

## **Breaking the Silence: Towards human rights-informed conversations with children**

A book review of: Glistrup, K. (2025). *What Children Don't Know... Hurts Them: Break the Silence*. Denmark. ISBN 978-87-994320-7-3 (e-book) ISBN 978-87-994320-5-9

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*'What Children Don't Know... Hurts Them'* by Karen Glistrup offers a compassionate call to dismantle the culture of silence surrounding and shaping children's experiences during times of family crisis. Rejecting assumptions that children lack competence and that withholding information is protective, the author argues that dialogue is essential for their wellbeing and provides guidance to cultivate the qualities and practices necessary for open and honest conversations with children.

Although not framed within Human Rights Education (HRE), the book strongly aligns with children's interdependent protection and participation rights, particularly entitlements to access information and be heard. Acknowledging academic and personal intersections, this book addresses a wide audience of adults who engage with children of all ages. The author foregrounds children's often overlooked or silenced experiences of adverse mental health conditions within 'the whole family'. Issues explored include the societal stigma surrounding mental illness and the asymmetrical involvement of children affected by it. The central theme concerns children's recognition and wellbeing, and the implications extend to other adverse life circumstances including divorce, displacement and trauma. For educators and practitioners engaged in HRE, it provides valuable practice-based insights that

can inform broader educational or social justice conversations with the children they encounter in their specific contexts.

Drawing from psychology, social work and family therapy, the author effectively combines theory with practice-based experience to offer a praxis-oriented contribution to the literature and guidance for professionals working with children and families. The book introduces accessible and adaptable tools - such as drawing, metaphors, relaxation techniques and peer group sessions - to support children's emotional expression and processing and to reduce isolation in contexts of adversity. Part III, *Family Talks*, presents a novel structured framework for facilitating open and honest dialogue between parents and children on complex issues. Throughout, the author interweaves 'meaningful moments from conversations' with children, families and professionals, providing emotional resonance and practical relevance while making the text accessible and engaging to a range of practitioner audiences.

### ***Children's recognition, dignity and rights***

The book's distinctive contribution lies in its unwavering recognition of children facing challenging familial situations and their need for '*openness, honesty and knowledge of the reality in which they live*' (p. 19) The author critiques the pervasive framing of silence as protection and the tendency to exclude children from conversations based on claims that '*they are too small to understand*' (p. 24), arguing that lies, secrets and concealment contribute to insecurity and isolation along with feelings of guilt and shame. The underestimation of both children's capacities and need for information highlighted in this book reflects concerns in HRE discourses (e.g., Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018). This book reminds us that children are always involved and affected by what happens around them even when adults, including

parents and teachers, avoid or overlook conversations about their experiences.

Acknowledging that silence can also be a protective coping strategy used by children to maintain control and self-dignity, the book invites practitioners to reflect deeply on how silence operates in child/adult relationships and consider how dignity can be upheld.

Furthermore, the book draws attention to the relational dynamics and reciprocal emotional labour involved in practice. The author challenges tendencies toward emotional distancing and urges practitioners to engage with children's pain rather than evade it, underscoring the ethical imperative for emotional presence and responsiveness in all conversations. These provocations invite HRE educators to foster dialogue with learners through approaches grounded in love, acceptance and dignity.

The book resonates with HRE by providing interdisciplinary, praxis-oriented insights that implicitly activate children's human rights to information, express their views and to be heard concerning matters affecting their daily lives, across home, educational, health, and social care settings (UN, 2009, para. 3). The focus on open emotionally responsive dialogue and taking children seriously reflects the 'ethics of recognition' central to HRE (Osler, 2015) and necessary conditions for creating emotionally safe, respectful spaces where children can express their views (Ward and Lundy, 2024).

Overall, the book offers transferable insights to HRE practitioners for fostering open conversations and meaningful participation in *broader educational and social justice agendas*, with strong potential to be extended through a human rights framework. '*What Children Don't Know... Hurts Them*' is a provocation that invites deep reflexivity on practice. The book is both a call to action to disrupt the culture of silence and a practice guide to foster

conversations that can promote children's right to be informed and involved in matters that affect them deeply.

## References

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