



Research to Practice Series

Opportunities for Prevention: Improving access to information, education and support about child sexual abuse

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.

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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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Opportunities for Prevention: Improving access to information, education and support about child sexual abuse

Issue 19 of the ICPS Research to Practice series explores the opportunities for preventing child sexual abuse through improving access to information, education and support; the relevant target groups; and implications for policy and practice. It is based on a study conducted by ICPS for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which examined the service needs and help-seeking behaviours of professionals, parents, community members and individuals in relation to concerns about child sexual abuse, as well as the functions and effectiveness of existing services. More information about the project is provided at the end of the issue.

ISSN 2209-3397



Section 1

Primary prevention of child sexual abuse

Primary prevention of child sexual abuse relates to stopping abuse from occurring in the first place, using interventions that target whole communities or populations. For many professionals, parents and community members, there is a belief that child sexual abuse is not readily preventable, and current responses generally focus on the needs of victims/survivors of child sexual abuse.

Since the commencement of the Royal Commission, the community is more aware of the need to protect children from child sexual abuse in institutional contexts. However, there remains a lack of awareness among parents and community members about the concept and dynamics of child sexual abuse, and an under-confidence about how to recognise and respond to concerns. There are also different understandings of what 'prevention' means, in the context of child sexual abuse. Service providers identify helplines, counselling, support services, and referrals, which may prevent further trauma or negative impacts for victims/survivors, as preventative activities. Similarly, statutory services that work with offenders, such as prisons, report that a key part of their work relates to deterrence and the prevention of further offending.

Child sexual abuse has more recently been positioned within a public health framework (Smallbone, Marshall & Wortley, 2008), which emphasises the importance of improving understanding of the scope and cause of the problem, and providing appropriate responses to motivate collective change (van Horn et al, 2015). Public health frameworks identify interventions at three levels: primary (aiming to stop abuse occurring), secondary (targeting early signs of abuse), and tertiary (responding when abuse has occurred). Intervention is required across all three levels.

While there are various primary prevention education, training and information resources available within Australia, access to and use of these resources is problematic for professionals, parents and community members. Currently, there is no coordination of primary prevention education and training programs, or quality control for the programs currently being delivered. Research participants reported that program development and provision is unregulated, and the outcomes of these programs are under-evaluated. They emphasised the need for a coordinated response and consistent, evidence-based messages to the whole community about preventing child sexual abuse.



Target groups relevant to preventing child sexual abuse

This study identified eight key target groups relevant to the prevention of child sexual abuse, including in institutional contexts, including:

- 1. Adults with problematic sexual thoughts towards children**
- 2. Adult child sex offenders**
- 3. Family members of adult child sex offenders**
- 4. Professionals working with children (such as teachers, school counsellors and sports coaches)**
- 5. Parents and family members**
- 6. Community members**
- 7. Young people with problematic sexual thoughts and/or behaviours**
- 8. Children with sexually harmful behaviours**

Demographic characteristics such as gender and culture influence whether individuals formally seek help (Galdas, Cheater & Marshall, 2005; Farelly, 2008). Among parents and other adults, help-seeking about child sexual abuse occurs most frequently when an issue arises, such as a concern about the behaviour of an adult or another child. A number of studies have found that there are particular issues that prevent 'bystanders' from providing help or assistance (Banyard, 2015), such as societal norms dictating that individuals should not get involved; a risk of being injured physically, emotionally or socially; an assumption that others will intervene and take responsibility; or wishing to avoid the awkwardness associated with intervening in a dispute involving people they might not know (Leonard, 2014).

Each of the target groups described a range of challenges to accessing information and support about preventing child sexual abuse. Challenges included problems with recognising issues, accessing support services, having a knowledge and awareness of services, and the availability of those services. For adults and young people with problematic sexual thoughts, there was an additional layer of complexity, including fear of being reported, fear of persecution, stigma, shame and guilt, which often prevented these individuals from seeking or accessing services.

In Australia, a range of nation-wide services provide phone-based and web-based information, advice and support to a variety of individuals seeking help in relation to child sexual abuse. State and territory-based services tend to be limited to government services that primarily facilitate the reporting of an offence or child-at-risk concerns, with additional services provided through rape crisis centres, family violence agencies and victim-support services. Private psychologists and psychiatrists are also available, although there are a limited number with appropriate expertise in child sexual abuse, and most of these are located within capital cities such as Melbourne and Sydney. State and territory-based services that provide support to perpetrators, children and young people are program-based, and do not offer primary prevention services by way of giving advice and information to the general public, or to people concerned about their own or others' behaviour.

There is no single primary prevention service that offers support, information and advice to all identified target groups regarding child sexual abuse.

Service providers highlighted a range of challenges they experience when providing services to these target groups. These include recruitment and retention of staff, the cost of providing adequate staff training and regular supervision, access to funding, and organisational awareness and profile to better reach target groups.

Barriers and enablers to accessing information and support to prevent child sexual abuse

Child abuse prevention service providers, and service providers working with adult offenders, said that for some individuals, a permitting family or organisational culture of child sexual abuse created an environment where individuals could offend without being challenged. This meant that individuals did not necessarily question their behaviour, were not helped to understand that it was wrong, or were not encouraged to seek help to address it. The literature indicates that a major barrier to help-seeking across all target groups is the self-recognition or awareness of problems, and specifically for perpetrators, the limited recognition for the need for treatment (Clarke, Abbott, DeSouza & Bellringer, 2007; Mojtabai & Crum, 2013)

A large number of service provider participants also said there were significant barriers to accessing support services for individuals with problematic sexual thoughts towards children. They reported that the lack of available specialised counselling and support services was a significant barrier to assisting individuals who do reach out for support to deal with problematic sexual thoughts, prior to any perpetrating. Many of the services that support adults with problematic sexual thoughts and behaviours are funded to work with individuals who have been charged with sexual offences; while individuals with 'only thoughts' have limited support options. Some providers explained that when they had tried to refer individuals to specialist services, they had been refused access, as these individuals are only eligible to receive help if they have already been charged or are a client of corrective services.



Implications for policy and practice

Developing a whole of community approach to preventing child sexual abuse

To influence the health and wellbeing of the whole population, interventions are required across primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and must be able to reach families, communities and governments. There is the need for a clear, high-level government policy, which directs a whole-of-system or whole-of-government approach to preventing child sexual abuse. There is currently no coordinated response that provides prevention messages to empower parents, community members and individuals with problematic sexual thoughts towards children, to help them understand that child sexual abuse can be prevented. Broader, universal primary prevention messages should aim to change the social conditions that excuse, justify, or even promote the sexual abuse of children, and which challenge the notion that child sexual abuse cannot be prevented.

Enhancing service delivery of primary prevention child sexual abuse programs

There is a lack of coordination and quality control over the development and delivery of primary prevention child sexual abuse programs within Australia. Nationally coordinating the delivery of programs may help with quality assurance and robustness, as would support for and implementation of evaluations that consider program effectiveness and outcomes. While there are national services that aim to raise awareness of and communicate the best ways to respond to concerns about child sexual abuse, there is currently no single service that provides support and assistance to all identified target groups; and existing services experience various challenges in providing well-resourced programs. Possible responses may include establishing a new national primary prevention service, exploring opportunities to extend an existing service, or resourcing partnerships among existing services. Additional knowledge and experience in addressing some of the existing gaps in service delivery, such as support for perpetrators, could also be drawn from the international arena.

Supporting better access to primary prevention education and resources

Professionals such as counsellors, teachers, psychologists and social workers are in a unique position, as they often have direct contact with children. These professionals play an important role in preventing and detecting child sexual abuse, and therefore need adequate training. Research by Kenny and Abreau (2015) highlights that the majority of professionals working with children receive limited specific education and training about child sexual abuse, and professionals indicate they have limited knowledge about grooming and sexually inappropriate online behaviours. Those working with children and young people need access to regular education and training that focuses on preventing child sexual abuse, including increasing knowledge about grooming and online and social media behaviours that place children at risk. These training and education opportunities are credible and evidence-based.

Addressing the needs of adults with problematic sexual thoughts and/or behaviours towards children

Previous studies identify that various internal and external barriers prevent individuals from accessing support and assistance for problematic sexualised thoughts about children (Brown et al., 2014; Van Horn et al., 2015). A key issue for these individuals is that current legislation and mandatory reporting has a significant impact on their help-seeking behaviour. This study indicates the continued existence of these challenges, and highlights the need for a system-wide approach to address them. There is a significant gap in the availability of services and supports for individuals with problematic sexual thoughts. While a range of treatment services and models are available to those who have offended, these services are currently not funded to support individuals who have not offended. While helplines are one form of support available to these individuals, this study identified that no helpline provides specialist support for these individuals, and there are few widely advertised or accessible external services that offer longer-term support.

Addressing the needs of family members of adults with problematic sexual thoughts towards children

This study did not identify a program or service that consistently provides support to family members of individuals who identify as having problematic sexualised thoughts or behaviours towards children, and there is little information available that considers the needs of this population group. Further research is required to explore this issue.

Addressing the needs of children and young people with problematic sexual thoughts and behaviours towards children

Service providers report that there is an increasing awareness of children and young people experiencing problematic sexual behaviours, and suggest the need for earlier education programs for children and young people, emphasising respectful relationships. While the causes and drivers of problematic sexualised behaviours occur for a range of reasons, often these behaviours are a symptom of other forms of abuse and neglect, requiring a broader approach to addressing risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect. Additionally, parents need to be able to access age-appropriate education and information so they can respond to and protect their children.

The prevention project study by Beier and colleagues in Germany (2016) found that children and young people are aware of problematic sexualised thoughts and behaviours towards other children, and seek help and support for this. The study suggested that while telephone helplines can provide an appropriate first line of support for these young people, other local measures need to be developed to meet their longer-term needs.



About the Study

This study was commissioned by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, to develop an understanding of: the service needs and help-seeking behaviours of professionals, parents, and community members concerned about the behaviour of an adult who is exhibiting potentially sexually harmful behaviour towards a child; the needs and help-seeking behaviours of professionals, parents and community members concerned about a child who is exhibiting potentially sexually harmful behaviour; the needs and help-seeking behaviours of individuals concerned that they may sexually harm or abuse a child; and the functions and effectiveness of existing services tasked with responding to the needs of these target groups. The study included a literature review, a service-mapping exercise, interviews with 23 service providers, and focus groups with parents and caregivers, community members and professionals working with and for children.

More information about the project is available at www.acu.edu.au/icps

References

For a complete reference list, please refer to the report.

Saunders, V., & McArthur, M. (2017). **Help-seeking needs and gaps for preventing child sexual abuse.**

Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

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The Research to Practice Series is produced with funding from the Community Services Directorate, ACT Government. Content developed by Erin Barry, and designed by Fuzz Illustration.

