

The current state of knowledge about preventing child sexual abuse



- by expert Dr Joe Tucci, Australian Childhood Foundation

Even a cursory review of the literature relevant to child sexual abuse prevention immediately highlights a number of definitional debates which remain unanswered. For example, to what extent are actions that focus on preventing child sexual abuse within institutions similar or different to those that aim to prevent child sexual abuse within families? What are the core elements of evidence-informed prevention approaches? And how might they be adapted to diverse groups of children, young people, families and/or communities?

Not all of the answers to these questions are readily available. Efforts to prevent child sexual abuse appear to be focused on changing the behaviour of individuals (adults and other young people) who engage in sexually abusive behaviour towards children and young people, and/or preventing or reducing the risk of sexual abuse in child and youth-serving organisations, sometimes called *situational prevention*.

The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (the National Centre) sought to define “prevention of child sexual abuse” and understand the evidence informing interventions considered to have a preventative impact. This Knowledge Summary focuses on the outcomes of a rapid review pertaining specifically to child sexual abuse prevention.

What did we do?

The National Centre commissioned a rapid literature review undertaken by Southern Cross University in partnership with the Australian Childhood Foundation on child sexual abuse prevention as part of its Scoping Study series in 2022.¹ The review separated two distinct but often conflated activities – child sexual abuse prevention and child sexual abuse education. These are:

1. *Child sexual abuse prevention* – efforts that stop sexually abusive or harmful behaviour towards children and young people from occurring in the first place.
2. *Child sexual abuse education* – efforts that improve knowledge and skills of children, young people and adults, that aim to:
 - identify indicators of sexually harmful or abusive behaviour towards children and young people when it happens
 - promote disclosure and help-seeking by children and young people who have experienced sexually abusive or harmful behaviour, and/or
 - enhance reporting and responses that can prevent the recurrence of abuse.

Following the established methodology for scoping literature reviews, a total of 4,552 articles published between 2012-2022 were initially identified. Further screening and analysis resulted in a final total 129 articles which met strict criteria.



Key messages from the literature

There is continued confusion in the literature about how to define child sexual abuse prevention.

Research has been plagued by the lack of an agreed, shared definition of child sexual abuse creating challenges for measurement, prevention, intervention and assessing impact.² Recent research by the Australian Child Maltreatment Study has made a critical contribution by developing a definition with broad consensus internationally.³

Similarly, *child sexual abuse prevention* it is not consistently or coherently conceptualised. This has resulted in empirical, theoretical and programmatic confusion with a lack of agreement about the upstream societal factors contributing to child sexual abuse. In contrast, recent family violence prevention efforts have been aided by OurWatch and others who have developed a generational theory of change emphasising the importance of increasing gender equity across societal structures. The prevention of child sexual abuse lacks the sharpness of an articulated and agreed theory of change.

The child sexual abuse literature is too narrowly focused.

The focus of child sexual abuse prevention approaches to date has largely involved interrupting sexually abusive behaviour of adults towards children. There is still limited evidence about:

- how to prevent children and young people engaging in harmful sexual behaviour
- how to address the intergenerational patterns of abuse
- how to prevent and stop intrafamilial child sexual abuse.

Effective community capacity building approaches to prevention target both community awareness *and* action.

There is limited robust evidence explaining how greater community awareness translates to reducing the sexual abuse of children and young people. To date, there has been no published research on community education campaigns in relation to children and young people who engage in harmful sexual behaviour.

Available research points to the need for multi-level campaigns that build community capacity from awareness raising to empowering action.⁴ Such campaigns include assessing community beliefs about child sexual abuse, implementing targeted training with families, professionals and the general community and empowering people to take active steps to prevent and/or mitigate risk of child sexual abuse at a local level.

There is promising evidence that one effective element in child sexual abuse prevention involves intervention with individuals at risk of sexually abusing children and young people.

There is currently an increased interest in Australia in investing in approaches which set out to detect and change the behaviour of individuals at risk of sexually abusing children and young people. Such efforts require improved risk profiling of potential offending and effective screening and treatment programs for those at risk of offending or who have not been convicted of offending.

International examples of evaluated programs⁵ aim to stop adults identified as at risk of inflicting child sexual abuse.

Common approaches across these programs include:

- psychoeducation
- promoting self-reporting to authorities
- identifying and rehearsing alternative behaviours, and
- strengthening community resources and relationships which can sustain behavioural change.



Addressing the needs of children and young people who engage in harmful sexual behaviour may be an important strategy in preventing child sexual abuse.

There is growing recognition that children and young people who inflict harmful sexual behaviour on other children require specialist intervention to reduce the risk they pose whilst they are still young and as they mature.⁶ These programs typically include:

- support to address experiences of trauma and other disruptions in development, including for those children who have been harmed
- psychoeducation activities that promote normative sexual behaviour
- providing opportunities for children and young people to acquire life skills, and
- prosocial modelling, family and relational therapy to address intrafamilial dynamics and restorative justice.

Situational child sexual abuse prevention strategies are critical in addressing weaknesses in the operations and policies of certain places, organisations and institutions.

Situational prevention enables organisations to take responsibility for protecting children and young people on their watch, establishing practices and procedures that prevent those adults motivated to abuse from having access to children and young people.

The situational prevention literature highlights the need for child and youth-serving organisations to:

1. *Understand offender behaviour*, which is critical to creating a child-safe culture. This includes: how offenders identify and groom children, young people and their families; the techniques they use to maintain the abuse and the child's silence; and tactics they use to avoid detection.
2. *Monitor, supervise, regulate or restrict interactions* between children and adults, and
3. *Conduct thorough risk assessments*, including a suite of risk management, mitigation and monitoring strategies.⁷

Implications for Policy and Practice

There is a critical need for the development of a robust conceptual framework for child sexual abuse prevention. It should be underpinned by a clear theory of change that is multi-layered, address the precursors to child sexual abuse and provide a rationale for short, medium and long-term outcomes. It is imperative that a rigorous and sustained research agenda is implemented nationally that resources and supports the theory of change and evaluates its impact.

Child sexual abuse prevention efforts must be broadened to include the range of contexts within which sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour occurs, including intrafamilial, sibling and online environments.

There is a need to deepen our understanding of the relationship between prior victimisation, responses to victimisation and intergenerational cycles of child sexual abuse. Community awareness raising efforts must be more closely linked with actual behaviour change strategies at individual, family and community levels. It is imperative that an overarching child sexual abuse prevention theory of change drives the content and methodology of awareness raising initiatives.



National Centre Insight

The National Centre recognises that child sexual abuse will not be stopped unless there is a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the power dynamics and factors which enable it.

Lived and living experience must be privileged in the co-design of a theory of change for child sexual abuse prevention. The National Centre is committed to engaging, listening and amplifying the views of victims and survivors to inform a theory of change to enable identification, interruption and abolition of child sexual abuse.

Help us understand your learning needs

The National Centre's Learning and Development Plan aims to build and strengthen the capability of practitioners and organisations in how they respond to and support victims and survivors of child sexual abuse through training, learning, development and knowledge exchange resources and activities. Please help us to understand your learning needs by emailing us your feedback at: practice@nationalcentre.org.au

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- 2 Mathews B, & Collin-Vézina D. Child sexual abuse: toward a conceptual model and definition. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 2019; 20(2), 131–148.
- 3 Haslam D, Mathews B, Pacella R, Scott JG, Finkelhor D, Higgins DJ, Meinck F, Erskine HE, Thomas HJ, Lawrence D, Malacova E. *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report*. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology 2023.
- 4 Schober DJ, Fawcett SB & Bernier J. The Enough Abuse campaign: building the movement to prevent child sexual abuse in Massachusetts. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 2012; 21(4), 456–469.
- 5 See, for instance, Engel J, Korner M, Schuhmann P, Kruger THC & Hartmann U. Reduction of risk factors for pedophilic sexual offending. *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 2018; 15(11), 1629–1637; and Van Horn J, Eisenberg M, Nicholls CM, Mulder J, Webster S, Paskell C, Brown A, Stam J, Kerr J & Jago N. Stop it now! A pilot study into the limits and benefits of a free helpline preventing child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 2015; 24(8), 853–872.
- 6 Beier KM, Oezdemir UC, Schlinzig E, Groll A, Hupp E & Hellenschmidt T. “Just dreaming of them”: The Berlin Project for Primary Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse by Juveniles (PPJ). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 2016; 52, 1–10.
- 7 Kaufman KL, Erooga M, Mathews B & McConnell E. Recommendations for preventing child sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations: Implications from an Australian Royal Commission review of the literature. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2019; 34(20), 4199–4224.