How can child welfare and youth-serving organisations keep children safe?

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Pause and reflect

Think of a familiar organisation that engages with children. What is its risk profile?

STOP!

Stop and think about what would be the most risky aspect of an organisation’s activities that allow the possibility of child abuse – particularly child sexual abuse?
Risk Factors for Child Sexual Abuse

Characteristics of children may increase their vulnerability to sexual abuse:

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

Characteristics of offenders:

- 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 & personality characteristics (charming, but deviant attitudes)
- Engage in ‘grooming’ behaviour - desensitising a child/young person
- (social status and sexual orientation of offenders are myths that are not supported by the research)

Characteristics of the environment (including organisational context)

(Irenyi, Bromfield, Beyer & Higgins, 2006)
Child abuse prevention

Public health approach to prevention activities:

- **Individual child factors** – e.g., protective behaviours programs; building resilience
- **Family/parental factors** – e.g., parent skills training; building support & protective factors
- **Perpetrators** – reducing risk of (re-)offending
- **Social/environment factors** – e.g., community knowledge/attitudes/skills re: abuse & child safety
- **Organisations** – reducing situational risks; creating child-safe cultures across child-related/youth-serving organisations
Preventing ‘bad’ people isn’t enough

Sexual abuse prevention strategies in organisations have focused on identifying and screening those with a history of child sexual abuse. However:

- First time abusers have no offence history
- Much abuse goes undetected or reported
- Young people also engage in sexually abusive behaviours (30–60%)

Boyd 2008; Pratt & Miller 2012
Preventing abuse in organisations….  

- How is it like preventing financial fraud?  
  - We don’t expect that the processes for ensuring financial prudence rely primarily on employment screening, or on customer vigilance  

- Instead:  
  - Define acceptable behaviour  
  - Strategies to minimise risk  
  - Culture is important – as *The Wolf of Wall Street* demonstrates
Box Office Exploration

- Social Psychology knowledge from the 1970s explored on the big screen
- Demonstrates the power of the situation
- The implication for child-safety in organisations:
  - We have failed—and will continue to fail—if we try and focus solely on identifying and weeding out, or preventing ‘bad people’ from organisations.
The power of the situation
Creating Safe Environments
1. Screening for known perpetrators
   - Preventing infiltration - national overview of working with children checks

2. Managing situational risks
   - Overview of research on risk factors, and strategies for prevention

3. Creating positive cultures
   - Clarifying unacceptable behaviour
   - Encouraging disclosures
   - Involving police and child protection authorities
1. Screening

Preventing known perpetrators:

1. Police checks
2. Working with Children Checks
3. Mandatory reporting
Pre-employment screening

- Understanding differences between a **police check** and a **Working with Children Check (WWCC)** – more extensive, but also more targeted
- Understanding your obligations – in many jurisdictions, employers are prohibited from employing someone in a child-related occupation who does not have a WWCC
- Recognising the **limitations of pre-employment screening** – most child sex offenders do not have criminal records.

*Having all staff vetted through a WWCC is the first chapter in the book, not the final chapter.*

- Next steps: Creating child-safe organisations through policies, monitoring and ongoing actions.

Mandatory reporting

- The legal requirement to report suspected cases of abuse/neglect
- Laws differ depending on which state/territory you live, and about what type of abuse/harm (or in many jurisdictions, risk of harm) there is a concern
- Sexual abuse and physical abuse are the two types of child abuse type about which it is mandatory for some people to report concerns in all Australian state/territories; but...
  - the categories of **people** who are so required varies from very restrictive (e.g., in Qld) or very expansive (NT)
  - the **situations** in which the sexual abuse occurred also determines whether or not a notification is mandatory e.g., in WA, sexual abuse has to be reported by child care or after-hours school workers, but it is limited to abuse occurring in the care setting.

2. Managing situational risks

Making organisations safer involves:

1. Identifying organisational risk factors
2. Changing risky environments where possible
3. Closer monitoring of inherent risks
Not all organisations are equal

Different organisations will have a different risk profile
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)

Does your organisation:
- Have low supervision of adult-child interactions?
- Use adults as role-models or mentors?
- Use social media or other potential communication avenues?
- Have a particular culture where violence or abuse might be better tolerated (gender stereotypes? homophobia? alcohol?)
It’s not all ‘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?

- This includes 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
Situational Crime Prevention

Premise: under the right circumstances, anyone could offend

Situational crime prevention approaches:

- 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

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

(Irenyi, Bromfield, Beyer & Higgins, 2006)
3. Creating Positive Cultures

Safe environments = positive organisational cultures:

1. Clarifying unacceptable behaviour
2. Encouraging disclosure
3. Involving police and child protection authorities
Key strategies for creating child-safe organisations

- Induction programs – defining acceptable behaviour
- Reinforce with ongoing professional development
- Supervision, mentoring and accountability for staff
- Understanding mandatory reporting obligations
- Analyse risks across the organisation
- Develop (and regularly review and update) child abuse policies, procedures, and standards
Facilitating Disclosure

Disclosure is the *process* of telling someone about an incident of sexual assault.

Could be referring to disclosure of a range of offences such as:

- Between peers at school/organisation
- Between peers outside of school/organisation
- At home - by a family member (sibling/parent/other); neighbour; acquaintance
- In another context - by a known or unknown offender
- Physical sexual assault, unwanted requests, as well as a range of offences online or using digital media (including images, ‘sexting’, bullying, etc.)
“Disclosure was not always a conscious decision or planned action and not all survivors had a clear objective in disclosing. Those who did were primarily motivated by:

- the need for safety, protection and support;
- not wanting to be alone; or
- were seeking information to help them clarify their understandings about the nature of the assault.”

(Lievore, 2003, p. v; cited in Quadara, 2008, p. 3)
Disclosures is complex

Barriers to a young person disclosing sexual assault include:

• Relationship between victim and perpetrator
• Fear of not being believed or being blamed for the assault
• Cultural factors and values
• Concerns about how disclosure will impact on significant others
• Expectations and attitudes about what is “normal” for young men and women in heterosexual relationships
• Being a male victim/survivor – clash with gendered expectations of masculinity, and fear of being labelled “gay”
Whole-of-organisation approaches

Schools, churches, sports & other youth organisations can:
- Promote respectful relationships
- Create physically safe environments
- Create emotionally safe environments that facilitate disclosures, respond appropriately to disclosures, and provide a supportive/therapeutic context for victim/survivors

Whole-of-organisation approaches are aided 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 & evaluation)
- Prevention education programs for students, teachers & families
- Education on the long-term impacts of sexual assault

(Quadara, 2008)
National Safe Schools Framework (revised 2011)

- Provides a good basis for sports organisations to consider
- Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) - Student Learning and Support Services Taskforce:

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

Specific focus on whole-of-school approaches to:
- minimising bullying, harassment and violence; and
- providing support students on issues related to child abuse and neglect.

National Safe Schools Framework

Similar to anti-bullying strategies

Effective strategies for school responses to child abuse include:

- Professional development training and resources for staff
- Specific policies based on consultation with parents and students
- Use of curriculum activities to develop knowledge, attitudes and skills
- Empowering students/young people
- Clarifying roles for teachers / carers (e.g., re: responsibility for supervision; reporting concerns or disclosures, etc.)
- Addressing cases that arise
- Documenting and evaluating responses to cases that have arisen
- Effective counselling and social support for victims
- Collaboration with relevant external agencies
Religious organisations – case study

Problematic organisational features can be:

- Minimisation and denial of allegations
- Failure to encourage victim to report to police
- Inappropriate response to any legal proceedings
- Sex-role beliefs
- Doctrines and practices that support patriarchy
- Failure to appropriately support both victims and alleged offenders
- Poor leadership and polarisation of members

Higgins, 2001, cited in Irenyi et al., 2005
Organisational culture

“...religious sex role beliefs that posit men’s sexuality as unable to be contained and women as the source of men’s incitement, and church doctrines and practices that support patriarchy contribute to an organisational culture in which disclosure of sexual abuse is discouraged and victims are unsupported.”

Higgins, 2001, paraphrased in Irenyi et al., 2005, p. 14
The focus of prevention....

- spans the continuum from awareness training directed toward individual parents or staff members to more systematic, institution-wide efforts to identify and ameliorate environmental or situational risks that create conditions allowing child sexual abuse to occur.

- implement existing protective systems and processes more rigorously, thoroughly, and consistently
Resources for Creating Child-Safe Organisations

- 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](http://www.childwise.net)
- AIFS resources on organisational issues:
Relationship education and navigating a world of sexually explicit images

The Porn Factor

Through candid interviews with young people, experts and porn industry professionals, *The Porn Factor* explores how pornography is shaping young people’s sexual expectations and experiences. Essential viewing for parents, teachers, youth workers and others involved in young people’s education, support or care. Coming soon.

In The Picture

Supporting young people in an era of explicit sexual imagery
A secondary school resource
Maree Crabbe

Readily available and aggressively marketed online, exposure to hardcore pornography is now mainstream. The classroom or parent talk is now no match for porn – with its endless array of gyrating bodies, offering a quick, easy and anonymous sexual charge. Porn has become the default sexuality educator for young people growing up online.

http://www.itstimewetalked.com.au

Australian Government
Australian Institute of Family Studies
Summary of risk management strategies

- Pre-employment screening 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, etc.)
  - Responding to disclosures
  - Training for staff
  - Ongoing support for staff
- Positive culture (child-friendly; transparent; respectful)
- Implement specific prevention programs

Irenyi et al., 2006
Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) is an information exchange for practitioners, policy makers, service providers and researchers working with children, families and communities.

Recent publications

**Strengths of Australian Aboriginal cultural practices in family life and child rearing**
CFCA PAPER—SEP 2014
Explores some of the characteristics of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices that contribute

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References


CFCA resources relating to Protecting Children: