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Dark Secrets of Childhood: Media Power, Child
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Book Review

Powell, F. and Scanlon, M. (2015). *Dark Secrets of Childhood: Media Power, Child Abuse and Public Scandals*. Bristol: Policy Press. ISBN:9781447317852.

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In this robust and scholarly book, the authors through the 'lens' of the child abuse inquiry, offer the reader a critical commentary on the gradual transformation of Irish social, cultural and legal perspectives on the rights and welfare entitlements of children.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one – chapters 1 to 5- deals with historical events, changing professional practices and discourses leading to the establishment of child abuse inquiries. The first two chapters chronicle the emergence of child abuse as a social problem and a media concern. Chapters three and four examine and contextualize the institutional abuse of children by the Catholic Church and the unsatisfactory nature of its engagement in authentic truth –telling and reparation concerning its human rights violations. This chapter also identifies how an absence of civility in post -independence Ireland led to the emergence of a victim blaming morally ambivalent stance which condoned or turned a blind eye towards abusive behaviour. Chapter five addresses the cultural constraints which impeded the development of a child protection system capable of safeguarding children and promoting their rights.

Part two- chapters 6 to 10- *offers steps forward on the road to recognizing children's right to be treated as citizens in societies that profess to be democracies*. Chapter six begins with the emergence of childhood as a response to changing conceptions of adulthood. It chronicle the cultural shifts in the 1960s which advanced the case for children to be *entitled to full liberation in the governance of their own lives* and contrasts this rights based perspective with a welfarist approach largely dictated by adults. The chapter concludes with a an argument that children's rights to the 3 Ps –care and protection, provision and participation- advanced in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) need to be operationalized within the context of a new deal for childhood citizenship. Chapter seven examines the inter-active cultural framing of childhood by adult media. Chapter eight assembles the historical 'facts' behind the false charity and disciplinary tactics which were used across Europe and Ireland to dehumanize and oppress children up until recent times. Chapter nine critically deconstructs the safeguarding and promotion of wellbeing practices of social workers and their managers in contemporary Ireland and highlights the inadequacies of the treatment of children in direct accommodation. The book concludes with a nuanced calculation of the media's contribution to the promotion of new discourses and practices leading to a progressive refashioning of childhood. Media focus on child abuse has raised public awareness of child maltreatment issues but it has also fomented moral panics and engaged in the scapegoating of individuals rather than holding the system and its cultural

convictions to account. Three progressive responses for tackling child abuse are advanced by the authors in the conclusion -

- reduce levels of child poverty and provide supports for families experiencing social deprivation
- invest in child protection and welfare services
- promote children's rights and empower them as active citizens.