims.

This 'relationship' between the characters Tony and Whitney is not one of affection – it is a case of childhood sexual abuse. The sexual acts taking place between them are not an expression of love, but constitute child rape.

Victims of childhood sexual abuse have become the largest client group of specialist rape and sexual abuse support services. However, woefully inadequate funding for these services has meant that many traumatised and vulnerable victims experience a postcode lottery in access to services, and can face huge delays in accessing vital support such as counselling and therapy. Many other victims cannot access a support service at all. While at the same time the perpetrators of the sex crimes are the focus of a range of policies and programmes which are allocated huge Government budgets.

Fay Maxted, CEO of The Survivors Trust said: "The Government is ploughing millions of pounds into sex offender management, but forgetting about helping the victims of these crimes. The Government is currently spending just 16p for each victim of childhood sexual abuse which is a tiny drop in the ocean. Countless numbers of victims are being ignored and left with nowhere to turn, while the focus remains on the offender".

She continued to say that "many people do not realise that childhood sexual abuse also includes child rape, and Eastenders has made a brave and valuable move by placing the spotlight on this issue over the coming months. However, to raise awareness about the huge problem of sexual abuse of children is only the first step in many. This storyline will undoubtedly touch a nerve with many viewers who have experienced abuse and who then

need access to support and advice from experts to help rebuild their life. However, charities that provide this help are closing because they do not have enough money to continue.”

The Survivors Trust has worked with the BBC to provide information about specialist member groups located throughout the UK and Ireland, contact details of which will be available to viewers by calling the BBC Action Lines number announced after key Eastenders episodes.

Fay Maxted commented: “The reality is that many of the support groups which help victims of rape and sexual abuse face imminent closure or a need to reduce their service due to a lack of funds. Coverage of childhood sexual abuse and rape on Eastenders is an important way to make victims realise that they are not alone, and that sexual abuse happens far more often than many people think. But this could be very harmful for victims if they are not then able to have ongoing contact with a local group which can support them to come to terms with what has happened to them and help them to rebuild their life”.

Background information

On Friday 12th September viewers of BBC One’s Eastenders were introduced to a new storyline focusing on childhood sexual abuse and child rape. We saw Tony King, partner of one of the soap’s most well-known characters Bianca Jackson, returning home from prison and later discovered that he has previously had a relationship with Whitney Dean, Bianca’s fifteen year old daughter by another man. The episode airing on Monday 15th September is far more shocking. Scenes of Tony and Whitney together in the bedroom and other plot devices make it apparent that a sexual relationship has been going on since Whitney was twelve years old. Whitney believes that he is in love with her and will run away with her when she is sixteen.

Childhood sexual abuse is a serious and prevalent social issue – 21% of women and 11% of men report being sexually abused as a child. This means that there are 7.2 million adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse in the UK. Most childhood sexual abuse takes place in the home and the perpetrator is usually known to the victim and their family, as in the case of the Eastenders storyline. Many of these victims never tell anybody, and even if they do tell someone those affected may not get the help and support they need.

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The Survivors Trust is a national umbrella agency for over 120 specialist voluntary sector agencies providing a range of counselling, therapeutic and support services working with women, men and children who are victims/survivors of rape, sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse.

More information about The Survivors trust can be found on our website:

www.thesurvivorstrust.org