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Research to Practice Series

Our Safety Counts: Key Findings from the Australian Survey of Kids and Young People

Help-seeking and institutional responses to safety concerns

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families.

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Our Safety Counts: Key Findings from the Australian Survey of Kids and Young People

Issue 14 of the ICPS Research to Practice Series presents the key findings from the Australian Survey of Kids and Young People (ASK-YP), an online survey of children and young people aged 10-18, which explored their perceptions of interpersonal safety in institutions. Conducted in 2015, the survey was completed by 1,480 young Australians.

The survey addressed two main research questions:

- 1. What are children and young people's perceptions of safety within institutions?*
- 2. What do children and young people consider is already being done to respond to safety issues and risks in institutions?*

The **ASK-YP** Survey was the final phase of a study conducted by ICPS, commissioned by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which examined children's experiences and perceptions of interpersonal safety in institutions. Issue 14 builds on Issues 11 and 12; which presented the findings from the first part of the study; as well as Issue 13, which presented the survey findings on children and young people's perceptions of interpersonal safety within institutions and how well they thought institutions were doing. Images from the survey have been used throughout this issue.

More information about the survey and the project is provided at the end of the issue.


Section 1

Hypothetical Scenarios

Children and young people who participated in the survey were presented with two of four scenarios. The first included a young person (Sally or Michael) who felt uncomfortable with a male teacher, and the second included a young person (Mary or Jason) who felt uncomfortable with a male peer. The gender of the student and peer were randomly assigned. Examples of the scripts are below.



YOU'RE GOOD LOOKING



EVERYONE
LOOK AT SALLY!

Scenario 1: Student-to-teacher

Sally is in the school play and rehearses after school. Her teacher tells her that she is very talented and seems really encouraging. But Sally sometimes feels a bit uncomfortable with her teacher; he always singles Sally out for special attention and encouragement. He's a nice guy and everyone likes him. But Sally is uncomfortable because sometimes her teacher stands really close to her and compliments her in ways that makes her feel weird. Sally's teacher has started arranging one-on-one rehearsals with Sally where Sally has to practice the romantic scenes with him, saying things like "I love you". Sally's teacher says these rehearsals are important to be ready for the performance.



I Love You

Scenario 2: Student-to-peer

Jason isn't a good swimmer and he is worried because he is going on a beach camp later in the year. His mother has organised for him to get some extra swimming lessons from Dan who goes to Jason's school and is the captain of the swimming team. Everyone loves Dan because he's a nice guy and he's won lots of competitions. Jason likes Dan too but sometimes feels uncomfortable when Dan is in the water with him. He stands just a little bit too close and insists that he hold Jason up when he's practicing his kicking. Last week Jason told Dan that he doesn't need to be held anymore. But Dan said, "come on, trust me, I know what I'm doing; unless you want everyone at camp to laugh at you because you can't swim you need to do it my way." Jason still doesn't feel OK.

More than three-quarters of children and young people thought it was unlikely that someone at their school would encounter an adult or peer who made them feel uncomfortable or acted in a way that made them feel unsafe. For both scenarios, more females than males rated these situations as being unlikely or very unlikely; while more males than females rated them as likely or very likely. A greater percentage of young men reported that it was 'likely' or 'very likely' that a child or young person at their school would experience the circumstances in Scenario 1 (student-to-teacher interaction) than Scenario 2 (student-to-peer). Both males and females were more likely to feel worried if they encountered an adult who made them feel uncomfortable, than a peer. Females were more likely than males to feel very

worried if they came across someone demonstrating potentially grooming behaviour.

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TRUST ME

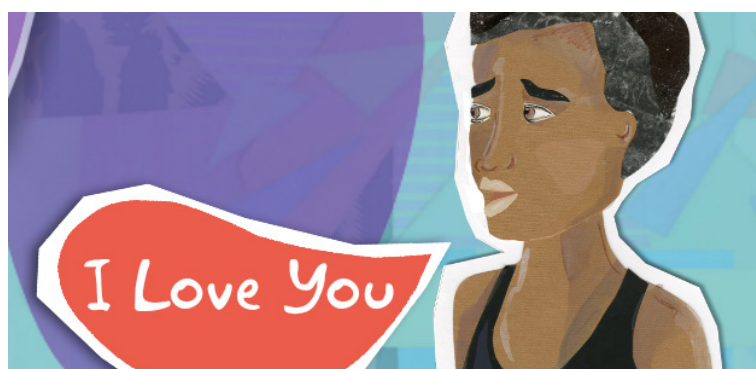
Section 2

What do children and young people think about institutional responses to their safety concerns?

More than half of all males and females believed their schools were doing enough to respond to safety issues, and less than 5% believed their school was doing nothing. Females were more likely than males to report that their school was doing enough to keep children and young people safe; as were children aged 12 and under; while 14 year olds were more likely to report that their school was doing some things but not enough. Participants aged 16 and over were more likely to report their school as doing nothing to prevent young people from being unsafe.

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Participants believed that if they were to encounter an adult or peer who was acting inappropriately and making them feel uncomfortable, they would most need another adult to believe them when they reported their concerns, for another adult to step in and take control, and to know what to do or say if they were in a similar situation. Around 45% of participants thought that adults would only know that a child was unsafe if the child told them.



There were some small but significant differences in what participants believed males and females would need in the scenarios presented. For example, participants were more likely to believe that a female student would need an adult to believe them and to know what they could say in a situation if an adult or a peer was making them feel uncomfortable. They also believed it would be important for an adult to notice when a male student was made to feel uncomfortable by an adult.

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Section 3

Children and young people's help-seeking.

Children and young people were much more likely to seek help from a peer or a parent, than from someone at school. Males were most likely to seek support from a friend, their mum or dad; and females most likely to seek support from a friend or their mum.

Support sought from	Gender		Total
	Males% (n=504)	Females% (n=638)	
A friend	58.7	59.6	59.2
My mum	55.4	53.9	54.5
My dad	47.4***	23.3	33.7
My sister or brother	22.4	20.2	21.1
Another adult	15.0	11.0	12.7
A teacher	28.9	24.3	26.4
A counsellor	17.4**	11.5	14.0
I feel safe most of the time	7.6	5.6	6.5
Someone else?	9.1*	5.4	7.0
I wouldn't tell anyone	8.7**	4.6	6.4

Note: Percentages determined by calculating the number of male and female participants who responded 'yes' to using each help source. To examine gender differences in responses to use of help sources, chi-square analyses were conducted.

*p <.05; **p <.01; ***p <.001

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Barriers to seeking support from institutions

Forty percent of participants either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they would feel uncomfortable talking to an adult at school. Twenty percent of males and 30% of females felt they would be worried that things would get worse if they told.

Barrier	Gender			
	Males% (n=419)		Females% (n=484)	
	Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I would feel uncomfortable talking to an adult at school about things like this(a)	27.7	17.7	29.1	17.4
Adults at my school don't really care about young people in situations like this so I wouldn't ask(a)	9.8	5.0**	5.8	1.9
Adults at my school are too busy to deal with things like this(a)	10.3	4.5*	7.2	2.9
I would be worried that things would get worse if I told an adult at my school(a)	14.9	6.5	21.6	9.3**
Adults at my school wouldn't know what to do in situations like this(a)	9.3	5.5	9.5	2.3
I would deal with this type of thing by myself(a)	17.3	10.1*	13.5	5.8

Note: Percentages determined through calculating the number of male and female participants who responded 'agree' and 'strongly agree' to each presented statement. To examine gender differences in responses to presented statements, chi square analyses were conducted.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

40% of participants either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they would feel uncomfortable talking to an adult at school.



What are the implications for institutions that engage children and young people?

Recognising that children and young people preferred to disclose unsafe situations to parents and friends; institutions should consider ways to better engage with parents and peers to identify risks and develop strategies to assist children and young people when they are unsafe. The few studies that have considered the way that parents respond to their children's concerns about sexual safety, argued for programs to help build parents' confidence, particularly when dealing with adolescent children. They also recommended providing support for both the parent and the child to help them deal with the psychological effects of abuse and disclosure. Similarly, studies might consider what adolescents need to best support their peers when safety concerns are revealed. Programs might focus on linking peers up with trusted adults who can help them find solutions together.

There is a need to reconsider the nature and scope of education and information provided to children and young people about abuse and dealing with unsafe adults and peers – and it must be informed by the needs of young people of different ages and genders. It may be provided at school but also complemented by delivery from other trusted adults who children and young people turn to. It should be informed by young people themselves, to ensure it meets their needs and promotes strategies that young people believe they would use in situations when they were unsafe.



About the Study

This research project was commissioned by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and explored what children and young people experience and think about safety in institutional contexts.

The first part of the study held 10 focus groups with 121 children and young people aged 4 – 18 years in the ACT, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, about their perceptions and experiences of safety, including in institutions. The second part of the study conducted a national online survey of children and young people aged 10-18 about their views and experiences of safety in institutions, which was completed by 1,480 people. The report presenting the focus group findings was published in 2015, and the report presenting the survey findings was published in September 2016.

More information about the project, along with links to associated publications, is available at www.acu.edu.au/icps

References

Moore, T., McArthur, M, Heerde, J., Roche, S., & O'Leary, P. (2016). *Our safety counts: Children and young people's perceptions of safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns*. Melbourne: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University.

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