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

A/Prof Daryl Higgins

Deputy Director (Research), Australian Institute of Family Studies

CFCA Webinar

15 September 2016

The views expressed in this presentation are those of the presenter and may not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Institute of Family Studies or the Australian Government.

Acknowledgements

- This presentation includes material by collaborators on a project for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse:
  - Keith Kaufman – Psychology Professor, Portland State University, Oregon, US
  - Marcus Erooga – Visiting Research Fellow, Centre for Applied Childhood, Youth & Family Research, University of Huddersfield, UK
- I am also grateful for the input from colleagues—past and present—at AIFS who have contributed to the material, including: Antonia Quadara, Leah Bromfield, Lorraine Beyer, Mel Irenyi, & Debbie Scott.
- The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) is committed to the creation and dissemination of research-based information on family functioning and wellbeing.

Pause and reflect

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

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?

Child sexual abuse risk factors – focus on characteristics of potential *victims* and *offenders*…

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 or discrimination experienced by single parents, CALD or some Indigenous communities)
- Family dysfunction and parent characteristics (parenting skills, mental health, drug/alcohol issues)

Charactristics 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 – de-sensitising a child/young person
- (NB: social status and sexual orientation of offenders are myths that are not supported by the research)

Characteristics of the **environment** (including organisational context)

Source: (Irenyi, Bromfield, Beyer & Higgins, 2006)

Public health approach to child abuse prevention – includes environmental factors & organisational context

- **Individual child factors** – e.g., child abuse prevention education ("protective behaviours") programs; and programs to build resilience
- **Family/parental factors** – e.g., parent skills training; building support & enhancing protective factors (e.g., warmth; supervision & monitoring)
- **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 and youth-serving organisations

Preventing ‘bad’ people isn’t enough

Sexual abuse prevention strategies in organisations have focused on screening to identify those with a history of child sexual abuse.

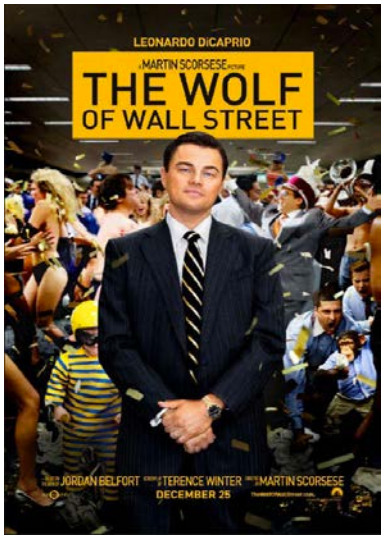
However:

- First-time abusers have no offence history
- Much abuse goes undetected or reported, so won’t be detected in screening
- Young people also engage in sexually abusive behaviours (30–60%)

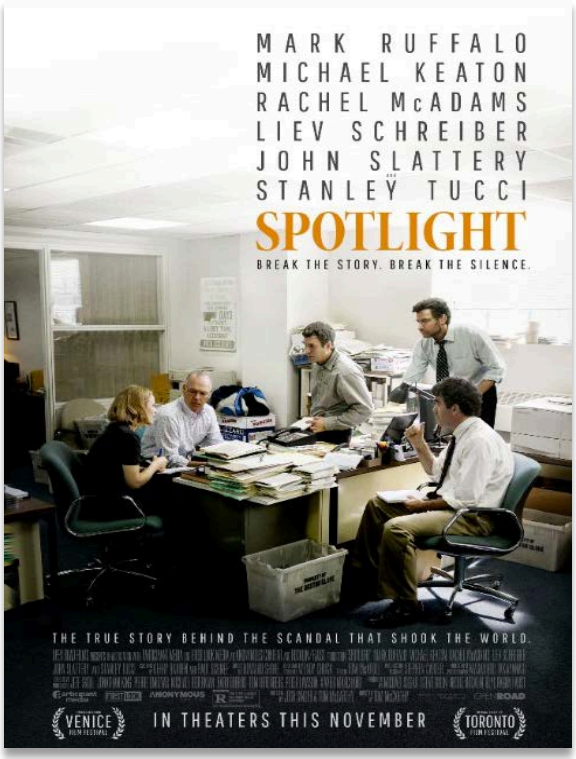
Boyd 2008; Pratt & Miller, 2012

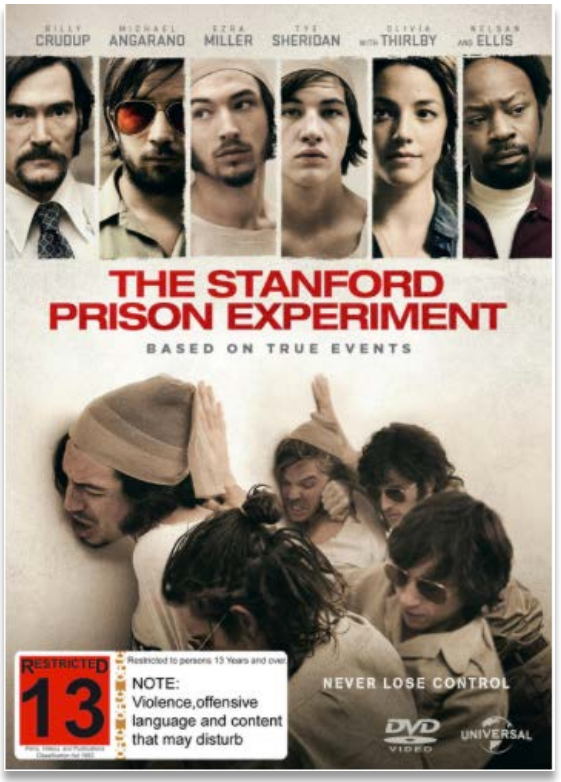
Preventing abuse in organisations….

- 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
  - Implement strategies to minimise risk
  - Address the culture – as *The Wolf of Wall Street* demonstrates



Box Office lessons:
The power of the situation





Box Office lessons

- Social Psychology knowledge from the 1970s explored on the big screen
- Demonstrates the “power of the situation” to influence individual behaviour
- Implications for child-safety in organisations:
  - We have failed—and will continue to fail—if we try and focus *solely* on identifying, weeding out, or preventing ‘bad people’ from joining organisations.

Key risks in child-related organisations

- Grooming process prior to the act of abuse is a precursor to offending that relies upon relationship and trust building between the victim, the perpetrator, and the institutional community.
- The modus operandi of perpetrators may differ between institutional contexts, as different settings allow for different opportunities for, and facilitators of, abuse.
- New technology, mobile phones, and social media open up new avenues for communication, and therefore grooming, for potential abusers
- Climate, culture and norms in organisations can facilitate abuse:

"Just as children are 'groomed' by adults to allow them to perpetrate sexual acts, other adults are also 'groomed' (or desensitised) to perceive potentially risky behaviour as harmless" (van Dam, 2001)

Kaufman et al., 2016; van Dam (2001) cited in Irenyi, Bromfield, Beyer, & Higgins, 2006, p. 10)

Overview: Child-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

3 steps in creating child-safe organisations

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:**
  - more extensive, but also more targeted
- See CFCA Resource sheet *Pre-employment screening: Working With Children Checks and Police Checks – May 2016*: <aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/pre-employment-screening-working-children-checks-and-police-checks>
- Understanding your obligations – in many jurisdictions, employers are prohibited from employing someone in a child-related occupation who does not have a Working With Children Check.
- Recognising the **limitations of pre-employment screening** – most child sex offenders do not have criminal records.
  NOTE: Having all staff vetted (pre-employment) 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.
  - Victoria now has "failure to disclose" legislation, which covers all adults with a 'reasonable belief' that a sexual offence has been committed against a child. It is separate from mandatory reporting obligations of specified professionals. See: <http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/home/safer+communities/protecting+children+and+families/failure+to+disclose+offence>

Source: <aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/mandatory-reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect>

3 steps in creating child-safe organisations

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 potentially private communication avenues?
- Have a culture where abuse might be tolerated (gender stereotypes? homophobia? alcohol?)

It is not only about ‘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

Underlying 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 steps in creating child-safe organisations

3. Creating Positive Cultures

Safe environments = positive organisational cultures:

1. Clarifying unacceptable behaviour
2. Encouraging disclosure
3. Involving police and child protection authorities

Examples of strategies for creating child-safe organisations

- Values-based interviewing
- Create induction programs – where acceptable behaviour is defined
- Reinforce with ongoing professional development
- Implement supervision, mentoring and accountability for staff
- Understanding and comply with mandatory reporting obligations
- Analyse & address risks across the organisation
- Develop (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 offences from a range of contexts such as:

- between peers at schools or youth-serving organisations
- between peers outside of schools or youth-serving organisations
- at home – by a family member (sibling/parent/other); neighbour; aquaintance
- elsewhere – by a known or unknown offender

Disclosure could relate to experiencing a variety of abusive behaviours:

- physical sexual assault, unwanted requests, as well as a range of *online offences* or using digital media (including images, 'sexting', bullying, etc.)

Facilitating Disclosure… cont.

"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)

Barriers to Disclosure

Disclosure 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
- e.g., National Safe Schools Framework (2011) “Promoting and providing a supportive learning environment in which all students can expect to feel safe”. See < www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/_resources/natsafeschools_file.pdf >

(Quadara, 2008)

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., 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

www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/_resources/natsafeschools_file.pdf

Religious organisations – a case study

Problematic organisational features can be:

- unquestioned power and high levels of authority
- minimisation and denial of allegations by leaders in authority
- failure to encourage victim to report to police
- inappropriate response to any legal proceedings
- doctrines and practices that support patriarchy or repressed sexuality (celibacy?)
- failure to appropriately support both victims and alleged offenders
- poor leadership and polarisation of members of the church/religious community
- sex-role beliefs (e.g., see next slide)

Higgins, 2001 (cited in Irenyi et al., 2005); Kaufman, Erooga et al. (2016)

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

Summary: The focus of prevention….

- spans the continuum from
  - 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
- ensures existing protective systems and processes are implemented more **rigorously, thoroughly, and consistently**

Resources for Creating Child-Safe Organisations

- The Australian Council for Children and Youth Organisation's *Safeguarding Children* is an accreditation program run by the Australian Childhood Foundation <www.safeguardingchildren.com.au>
- Life Without Barriers – *We Put Children First* <www.lwb.org.au/childrenfirst>
- 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>
- Erooga, M. (ed). (2012). Creating safer organisations: Practical steps to prevent the abuse of children by those working with them. Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, UK.
- AIFS resources on organisational issues:

  <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/topics/child-safe-organisations>

  <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/child-maltreatment-organisations-risk-factors-and-strate>
- Protecting Australia's Children Research Register:

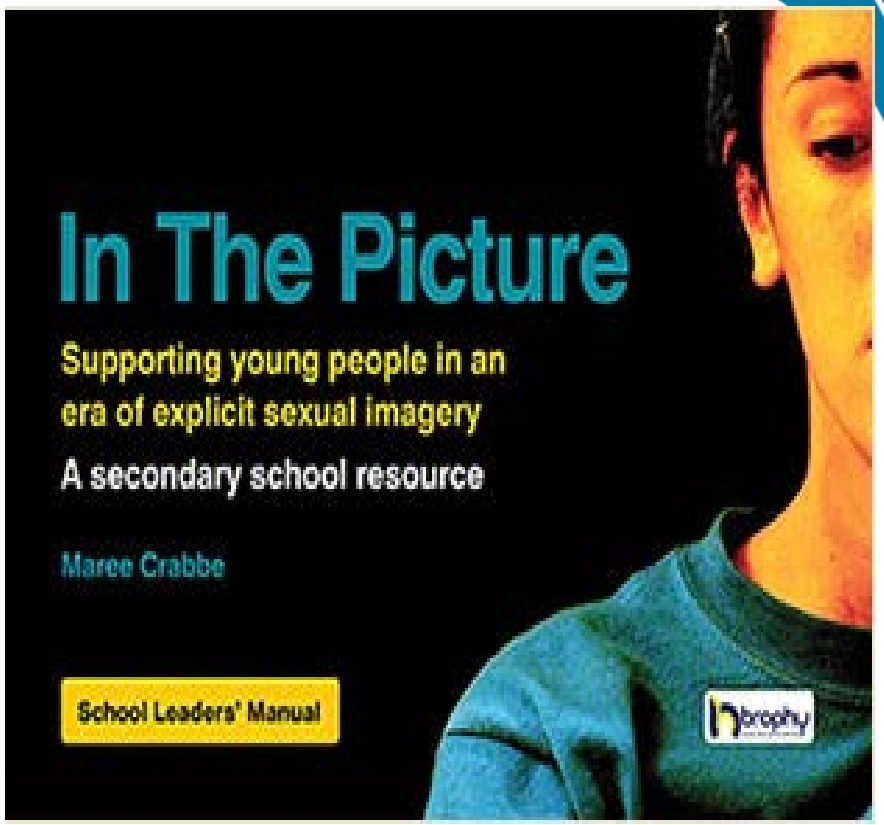
  <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/protecting-australias-children-research-and-evaluation-register-2011-2015>

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.

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.



Summary of risk management strategies

- Pre-employment screening, values-based interviewing 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)
  - responding to disclosures
  - training staff
  - providing ongoing support for staff
- Positive culture (child-friendly; transparent; respectful)
- Implement specific prevention programs and strategies
  e.g., respectful relationships; sexual health; child-abuse prevention awareness & skills ("protective behaviours"), etc.

Irenyi et al., 2006

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Elements of a Child-safe Institution

1. Child safety is embedded in institutional leadership, governance and culture
2. Children participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously
3. Families and communities are informed and involved
4. Equity is promoted and diversity respected
5. People working with children are suitable and supported

http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/5d0dc659-68c2-46f9-847b-fafd52f58673/Creating-child-safe-institutions

Elements of a Child-safe Institution… cont.

6. Processes to respond to complaints of child sexual abuse are child focussed
7. Staff are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children safe through continual education and training
8. Physical and online environments minimise the opportunity for abuse to occur
9. Implementation of child-safe standards is continuously reviewed and improved
10. Policies and procedures document how the institution is child safe

http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/5d0dc659-68c2-46f9-847b-fafd52f58673/Creating-child-safe-institutions

Child Family Community Australia

aifs.gov.au/cfca

Church policies to protect children/respond to disclosures

- National Council of Churches in Australia – Framework and Standards; and Safe Church Training Agreement: <www.safechurches.org.au>

See also:

- Catholic Church's Truth Justice Healing Council <www.tjhcouncil.org.au>
- Anglican's Professional Standards Units: e.g., <http://safeministry.org.au>
- Presbyterian's Breaking the Silence: <www.breakingthesilence.org.au>
- Salvation Army's Professional Standards Office: <https://salvos.org.au/about-us/latest-news/media-newsroom/20140821-pso-restructure/>
- Christian Reformed Churches of Australia policy: <http://resourcecentre.crca.org.au/childsafe/>

For other examples, see: <clergyabuseaustralia.org>

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Personal Safety Survey*. See: <http://www3.aifs.gov.au/acssa/statistics.html#npss>
- Higgins, D. J. (2001). A case study of child sexual abuse within a church community. *Journal of Religion and Abuse, 3(1/2), 5-19*.
- Higgins, D. J., Kaufman, K., & Erooga, M. (2016). How can child welfare and youth-serving organisations keep children safe? *developing practice: the child youth and family work journal, 44,* 48-64.
- Irenyi, M., Bromfield, L., Beyer, L., & Higgins, D. (2006). Child maltreatment in organisations: Risk factors and strategies for prevention. *Child Abuse Prevention Issues No. 25*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne. Available: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/child-maltreatment-organisations-risk-factors-and-strate>
- Quadara, A. (2008). Responding to young people disclosing sexual assault: A resource for schools. <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/responding-young-people-disclosing-sexual-assault>
- CFCA resources relating to Protecting Children:
  <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/topics/child-abuse-and-neglect-prevention>
  <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/topics/child-safe-organisations>
  <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/topics/national-framework-protecting-australias-children>
- Protecting Australia's Children Research and Evaluation Register: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/pacra/>

Thank you… for keeping children safe!

Questions?

Join the conversation & access key resources

Continue the conversation started here today and access a range of key resources on the CFCA website:

www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/news-discussion