

Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse

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1 How to Report on Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is a serious problem for the whole community. There are ways you can report on child sexual abuse that will help listeners, readers and viewers to see it as an issue that affects everyone in some way, and that everyone can take action on. You can report on this issue in a way that informs, educates and contributes usefully to public dialogue.

Name it

Always use the term ‘child sexual abuse’ where it applies. Using terms like ‘affair’ or ‘sex’ to describe an incident of sexual abuse against a child minimises and trivialises what is a very traumatic, damaging experience and a crime. Plus, if your audience consistently comes across this terminology they will get a better understanding of the extent of the problem.

Safety comes first

When reporting on child sexual abuse, it is especially important that you do everything you can to ensure that your reporting does not compromise the survivor’s safety. This might involve leaving out certain details about the abuse in order to protect the survivor or their family’s anonymity, if that’s appropriate. This also means considering the emotional safety of survivors you may interview. Being asked to recount experiences of abuse may re-traumatise survivors. Where possible allow them to see, and contribute to, a written version of their account.

Child sexual abuse is absolutely never acceptable

The adult perpetrator is always solely responsible for any incident of child sexual abuse. Never use language or contextualise the story in a way that suggests that the survivor of the abuse was in any way to blame for what happened to him or her. Children are vulnerable, impressionable, and are dependent on adults to protect and care for them – there are no circumstances under which a child should be made to appear responsible for any aspect of the abuse they experienced.

Child sexual abuse is serious and highly traumatic

It is never appropriate to report on child sexual abuse in a way that sensationalises, trivialises, or makes light of it.

Contextualise the story with statistics

Use local, national and (where appropriate) international statistics on child sexual abuse to frame the story.

Take the emphasis away from ‘stranger danger’

While incidents of child sexual abuse perpetrated by strangers tend to dominate the headlines, most survivors were actually abused by an adult they know and trust – and it’s important for you to underscore your reporting with that fact. If it is legal to do so, where there is a relationship between the survivor and the perpetrator, acknowledge that (if you are able to).

Use your best sensitivity and good judgement when reporting survivors' stories, especially when they are a child

Make sure you do all you can to report on child sexual abuse in a way that upholds the survivor's right to dignity, remembering that there might be trauma associated even with an abuse that happened many years ago. Provide as much time as possible for survivors to tell their story in their own time. If possible, it would be best practice to provide an opportunity for survivors and/or their (non-offending) family members to look at what you're reporting before it is published or aired publicly. Where possible follow-up after an interview to see if they are okay.

Know the law

There are laws about what information you can and cannot divulge when you're reporting on a situation which may involve child sexual abuse, or where a protection order of some kind has been issued. See 'Resources' for more information about this.

Be fair

Child sexual abuse is a highly emotive issue. Be sure to report what you can sensitively and appropriately, in a balanced way, always keeping in mind that children are exceptionally vulnerable members of our community.

Humanise the story with appropriate terminology

Where legally possible and where consent has been sought, refer to the survivor of child sexual abuse by name. If that's not appropriate (for example, if you're talking about a survivor who is still a minor or you need to protect their identity to keep them safe), be as specific as you can – for example, 'child who has been a victim of sexual abuse.' The term 'survivor' is also used for people who have experienced child sexual abuse in the past.

It is important to include information about available support options for people who have experienced child sexual abuse, as well as for people who suspect that they know a child who is being sexually abused. You should always include contact details for local support services.

Call on community experts for comment

Don't just rely on the police or the judiciary for comment when reporting on child sexual abuse. Community experts on the issue will be able to put your story in context.

Always list the following at the end of a story about child sexual abuse:

If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual abuse or family violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732

or visit
www.1800RESPECT.org.au

In an emergency, call 000.

2 Facts & Figures

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that in 2005 around



were **SURVIVORS** of child sexual abuse

Most child sexual abuse is committed by someone the person

knows and **trusts**



often a family member or friend and most often a

MAN

Representative surveys conducted with Australian adults have found that



2.8%

MEN



10.3%

WOMEN

had been

sexually abused

during childhood

The most reliable statistics we have on child sexual abuse come from child protection data; however, since these figures represent only those cases which were detected and reported, it's likely that they are only the tip of the iceberg. It is highly probable that child sexual abuse is vastly underreported, given the 'hidden' nature of the crime, the vulnerability of children, and the barriers many children (especially those who are very young) face to disclosing sexual abuse. Many reports about child sexual abuse are only made much later in life, and many children who experience sexual abuse will grow up without ever telling anyone about the abuse.

- The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that in 2005, around 1.3 million Australians were survivors of child sexual abuse.¹
- Close to 1 million of these survivors were female, and around 300,000 were male.²
- Representative surveys conducted with Australian adults have found that 2.8% of men and 10.3% of women had been sexually abused during childhood.³
- Most child sexual abuse is committed by someone the person knows and trusts, often a family member or friend, and most often a man.⁴ More than half of child sexual abuses are committed by a father, stepfather, or other male relative.⁵

At-Risk Groups

Child sexual abuse can happen to anyone. However, statistics suggest that women are more likely to have experienced child sexual abuse than men.⁶

For a range of complex reasons, some people may be more vulnerable to child sexual abuse and its effects than others. This is particularly the case for people who may already live with social or economic marginalisation – for instance, because of poverty and social isolation, homelessness or housing insecurity, domestic violence, drug and alcohol use, or mental illness – and research suggests that childhood disability, mental health and/or behavioural problems are all risk factors for child abuse (including sexual abuse).⁷ Marginalised people might also experience more barriers to reporting sexual abuse and accessing support.⁸ In addition to this, we know that children who are exposed to one kind of abuse (whether it is sexual, physical, emotional, or takes some other form) are at increased risk of being exposed to other kinds later in life.⁹

3 Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is a highly traumatic experience, with varied and profound impacts. Its effects can stay with someone for a lifetime (although it's important to emphasise that survivors of child sexual abuse do have the ability to overcome the effects of the abuse, especially with the right support). Ultimately, because of the widespread and impactful nature of child sexual abuse, it has a range of consequences for families, communities, and society as a whole.

Physical and Mental Health

- People who were sexually abused as children are more likely to develop mental health problems, and to engage in self-harming behaviours including attempted suicide and harmful use of non-prescription drugs and alcohol.¹⁰
- People who were sexually abused as children suffer from more physical health problems than the general population, and have higher healthcare costs.¹¹
- Adults who experienced child sexual abuse are more likely to have problems with drug and alcohol use than the general population, and are much more likely to have attempted suicide.¹²

Economic Impacts

- The average annual healthcare costs of people who were sexually abused as children are more than double those of people who were not abused.¹³
- For people who were both sexually abused and physically abused as a child, this figure rises to more than six times the annual healthcare costs of people who weren't.¹⁴

Social Impacts

- The impact of child sexual abuse extends beyond the survivor and their immediate family. The whole community experiences flow-on effects, ranging from the impacts of self-harming behaviours (such as using drugs or alcohol) that survivors might use to cope with the trauma, to the loss of social cohesion resulting from poor outcomes in education and employment, and the social isolation linked with physical and mental health issues.¹⁵
- Some studies estimate that around 60-90% of women in Australian prisons are survivors of childhood sexual abuse.¹⁶

4 System Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Legal

Anyone who engages sexually with a child in Australia is committing a sexual offence. Laws that deal with child sexual abuse vary in each jurisdiction, however, there may be differences in the legal response depending on the circumstances of the abuse – for instance, in cases when older minors who are close in age engage in sex without coercion, when a teacher or person of authority is involved, and so on.

Many States and Territories have specialised policing units that investigate child sexual abuse and provide support to survivors. Because children are particularly vulnerable, special support arrangements are generally made for them in providing statements to police and when participating in the court process.

Community

There are a variety of support services for children who have been sexually abused in each State and Territory, as well as for adults who experienced sexual abuse as a child, regardless of whether the abuse has been reported or not. These include support services attached to forensic sexual abuse units (which are generally based at hospitals and can collect forensic evidence about recent abuses), or services based in the community that offer counselling or other kinds of therapeutic intervention, support for survivors and families, legal advice, and so on.

Government

The Australian Government has responded to child sexual abuse at a policy level in a number of ways. The key national policy documents that deal with child sexual abuse include COAG's *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022* and the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*. State and Territory Governments also have their own strategies or plans that tackle violence against women and children.

5 Definitions

‘Child sexual abuse’ refers to any sexual behaviour between an adult and a child below the age of consent.¹⁷ It can also refer to non-consensual sexual activity between two minors, and any sexual activity between a young person and a person in a position of power and authority (like a parent or teacher). In Australia, each jurisdiction has different legal definitions of child sexual abuse.

Sexual activity can include:

- vaginal or anal sex, with a penis, finger, or another object
- oral sex
- touching genitals, breasts, or other intimate areas
- exposure to or involvement in pornography
- voyeurism (being watched doing intimate things)
- exhibitionism (deliberately exposing genitals or other intimate body parts, for example)
- other behaviours, such as talking about sexually explicit things which are developmentally inappropriate for the child’s age, including sending sexual text messages or emails, and so on.

Child sexual abuse can happen to anyone, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, cultural background, or any other aspect of identity.

6 Resources & Further Reading

Research

Australian Institute of Family Studies:

<http://www.aifs.gov.au>

Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault:

<http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa>

Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) information exchange:

<http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca>

AIFS collated resources on child sexual abuse:

<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/carc/index.html>

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare – Child Protection:

<http://www.aihw.gov.au/child-protection>

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse:

<http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au>

Commentary

Our Watch:

<http://ourwatch.org.au>

Legislation

ACT

Children and Young People Act 2008

See 'Chapter 25: Information secrecy and sharing':

<http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/a/2008-19/current/pdf/2008-19.pdf>

Domestic Violence and Protection Orders Act 2008

See 'Part 13: Public access and publication':

<http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/a/2008-46/current/pdf/2008-46.pdf>

NSW

Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 – see 'Section

105: Publication of names and identifying information': http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/caypapa1998442/s105.html

Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007 – Section 45

'Publication of names and identifying information about children and other persons involved in apprehended violence order proceedings':

http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/capva2007347/s45.html

NT

See Care and Protection of Children Act

Section 301 'Disclosure of child's identity':

http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nt/consol_act/capoca269/s301.html

See Domestic and Family Violence Act 2007 – Section 26 ‘Prohibition on publication of personal details’: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nt/num_act/dafva200734o2007300/s26.html

QLD

See Child Protection Act 1999 – Part 6 ‘Confidentiality’:
http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/qld/consol_act/cpa1999177

Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 1989
Section 82 ‘Restriction on publication of proceedings’: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/qld/consol_act/dafvpa1989379/s82.html

SA

See Children’s Protection Act 1993
Section 59 ‘Reports of family care matters not to be published’
and 59A ‘Restrictions on reports of proceedings’:
http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/sa/consol_act/cpa1993229

Intervention Orders (Prevention of Abuse) Act 2009 – Part 5,
Division 1, 33 ‘Publication of report about proceedings or orders’:
<http://www.legislation.sa.gov.au/LZ/C/A/INTERVENTION%20ORDERS%20%28PREVENTION%20OF%20ABUSE%29%20ACT%202009/CURRENT/2009.85.UN.PDF>

TAS

See Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997
Section 103 ‘Duty to maintain confidentiality’: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/tas/consol_act/cypatfa1997399/s103.html

Family Violence Act 2004 – Part 4,
Section 32 ‘Restriction of publication of names of parties, &c.’:
http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/tas/consol_act/fva2004158

VIC

See Children, Youth and Families Act 2005
Section 534 ‘Restriction on publication of proceedings’: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/cyafa2005252/s534.html

Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010
Part 6 ‘Restriction on Publications of Proceedings’:
http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/psioa2010409

WA

See Children and Community Services Act 2004
Part 10 ‘Confidentiality provisions’: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/wa/consol_act/cacsa2004318/s237.html

Restraining Orders Act 1997 – Section 70 ‘Information on Identity of Certain Person Restricted’:
http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/wa/consol_act/ro82a1997200/s70.html

References

- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, Personal safety survey Australia 2005, Cat. no. 4906.0, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Richard O. Visser, Anthony Smith, Chris E. Rissel, Juliet Richters, and Andrew E. Grulich, 2003, "Sex in Australia: Experiences of sexual coercion among a representative sample of adults." Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 27(2): 198-203.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Richard O. Visser, Anthony Smith, Chris E. Rissel, Juliet Richters, and Andrew E. Grulich, 2003, "Sex in Australia: Experiences of sexual coercion among a representative sample of adults." Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 27(2): 198-203.
- 7 See Council of Australian Governments, Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020. http://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/child_protection_framework.pdf.
- 8 M. Charlton, et al., 2004, 'Facts on traumatic stress and children with developmental disabilities', National Centre for Child Traumatic Stress, Los Angeles.
- 9 See E Cannon et al, 2010. 'Adult health and relationship outcomes among women with abuse experiences during childhood.' Violence and Victims, 25(3): 291-305; C Widom et al, 2008, 'Childhood victimisation and lifetime revictimisation'. Child Abuse and Neglect, 32, 785-796.
- 10 Rebecca Reeve and Kees van Gool, 2013, 'Modelling the relationship between Child Abuse and Long Term health Care Costs and Wellbeing: Results from an Australian Community-based Survey'. Economic Record, 89(286): 300-318.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 D Kilroy, 2001, 'When will they see the real us? Women in prison'. Paper presented at the Women In Corrections: Staff and Clients Conference, Adelaide: <http://www.sistersinside.com.au/media/whenwillyouseetherealus.pdf>.; J Richters et al, 2008, Sexual health and behaviour of New South Wales prisoners, New South Wales School of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of New South Wales.
- 17 The age at which you are legally able to consent to sex is 16 years in the ACT, NSW, NT, Victoria and WA, and 17 years in SA and Tasmania. Queensland is the only state that differentiates between anal sex (for which the age of consent is 18 years) and other kinds of sex (16 years).