Organisational measures for preventing child sexual abuse in after-school programmes

Invited written contribution to the Mission d'information et d'évaluation of the Paris City Council

Douglas H. Russell and Daryl J. Higgins
Institute of Child Protection Studies
Australian Catholic University

10th November 2026

Core proposition: effective prevention requires an organisational safeguarding system, not reliance on any single measure such as screening, policy, staff training or child-focused education.

Purpose and scope

This contribution responds to the Paris City Council committee's request for practical organisational measures that may help prevent child sexual abuse in after-school programmes for children aged 3 to 11. It draws primarily on our research on organisational child sexual abuse prevention, contextual prevention, safeguarding capability and children's help-seeking, together with Australian child-safe organisational frameworks and policy experience.

The contribution is not an assessment of the French legal or regulatory system. Measures developed in Australia cannot simply be transferred without adaptation to the governance, workforce, cultural and service context of Paris. Rather, the Australian experience provides a structured set of principles and practices that can inform locally designed safeguarding arrangements.

We distinguish throughout between: (1) measures already reflected in Australian policy or organisational frameworks; (2) findings supported by research or evaluation; and (3) evidence-informed recommendations where direct outcome evidence remains limited.

1. Safeguarding should operate as an organisational system

Child sexual abuse prevention in after-school programmes should not be reduced to vetting workers, adopting a policy or delivering one-off training. Our systematic review identified 50 prevention-related concepts across 25 multidimensional models and frameworks and synthesised them into six Conditions of Safety. These encompass child-safe organisational culture, policy and practice; attention to people who may cause harm; safe environments in which risks are identified, mitigated and monitored; the empowerment and education of children; support for those who experience abuse; and appropriate responses to adults and children who engage in harmful sexual behaviour (Russell & Higgins, 2026).

For after-school programmes, the practical implication is that safeguarding should be treated as a connected system spanning governance, workforce practices, daily interactions, physical and online environments, participation and complaints, response arrangements, and continuous improvement. Weakness in one part of the system can undermine otherwise strong arrangements elsewhere.

2. Organisational measures for after-school programmes

2.1 Leadership, governance and a child-safe culture

A governing authority should assign clear responsibility for child safety, establish expectations for all providers and sites, and routinely examine whether safeguards operate in practice. Leaders should communicate that child safety is a core organisational responsibility rather than an administrative compliance task. Safeguarding should be a standing item in supervision, team meetings, induction and service review. Leaders also need mechanisms for staff to raise concerns about colleagues, including subtle boundary violations or patterns of conduct that may not initially meet a statutory reporting threshold.

Australian implementation: The National Principles for Child Safe Organisations place leadership, governance and culture first and require child safety to be embedded in organisational decision-making. ICPS submissions on Child Safe Standards have also emphasised organisational education, capacity-building, oversight and monitoring, rather than relying on standards alone. See: https://humanrights.gov.au/resource-hub/resources-for-organisations-businesses/child-safe-organisations

Research basis: Implementation research in early childhood education indicates that policy and training do not automatically become everyday practice. Leadership, team culture, reflective structures and organisational conditions shape whether safeguarding is enacted consistently (Wachter et al., 2026).

2.2 Suitable, supported and accountable personnel

After-school providers should use safer recruitment processes that examine suitability to work with children, not only criminal history. This can include child-safety statements in position descriptions, structured questions about values and professional boundaries, verified references, legally available background checks, induction into codes of conduct, probationary review, ongoing supervision and clear consequences for breaches. Screening should be treated as one layer of protection, because it cannot identify every person who may later behave unsafely.

Australian implementation: The National Principles cover recruitment, screening, induction, supervision and support. Australian systems also use measures such as working-with-children or vulnerable-person checks, mandatory reporting and reportable-conduct arrangements, although requirements vary by jurisdiction.

Evidence-informed recommendation: Providers should combine entry controls with ongoing observation, supervision, training and accountability. These preventive organisational arrangements are different from systems that act only at recruitment or after concerns arise.

2.3 Clear behavioural expectations and active supervision

Codes of conduct should translate safeguarding principles into observable expectations for interactions with children. They should address physical contact, privacy and personal care, favouritism, gifts, transport, photography, digital communication, one-to-one situations, contact outside the programme and responses to children's disclosures. Expectations should apply to employees, volunteers, contractors, visitors and partner organisations. Supervisors should actively reinforce the code and respond consistently to low-level boundary concerns before unsafe patterns become normalised.

Research basis: Safeguarding capability research identified clear behavioural expectations, knowledge of grooming and concerning conduct, staff confidence to challenge colleagues, and routine organisational attention to safeguarding as important capabilities (Russell & Higgins, 2019).

Recommendation for Paris: Develop a common code of behaviour to which providers and individual educators/carers need to sign up to, with sufficient specificity for after-school contexts, while allowing individual sites to add controls for their particular activities, premises and age groups.

2.4 Context-specific risk assessment and safer environments

Each programme should assess how its own activities, staffing patterns, transitions and spaces may create or reduce opportunities for abuse. Relevant issues can include rooms that are out of view, toilets and changing spaces, arrival and collection, transport, excursions, mixed-age activities, temporary or shared premises, late collection, digital platforms, visitors, contractors and periods of low staffing. Controls should be proportionate and should preserve positive relationships rather than creating surveillance that is frightening or institutionally restrictive.

Research basis: Contextual prevention targets factors external to an individual child or potential perpetrator to create safer environments. A practical cycle is to identify the context, assess its risks, select and implement matched strategies, and monitor change. Strategies can include formal regulation, active guardianship, visitor controls, environmental design and situational measures (Rayment-McHugh et al., 2024).

Australian implementation: The National Principles require physical and online environments to promote safety and wellbeing while minimising opportunities for harm. The emphasis is on identifying, mitigating and reviewing risks arising from organisational activities and environments.

2.5 Children's rights, participation and accessible ways to raise concerns

Children should receive developmentally appropriate information about their rights, expected adult behaviour, personal boundaries, help-seeking and what will happen if they raise a concern. They should have regular opportunities to describe when and where they feel safe or unsafe and to influence programme rules and environments. Complaints mechanisms should be understandable and usable by younger children, including children who communicate non-verbally or require disability, language or cultural supports.

Research basis: Children and young people do not necessarily nominate organisational workers as the first people to whom they would communicate a safety concern. Parents and friends can be central within the ecology of help-seeking. Organisations therefore need trusted workers and child-friendly reporting routes, while also equipping families and responding appropriately when concerns first emerge outside formal organisational channels (Russell & Higgins, 2023).

Australian implementation: The National Principles recognise children's rights and participation, trusted adults and friends, child-friendly ways to express views and raise concerns, and the involvement of families and communities.

2.6 Workforce education embedded in everyday practice

All personnel should understand child sexual abuse risks, grooming and boundary concerns, indicators of harm, relevant reporting duties, how to receive a disclosure, internal escalation pathways, confidentiality and information sharing. Training should be role-specific, refreshed and reinforced through supervision, case discussion and reflective practice. Completion of a module should not be treated as proof of competence.

Research and practice basis: Multi-level implementation work in early childhood settings has combined organisational development, leadership coaching, educator training, team development, child empowerment and family involvement. Its formative findings support adaptive, organisation-wide development rather than stand-alone training, but should not be presented as definitive evidence of reduced abuse (Wachter et al., 2026).

Recommendation for Paris: Specify minimum learning outcomes and reinforcement processes, then monitor staff confidence and practice rather than training attendance alone.

2.7 Child-focused complaints, reporting and response

Programs need clear internal and external pathways for immediate safety concerns, allegations, boundary violations and complaints. Processes should identify who receives reports, who ensures the child's immediate safety, when statutory authorities are notified, how conflicts of interest are managed, how records are secured, how families are informed, and how the rights of all involved are respected. Children and families should receive feedback about the process in a form they can understand.

Australian implementation: Child-focused complaints processes are a core National Principle. Australian jurisdictions also provide examples of mandatory reporting, reportable-conduct schemes and independent oversight, although their legal form differs.

Evidence-informed recommendation: A response system must include support for affected children and families and learning for the organisation. Prevention and response should be connected: information from concerns and complaints should inform risk assessment, supervision and service improvement.

2.8 Monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement

Oversight should examine whether safeguarding arrangements are genuinely implemented across sites. Useful indicators may include children's knowledge of trusted people and reporting routes; perceptions of safety; staff knowledge and confidence; supervision quality; response times; patterns in boundary concerns and complaints; implementation of environmental controls; participation by children and families; and completion of corrective actions. Incident counts alone are an inadequate measure of safety because low reporting can indicate either low harm or inaccessible reporting systems.

Australian policy experience: ICPS has consistently advocated for the need for capacity-building, monitoring and evaluation. We recommend assessing proximal conditions of safety rather than waiting for rare but severe outcomes as the only evidence of effectiveness.

Recommendation for Paris: Establish a small common indicator set across after-school programmes, accompanied by periodic qualitative feedback from children, families and personnel, and use results for improvement rather than superficial compliance ranking.

3. Interpreting the strength of the evidence

The committee has appropriately asked for a distinction between existing Australian arrangements, evaluated findings and recommendations based on research or professional practice. That distinction is necessary because organisational safeguarding contains measures with different levels and types of evidence.

Category	Meaning in this contribution	Examples
Implemented in Australia	Reflected in national principles, jurisdictional standards or associated systems; implementation and legal status vary by jurisdiction.	Leadership and governance; recruitment and screening; child-focused complaints; training; safe environments; review and improvement.
Supported by research/evaluation	Supported by empirical, systematic-review, conceptual or implementation research. Evidence does not always demonstrate a direct reduction in CSA incidence.	Multidimensional organisational prevention; contextual risk assessment; safeguarding capabilities; children's help-seeking; formative implementation findings.
Evidence-informed recommendation	Consistent with available research, theory and professional practice, but direct outcome evaluation may be limited.	Matched local risk controls; repeated child feedback; integrated monitoring; adapting implementation support to organisational capacity.

A central limitation is that direct evaluation of organisational CSA-prevention systems remains comparatively underdeveloped. Absence of definitive outcome evaluation should not be mistaken for evidence that organisational measures are unnecessary. It means that implementation should incorporate

evaluation from the outset and that claims about effectiveness should remain proportionate to the available evidence.

4. Priority recommendations for consideration

1. Adopt a whole-of-organisation safeguarding framework for all municipal and contracted after-school programmes, with clear accountability at city, provider and site levels.
2. Establish a common, practical code of conduct and safer recruitment, induction, supervision and disciplinary arrangements for employees, volunteers and contractors.
3. Require each programme to conduct and periodically review a context-specific assessment of physical, relational, activity-based and online risks.
4. Create child-friendly participation, complaints and help-seeking mechanisms suitable for children aged 3 to 11, with adaptations for disability, language and diverse needs.
5. Engage families as safeguarding partners and ensure they know expected staff behaviour, reporting routes and how the organisation will respond.
6. Provide role-specific safeguarding education reinforced through supervision, reflective practice and leadership support rather than relying on one-off training.
7. Connect prevention with prompt reporting, independent oversight, support for affected children and families, and organisational learning from concerns and complaints.
8. Monitor implementation through indicators of the conditions of safety, including children's experiences and organisational capability, alongside incident and response data.

Conclusion

After-school programmes can reduce opportunities for child sexual abuse when safeguarding is embedded in organisational culture, everyday practice and the design of environments. No single measure is sufficient. The strongest approach combines accountable leadership, suitable and supported personnel, clear behavioural boundaries, context-specific risk reduction, children's participation, accessible complaints processes, effective response and continuous improvement. Australian frameworks offer useful examples, but their value for Paris will depend on careful adaptation, adequate implementation support and transparent evaluation.

References

Australian Human Rights Commission. (2018). National Principles for Child Safe Organisations.

Families Australia & Institute of Child Protection Studies. (2021). Response to the National Strategy Advisory Group consultation paper.

Institute of Child Protection Studies. (2019). Submission to the review of the Victorian Child Safe Standards. https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/institutes-academies-and-centres/institute-of-child-protection-studies/publications/submissions

Institute of Child Protection Studies. (2020). Submission on Child Safe Standards in the Australian Capital Territory. https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/institutes-academies-and-centres/institute-of-child-protection-studies/publications/submissions

Rayment-McHugh, S., McKillop, N., Adams, D., Higgins, D. J., & Russell, D. H. (2024). Context matters: Conceptualising and operationalising the contextual prevention of child sexual abuse. Child Abuse Review, 33(1), e2859. https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2859

Russell, D., & Higgins, D. (2020). Safeguarding capabilities in preventing child sexual abuse: exploratory factor analysis of a scale measuring safeguarding capabilities in youth-serving organizations workers. *Child Maltreatment*, *25*(2), 233-242. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559519870253

Russell, D. H., & Higgins, D. J. (2023). Friends and safeguarding: Young people's views about safety and to whom they would share safety concerns. Child Abuse Review, 32(3), Article e2825. https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2825

Russell, D. H., & Higgins, D. J. (2026). Conditions of safety: A systematic review of safeguarding models and concepts for preventing organizational child sexual abuse. Trauma, Violence, & Abuse. https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380251408373

Wachter, K., Higgins, D. J., Russell, D. H., & Bulander, Y. (in press). From policy to practice: A public health approach to safeguarding in early childhood education and care. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*.