

What does the evidence tell us about the impact of child sexual abuse education programs?



- with expert Dr Joe Tucci, Australian Childhood Foundation

It is undeniable that we must prevent child sexual abuse from occurring. The scale of the problem, its devastating impacts across the lifespan and the heavy toll across the community all lead to the conclusion: child sexual abuse must be stopped *before it starts*.

However, establishing effective ways to *prevent* child sexual abuse is far from straightforward. While it is widely referred to in the research literature and broader community discourse, child sexual abuse prevention is not consistently defined in policy, research and service delivery. This has resulted in empirical, theoretical and programmatic confusion that fails to clearly render the problems to be resolved, the methodologies consistent with these problems, the effort required to achieve success, and evaluation of outcomes achieved in the short term and sustained over time.

But what do we mean by “prevention of child sexual abuse”? The way we define this goal directly influences the development and implementation of interventions including the role of education programs. This Knowledge Summary outlines the findings of a rapid literature review pertaining specifically to child sexual abuse education programs.

Reviewing the evidence: child sexual abuse prevention education

The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (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. The review separated out two distinct but often conflated activities:

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. These programs:
 - 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 early intervention that may prevent the recurrence of abuse.



Key messages from the research

- **Overwhelmingly, children and young people are the targets of child sexual abuse education, with few programs targeting significant adults in their lives.** Predominately school-based, few programs are delivered in community settings and or in the home.
- **Child sexual abuse education programs largely focus on building knowledge and developing skills to encourage help-seeking by children and young people.** This includes teaching children and young people to recognise unsafe situations, identify elements of grooming behaviour and raise concerns about abusive behaviour to adults in their trusted network.
- **Few programs address the barriers to disclosing child sexual abuse faced by children and young people.** Common barriers include the complex range of feelings children and young people may be experiencing including secrecy and denial based on shame, distress, ambivalence and fear about the consequences of disclosing; and a desire for confidentiality if they do disclose.
- **Programs fail to address inclusion and diversity.** Very few programs address the needs of children and young people living with a disability, even less for those with sensory deficits, and none address the experiences of children and young people who identify as sexually and or gender diverse.
- **The cultural needs of children and young people are overlooked.** There was little evidence that any programs had been tailored to ensure that the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families are understood and addressed. It was extremely difficult to identify how any of the evaluated programs incorporated cultural safety for First Nations children and their families and communities.
- **There is little evidence that the insights of children or adults with lived and living experience of child sexual abuse have informed child sexual abuse education programs.** The approach to developing education programs would be strengthened by collaboration with victims and survivors of child sexual abuse to embed lived and living experience insights from the program design stage.
- **Evidence about the impact of child sexual abuse education programs show some positive effects but are far from conclusive.** Most positive effects relate to knowledge gains, with less measurement of children and young people's protective skills or use of protective networks. Significant questions exist as to whether children and young people would be able to use this knowledge to raise concerns and seek help when faced with a real-life scenario.
- **There is confusion in the literature about the role of education in the prevention of child sexual abuse.** Education programs continue to be described as prevention strategies. Very few studies have measured the effectiveness of education of children and young people in reducing the incidence and prevalence of child sexual abuse.

Implications for policy and practice

Child sexual abuse prevention lacks a theory of change with short, medium and long term objectives

The conceptual slippage regarding child sexual abuse education programs as prevention highlights the absence of a clear rationale regarding the prevention of child sexual abuse. Prevention of family violence organisations like OurWatch have developed a generational theory of change emphasising the importance of increasing gender equity across societal structures. However, the prevention of child sexual abuse lacks the sharpness of similar theory of change. This has meant the development, funding and implementation of programs do not meet common objectives and are not effective. A unifying theory of change with short, medium and long-term goals will address the limitations in approaches to prevention to date. It is more logical to focus child sexual abuse prevention through changing the behaviour of individuals who are at risk of causing sexual harm to children and young people.



We need a clearer and agreed understanding about the role of child sexual abuse education for children and young people

Child sexual abuse education of children and young people must be understood as an early detection effort, rather than prevention of abuse before it starts.

To position the education of children and young people as a prevention strategy of child sexual abuse, implicates children and young people as preventers of their own victimisation. This diminishes the responsibility of adults to protect children and young people.

Greater emphasis should be placed on education programs targeting adults in early detection of child sexual abuse and protection of children and young people from child sexual abuse

Improving adults' knowledge and skills to identify grooming and risk situations and decrease the incidence of child sexual abuse has significant potential. Such efforts reinforce the responsibilities of adults for the safety of children and young people and strengthen their capabilities to take protective action.

Involve children and young people and those with lived and living experience in co-designing programs that seek to empower help-seeking and disclosure

Child sexual abuse education assumes that increasing children and young people's knowledge about grooming and risk situations will translate into behaviour change that effectively interrupts grooming. Incorporating the perspectives of children, young people, and adults with lived and living experience will strengthen the efficacy of education programs to support children and young people to overcome the barriers to help seeking and disclosure.

National Centre Insight

The National Centre recognises that child sexual abuse will not be stopped unless there is a comprehensive framework for addressing the power dynamics and factors which enable it. This kind of unifying rationale will enable identification, interruption and prevention of multiple forms of child sexual abuse before it starts, including extra and intrafamilial child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour of children and young people. It would also help to build a robust public health prevention approach, in which different interventions such as child sexual abuse education programs are deployed to affect different outcomes.

The National Centre looks forward to working with government, researchers, practitioners and people with lived and living experience to inform a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors which enable child sexual abuse to occur and developing a clear theory of change, to embed preventative interventions across systems.

Help us understand your learning needs

The National Centre's Learning and Professional Development Plan aims to build and strengthen the capability of workers 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.

Vosz M, McPherson L, Tucci J, Mitchell J, Fernandes C, Macnamara N. It Is Time to Focus on Prevention: a Scoping Review of Practices Associated with Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse and Australian Policy Implications. *International Journal on Child Maltreatment*, 2023; 6, 79–107. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42448-022-00143-8>