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How organisations can identify, assess and reduce child safety risks

Safeguarding Forum – Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, VIC

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Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS)

A nationally recognised centre of research excellence in the field of child, youth and family welfare.

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Prevention

Prevention – based on knowledge of causes and contributing factors

Child Sexual Abuse occurs at the intersection of:

- Motivation (of a potential offender)
- Vulnerability (of a potential victim)
- Opportunity

Prevention means addressing the **preconditions** that facilitate abuse at each of these levels.

Create and support **conditions of safety** within families, organisations and communities.

Knowledge of risk factors

Child sexual abuse risk factors focus on characteristics of potential *victims* and *offenders*. **Victim** characteristics:

- Age (middle childhood and around puberty: 8-13, but particularly 6-7 and again at 10-12)
- Gender (female) – but boys are also frequently abused – particularly in institutional contexts
- Previous experience of child maltreatment (physical or emotional abuse, neglect, family violence)
- Child disability
- Level of assertiveness
- Social and structural disadvantage (e.g. poverty or discrimination experienced by single parents, CALD or some Indigenous communities)
- Family dysfunction and parent characteristics (parenting skills, mental health, drug/alcohol issues)

Knowledge of risk factors (cont'd)

Child sexual abuse risk factors focus on characteristics of potential *victims* and *offenders*. **Offender** characteristics:

- Gender (male) - but women can also offend sexually
- Problems such as substance abuse
- Prior history of abuse (though 'victim-to-offender' cycle is not determinative, and problematic)
- Psychopathology and personality characteristics (charming, but deviant attitudes)
- Engage in 'grooming' behaviour – de-sensitising a child/young person
- (NB: social status and sexual orientation of offenders are myths that are not supported by the research)

Environmental factors

Risks, enablers and protective factors

What do we know about organisational contexts?

- Are all organisations equal?
- To supplement research about victim- and perpetrator-factors, we need to explore what it is about different organisational settings that might increase or decrease the risks.
- Can organisations change, and increase conditions of safety for children?

Shifting the paradigm

Preventing ‘bad’ people isn’t enough

Sexual abuse prevention strategies in organisations have focused on **screening** to identify those with a history of child sexual abuse.

However:

- First-time abusers have no offence history
- Much abuse goes undetected or reported, so won’t be detected in screening
- Young people also engage in sexually abusive behaviours (around 30–60% of incidents relate to peers)

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/2016/06/22/public-health-approach-preventing-child-maltreatment>

Box Office lessons: The power of the situation



Box Office lessons on Social Psychology

Social Psychology knowledge from the 1970s explored on the big screen

Demonstrates the “power of the situation” to influence individual behaviour

Implications for child-safety in organisations:

- We have failed—and will continue to fail—if we try and focus *solely* on identifying, weeding out, or preventing ‘bad people’ from joining organisations.

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/2016/06/22/public-health-approach-preventing-child-maltreatment>

Key risks in child-related organisations

- Grooming process prior to the act of abuse is a precursor to offending that relies upon relationship and trust-building between the victim, the perpetrator, and the institutional community.
- The modus operandi of perpetrators may differ between institutional contexts, as different settings allow for different opportunities for, and facilitators of, abuse.
- New technology, mobile phones, and social media open up new avenues for communication, and therefore grooming, for potential abusers.
- Climate, culture and norms in organisations can facilitate abuse:
 - “Just as children are 'groomed' by adults to allow them to perpetrate sexual acts, other adults are also 'groomed' (or desensitised) to perceive potentially risky behaviour as harmless.” (van Dam, 2001)

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/2016/06/22/public-health-approach-preventing-child-maltreatment>

OVERVIEW:

3 elements of child-safe environments

- 1 Screening for known perpetrators
- 2 Managing situational risks
- 3 Creating positive cultures

Screening for known perpetrators

1

Pre-employment screening

Having pre-employment vetting is the first chapter in the book, not the final chapter!

- Understanding differences between a **police check** and a **Working With Children Check**:
 - More extensive, but also more targeted
 - See *Pre-employment screening: Working With Children Checks and Police Checks* <aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/pre-employment-screening-working-children-checks-and-police-checks>
- Understanding your obligations – in many jurisdictions, employers are prohibited from employing someone in a child-related occupation who does not have a Working With Children Check.
- Recognising the **limitations of pre-employment screening** – most child sex offenders do not have criminal records.

Managing situational risks

2

Situational crime prevention

A situational crime prevention framework can:

- Provide a lens for understanding how child victimisation occurs in institutions
- Serve as a foundation for development of effective prevention strategies in different contexts through:
 - Development of policies to address risks
 - Monitoring and ongoing actions.

Situational crime prevention

- Address the limits of both pre-employment and ongoing screening/suitability assessments
- Focus on creating safe *environments* rather than safe *individuals*
- Have been successfully applied to reducing a range of criminal behaviours

Underlying premise: Under the right circumstances, anyone could offend

Key focus is on *opportunity reduction*:

- Making crime more risky
- Making crime more effortful
- Reducing rewards
- Removing excuses
- Preventing—and not tolerating—potential ‘grooming’ behaviour

Not all organisations are equal

Different organisations will have a different risk profile and present different opportunities for grooming behaviour to occur or go undetected

Family-like environments carry the highest risk:

- Staff required to act in *loco parentis*
- Physical contact, showering, changing clothes (e.g. sports)
- Sleep-overs/camps
- Transport (at odd hours)

Not all organisations are equal (cont'd)

A risk-analysis of organisational activities could focus on:

- Level of observation/supervision of adult-child interactions
- Use of adults as role-models or mentors
- Use of social media or other potentially private communication avenues
- A culture where abuse might be tolerated (e.g. gender stereotypes, homophobia, alcohol)

Don't lose sight of the big picture:

It is not only about 'risk'...

What are the opportunities for building resilience?

How can staff act as a support for young people who might be vulnerable to, or who have actually experienced maltreatment in the home or elsewhere?

- Sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, or exposure to family violence

Some possible protective factors or supports:

- Being a positive role model (safe; boundaries)
- Encouraging and responding appropriately to abuse occurring elsewhere
- Fostering inclusion and peer support

Creating positive organisational cultures

3

Strategies for creating child-safe organisations

Examples:

- Values-based interviewing
- Create induction programs – where acceptable behaviour is defined
- Reinforce with ongoing professional development
- Implement supervision, mentoring and accountability for staff
- Understanding and comply with mandatory reporting obligations
- Analysis of—and implementation of strategies to address—risks across the organisation (situational prevention)
- Ask for, and respond to, the views of children and young people about safety within the organisation
- Develop (regularly review and update) child abuse policies, procedures, and standards

Facilitating disclosure

Disclosure is the *process* of telling someone about a harmful incident

Could be referring to disclosure of offences from a range of **contexts**—within or beyond the organisation—such as:

- Between peers at schools or youth-serving organisations
- Between peers outside of schools or youth-serving organisations
- At home – by a family member (sibling/parent/other); neighbour; acquaintance
- Elsewhere – by a known or unknown offender

Facilitating disclosure (cont'd)

Disclosure could relate to experiencing a **variety of abusive behaviours, not just sexual abuse:**

- Physical sexual assault, unwanted requests, as well as a range of *online offences* or using digital media (including images, 'sexting', bullying, etc.)

Organisational cultures might allow for a variety of forms of bullying, harassment and intimidation to occur, which in turn can increase a child's vulnerability to sexual abuse though feeling 'different' (e.g., homophobia; sexism, or more subtle forms of gender stereotypes of masculinity/femininity, etc.), or because of the use of alcohol or other substances (Higgins, 2013).

Whole-of-organisation approaches are enhanced by:

- Agreed definitions of child sexual abuse
- Statement about the consequences of offending
- Clear, published policies and procedures that are victim-centred (with regular training, review, monitoring and evaluation)
- Prevention education programs for young people, adult workers/volunteers, and families
- Education on the long-term impacts of sexual assault

National Safe Schools Framework (2011)

“Promoting and providing a supportive learning environment in which all students can expect to feel safe”.

See: www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/_resources/natsafeschools_file.pdf

Child-safe strategies need to be more than compliance-oriented

- They need to be informed by, respond to, and empower children and young people (who are the key beneficiaries of investments)
- They need to be aware of the potential for – and reduce the likelihood of – unintended consequences
- They need to be regularly evaluated and adjusted
- They need to complement and be integrated into other institutional policies and initiatives
- They can be enhanced through partnerships

Applying the Situational Prevention Model

Based on Kaufman et al. (2010)

Steps to reducing risks:

1. Conduct Initial Risk Assessment
2. Confirm key risks with stakeholders (clergy, parish leaders, other parishioners – particularly parents & young people) – including. frequency/severity
3. Link risks to risk-reduction and prevention strategies
4. Prioritise risks
5. Implement proposed risk-reduction and prevention strategies
6. Ongoing monitoring

Applying the Situational Prevention Model

Based on Kaufman et al. (2010)

Typical situational risk categories:

1. Lifestyle and routine activities
2. Physical environment
3. 'Client' / victim characteristics
4. Locations
5. Facilitators (organisational climate, culture, and practices)
6. Offender characteristics

Overview of risk-management strategies

- Pre-employment screening, values-based interviewing and ongoing suitability assessment
- Minimising situational risks by limiting opportunities (recognising that **any person** can perpetrate child abuse, though some people are higher risk)
- Appropriate, articulated, and supported policies and procedures about:
 - Identifying signs of abuse (recognise risk factors/vulnerability of some children; grooming behaviours of perpetrators)
 - Responding to disclosures
 - Training staff
 - Providing ongoing support for staff
- Positive culture (child-friendly; transparent; respectful; based on protective participation of children/young people)
- Implement specific prevention programs and strategies
e.g., respectful relationships; sexual health; child-abuse prevention awareness & skills (“protective behaviours”), etc.

Irenyi et al., 2006

ICPS Resources for Child-Safe Organisations

Research reports:

- [Taking us seriously: children and young people talk about safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns](#)
2015, Tim Moore, Morag McArthur, Debbie Noble-Carr, Deborah Harcourt
- [Our safety counts: Children and young people's perceptions of safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns](#)
2016, Tim Moore, Morag McArthur, Jessica Heerde, Steven Roche, Patrick O'Leary
- [Safe and sound: Exploring the safety of young people in residential care](#)
2016, Tim Moore, Morag McArthur, Steven Roche, Jodi Death, Clare Tilbury
- [Help-Seeking Needs and Gaps for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse](#)
2017, Vicky Saunders, Morag McArthur

Additional Resources and Tools:

- [Kid Central Toolkit](#)
- Research to Practice Issues:
 - Issue 11: [Being Safe and Feeling Safe: Children's Conceptualisations of Interpersonal Safety](#)
 - Issue 12: [Children's views about safety in institutions.](#)
 - Issue 13: [Our Safety Counts: Key findings from the Australian Survey of Kids and Young People – Perceptions of interpersonal safety and characteristics of safe institutions.](#)
 - Issue 14: [Our Safety Counts: Key findings from the Australian Survey of Kids and Young People – help-seeking and institutional responses to safety concerns.](#)

Other resources for creating child-safe organisations

- The Australian Council for Children and Youth Organisation's *Safeguarding Children* is an accreditation program run by the Australian Childhood Foundation
www.safeguardingchildren.com.au
- Life Without Barriers – *We Put Children First*
www.lwb.org.au/childrenfirst
- Childwise has published *12 Steps to Building Child Safe Organisations* and conducts regular training, such as *Choose with Care* and cybersafety programs
www.childwise.net
- Erooga, M. (ed). (2012). *Creating safer organisations: Practical steps to prevent the abuse of children by those working with them*. Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, UK.
- Developing an understanding of how children understand and experience safety in institutions
<http://www.acu.edu.au/621059>
- CFCA resources on organisational issues:
<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/topics/child-safe-organisations>
<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/child-maltreatment-organisations-risk-factors-and-strate>
- Protecting Australia's Children Research Register:
<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/topics/child-safe-organisations>
<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/child-maltreatment-organisations-risk-factors-and-strate>
- Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse
<http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/policy-and-research/our-policy-work/making-institutions-child-safe.aspx>

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Elements of a child-safe institution:

1. Child safety is embedded in institutional leadership, governance and culture
2. Children participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously
3. Families and communities are informed and involved
4. Equity is promoted and diversity respected
5. People working with children are suitable and supported

<http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/5d0dc659-68c2-46f9-847b-fafd52f58673/Creating-child-safe-institutions>

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Elements of a child-safe institution (cont'd):

6. Processes to respond to complaints of child sexual abuse are child-focussed
7. Staff are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children safe through continual education and training
8. Physical and online environments minimise the opportunity for abuse to occur
9. Implementation of child-safe standards is continuously reviewed and improved
10. Policies and procedures document how the institution is child safe

NOTE: These 'elements' are currently being drafted into National Principles for endorsement by the community services ministers nationally, under agreed activities within the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children's third action plan.

<http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/5d0dc659-68c2-46f9-847b-fafd52f58673/Creating-child-safe-institutions>

References

☞ Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Personal Safety Survey*.

See: <<http://www3.aifs.gov.au/acssa/statistics.html#npss>>

☞ Higgins, D. J. (2001). A case study of child sexual abuse within a church community. *Journal of Religion and Abuse*, 3(1/2), 5-19.

☞ Higgins, D. J., Kaufman, K., & Erooga, M. (2016). How can child welfare and youth-serving organisations keep children safe? *developing practice: the child youth and family work journal*, 44, 48-64.

☞ Irenyi, M., Bromfield, L., Beyer, L., & Higgins, D. (2006). Child maltreatment in organisations: Risk factors and strategies for prevention. *Child Abuse Prevention Issues No. 25*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne. Available: <<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/child-maltreatment-organisations-risk-factors-and-strate>>

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☞ Quadara, A. (2008). Responding to young people disclosing sexual assault: A resource for schools. <<https://aifs.gov.au/publications/responding-young-people-disclosing-sexual-assault>>

☞ CFCA resources relating to Protecting Children:

<<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/topics/child-abuse-and-neglect-prevention>>

<<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/topics/child-safe-organisations>>

<<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/topics/national-framework-protecting-australias-children>>

☞ Protecting Australia's Children Research and Evaluation Register: <<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/pacra/>>