

Institute of Child Protection Studies



12 Research to Practice Series Children's views about safety in institutions

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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Children's views about safety in institutions

Issue 12 of the ICPS Research to Practice series explores children and young people's views about safety in institutions, what they believe makes an institution safe for children and young people, and what advice they would give adults about dealing with their safety needs. It builds on Issue 11 of this series, which looked at children's conceptualisations of interpersonal safety.

Issues 11 and 12 are based on the findings 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 safety in institutions. The study included focus groups with 121 children and young people aged 4–18, and an online survey of 1142 young people aged 10–18. This issue focuses

on the focus group findings. A follow-on issue will present the findings of the survey. More information about the project is provided at the end of the issue.



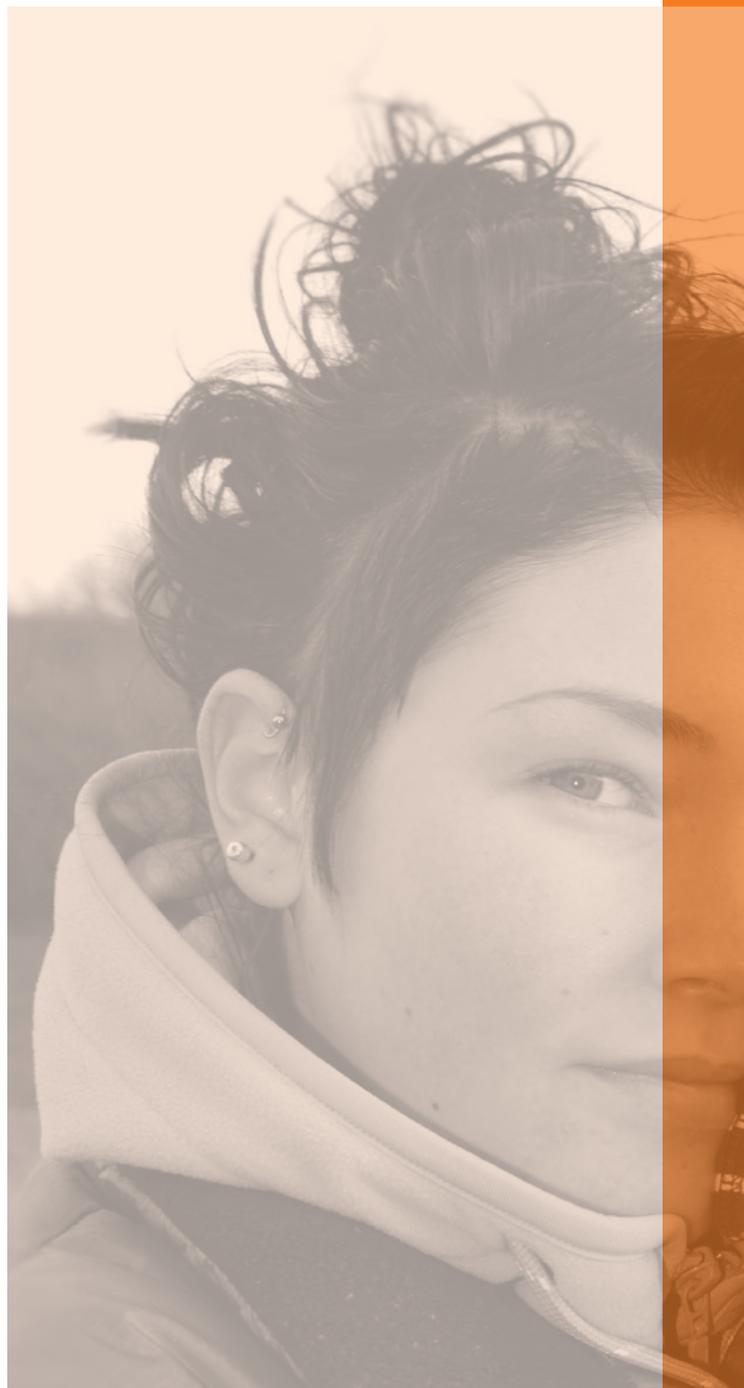
Children and young people's views and concerns about safety in institutions

'The world is unsafe for most kids, well that's how they feel anyway. So if you're going to make it safe you've got to make them feel OK... You have to ask them what worries them and fix that.'(MX-2)¹

This study invited children and young people to consider safety within institutions, including school, sports groups, hospitals, church and youth groups, holiday camps, after-school care, and for a small number of participants, residential and out-of-home care.

Within these institutions, children and young people most often raised concerns related to bullying by peers or adults; of coming across 'creepy adults'; being pressured into doing things that they didn't want to do (that had negative consequences); being hurt because adults weren't doing their job; or of the institution failing to protect them from external threats, such as kidnapping, road accidents or violent strangers.

Most participants reported feeling safe in their institutions, but talked about experiences at their current, previous, or at other schools or other institutions that were unsafe. They discussed a general lack of faith in adults' and institutions' responses to bullying; and based their assessment of how they thought adults would respond to their safety concerns (including child sexual abuse); by the way they responded to bullying. They felt that in order to feel safe from child sexual abuse in institutions, they needed to have confidence in adults' abilities and willingness to deal with other equally important issues, which were more likely to occur.



¹ Quotes provided in this issue have been sourced from the focus groups with children and young people. 'YP' refers to young people aged 12 – 18, and 'MX' refers to mixed groups with children and young people. Some quotes capture the conversation of multiple participants.

What makes an institution safe for children and young people?

Children and young people felt that institutions were safe when a number of conditions were met, relating to the institution's purpose, environment, people, and the practices that were in place.

1. The institution has a focus on helping children and young people

Children and young people often had faith in institutions which had a purpose to care for children. Children believed that safe adults who monitored their peers and stood up for children when they had concerns would discover unsafe adults. However, a few realised that some adults would pretend to be safe people in an attempt to manipulate or hurt children.

'If they're like teachers or youth workers or whatever they're more likely to be focused on the kids and will be able to pick up when something's not right.' (MX-2)

'Some adults act like they're your friend or they're good but all they want to do is hurt you. That's why I don't trust adults.' (MX-2)

2. The institution values children and young people, their views and concerns and their participation

Participants believed that safe institutions not only valued children but also their views and wishes. They felt that these institutions had mechanisms for children and young people to identify issues, raise concerns, and have a say in how the institution dealt with their safety concerns. Young people believed that institutions needed to explicitly ask children and young people about any concerns they might have, rather than waiting for them to start conversations themselves. Some participants also felt that institutions should have processes for children and young people to make complaints, and to inform them what responsibilities institutions had in responding to their concerns.

'Every school should do what we just did [in the focus group]. Talk about what risks there are and if it's a big risk and what's been done and what we think should be done. How else can they find out what young adults think and how can we hear what's been done?' (YP-3)

3. The institution provides a safe environment for children and young people

Participants talked about the importance of the physical and social environment within and around institutions, and felt that safe places were organised, clean and tidy. Children and young people reported that if they felt they weren't trusted, they didn't feel safe. Children felt that institutions that were child-centred were most often characterised by things that made them feel 'at home', such as toys, games, play equipment and other things for children and young people to do.

4. The institution proactively protects children and young people from unsafe people and experiences

Children and young people felt that it was important for adults to be vigilant about safety issues and to take responsibility for responding early. They felt that institutions were safest when they had a good understanding of the risks for children and young people, and had developed strategies for keeping them safe and responding when they weren't.

***'Adults have to watch kids more. Not be so caught up in their own little world. If a kid changes then they should ask, ask the kid's friends, find out what's going on. That's their job. They shouldn't wait until the kid says something because that's going to be too late.'* (YP-1)**

Participants felt institutions should be attuned to the safety issues that children and young people might encounter, do some research about the things that worry children and young people, and investigate whether there were real threats in the institution and the environment around it. They also felt that adults should be up to date on the best ways to protect children and young people in unsafe situations, by training, reading research and having conversations with experts.

***'They need to know what procedures that they have to follow to do the right thing.' 'They probably don't know what to do. They probably just freak out so much and don't know what to do so do the wrong thing.' 'They need to research so that they know what to do if that situation happens.' 'They need to know that some things don't work. Like saying some things or doing some things are wrong.'* (YP-3)**

Children and young people reported that even when they encountered unsafe situations, if they knew how adults were going to respond and had faith in these responses, they were more likely to feel safe. They said it was important not only for strategies to be in place for keeping children and young people safe and responding to threats, but also for children to know about these strategies and see them in place.

***'Knowledge – knowing what is being done if something dangerous has happened. Like if there are strangers in the area knowing what your teachers and adults are doing makes you feel more safe rather than just knowing something bad is happening and worrying that you're in danger.' 'But adults don't always understand this.' 'They think they should hide that stuff from kids to keep them safe but you feel more scared if you don't know what's happening.'* (YP-2)**

Children and young people felt they needed to know more about risks, the ways that adults were attempting to keep them safe, and the ways that institutions were responding when they were harmed. They felt that in an attempt to shelter them, adults often 'shut kids out' of important discussions, and failed to provide them with the information they needed. They believed that adults needed to be appropriate in what they provided to children and young people, and thoughtful about how it was presented, but felt it was important for adults to be more frank about current situations.

***'If they're old enough to understand it they should be talked to about it.'* (YP-4)**

5. The institution employs safe and trusted adults

Participants often described safe adults as those who were caring, predictable, respectful, trustworthy, appropriate and fun. Adults who were fair, even-tempered, had boundaries, acted in adult-like ways (weren't erratic, too familiar or inappropriate), and didn't use their power to belittle or control kids were often identified as being safe. Safe adults made children and young people feel safe, were approachable and took their concerns seriously, responded appropriately and 'took their side', and advocated for children when their safety concerns related to adults or institutions.

Some children felt that adults often stuck together, and processes (such as institution-based investigations) aimed to protect the accused from wrongful allegations, rather than responding to children's concerns. While they agreed that adults needed to be fair, they felt that children's worries should be privileged, at least while processes were being enacted.

According to children and young people, trusted adults were those who:

- Care about children and young people
- Act like adults
- Are available
- Are able to talk about sensitive issues
- Prioritise children's needs and concerns
- Do what they say they will do
- Aren't creepy
- Don't play favourites
- Don't bully children or young people
- Monitor their peers
- Have Working with Children Checks and that their suitability is made known

***'There's too many pressures on them to do other things than just listen to us or to care about things that happen outside of their job ... If they have to choose between writing a report or asking us how we're going and what we need they'll always have to choose doing office work – because there'll be consequences for them if they don't ... Like their boss will get angry ... They're not accountable to us so it doesn't matter if they don't do what we ask them to do, what we need.'* (MX-2)**

6. The institution is open to monitoring by an external agency

Children and young people believed that institutions needed to be encouraged to assess children's safety issues and to be vigilant about whether institutions were doing enough to ensure that children were safe. They felt this might best be done by people external to the institution, who could come in and 'check to see if they've got it right', 'to see if what they're doing is up with the latest research', and to 'hear from kids about whether they think things are going ok'.

What advice would children and young people give adults about dealing with children's safety needs?

Children and young people identified a number of actions that they believed adults should take, when a child raised concerns with them.

1.Listen

Children and young people felt that even caring adults often unwittingly stopped them from talking, focusing more on what they would do, rather than taking the time to understand their feelings, validate them and find out what they needed in the moment.

2.Acknowledge children's concerns rather than downplay them or try to fix them

Participants said that adults often tried to downplay their concerns, saying things like, 'it can't be that bad', 'you must have misunderstood', or 'don't worry, I'm sure things will get better'. They found this belittling and unhelpful, and said they wouldn't trust adults who interacted with them in this way. They most trusted adults who listened to them and recognised that they were unhappy and wanted something to be done.

3.Help the child or young person determine whether there is a problem or not

Children and young people felt that it was important for adults to help them make sense of particular encounters they had experienced, and to help them understand whether they were at risk or not. They recognised that they often mislabeled people, places and events as being unsafe when they were safe (particularly when they were unaware of checks that had been carried out and strategies that were in place) or vice versa.

4.Take the child or young person's side

A small number of participants voiced a general lack of faith in institutions, believing that they placed the needs of the institution and of adults within that institution before the children and young people. A larger number expressed concern that adults may be less inclined to see other adults as inappropriate and often 'stuck together' and protected each other when children and young people made complaints or allegations. They believed that institutions should side with children and young people in the first instance, take their concerns more seriously, investigate their allegations and act on their wishes until the investigation process was complete.

5.Help children and young people to build their skills to respond to situations

Participants believed that adults could not always be around to help protect them from unsafe people or things, and that it was important for children and young people to be skilled up to deal with issues themselves.

***They don't do that well at keeping kids safe. They don't teach us what to do.'** (YP-4)*

6. Offer solutions that are realistic and respond to children and young people's concerns

Children and young people were ambivalent about a number of the strategies that adults had implemented, because they had seen them fail. In each focus group, children and young people raised concerns about bullying and reported that most strategies were not helpful – because adults either didn't use them or positive outcomes were not achieved. Without confidence in strategies, children were reluctant to tell adults about their concerns, particularly when they believed that the strategies made things worse for them.

'The worst thing they can do is say they're going to do something and then not do it. Because we watch them and if they let us down we're not going to go and ask them again.'

[Q: Do you not ask them or do you not ask any adult again?]

'We won't ask any adult if we think that they'll just do the same thing.' (MX-2)

Children and young people felt that adults need to have more realistic knowledge and skills on how to respond to a child who discloses that they are unsafe.

7. Understand and overcome barriers to children and young people getting the support they need

Participants believed that adults and institutions need to work with children and young people to help them overcome barriers to seeking support. Barriers included the child or young person:

- Not realising how big the issue is that they are facing
- Feeling embarrassed or ashamed about asking for help
- Not having confidence that adults could help
- Not knowing who to talk to
- Thinking that raising their concerns will make things worse
- Thinking there will be retribution if they raise a concern about an adult or institution
- Having had bad experiences in the past – when they weren't listened to, when adults' reactions weren't helpful, or when there were consequences for them or others

There were also concerns about things that got in the way of adults being physically available to children and young people, to them taking children's concerns seriously and in acting to appropriately respond. Administrative tasks, competing priorities and a lack of time spent with children and young people were highlighted as key factors that restricted adults' capacity to prevent and respond.



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. It was conducted in partnership with Griffith University and the Queensland University of Technology.

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. The report from Part 1 of the study was published in 2015, and the report presenting the survey findings will be 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, Noble-Carr, D., & Harcourt, D. (2015). *Taking us seriously: children and young people talk about safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns*. Melbourne: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University.

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