

Creating Safer Futures

Raising awareness of child sexual abuse
amongst young adults through digital storytelling

FINAL REPORT
2026



Funding

This research was funded by the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, “Creating Safer Futures: Raising Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse Amongst Young Adults Through Digital Storytelling” (Katie Wright, Sari Braithwaite, Valerie Braithwaite, Shurlee Swain, Danny Taggart, 2023-2026). Elements of this project were also supported by an Australian Research Council (ARC) grant, “Reclaiming Child Rights: Activism, Public Inquiries and Social Change” (DP220100376, Katie Wright, Johanna Sköld, Shurlee Swain, Sari Braithwaite, 2022-2026).

Suggested citation

Katie Wright, Sari Braithwaite, Valerie Braithwaite, Shurlee Swain, Danny Taggart (2026) Creating Safer Futures: Raising Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse Amongst Young Adults Through Digital Storytelling. Final Report. La Trobe University. DOI: [10.26181/32829809](https://doi.org/10.26181/32829809)

ISBN: 978-0-6459541-2-8

Copyright © La Trobe University, 2026



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Further information about the research program is available at voicesforchange.org.au

Table of contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
1. INTRODUCTION	6
2. LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY	8
3. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY	10
4. STORYTELLING CASE STUDIES	12
5. ADVOCATE SURVEY ON AWARENESS RAISING	14
6. CO-DESIGN WORKSHOP	16
7. DEVELOPING THE DIGITAL STORY	20
8. THE DIGITAL STORY	23
9. EVALUATING THE DIGITAL STORY	27
10. REFLECTIONS FROM COLLABORATORS	38
11. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS	39
REFERENCES	42
APPENDICES	45
APPENDIX 1: PROJECT COLLABORATORS	46
APPENDIX 2: DIGITAL STORY WEBSITE	47
APPENDIX 3: DIGITAL STORY SUPPORT & RESOURCES	55
APPENDIX 4: FACT SHEET	57

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the unceded lands on which we live and work. We pay respects to elders, past and present, and extend that respect to Indigenous peoples across Australia.

We acknowledge the lived and living experiences of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and honour the crucial role that survivor advocates and activists have played raising awareness, improving child safety and in the ongoing fight for justice.

We warmly thank the advocates who completed the Advocate survey; the students who engaged with the digital story; and the course coordinators who shared information about the project with their students. We offer special thanks to Peter Gogarty for collaborating with us and for sharing his story for this project.

This research was made possible with contributions from many people. We thank everyone who collaborated with the research team: members of the project Advisory Committee and the Youth Panel; the creative team involved in the creation of the digital story; web designers and developers; and the research assistants who worked at various stages on different parts of the project: Johanna Boardman, Charlie Hock, Caroline Lyall and Taryn Baker. All names, photographs and quotes from people identified in this report are published with their permission.

The project was conceptualised and designed by Katie Wright, Sari Braithwaite and Shurlee Swain. The digital story was created by Sari Braithwaite with contributions from the research team, the project Advisory Committee, the project Youth Panel, and our creative collaborators. Katie Wright led and managed the digital story evaluation phase, Valerie Braithwaite led the quantitative analysis for the advocate survey and the evaluation of the digital story, and Katie Wright led the qualitative analysis.

Executive summary

This report presents key findings from the *Creating Safer Futures* project. The research aimed to identify a new approach to raising awareness of child sexual abuse using digital storytelling in ways that are ethical, victim-centred, trauma informed, strength-based, and collaborative.

Background & context

Child sexual abuse is a major social and public health problem. Raising awareness is a key component of prevention and supporting victims and survivors. The key objective of the *Creating Safer Futures* project was to find novel ways, through digital storytelling, of having difficult conversations with young adults about child sexual abuse. Young adults are the next generation of caregivers both in personal and professional contexts.

Brief literature review

The literature review analysed existing scholarship on raising awareness of child sexual abuse; audience engagement with difficult topics; and collaborative approaches to working with victim-survivors.

Project design

The project design comprised three parts, with each part building on the knowledge generated at earlier stages. *Stage 1: Foundational research* consisted of literature reviews, case study analysis and a national survey of advocates. *Stage 2: Development* involved the creation of a digital story through a co-designed workshop and collaborative production model. *Stage 3: Evaluation and dissemination* tested the digital story with young adults, and developed a Fact Sheet for researchers and creatives engaging with victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. The project was guided by trauma informed principles and underpinned by an ethics of care. In conducting this research, the expertise and wisdom of victim-survivor advocates was centred, recognising the valuable contribution they have made to child safety and the fight for justice for victims and survivors.

Storytelling case studies

The project identified five successful creative works that explored child sexual abuse. A case study approach examining the conceptualisation, design, process and impact of each creative work was used to identify key takeaways for consideration in the development of the *Creating Safer Futures* digital story. This included a commitment to meaningful victim-survivor collaboration, telling stories of action and defiance, and finding the balance of exploring the harm of child sexual abuse, while acknowledging the resilience of victims and survivors in adulthood.

Advocate survey on awareness raising

Breaking the Silence: A Survey of Advocates was undertaken from mid-2024 to early 2025. The purpose of the survey was to learn about awareness raising from advocates and activists who have regularly engaged in public and private conversations about child safety and child sexual abuse. The results of the survey revealed recommendations about use of language, approaches to communication, and the types of messaging which are important to convey.

Participatory co-design workshop

In mid-2024, an innovative two-day participatory co-design workshop brought together researchers, the Youth Panel, the Advisory Committee and digital designers. Through the workshop, the educational and creative direction of the digital story took shape.

Developing the digital story

The production of the digital story was informed by the foundational research, the advocate survey and the participatory workshop. The process prioritised victim-survivor collaboration, and genuine engagement of young adults in the production. Post-production involved a dynamic exchange between the expertise of academics and creatives to produce a digital story that would resonate emotionally and reflect rigorous academic scholarship.

The digital story

The digital story features the experience of survivor advocate, Peter (Pete) Gogarty. Pete was invited to collaborate in the creation of the digital story as he is a highly skilled communicator with extensive advocacy experience, and he shares his story with vulnerability and power. He has extensive media experience, a background as an educator who has shared his story widely with university students, and longstanding connection to the lead researcher. His involvement in the project Advisory Committee and participation in the co-design workshop further informed his contribution and strengthened the relationship between him and the researchers. Pete's narrative was divided into five sections, containing audio, video, images and infographics. The final part of the digital story involved the participatory act of symbolically breaking down a wall of silence.

Evaluating the digital story

In mid-late 2025, the final stage of the project involved evaluating the digital story with our target audience: young adults enrolled in tertiary education. The key area of interest was the degree of comfort people felt talking about child sexual abuse. 296 students engaged with the digital story and completed a short survey. Comfort levels increased significantly for the sample after engaging with Pete's story. The key factor that explained who increased in comfort and who did not is whether they felt inspired.

Conclusion and next steps

This project drew together a diverse group of people/experiences/expertise for new knowledge creation. The project generated new knowledge on advocate wisdom; produced new guidelines for researchers and creative arts projects on collaboration and talking about child sexual abuse; and finally, designed an innovative and effective new approach to raising awareness of child sexual abuse amongst young adults.

Given the success of the research, there is considerable potential to upscale the project to include more survivor advocate stories, adapt it to target different audiences (e.g. law enforcement, care workers, parents), and undertake further testing of its resonance with a wider range of tertiary students, those not in education, and with other young populations (e.g. senior secondary school students).

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a major social and public health problem with considerable adverse effects for victims, families, and society more broadly. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that 28.5% of Australians—approximately one in three girls and one in five boys—have experienced child sexual abuse (Mathews, Pacella, et al., 2023). Impacts of sexual abuse in childhood include mental health disorders, physical health problems, reduced socioeconomic outcomes. It may also affect people's relationships, their identity, and their future aspirations (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013; Commonwealth of Australia, 2017; Downing et al., 2021; Finch et al., 2021; Hailes et al., 2019).

Raising awareness is important both as a protective factor, and to support victims and survivors (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2016). Australia's National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse (2021-2030) acknowledges the difficulty of engaging with this subject, emphasising that society's "collective silence perpetuates suffering" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). The research project, *Creating Safer Futures: Raising Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse Amongst Young Adults Through Digital Storytelling*, addressed the deeply entrenched problem of ongoing societal silences around child sexual abuse and the question of how to safely engage young people with this topic.

For decades, victims and survivors have raised public awareness and demanded action (Wright, 2017). The landmark Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013-2017) shone a light on the issue and brought it into public discourse. The inquiry broke silences and made child sexual abuse "speakable" in new ways (Wright & Swain, 2018). Yet, as media attention shifted, a new challenge emerged: how to continue conversations and maintain a focus on child sexual abuse. This research addressed this challenge: it aimed to engage reluctant audiences to listen to victim-survivor stories ethically and empathetically.

We set out to identify a new approach to raising awareness about child sexual abuse by creating a storytelling prototype suited to young adults and the digital media age. It focused on young adults because they are the next generation who will have caregiving roles for children and responsibility for child safety, both in their professional and personal lives. They are also a generation of Australians who missed the public educative opportunities provided by the Royal Commission as they were too young to engage with media attention and community discourse.

To meet the challenge of creating a new approach to awareness raising, the project adopted an interdisciplinary, mixed-methods, collaborative and co-design approach. The project design recognises the collective expertise of advocates, who have been at the forefront of social action to break silences, improve child safety, and better support victims and survivors. It also recognises the expertise of young people, whose input was critical to the creation of a digital story that would appeal to our target audience of young adults.

The project brought together survivor advocates, young adults, academics, and creative specialists to develop a digital storytelling experience about child sexual abuse that would engage young adults. The foundations of the research were laid through comprehensive literature reviews, case studies of creative arts projects, a survey with survivor advocates, and a participatory two-day workshop. After creating the storytelling experience, the final component of the research was evaluating its impact on young adults through a mixed-methods survey.

This Report provides a brief overview of each stage of the project that informed the creation of the digital story. Results from the evaluation of the digital story are then presented. Critically, engagement with the *Creating Safer Futures* digital story significantly increased young adult's level of comfort in speaking about child sexual abuse.

2. Literature review summary

A comprehensive literature review was undertaken in three key areas: raising awareness of child sexual abuse; audience engagement with difficult topics, and collaborative approaches to working with victims and survivors. A summary is provided below of the key themes that emerged from the literature review.

Raising awareness of child sexual abuse

Sexual violence awareness campaigns are recognised as a vital component of primary prevention, generating community knowledge gains and increase reporting and engagement with support services (Knack et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2023). Community attitude studies reveal that whilst the overwhelming majority of people view child safety as a shared social responsibility, significant barriers exist including stigma, familial norms, discussion reluctance, and educational deficits (Grady et al., 2024). Critically, child sexual abuse is viewed as even more stigmatising than other forms of sexual violence (Mellen et al., 2025).

Public awareness campaigns are therefore essential as they can enhance community knowledge at individual, institutional, and societal levels (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2016) and contribute to destigmatisation. Literature emphasises the value of comprehensive public health approaches addressing child sexual abuse through prevention, early intervention and appropriate responses when abuse has occurred (Klika et al., 2020; Letourneau et al., 2014).

Studies consistently demonstrate increased awareness and knowledge following interventions and education programs (Knack et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2023), with community-based, community-developed, and community-led solutions appearing to be most effective (Gomez & Fliss, 2019). Despite this, there remains limited high-quality evaluations of child sexual abuse interventions and public education campaigns, particularly in the area of behaviour change (Dhaliwal, 2015; Kemshall & Moulden, 2017; Walsh et al., 2023).

Audience engagement with difficult topics

Child sexual abuse is a sensitive, difficult topic and this means that engaging audiences with the subject can be challenging (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). Research on successful approaches indicates that a focus on story and narrative may offer a powerful engagement pathway (Bowman et al., 2019; Lee & Priester, 2015; Osman, 2021). This suggests that personal storytelling, rather than abstract top-down approaches (e.g. public education campaigns emphasising statistics), may be more impactful as they facilitate connection to a person's experiences.

News media is also recognised as providing important engagement pathways through coverage of high-profile cases of sexual violence (Gurman et al., 2018; McCartan et al., 2015). Media coverage can create community dialogue and public education, encourage discussions on difficult topics, and challenge entrenched norms, such as the stigma

experienced by victims and survivors. However, significant barriers to audience engagement remain, including topic complexity and perceived irrelevance, pervasive rape myths, victim-blaming attitudes, sexual violence discussion taboos, and shame (Greeson et al., 2018; Madden, 2018). These barriers suggest that strategies should move beyond simple awareness raising to encompass clear behaviour change messaging and action guidance that enable audiences to translate concern into action (McCartan et al., 2015).

Collaborative approaches to working with victims and survivors

Lived experience is now widely recognised as a legitimate, highly valued form of expertise, with research revealing both significant benefits and challenges when engaging in collaborative approaches (Taggart et al., 2025; Wright et al., 2023).

Victims and survivors often respond positively to research collaboration, citing helping others as the primary motivation, with benefits including contributions to new knowledge and social change, empowerment and self-confidence and, when genuine collaboration is done well, reducing power imbalances (Campbell et al., 2023; Jumarali et al., 2021). Yet there are risks and challenges that must be carefully considered, including how to minimise re-traumatisation, how to ensure power imbalances are not replicated, and the time commitments and remuneration offered to lived experience experts (Alyce et al., 2023).

Trauma-informed approaches that prioritise safety, transparency, empathy, agency, flexibility, responsiveness, authentic relationship building, consensus decision-making, and active listening are essential, supported by opportunities for professional support if required (Keighley et al., 2023; Matthew & Barron, 2023). Future directions emphasise wider uptake and greater power sharing, incorporating victim-survivor payments, genuine process contribution opportunities, and whole project participation from design through implementation, with data generation and interpretation integrity remaining key considerations requiring researcher reflexivity and rigorous auditing.

Summary

The literature review undertaken for the project examined wide-ranging scholarly and practice-based research on child sexual abuse awareness raising, difficult topic community engagement, and victim-survivor collaborative approaches. Whilst considerable progress has occurred in Australia, particularly over the past decade, major challenges remain. Public education campaigns generate demonstrable benefits, particularly knowledge generation and increased help-seeking behaviours, though evidence remains limited regarding behaviour change effectiveness. Given the distressing nature of child sexual abuse, storylines and narratives prove powerful audience-reaching tools. Collaborative approaches have been shown to yield numerous benefits but must proceed carefully, employing genuine trauma-informed practices and prioritising safety and care. Moving forward requires sustained awareness raising, public engagement, and collaborative research alongside evidence-based strategies for safely building public conversation momentum.

3. Approach and methodology

Trauma informed approach

All aspects of the project were guided by trauma informed principles and underpinned by an ethics of care. The research began with recognition that victims and survivors of child sexual abuse have historically been silenced and that centring their lived experience is essential to honouring their expertise, increasing public awareness, and preventing future harm. Careful attention to the safety of everyone involved in the project was paramount.

Sociologist Allison Pugh's (2022) concept of 'connective labour' captures our overarching approach. Connective labour describes a multi-dimensional and relational process of witnessing and connecting with the other; through 'seeing' and genuine engagement, meaning is co-created. Our work, also informed by social justice scholarship and the team's experience working with marginalised and traumatised groups, was anchored in several core principles:

- Ensuring participants had choice, control, and safety with maximum autonomy over the process.
- Building trusting relationships that recognised advocates' need for care and support.
- Creating a culture of care and making specialist support available if needed.
- Using storytelling to transmit lived experience knowledge intergenerationally, thereby subverting harmful trauma transmission patterns.
- Recognising survivor advocates' skills and emotional capacity to discuss child sexual abuse without overprotection while valuing their diverse expertise throughout the research process.

Research aims

The key objective of *Creating Safer Futures* was to find novel ways of having difficult conversations with young adults about child sexual abuse as:

- A prevention strategy.
- A tool to de-stigmatise experiences of child sexual abuse.
- A way of supporting victim-survivors to tell their story.
- To recognise the valuable contributions of victim-survivor advocates to child safety.

Research design

To achieve this aim, the project employed a three-staged mixed-methods design that comprised (1) background and foundational research; (2) development of a production process and the creation of the digital storytelling tool; and (3) evaluation of the digital storytelling with young adults.

Stage 1: Foundational research

1. Literature reviews on raising awareness of child sexual abuse; audience engagement with difficult topics; and collaboration with victim-survivors.
2. Case studies of commercially successful and grassroots storytelling approaches.
3. A survey to generate new understandings of advocates' knowledge and expertise as well as their opinions, beliefs and experiences of raising awareness of and talking about child sexual abuse.

Stage 2: Development

1. Identification of new approaches to digital storytelling, engagement, and impact through a participatory co-designed workshop that facilitated intergenerational dialogue between survivor advocates and young adults.
2. Development of a bespoke production process to create a prototype storytelling experience aimed at engaging young adults, including through a focus on social change advocacy.

Stage 3: Evaluation and dissemination

- Evaluate student engagement with the storytelling prototype.
- Development of a Fact Sheet, providing guidance for researchers and people in the creative industries on victim-survivor collaboration and engagement.

4. Storytelling case studies

To help inform the development of the digital storytelling prototype, a case study methodology (Yin, 2018) was employed to analyse creative works addressing child sexual abuse: two large budget/commercial projects and three modest budget grassroots projects. Case studies examined process, representations, and audience engagement, with a particular focus on the strengths and limitations of each of these works, and ways they may help with the conceptualisation of the storytelling approach.

Case studies

Case studies were selected based on a set of criteria including works created within the last 15–20 years, both Australian and international, reflecting a range of stakeholders, approaches, and budgets, from victim-survivor-led grassroots and non-profit initiatives to commercial and institutional projects, to individual and collaborative endeavours.

Case studies selected were diverse in design, scale and impact. They included a protest song, a grassroots protest campaign, the development of a survivor led arts precinct, a Hollywood film, and a museum exhibition.

- Tim Minchin, *Come Home Cardinal Pell* (protest song).
- LOUD Fence.
- Parragirls, Memory Project.
- Tom McCarthy, *Spotlight*.
- National Museum of Australia, *Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions*.

Key takeaways

For the purposes of this report, we focus on the strengths of the projects analysed and key principles that could inform our work. Our intention was not to be critical of creative works made by victims and survivors. We also understand that this type of work is difficult, and that creative projects are products of their time; for example, what is viewed as best practice at one point in time may be contested and notions of best practice continue to change and evolve.

From the five case studies, the following key elements were identified as important considerations for the development of the digital storytelling model:

- Storytelling needs to be personal to connect audiences.
- Creators need to genuinely and meaningfully collaborate with victims and survivors when developing and sharing their stories.

- Victims and survivors should not be reduced to their experiences of child sexual abuse and instead be recognised and portrayed in multifaceted ways.
- Tell stories of action. Change-making in the face of suffering/injustice can shift audience experiences from feelings of hopelessness to empowerment.
- Stories can motivate people to contribute to positive social change, and audiences respond to a “call to action” after bearing witness to injustice.
- There can be value in working with public figures but this needs to be done authentically.
- Include clear educational messaging to support the storytelling.
- Where possible, create something that is accessible over time.
- A variety of projects are needed to capture different audiences and different access modes, e.g. online and in-person.
- Be aware that no one project can do everything.

5. Advocate survey on awareness raising

An original survey was created to help inform the development of the digital storytelling prototype as well as inform related research being undertaken by some research team members on child rights and the history of survivor activism in Australia. ***Breaking the Silence: A Survey of Advocates*** was undertaken from mid-2024 to early 2025. The purpose of the survey for the *Creating Safer Futures* project was to learn about awareness raising from advocates and activists who have regularly engaged in public and private conversations about child safety and child sexual abuse.

In total, 78 Australian advocates completed the survey, containing 176 qualitative and quantitative questions. Individual advocates were identified through the professional networks of the Australian researchers and the project Advisory Committee, as well as through online searches of traditional and social media. People working in advocacy and support organisations related to child sexual abuse were invited to participate. In addition, some advocates who completed the survey made recommendations to the research team about other potential participants.

The survey consisted of five sections:

- Your Advocacy.
- Public Message Awareness Raising.
- Interpersonal Awareness Raising.
- Engaging with Different Groups.
- Overcoming Obstacles and Challenges.

Key findings

Advocates agreed that the ease of talking about child sexual abuse was on a downward trajectory from a highpoint immediately after the Royal Commission.

Advocates agree on what message needs to be communicated, whether it be through a public campaign or one-on-one or small group interaction. Fundamental messages are:

- Child sexual abuse could happen to a child close to you.
- It is more common than people think.
- Child sexual abuse does enormous harm.
- Everyone is responsible for preventing child sexual abuse.
- Prevention of child sexual abuse is possible.

Advocates are adamant that clear and direct – though sensitive – communication about what constitutes child sexual abuse and grooming is vital. “Child sexual abuse” is preferred over abbreviations such as CSA to ensure the issue is not minimised.

Advocates prioritised giving people the gift of their time, listening, assuring victims and survivors that they should not feel shame or blame themselves, and creating a safe space for them to reach out to someone whom they could trust and who would listen and believe them. Advocates prioritised giving hope and confidence for the future. Telling stories about individuals and insisting on victims and survivors being centre stage humanised the journeys of others and shared the experience of real people who led meaningful lives with their trauma. In short, ‘hard talk’ was wrapped in warm blankets of understanding, care and support.

Finally, the advocates who responded to this survey were determined. They looked in the eye the obstacles to their progress in raising awareness of child sexual abuse: They recognised that child sexual abuse remains a socially stigmatised topic and felt the “othering” of victims and survivors and their supporters. They felt the barbs of being talked at, not with, of others over-simplifying complexity, of trivialising or denying child sexual abuse. But, despite their acknowledged challenging role, they remain true to their mission.

The survey results informed the planning and design of the 2024 Participatory Workshop, and both the survey and the workshop were foundational to the development of the digital storytelling model.

Report on Breaking the Silence: A Survey of Advocates

Detailed findings from the advocate survey can be found in the report, *Raising Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse: The Wisdom of Advocates*. The report and accompanying codebook can be found [here](#).

6. Co-design workshop

In mid-2024 a two-day co-design workshop was held to identify a novel approach to raising awareness of child sexual abuse by engaging young adult audiences. The key aim was that ideas generated at the workshop would inform the design of the project's storytelling model. The workshop included 24 participants: all six members of the research team, eight members of the Advisory Committee, all eight members of the project Youth Panel, and two staff members from the digital design agency, Sandpit.

Separate workshop sessions were held with each group (advocates, young people, researchers) and the final session brought everyone together. The separate sessions were designed to create a safe space among peers for initial discussion. The final session, which included all groups, generated dialogue across generations and areas of expertise to synthesise the different knowledge forms (advocacy, youth culture, research, design). What was remarkable about the final workshop session was that it enabled the intergenerational creation and transmission of trauma prevention messaging.

Advisory Committee knowledge sharing

Key questions that shaped the workshop session with survivor advocates:

- What are the key themes and messages advocates want to share and why?
- What is the persistent resistance to engage with this topic and how can we overcome this?

Key themes that emerged from the Advisory Committee session included the importance of the storytelling model's ability to convey that child sexual abuse is ongoing and requires continued action. Committee members emphasised that raising awareness and sharing stories is essential to breaking cycles of abuse, while ensuring people don't feel hopeless or overwhelmed. The storytelling model should include a clear call to action, reinforcing that keeping children safe is everyone's responsibility. The need for language that cuts through in a crowded media landscape was identified as critical; the storytelling must resonate emotionally and ideally tap into existing instincts around justice and child protection, motivating people to take action, no matter how small.

Youth Panel knowledge sharing

Key questions that shaped the workshop session with young people:

- How are young adults engaging with digital content?
- Which public education campaigns have worked/not worked and why?
- How might we engage young adults with the topic of child sexual abuse?

Key themes from the Youth Panel session emphasised the need for an immediate 'hook' to capture attention before young people scroll away. The Panel recommended a sequenced approach that allows people to engage, disengage and re-engage with the content at their own pace, with multiple shorter segments preferable than a single long-form piece. The Youth Panel noted that young adults respond best to messages from people their own age or, interestingly, from a grandparent-like figure. Stories should connect to real-world experiences, be supported by educational resources, and use language that starts gently but becomes more direct as content progresses. The Youth Panel stressed that young adults are not afraid of 'difficult topics'. On the contrary, many young people regularly engage with distressing content. However, topics need to be presented in ways that feel relevant to them. Finally, it is essential to avoid condescension when seeking to engage young people.

Researcher knowledge sharing

Key questions that shaped the workshop session with the research team:

- What themes emerged from Advisory Committee and Youth Panel sessions?
- How do discussions in earlier sessions align or not with the research literature?
- How do we want young adults to explore stories of child sexual abuse?

Key themes from the research team discussion included recognition that young adults are most interested in stories from their peers, but they are also interested in hearing from older people. This opened an important avenue for the project to explore an intergenerational exchange involving an older survivor/advocate. Critically, young people prefer interactive content that provides them with control over their engagement (e.g. ability to pause and return) and that timing and pacing is critical. A clear message that emerged from the Advisory Committee was that prioritising emotional engagement can provide a pathway for conveying facts and information, and that it was important that audiences do not feel overwhelmed or that the problem is too big to tackle. Finally, difficult parts of a story need to be balanced with hopeful elements and audiences should feel empowered, with information and resources woven throughout. Discussions with the Advisory Committee and Youth Panel aligned with and confirmed important issues documented in the research literature.

Creative exchange, collaboration and co-design

Each workshop session provided unique insights, expertise and perspectives. Staff from the digital design agency, Sandpit, fed back to the group core ideas that emerged in each workshop session and presented a concept for the architecture of the digital storytelling tool. What emerged was a shared vision incorporating ideas and contributions from each group – young people, advocates and researchers.

Through collaborative co-creation, it was proposed that the storytelling tool would be an online experience for young adults where viewers would witness the story of older (60+

years) survivors of child sexual abuse telling their story to a young adult. Each survivor would tell their story in short 'bite sized' videos which audiences could consume at their own pace.

Through dialogue, workshop participants agreed that the storytelling experience should include the option for the viewer to undertake a symbolic action reflecting their support of the cause and that they stand in solidarity with victim-survivors.

This discussion led to the idea of the viewer removing a brick from a wall to symbolically "break the wall of silence" and "let the light shine through." This was based on the idea that child sexual abuse has been shrouded in darkness, and that open conversation, in this case through the stories of survivor advocates, is an important element of raising awareness and helping to make children safer in the future. The workshop concluded with a genuine sense of accomplishment that a shared vision had been created.

Reflections on the participatory co-design workshop

Following the workshop, participants were invited to share their reflections.

As we had hoped, the workshop conversations and the survey findings were complementary, but what was truly remarkable about the event was the spirit of collaboration, generosity and inspiration generated by a diverse group whose contributions "sparked" off each other, virtually non-stop for two days. Each person added depth and insight, thoughtfully listened, and empathetically found shared common ground.

| Valerie Braithwaite, Researcher

Bringing all the groups together on day 2 for an amazing, collaborative, intergenerational conversation. I learned so much.

| Max, Youth Panel

In previous youth panels I've been involved in, I've felt like I wasn't fully listened to, and that I was simply there as a way for the organisers to 'tick the box' of consulting young people. However, with the Creating Safer Futures workshop, I felt genuinely consulted and listened to, which was really affirming. I also loved the opportunity to work alongside and learn from various different people, including researchers, advocates, and designers.

| Chloe Falzon, Youth Panel

It was a great feel and seeing everyone was just amazing. It was great. Only good can come out of it. [It was] dynamic and empowering, heartwarming and a good place to be.

| Chrissie Foster, Advisory Committee

Excellent opportunity to share lived experience with a forward focus on improving the safety for children in the future. I felt valued and listened to and feel that the contribution was positive.

| John Ellis, Advisory Committee



| Photographs of researchers, youth panel members and advisory committee members from the 2024 participatory workshop.

7. Developing the digital story

The process of developing the model for the digital storytelling experience drew on a wide variety of sources, all of which were essential contributions to the creation of a novel storytelling approach that would engage young adults. As noted above, foundational research elements included:

- Literature reviews.
- Advocate survey on raising awareness of child sexual abuse.
- Case studies of storytelling approaches and grassroots advocacy.
- Participatory co-design workshop with survivor advocates and young people.
- Collective knowledge, experience and expertise of the research team.

Process and methodology were prioritised throughout, both for the care and safety of participants and collaborators, and so that the approach could be replicated in any future upscaling of the project. Ensuring that the final product was of professional quality with high production values was also critical.

Victim-survivor collaboration and engagement

The research team was highly conscious of the importance of identifying suitable participant/collaborators for the development of the digital storytelling prototype. Initially, it was hoped that the prototype would feature several survivor advocates. However, due to time and budget constraints, and in recognition of the need to develop a bespoke production methodology that was victim-survivor-centred, trauma informed, and safe for young adult audiences, it became clear that telling one person's story responsibly was the most ethical approach.

The research team discussed the challenges of featuring only one person's story. It was clear that no one person could capture the full diversity of experiences or identities – there was no “perfect story” to present, nor should there be. After careful consideration, the decision was made to prioritise collaboration with a survivor advocate who had extensive experience both publicly sharing their story and communicating with young people. In addition, given the experimental research design and the need to iteratively develop the production and creative methodology, it was critical that our collaborator was someone who would be comfortable and feel safe as we worked with them to develop a novel storytelling prototype.

The research team invited a member of the project Advisory Committee, Peter (Pete) Gogarty, a survivor of clergy abuse, to share his story. Pete understood the project aims, had considerable media experience (both positive and negative), a long history of advocacy, and had worked closely with young people as a university lecturer. Pete had known the lead

researcher for many years and as an academic, advocate and practitioner, was happy to work with the two members of the research team, Sari Braithwaite and Katie Wright, to develop a bespoke filming and production methodology that was not only suited to this project, but could be replicated with other survivor advocates.

Youth panel collaboration and engagement

Central to the process was extending the ethos of collaboration and intergenerational dialogue from the co-design workshop into the filming and production, with the central aim that Pete connect with young adults. Members of the Youth Panel were invited to participate in the behind-the-scenes production process. They were asked to submit questions ahead of the production, and three members of the Youth Panel attended the audio recording and filming days.

Rather than Pete telling his story to the research team, or a director/producer – the typical production model was modified so that the young adults were supported to hold space for survivor stories. This was a radical departure from most production models which do not invite the target audience to assist in the creation of the work. The ambition was that if we could foster connection and engagement between Pete and a young adult in the room, that the audio/video captured could also create a similar dynamic with the wider audience cohort through the final digital story.



Pete sits with a set of childhood photographs preparing to be recorded for an audio only roundtable discussion with members of the youth panel.

Trauma informed principles guided our approach. While trauma-informed can mean many things, in this instance, the most important elements involved ensuring, as much as possible, a safe and comfortable environment for all involved, and providing participants and collaborators with as much choice and control as possible.

It is inevitable that both sharing and listening to deeply traumatic experiences will at times be uncomfortable and distressing. Yet there was a genuine shared commitment to foster an intergenerational exchange that could create connection and understanding – and be empowering – as opposed to the transmission of experience that can be traumatic.



Pete being prepared for filming with cinematographer Ursula Woods

Post-production

The overarching priority was to create an emotional connection between Pete and the audience – we wanted to translate the production experience of connection that the Youth Panel experienced to an audience who will never be in the same room as Pete. Over three hours of audio and video was edited into less than 15 minutes.

The shape of the narrative was discussed with Pete and he was given opportunities to see drafts and make edits. Feedback from the project Advisory Committee, the Project Youth Panel, and the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse was incorporated into the final version. Infographics with data and statistics (e.g. on prevalence, impacts) were incorporated to give broader context to Pete's experience. At the end of Pete's story, a short survey was included to measure audience engagement (this was only viewable during testing with students). A downloadable PDF with support services and resources was embedded into the site (see Appendix 3).

8. The digital story

The digital story was designed for people to go on a journey with a survivor. The story was embedded into a website that students could access via a browser on a computer or mobile device. The structure of the website meant that the narrative was broken down into chapters, each containing different storytelling devices – video, audio, images and text.

It was important that the creative work resonate emotionally, be informative, and ultimately provide a hopeful message. This was made possible through a combination of different storytelling tools – in combination, video, audio, visual and text all can elicit a different set of responses from a viewer.

Five chapters were created

- Meet Pete: Pete introduces why he chose to share his story for this project.
- The Abuse: Pete recounts his memories of meeting his abuser and the complex experience of ending the abuse.
- Impacts: Pete engages with the long-term effects that child sexual abuse has had on his life and mental health.
- Speaking Out: Pete talks about the importance of disclosure and implores everyone to fulfil their responsibility to keep children safe.
- Now & the Future: Pete reflects upon his life and imparts a message of hope.

The narrative did not include specific details about the nature of the abuse, but it did include powerful emotional elements when Pete discussed the impacts of abuse.

It is also important to note that while the story did include distressing themes (e.g. mention of suicide) the difficult parts of Pete's story were balanced by hope, action and reflections on a good life despite this experience.

On the following pages the core elements of the digital story are presented. A more complete picture of the different components that comprised the digital story, and the website which housed it, is provided in Appendix 2.

The Creating Safer Futures digital story is available to view online [here](#).



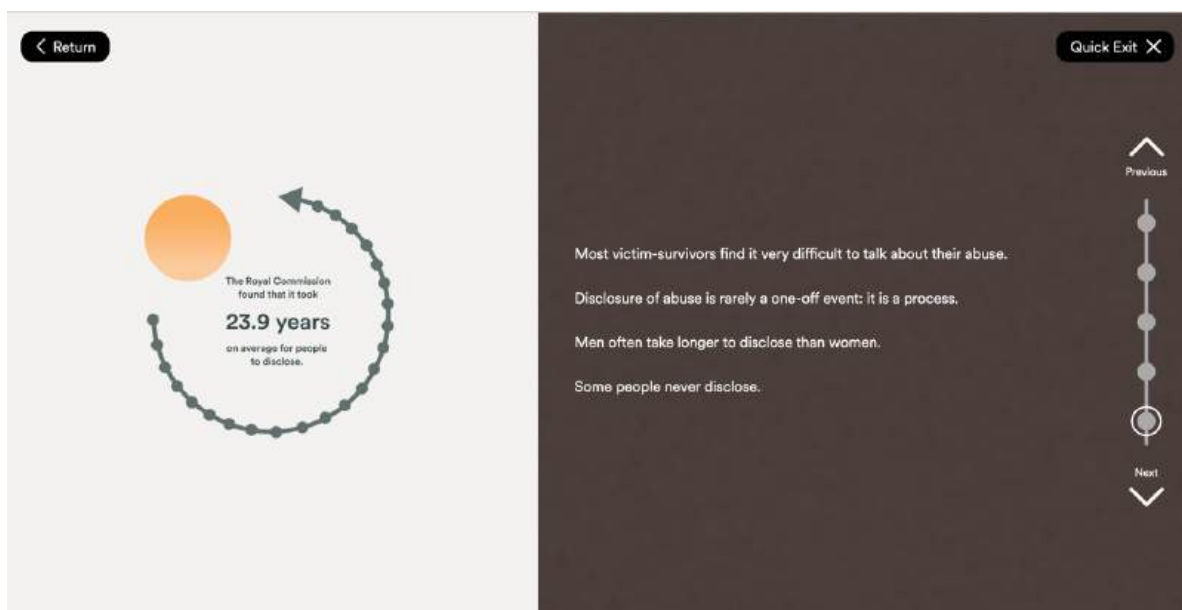
Direct to camera storytelling: In most of the videos, Pete looks directly down the camera, and he speaks conversationally. This creates the feeling that Pete is making eye contact with the viewer, talking directly to the person watching.



Audio Storytelling and Graphic Design: Direct camera storytelling can be an intense sensory experience. To create variation, the audio only storytelling gave the viewer a chance to disconnect from Pete in the present, and dive into understanding his memories. The audio recordings explore some of Pete's most difficult and confronting memories. The graphic design, with multiple exposures, aimed to represent the complex memories of surviving child sexual abuse.



Moving Portrait storytelling: The most emotionally intense video is structured in the middle chapter – once an audience has connected with Pete’s life and story, they bear witness to his grief and pain. We describe this technique as a moving portrait – in this video, Pete tearfully holds a picture of his childhood self, and a voiceover explores his inner monologue.



Infographics and Text: The personal components of the digital story were accompanied by educational elements. The inclusion of statistics and information was important to place Pete’s personal experience in the wider context of child sexual abuse, including prevalence and impacts, and provide resources for the audience engaging with the digital story.



Call to Action: After completing the survey, participants were taken to a “call to action” page – a concept developed in the co-design workshop.

This page, entitled, “One final request”, included the following text: *“Survivors have often said their experiences of child sexual abuse have been met by a wall of silence. We would like to try and help change that.”*

Participants were then taken to a page with a rendered image of a brick wall. The call to action involved symbolically removing a brick from a “wall of silence” to “let the light shine through”. Participants could choose to remove a brick.

The final page thanked participants and provided them with a PDF to download with further information, resources and contact details for support services (see Appendix 3).

9. Evaluating the digital story

The final stage of the project involved evaluating the digital storytelling experience with our target audience: young adults engaged in tertiary education. The key area of interest was **the degree of comfort people felt talking about child sexual abuse**. Supported by findings from the advocate survey and the participatory workshop, the ease or difficulty that people identified in speaking about child sexual abuse was selected as a core indicator of their general level of comfort with engaging with this issue. Indeed, the willingness to engage in a conversation about child sexual abuse is critical to raising awareness, destigmatisation, prevention and supporting victim-survivors.

Survey design

A short survey consisting of four questions was designed to measure the level of comfort people felt in speaking about child sexual abuse before and after engagement with the storytelling experience. Participants were then asked about their emotional response to the story. The final question was qualitative in design. It asked participants to reflect on Pete's story and the messages they took from it. This was followed by three final questions designed to collect demographic information (age, gender, course of study). All survey questions required responses.

Recruitment

Course conveners at an Australian University were invited to share information about the study with students via learning platforms or email. While participation was open to any tertiary student at the university, and students from a range of courses participated, they were recruited primarily from Education, Social Work, Nursing, Psychology, Law and Criminology. These courses were targeted as they train students for professions where they are likely to encounter the issue of child sexual abuse and potentially interact with victim-survivors.

Participants were offered a \$30 gift voucher in recognition of their time (approximate 25 minutes). The survey was open from late August 2025 to late September 2025.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using the SPSS package. Descriptive statistics (percent responses, means, standard deviations) were calculated where appropriate. A dependent t-test was used to compare comfort levels before and after engaging with the storytelling experience. Multiple linear regression was used to test which emotional reaction explained most change in comfort levels before and after the story. The codebook for *Creating Safer Futures: Digital Story Survey* is available [here](#). Qualitative data were thematically coded to identify key patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Sample

296 students engaged with the storytelling experience and completed the survey.

The sample was predominantly female (80.1%). Of those providing demographic details, 214 people identified as female, 42 as male, 5 as non-binary and 7 preferred not to say. Age ranged from 18 to 54 years. The majority were young adults aged 18-24 (74.8%), 13.5% were aged 25-30, and 11.7% were aged over 30 years.

Responses to the digital storytelling experience – Quantitative results

Comfort levels

Comfort levels increased for the sample after engaging with Pete's story.

Before engaging with the digital story, participants were invited to rate their comfort in an imagined discussion of child sexual abuse:

Imagine you are involved in a conversation with friends or family about child sexual abuse. How comfortable would you feel about participating in this conversation?

At the end, a similar question was asked to ascertain if their comfort level had shifted:

After hearing Pete's story, imagine having the same conversation about child sexual abuse with friends or family that we asked you about earlier.

How comfortable would you feel now about participating in this conversation?

A seven-point Likert scale was used to rate comfort levels before and after engaging with the storytelling experience, from 'very uncomfortable' (1); 'uncomfortable' (2); 'somewhat uncomfortable' (3); to 'neither uncomfortable nor comfortable' (4); through to 'somewhat comfortable' (5); 'comfortable' (6); and 'very comfortable' (7).

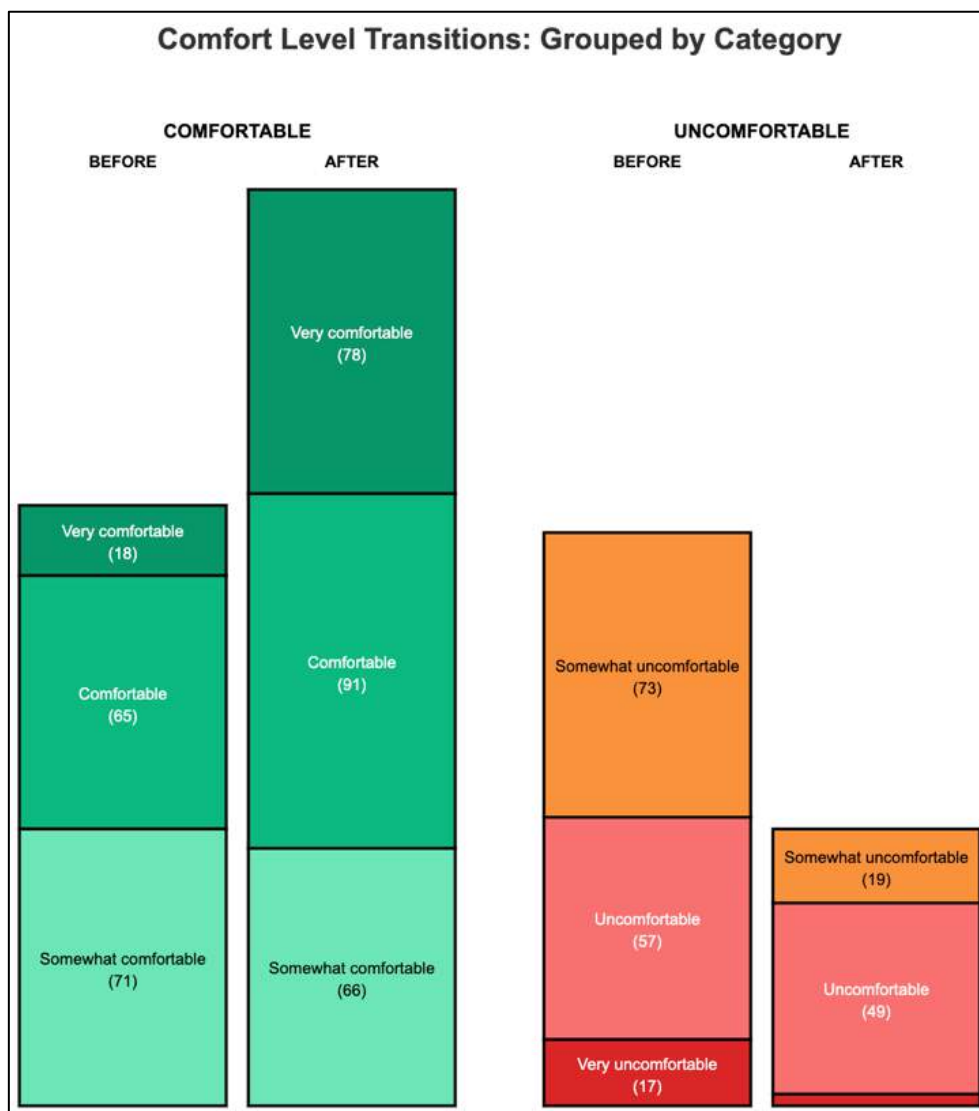
The mean comfort level for the sample before engaging with the story was 4.294, meaning that on average the sample was located just above the Likert scale midpoint of "neither uncomfortable nor comfortable."

After engaging with the story, the mean comfort level was significantly higher at 5.443. The mean scores before and after are reported in Table 1 together with standard deviations and a dependent t-test to test if the difference was large enough to reach statistical significance. The dependent t-test of 13.91 was significant at the .001 level.

Table 1: Mean comfort level (Standard deviation) for the sample before engaging with the story and after engaging with the story (N = 296)

Mean comfort level before	Mean comfort level after	Dependent t-test	Significance
4.294 (1.628)	5.443 (1.444)	13.91	<.001

This change toward greater comfort was unaffected by age and gender, although women at pre-test started with higher comfort levels than men. This difference was maintained at post-test. Comfort levels increased for 207 participants, stayed the same for 66 and decreased for 23 participants.



This chart illustrates the upward shift in comfort levels in the two left columns, and the downward shift in levels of discomfort in the two columns on the right.

Emotional responses

The factor that explained whose comfort level increased the most after engaging with Pete's story is whether they **felt inspired**.

Participants were asked about their emotional response to the storytelling experience:

*Your emotional response: How did you **feel** engaging with Pete's story?*

Seven emotional states were **provided**, and participants were asked to select all emotions that were relevant. Options available to choose from were: Angry; Empowered; Sad; Disillusioned; Hopeful; Empathetic; and Inspired.

A multiple linear regression analysis was used to identify any emotion or set of emotions that explained change in comfort levels. This analysis involved entering variables into the model in a hierarchical fashion. In the first model, comfort level before was entered on Step 1 to predict comfort level after. By controlling for comfort level before engaging with the story, any variables emerging as significant in subsequent models can be used to explain change.

On Step 2, the 7 emotions (scored 1 or 0) were added in a new model, Model 2 below. One significant finding emerged: Inspired. Those who experienced the emotion of being inspired improved more than others in becoming comfortable in having a conversation about child sexual abuse after engaging with the story. In the third model, Model 3, age, gender and an interaction term for age and gender were tested for significance. They did not contribute to change in comfort levels.

Table 2: Beta coefficients for a set of variables predicting change in comfort levels pre- and post-test (N=296)

Predictors	Beta coefficient Model 1	Beta coefficient Model 2	Beta coefficient Model 3
Comfort before	.578***	.576***	.569***
Angry		-.033	-.029
Empowered		.058	.059
Sad		.016	.015
Disillusioned		.042	.040

Hopeful		.059	060
Empathic		.065	057
Inspired		.134**	135**
Age			026
Gender			038
Age X Gender			037
Adj R squared	.33	.35	.34

Participants reported a range of emotional responses to the story. Emotions selected by the largest number of participants include empathetic and sad, followed by angry, inspired and hopeful (see Table 3 below).

Table 3: Number of emotions selected by the sample (N=296)

Emotion	Number endorsed	%
Empathetic	243	82.1%
Sad	232	78.4%
Angry	155	52.4%
Inspired	141	47.6%
Hopeful	131	44.3%
Empowered	108	36.5%
Disillusioned	17	5.7%

Over half the sample (55.4%) selected three or four emotions, with fewer choosing either one or two emotions, or five or more emotions.

Table 4: Number of emotions selected by participants (N = 296)

Number of emotions	Respondents choosing numbers of emotions	%
0	2	0.7%
1 or 2	64	21.6%
3 or 4	164	55.4%
5 or 6	63	21.3%
All 7 emotions	3	1.0%

Responses to the digital storytelling experience – Qualitative results

What participants said were the key takeaways

In total, 266 participants provided responses to the open-ended qualitative question:

Your reflections: What messages will you take away from Pete's story?

Overwhelmingly, the most common response (from 184 participants) was the importance of speaking out and having conversations about child sexual abuse. Many of the key messages that students took from the storytelling experience reflected points that were identified as important in the Advocates survey.

Key themes expressed by students' regarding the messages they took away from the digital storytelling experience about what is important:

- Speaking out.
- Having conversations.
- Raising awareness.
- Supporting others.
- Noticing signs of grooming and/or abuse.
- Taking action.
- Early intervention.

Other notable themes included that child sexual abuse:

- Is more prevalent than people think.
- Could happen to anyone.
- Has long term impacts but recovery is possible.
- Is a systemic problem.

Participants also noted that:

- Speaking about child sexual abuse helps and can be lifesaving.
- Grooming can leave victims and survivors feeling shame and confused.
- Child sexual abuse is never the child's fault.
- Supporting people to disclose earlier improves outcomes.

- It is never too late for survivors to speak out and get help.
- Everyone is responsible for keeping children safe.
- Experiencing child sexual abuse needs to be destigmatised.
- Child sexual abuse does not define people.
- There is hope for a good life after child sexual abuse.

Importantly, students connected with Pete as a person. Indicating a sense of familiarity, around one quarter of participants used Pete's name when they reflected on the message/s they would take away from the storytelling experience. Pete was described as courageous, inspiring, kind, strong, relatable, amazing, open and honest, defiant, brave, empowered and determined. One student wrote:

- *"Being a good person as an act of defiance'... potentially one of the best things I've heard in my 26 years of life."* (Female, 26 years)

While the digital story was designed as an awareness raising tool, rather than a therapeutic intervention, we were highly conscious that some of the participants would themselves have experienced child sexual abuse. An important secondary finding was its impact on young adult victims and survivors, who reported feeling supported, encouraged and empowered. Responses from 14 students, all young women, who referred to their own experiences, were striking:

- *"I need to tell someone".* (Female, 18 years)
- *"I can use my own story to save others"* (Female, 30 years)
- *"Pete has helped me feel that even I can speak out about my story too".* (Female, 20 years)
- *"We must not allow the experience to define or follow us for the rest of our lives."* (Female, 27 years)
- *"I have also felt like I should stop talking about my situation but his story of the daughter and the pharmacist has changed my mind that I should keep talking about it even if it annoys other people because it can help someone who really needs to hear it."* (Female, 26 years)
- *"I'm currently navigating my own journey from child sexual abuse. I resonated so deeply with Pete's story. It took me 10 years to speak up but this empowers me to speak up louder, scream it from the roof tops".* (Female, 30 years)
- *"Has encouraged me as a survivor of csa. Makes me feel less alone. Encourages me to spread awareness/speak up where I can".* (Female, 20 years)
- *"There is a light at the end of the tunnel."* (Female, 29 years)

- *“We are worthy”.* (Female, 22 years)

One part of Pete’s story particularly resonated with students. There is a moment in one of the videos where Pete says:

“I think the first thing people need to do is just stop pretending it is not a thing and just wanting to get on with their own life. And worse still, people saying, ‘Somebody should do something about that’ but it’s never them. Well, who is ‘somebody?’”

This was a challenging and provocative message. Here Pete is saying that people need to take more personal responsibility to care for and protect children. In this statement, Pete’s frustration is evident. Importantly, the direct challenge of this statement is mediated by Pete’s warmth and excellent communication skills, meaning that it inspired people rather than alienated viewers. Further, it aligned with the finding from the Advocate Survey related to the importance of viewing child safety as a shared social responsibility.

Student responses to this statement demonstrate that it resonated powerfully:

- *“The message I will take away from Peter's story is that it is up to everyone to make a difference, and that the 'someone' can and should be you.”* (Male, 20 years)
- *“Something that stuck with me a lot was the usual response to child sexual abuse is 'somebody should do something about that', and Pete's response was 'well, who is somebody'. I think that was incredibly inspiring and something that immediately stuck with me.”* (Female, 20 years)
- *“The fact that we all say someone should do something about this but never really stop and think who is that someone? this was very very enlightening for me, the main message I will take away from this is that everyone needs a someone, and where capable, I need to start being that someone instead of waiting around for that 'someone' to show up.”* (Female, 18 years)
- *“Do what you can to help others. Encourage others to speak up and be a safe space for them to do so.”* (Male, 18 years)
- *“We have to be the someone who can make a difference.”* (Female, 25 years)
- *“You have to be the "somebody" to speak out about child sexual abuse”.* (Female, 20 years)
- *“To stop thinking 'someone should do something about this' because we can all do something about it”.* (Female, 28 years)

A number of students noted that they had been inspired to take action in other ways, for example, incorporating this knowledge into their future practice as a psychologist or educator

and to start advocating for children. For some, Pete's story affirmed their career choice. Others noted that it had made them more receptive to having conversations:

- *"I would now welcome someone talking to me about their experience rather than shy away from it and feel too uncomfortable to listen".* (Female, 21 years)

Another person said:

- *"I will make sure to take this story into account when I become a teacher".* (Male, 23 years)

Responses were deeply thoughtful. Interestingly, every participant offered a reflection, with no-one essentially 'skipping' this question by entering a character that would allow them to move to the next survey question. Only one participant responded with a single word: "resilient". Other short responses included, "to speak up", "you should always have hope", "to look out for signs of abuse from children" and "anyone can be an advocate or agent of change to stop child sexual abuse". Strikingly, the majority of responses included several sentences and some were very lengthy.

An important element of the storytelling experience that is, perhaps, unique and noteworthy is the extent to which it was able to convey to participants in the study the complexity of abuse and break down binary understandings. A number of participants noted that they had learned that people can have mixed feelings, fondness even, for their abuser. Complex messages such as this can be difficult to convey, but Pete was able to provide young people with a multidimensional understanding of child sexual abuse, its impacts, that it does not need to define someone, and paths towards healing.

- *"I also found it interesting how Pete said he was very close to his abuser even after the abuse ended. Showed how multi-dimensional the abuse can be."* (Female, 22 years)
- *"1. When Pete said 'my whole psyche was modified to suit one man's pleasure' – I felt this would resonate with many young people who have been victimised and pressured into sexual encounters. 2. Additionally, I found that the 'need to tell somebody,' is vital for a victims' healing process. 3. That speaking up about the abuse is an act of defiance, and a victim's right."* (Gender not disclosed, 23 years)

Many participants noted that their engagement with the digital story had provided them with new insights into child sexual abuse. This response was especially interesting:

- *This video was so, so incredibly insightful. Thank you so much for putting it out there and letting Pete's story reach a wider audience. I originally joined the study more for the monetary reward but my goodness, I am so glad that I watched it - its insights were way, way more valuable than I thought. This should be shared as part of the [university] Teaching curriculum.* (Female, 22 years)

Some participants included a note of thanks in their responses, while others took the time to emailed the Lead Researcher to thank the team and Pete for undertaking what they recognised as important work.

- *“Thank you for being brave and helping other people.”* (Male, 30 years)
- *“Thank you for the very informative research it was very insightful.”* (Email from participant)
- *“I just completed the child abuse quiz that you are running. It was very impactful for my personal and professional life.”* (Email from participant)
- *“This was really well done! Thank you for all the time you are pouring into making work like this happen! It is so vital, and it was a delight to play a small little part in it.”* (Email from participant)

10. Reflections from collaborators

At the final project meeting held late in 2025, Advisory Committee and Youth Panel members reflected on the importance of the project and their involvement.

I'm convinced that the only way to change culture in institutions such as schools is that you have to move people to act. We're captured by stories that compel us to change. The only way to bring about cultural change, particularly in schools, is to convince people at the top that this is critical and a powerful story such as Pete's can do that.

| John Crowley, Advisory Committee

This has been a really cool experience for me overall and I think I've really appreciated just being in this space with people who have so much life experience that I could not possibly have...how you've done the co-design for all of this, I'll definitely be taking this back to my work.

| Oliver Ryan, Youth Panel

I get empowered by you people. I get to talk about true events that happened to me as a child. You people listen. Speaking out has helped me in the healing process.

| Dallas Phillips, Advisory Committee

Having the opportunity to hear from and work with inspiring individuals has been a truly meaningful experience.

| Daisy Nugent, Youth Panel

Peter Gogarty reflected on his experience working on the project, both as collaborator for the digital story and being part of the project Advisory Committee:

The opportunity to work with such a devoted team and to work so closely with a new generation of young people, together with the wonderful feedback from all those students who engaged with the digital story reassures me that my experiences were not for nothing. The Creating Safer Futures project is a wonderful template for what should be a much wider initiative. The ability of this project to cross generational divides and to make seemingly uncomfortable topics manageable and mainstream has already had a positive impact and cannot help but make future generations of children safer.

| Peter Gogarty, Digital Story Collaborator and Advisory Committee member

11. Conclusion and next steps

This multifaceted study drew on a wide variety of sources and inspiration – the lived experience expertise of advocates, young people’s perspectives, academic research findings, insights from other creative works and social/political projects, and the collective knowledge and skills that the research team had developed over many decades of working in the area of child sexual abuse or in related fields. These elements were all essential to meeting our aim of creating a novel storytelling approach that would engage young people.

The *Creating Safer Futures* study:

- Generated new knowledge on advocate expertise.
- Developed a Fact Sheet with guidelines for researchers and creative arts projects on collaboration and talking about child sexual abuse.
- Created an innovative digital story that successfully increased young adults’ levels of comfort talking about child sexual abuse.

Advocate expertise

Breaking the Silence: A Survey of Advocates was designed for this project and generated important new understandings of advocate expertise. Key findings identified important areas of consensus among advocates. Participants noted that the ease of talking about child sexual abuse has been on a downward trajectory from a highpoint immediately following the Royal Commission, suggesting waning public attention to this crucial issue. Despite this challenge, advocates demonstrated strong agreement on fundamental messages that need to be communicated, whether through public campaigns or through interpersonal interactions. These core messages they believed should be conveyed to the public is that child sexual abuse can happen to any child; it is more common than most people think; it causes enormous harm to victims; everyone in society shares responsibility for preventing it; and crucially, prevention of child sexual abuse is possible through collective action and awareness. Detailed findings from the quantitative component of the survey can be found [here](#).

Fact Sheet

Based on previous research undertaken by the research team and others, and the learnings from this project on victim-survivor collaboration, trauma-informed approaches, and speaking safely about child sexual abuse, the research team developed a Fact Sheet: *Engaging with victims & survivors & talking about child sexual abuse: Guidance for academic research and creative arts projects*. This document outlines key principles to assist with the development of ethical, sensitive and trauma informed approaches to working with victims and survivors on academic research and creative arts projects. It aims to honour the experiences of victims and survivors and ensure safe audience engagement. The Fact Sheet is available [here](#).

Digital storytelling and intergenerational learning

The intergenerational element of the intervention is novel: an older survivor advocate communicates with young people about trauma in a way that increases their comfort in talking about child sexual abuse and leads many to feel inspired. This sharply contrasts with how intergenerational transmission of trauma is commonly understood. Typically, the emphasis is the harmful passing on of trauma from parents to their children via epigenetic processes (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

The *Creating Safer Futures* project foregrounded intergenerational transmission of child sexual abuse knowledge with therapeutic effect, particularly for the young people in the survey who identified Pete's story as helping them understand and share their own. It also offers a wider social contribution in increasing awareness of the importance of child safety to a new generation of young people.

Evaluation of the digital storytelling experience shows that it is possible to engage young people with the topic of child sexual abuse and, moreover, that people's levels of comfort with the topic can be shifted. With powerful messaging and through connection to the storyteller, young adults can feel inspired and empowered to be that "someone" who speaks out, supports others, and makes a difference.

Strengths, limitations and future possibilities

Given the study findings, there is considerable potential for both wider distribution and for expansion and upscaling. While Pete's story was designed for young adults, it is general enough to appeal to a much broader audience. Wider distribution could include rolling it out to other tertiary institutions and possibly upper secondary school students. Upscaling could involve creating new stories with other survivor advocates aimed at different groups, demographics and sectors, e.g., parents, educators, care workers, support service providers, law enforcement, the legal profession and health professions.

Prioritising process and care was paramount in this research, and it is vital that any expansion or upscaling foreground trauma-informed practice and safety. This is particularly important for groups who experience systemic discrimination and are under-supported by child sexual abuse supports and services. Collaborative research in this domain, particularly when it involves creative processes and centres lived experience, requires substantial time and funding. Researchers and creatives must ensure appropriate supports are in place for all involved and commit to trauma-informed practice.

One example of our commitment to care was how all communication with the 296 students who participated in the evaluation was handled by the lead researcher, Katie Wright, who sent the individual thank-you emails to participants with their gift voucher and a PDF containing support services information. Rather than delegating this to a casual research assistant, we ensured students had a clear point of contact not only at the time of the study but into the future. Many unsolicited emails were received from students expressing gratitude

and appreciation for the research. Building in flexibility and contingency plans was another key element of embedding trauma-informed processes and would be essential for any future upscaling.

Future publications will document in greater detail the bespoke creative production methodology developed and the lessons we learned throughout the project that should be considered if the storytelling model is upscaled or replicated.

Limitations of the study include all participants being university students, being self-selected, and receiving financial compensation (\$30 gift voucher), which may have influenced engagement and responses. Reliance on self-reported data also introduces the possibility of social desirability bias. The digital story focuses on one person's narrative, and other survivor-advocate stories may not necessarily elicit the same responses. As with all creative work, the digital story is a product of its time. Finally, the research was constrained by funding and time, which affected the scale of the project and the extent to which follow-up with participants was possible.

It is also important to highlight that the digital story was created by Sari Braithwaite, an award-winning documentary filmmaker and member of the research team, in close collaboration with Pete and the lead researcher, Katie Wright, and with input and feedback from the broader research team, the Youth Panel and the Advisory Committee. While this was a strength for the *Creating Safer Futures* project, it may limit replication by others who do not have the skills, experience and established relationships that members of the research team brought to this study.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings offer highly valuable insights into the potential of digital storytelling as a tool for primary prevention and education and provide a strong foundation for future research and wider implementation.

We thank everyone who contributed to this project and participated in the research. We would like to thank Peter Gogarty especially for his generosity and being a wonderful collaborator.

References

- Alyce, S., Taggart, D., & Sweeney, A. (2023). Centring the voices of survivors of child sexual abuse in research: An act of hermeneutic justice. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1178141>
- Bowman, N. D., Knight, J., Schlue, L., & Cohen, E. L. (2019). What if it happened to me? Socially conscious music videos can address campus assault: Narrative engagement and rape myth acceptance. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 8(4), 454–463. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000189>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Campbell, R., Goodman-Williams, R., Javorka, M., Engleton, J., & Gregory, K. (2023). Understanding sexual assault survivors' perspectives on archiving qualitative data: Implications for feminist approaches to open science. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 47(1), 51–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843221131546>
- Collin-Vézina, D., Daigneault, I., & Hébert, M. (2013). Lessons learned from child sexual abuse research: Prevalence, outcomes, and preventive strategies. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 7(1), 22. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1753-2000-7-22>
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2017). Final Report: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2021). National strategy to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse, 2021–2030. National Office for Child Safety.
- Dhaliwal, S. (2015). Community awareness raising on child sexual exploitation possibilities and problems. *Safer Communities*, 14(1), 4–15. <https://search.informit-org.ez.library.latrobe.edu.au/doi/10.3316/afpd.43796>
- Downing, N. R., Akinlotan, M., & Thornhill, C. W. (2021). The impact of childhood sexual abuse and adverse childhood experiences on adult health related quality of life. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 120, 105181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105181>
- Finch, M., Featherston, R., Chakraborty, S., Bjørndal, L., Mildon, R., Albers, B., Fiennes, C., Taylor, D. J. A., Schachtman, R., Yang, T., & Shlonsky, A. (2021). Interventions that address institutional child maltreatment: An evidence and gap map. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 17(1), e1139. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1139>
- Gomez, R., & Fliss, J. (2019). A community-based prevention approach: Examples from the field. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 36(1), 65–74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-018-0593-x>
- Grady, M. D., Brooks, Z., Alba, C., & McNeil, S. (2024). Mind the gap: Strategies for child protection in communities and organizations (2906072203). 43, 46–68. *Social Science Premium Collection*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2023.2264219>

- Greeson, M. R., Soibatian, C., & Houston-Kolnik, J. D. (2018). The influence of community sociocultural context on creating an effective, coordinated response to sexual assault. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 42(4), 445–460.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684318790233>
- Gurman, T. A., Nichols, C., & Greenberg, E. S. (2018). Potential for social media to challenge gender-based violence in India: A quantitative analysis of Twitter use. *Gender & Development*, 26(2), 325–339.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2018.1473230>
- Hailes, H. P., Yu, R., Danese, A., & Fazel, S. (2019). Long-term outcomes of childhood sexual abuse: An umbrella review. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 6(10), 830–839.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(19\)30286-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30286-X)
- Jumarali, S. N., Nnawulezi, N., Royson, S., Lippy, C., Rivera, A. N., & Toopet, T. (2021). Participatory research engagement of vulnerable populations: Employing survivor-centered, trauma-informed approaches. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.24414>
- Keighley, R., Sanders, T., Saunders, L., & Agg, H. (2023). Participatory action research: Developing a collaborative approach to modern slavery research with survivors of exploitation. *Methodological Innovations*, 16(3), 393–404.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20597991231208441>
- Kemshall, H., & Moulden, H. M. (2017). Communicating about child sexual abuse with the public: Learning the lessons from public awareness campaigns. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 23(2), 124–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2016.1222004>
- Klika, J. B., Rosenzweig, J., & Hiner, Z. (2020). Prevention of child sexual abuse. In *Child Sexual Abuse* (pp. 643–656). Elsevier.
- Knack, N., Winder, B., Murphy, L., & Fedoroff, J. P. (2019). Primary and secondary prevention of child sexual abuse. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 31(2), 181–194.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2018.1541872>
- Lee, O. E.-K., & Priester, M. A. (2015). Increasing awareness of diversity through community engagement and films. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 51(1), 35–46.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2015.977126>
- Letourneau, E. J., Eaton, W. W., Bass, J., Berlin, F. S., & Moore, S. G. (2014). The need for a comprehensive public health approach to preventing child sexual abuse. *Public Health Reports*, 129(3), 222–228. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003335491412900303>
- Madden, S. (2018). Engaging collaborative communities: Dialogue and campus sexual assault. *Journal of Communication Management*, 22(3), 296–308.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-06-2017-0064>
- Mathews, B., & Collin-Vézina, D. (2016). Child sexual abuse: Raising awareness and empathy is essential to promote new public health responses. *Journal of Public Health Policy*.
- Matthew, L., & Barron, I. (2023). Young child sexual abuse survivors experience as participative action researchers (PAR). *Journal of Family Violence*.

- <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-023-00560-4>
- Mathews, B., Pacella, R., Scott, J. G., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Higgins, D. J., Erskine, H. E., Thomas, H. J., Lawrence, D. M., Haslam, D. M., Malacova, E. and Dunne, M. P. (2023), The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 218: S13-18. <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51873>
- McCartan, K. F., Kemshall, H., & Tabachnick, J. (2015). The construction of community understandings of sexual violence: Rethinking public, practitioner and policy discourses. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 21(1), 100–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2014.945976>
- Mellen, E. J., Kim, D. Y., Edenbaum, E. R., & Cellini, J. (2025). The psychosocial consequences of sexual violence stigma: A scoping review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 26(3), 389-402. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380241279860>
- Osman, S. A. (2021). Addressing rape culture through folktale adaptation in Malaysian young adult literature. *Girlhood Studies*, 14(1), 117–133. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2021.140110>
- Pugh, A. (2022) Emotions and the systematization of connective labor. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 39(5), 23-42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211049475>
- Taggart, D., Wright, K., Griffin, H., Duckworth, L., Baxter-Thornton, M., Coates, S., Lewis, E., Maxted, F., Shellam, K., Tuck, C., & Ford, S. (2025). Lived experience consultants to a child sexual abuse inquiry: Survivor epistemology as a counterweight to legal and administrative proceduralism. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 159, 107147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107147>
- Walsh, K., Pinnock, R., Smith, R., Higgins, D., & Mathews, B. (2023). Rapid review of approaches to community awareness and education for child sexual abuse and children’s harmful sexual behaviour. National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse. <https://nationalcentre.org.au/resource/community-awareness-and-education-for-primary-prevention-of-child-sexual-abuse-and-harmful-sexual-behaviour/>
- Wright, K. (2017). Remaking collective knowledge: An analysis of the complex and multiple effects of inquiries into historical institutional child abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 74, 10–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.08.028>
- Wright, K., & Swain, S. (2018). Speaking the unspeakable, naming the unnameable: The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 42(2), 139–152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2018.1467725>
- Wright, K., Taggart, D., Griffin, H., Baxter-Thornton, M., Coates, S., Duckworth, L., Lewis, E., Maxted, F., Shellam, K., Tuck, C., & Ford, S. (2023). Lived experience panels consulting to inquiries: Maximising benefits and minimising harms [Report]. La Trobe University. <https://doi.org/10.26181/24708222.v1>
- Yehuda, R., & Lehrner, A. (2018). Intergenerational transmission of trauma effects: Putative role of epigenetic mechanisms. *World Psychiatry: Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, 17(3), 243–257. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20568>
- Yin, R. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications*. Sage.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Project collaborators

Advisory Committee

- Julie Blyth
- John Crowley
- John Ellis
- Nicola Ellis
- Chrissie Foster
- Peter Gogarty
- Frank Golding
- Dallas Phillips
- Rachel Siewert
- Philippa White

Youth Panel

- Issy Crebert
- Chloe Falzon
- Joyce Koshy
- Queen Kury
- Max
- Daisy Nugent
- Aron Raward
- Oliver Ryan

Creative collaborators

- James Arneman, editor
- Jennifer Leonforte, sound editor and designer
- Munro Melano, composer
- Molly Seeary, graphic design
- Robin Waters, music mixer
- Ursula Woods, cinematographer

Appendix 2: Digital Story website

Landing Page

This project invited students to explore the story of Pete, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. The digital story was broken down into chapters, each containing a different combination of video, audio and text.

[< Return](#)Quick Exit

Pete

Before I tell my story, I often tell people to strap themselves in. I will talk about hard things that I've lived through, but I want you to know that I'm okay, and it's important for me to share my story. We need to be able to have hard conversations to keep kids safer. Thanks for being here.



Our first question for you
Imagine you are involved in a conversation with friends or family about child sexual abuse. How comfortable would you feel about participating in this conversation?

Very uncomfortable Uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neither uncomfortable nor comfortable Somewhat comfortable Comfortable Very comfortable

*required

[< Return](#)Quick Exit

Pete

Before I tell my story, I often tell people to strap themselves in. I will talk about hard things that I've lived through, but I want you to know that I'm okay, and it's important for me to share my story. We need to be able to have hard conversations to keep kids safer. Thanks for being here.

**1
MEET PETE**

**2
THE ABUSE**

**3
IMPACTS**

**4
SPEAKING OUT**

Meet Pete

In the opening chapter, Pete introduces why he chose to share his story for this project.



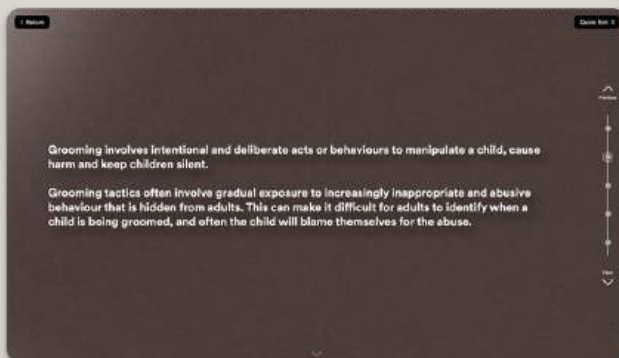
"If my story resonates with other people and it encourages them to feel a bit better about themselves and to get some assistance then it's well worthwhile me telling my story."

The Abuse

This chapter engages with the long-term effects abuse had on Pete's life and mental health, and the moment he discovered his abuser had been criminally charged for other child sexual abuse offences. There is educational information about the impacts of child sexual abuse on victims/survivors over a lifetime



"I think from probably about 13 on I thought that I was doing something wrong but not for years later did I think that [the abuser] was doing anything"



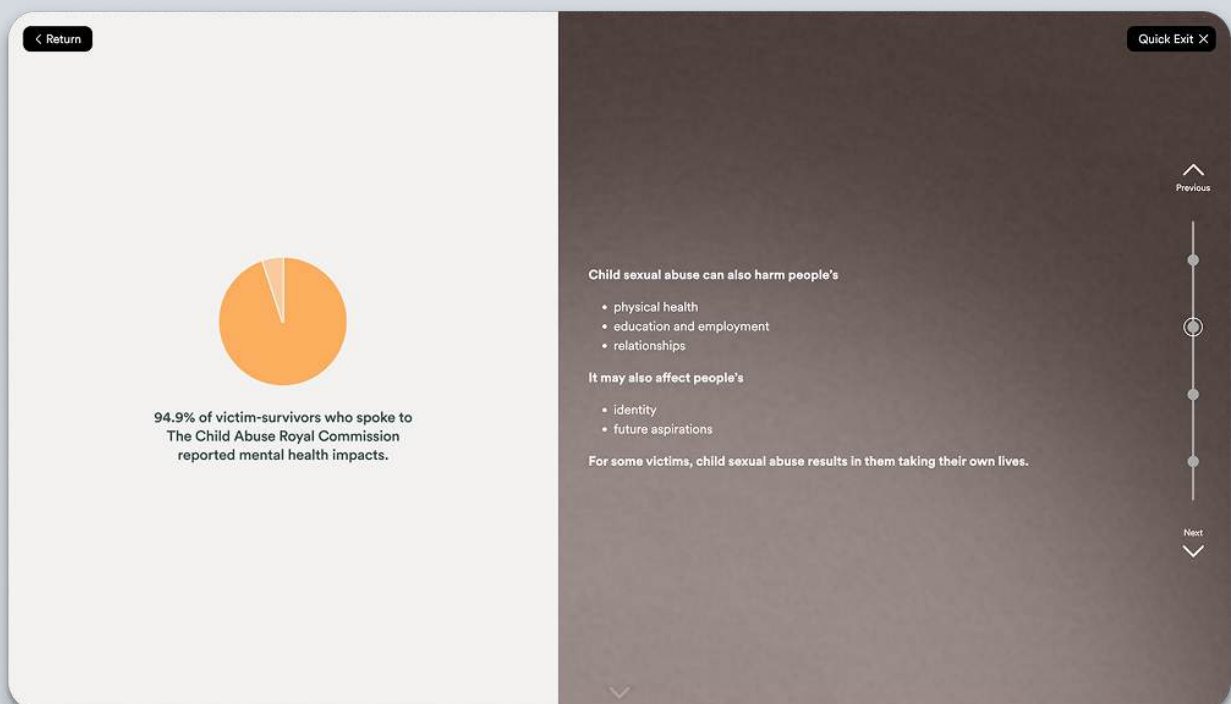
"I would go outta my way to be rejected by people...I wanted to prove to myself that I was completely worthless and useless."

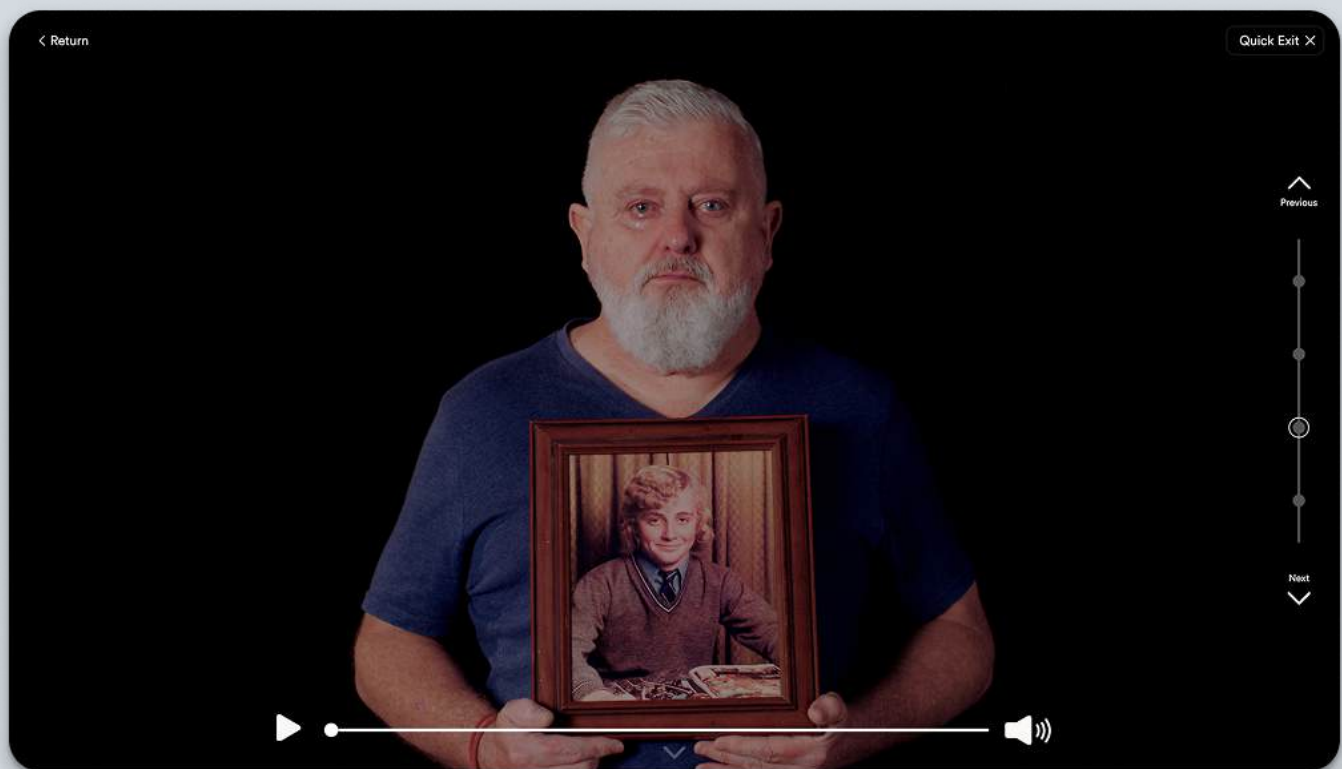
Impacts

This chapter engages with the long-term effects abuse had on Pete's life and mental health, and the moment he discovered his abuser had been criminally charged for other child sexual abuse offences. There is educational information about the impacts of child sexual abuse on victims/survivors over a lifetime



"I started really using the platform [to get] people to understand this is not my secret. I didn't do anything wrong here. I was victimised by somebody. And then the institution that employed him looked after him not me. So I started telling that story."





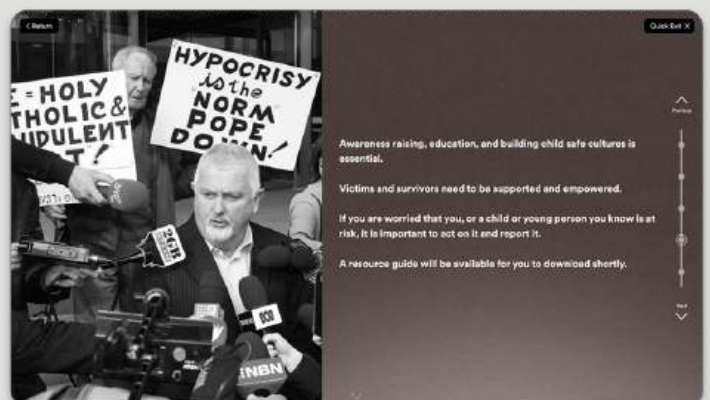
“The little boy that I look at in photos was destined to have a different existence to the one I've got. You can't just get over being sexually abused when you're a child.”

Speaking Out

The fourth chapter examines how Pete found his voice as a survivor and implores everyone to fulfil their responsibility to keep children safe. This chapter includes information about disclosure, and how people can support survivors of sexual abuse.



“The very first thing I'd say to any young person who's concerned about disclosing their abuse is that for their own sake for their own future they need to tell somebody.”



Awareness raising, education, and building child safe cultures is essential.

Victims and survivors need to be supported and empowered.

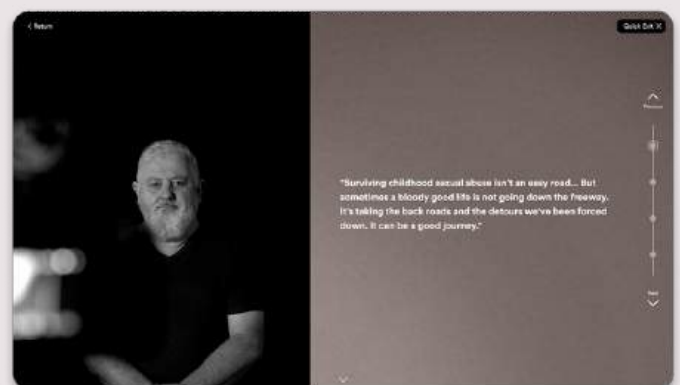
If you are worried that you, or a child or young person you know is at risk, it is important to act on it and report it.

A resource guide will be available for you to download shortly.

Now & the Future

After completing the first four chapters - the final chapter of Pete's story is unlocked. In this final chapter, Pete reflects upon his life, his struggles but also, imparts a message of kindness and hope.

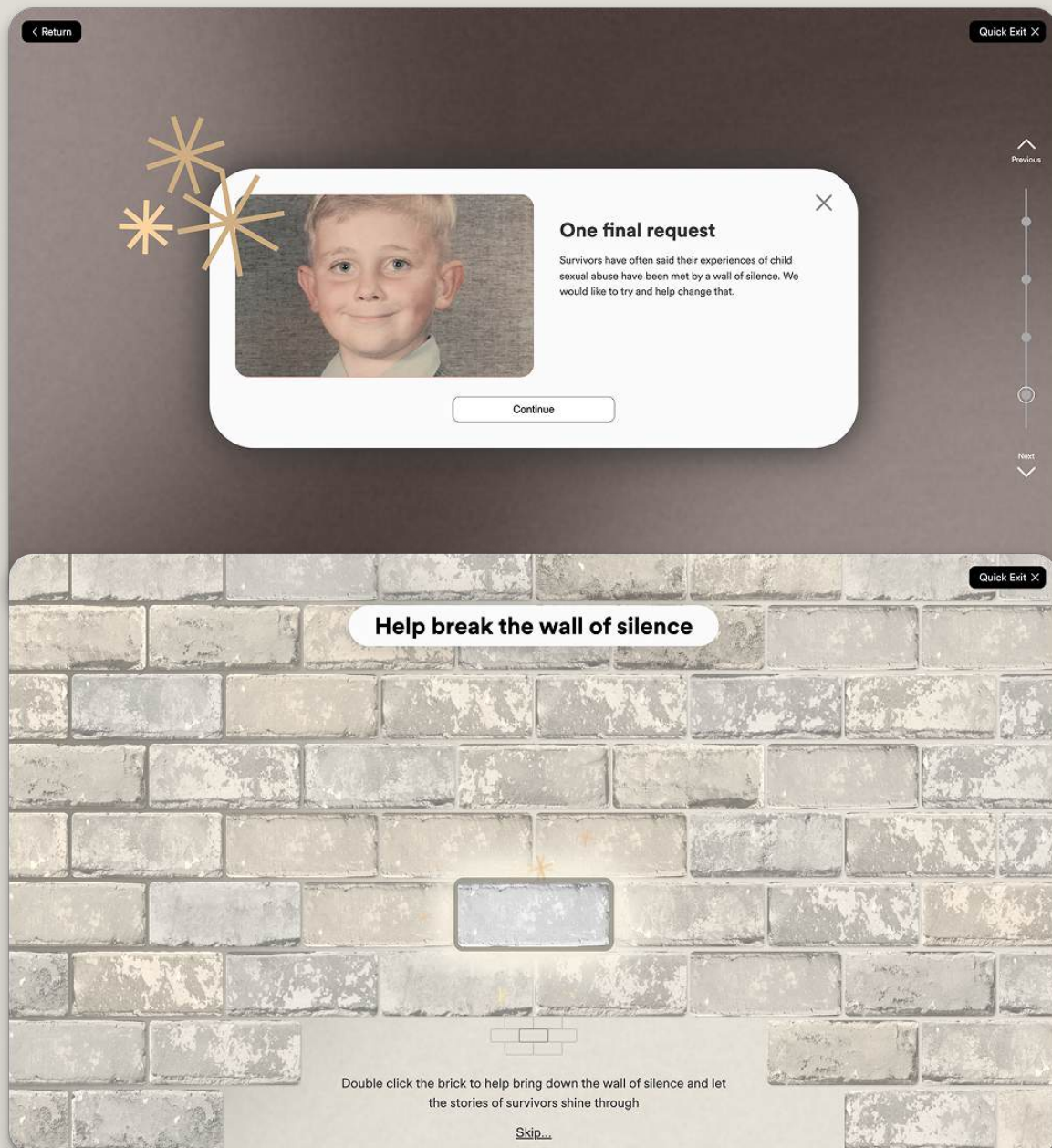
"That determination then to feel better about myself and to change my attitude about the world was definitely, still is, an act of defiance."



Symbolic Action

After completing the survey, which was unique to the prototype, participants were taken to a “call to action” page. The involved symbolically removing a brick from a “wall of silence.”

The final page thanks participants and provides a downloadable PDF with further information, resources and contact details for support services (see Appendix 3).



Appendix 3: Digital Story Support & Resources

Creating Safer Futures References



Grooming

Grooming involves intentional and deliberate acts or behaviours to manipulate a child, cause harm and keep children silent.

Grooming tactics often involve gradual exposure to increasingly inappropriate and abusive behaviour that is hidden from adults. This can make it difficult for adults to identify when a child is being groomed, and often the child will blame themselves for the abuse.

[Learn more](#)

Victims of child sexual abuse

- 28.5% of the Australian population have experienced child sexual abuse
- More than 1 in 3 girls experience child sexual abuse
- Almost 1 in 5 boys experience child sexual abuse
- When a child experiences child sexual abuse, it rarely happens only once
- Perpetrators of abuse are most often adults often known to the child
- How a disclosure is received and responded to can significantly impact victim-survivors

[Learn more](#)

Disclosure

- Disclosure is rarely a one-off event. It is often a process that happens with different people over multiple conversations
- On average, it takes 23.9 years to tell someone about the abuse
- Men often take longer to disclose than women
- Some people never disclose

[Learn more](#)

Impacts of child sexual abuse

94.9% of victim-survivors who spoke to The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse reported mental health impacts.

Child sexual abuse can also harm people's

- physical health
- education and employment
- relationships

It may also affect people's

- personal and cultural identity
- gender and sexual identity
- religious and spiritual beliefs
- future aspirations

For some victims, child sexual abuse results in them taking their own lives.

[Learn more](#)

Taking action

- Awareness raising, education, and building child safe cultures is essential
- Victims and survivors need to be supported and empowered
- If you are worried that a child or young person is at risk, it is important to act and report it

[Learn more](#)

If you would like to learn more about the Creating Safer Futures research project, please contact [Associate Professor Katie Wright](#), La Trobe University

Help and Support

If you or a child is in immediate danger, call Triple Zero (000).

If you want to talk to someone about child sexual abuse or need support, you can contact one of these services:

Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service

1300 657 380

For adults impacted by childhood trauma including child sexual abuse

1800RESPECT

1800 737 732

For people impacted by sexual assault, domestic and family violence and abuse

Lifeline

13 11 14

13YARN

13 92 76

A culturally safe crisis support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800

QLife

1800 184 527

An LGBTIQ+ peer support and referral for people wanting to talk about sexuality, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships.

If you need to report child abuse, search for 'child abuse' in your state or territory.

National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse Resources

Responding and taking action

Everyone in a child's life, from parents to professionals, has a role to play in protecting children from sexual abuse by noticing signs, listening, and asking questions, protecting the child, and providing support. This resource highlights the importance of responding and taking action to protect children.

[Learn more](#)

Perpetrators and grooming

This resource provides you with essential information on perpetrators and grooming, including who sexually abuses children, what grooming is, and how grooming occurs.

[Learn more](#)

Responding to children's disclosure of sexual abuse

This resource provides you with essential information on how to respond to a child's disclosure of sexual abuse, including asking questions, reacting appropriately, and taking necessary actions.

[Learn more](#)

Understanding and responding to adults' disclosure of child sexual abuse

This resource provides you with essential information on understanding and responding to adults' disclosure of child sexual abuse, including what 'disclosure' means, how adults disclose and providing support.

[Learn more](#)



Appendix 4: Fact Sheet

Engaging with victims & survivors & talking about child sexual abuse

Guidance for academic research and creative arts projects

Child sexual abuse is widely recognised as a difficult social topic, and this means it can be challenging to talk about it openly and safely.

Speaking about child sexual abuse continues to be taboo in many social spaces, leaving victims and survivors feeling silenced and preventing institutions from developing more effective policies to protect children and care for people who have been impacted.

It is important to engage with the topic of child sexual abuse and find ways of making it easier to discuss because:

- sexual abuse could happen to a child close to any of us
- it is more common than many people think
- child sexual abuse does enormous harm
- everyone is responsible for keeping children safe
- prevention is possible

Finding ways to engage the public in conversations and share information about child sexual abuse can enhance child safety and help victims and survivors feel seen and heard. The participation of people with lived experience of child sexual abuse is key to increasing public awareness, as their stories are an effective way of engaging the public. Victims and survivors need to be supported and treated with dignity in sharing their experiences.

This document outlines key principles to assist with the development of ethical, sensitive and trauma informed approaches to working with victims and survivors on academic research and creative arts projects.

It also offers principles to guide the creation of compelling stories that honour the experiences of victims and survivors and ensure safe audience engagement.



01 Principles for ethical collaboration and co-production with victims and survivors

It is not 'too difficult'

Some professionals worry about 'opening a can of worms' when talking about child sexual abuse and so avoid the topic out of concern. While care and sensitivity are vital, victims and survivors do not need to be overprotected when talking about child sexual abuse. In many ways, their experiences make them uniquely skilled to do so.

Trauma informed engagement

Being trauma informed is an approach to engaging with people that recognises that traumatic experiences can have ongoing impacts. A trauma informed approach responds by prioritising safety, establishing trust, offering choice, and respecting diversity. What this means in practice depends on the context.

For academic research and creative arts projects, trauma informed engagement includes offering victims and survivors choice and control over their involvement wherever possible, and being clear about when they may not have choice or control. All people interacting with victims and survivors should do so through a trauma informed lens. This includes support staff and contractors, even if their engagement may be brief or indirect.

Trauma informed engagement includes project teams being transparent with collaborators and participants. It includes offering people opportunities to contribute in ways that work best for them, taking into account physical, emotional and relational safety. It also includes making clear to victims and survivors how they can withdraw their participation from a project should they wish to do so, and any limits there may be on withdrawing.

Things that may seem small or trivial can matter greatly. Caring for victims and survivors means ensuring they are physically comfortable (e.g. suitable seats during interviews or when filming)

and feel psychologically safe (e.g. by cultivating a relationship in which they feel safe and empowered to say they do not wish to answer a question or talk about something specific). Other seemingly small things like providing food and refreshments and supporting travel arrangements are also important.

For some victims and survivors, establishing trust may be difficult and even elusive. Researchers and creatives should not be despondent about this but continue to work in ways that build survivors' confidence in the work being undertaken. For most victims, it was a "trusted" person who abused them.

Remember to also care for yourself. This work can be impactful, and academics and creatives need to be mindful of their own trauma and vulnerabilities, and have strategies in place to mitigate negative impacts.

Clearly defined and authentic participation

Co-production and co-design have become buzzwords in public engagement. They are underpinned by an ethos of civic participation linked to social justice outcomes for marginalised groups. It is important to clarify early the type of participation being offered to victims and survivors. This should be clearly negotiated at the outset.

Be realistic about what type of collaboration is possible. This work takes considerable time to do well. It is better to promise less and over deliver than to fall into a mutually created fantasy of idealised co-production that can erase previous harms. It is important to recognise that there are risks of harms in having overly ambitious plans.

If the victim/survivor participating in a project is publicly identified, and if this is new for them, the implications of public disclosure should be discussed at an early stage. It is important for people to know what they share may be seen by friends, family, colleagues, and perpetrators.

People who have not previously shared their story publicly should also understand that once it is in the public domain, it can be used in ways over which they have no control (e.g. a quote in the news or a social media post). Recognise too, that for some people, it is possible that public disclosures may place them at risk, for example, retaliation by perpetrators or those supporting a perpetrator.

Recognition of other skills and qualities

While lived experience expertise may be the core reason that people engage with a project, it is vital not to view a person only through the lens of their lived experience of trauma. It is important when engaging with victims and survivors to find out about, recognise and, if appropriate, utilise their individual skills, knowledge and qualities. This offers the potential to enhance project outcomes, and it will protect against victims and survivors feeling like they are siloed in only one, victim-based identity.

Recognising the generosity of victims and survivors

A key reason victims and survivors engage in creative and academic research projects is to make a positive difference to the world, and to have their voices heard. The process of how experiences are shared, gathered and, critically, used in the project are crucial for ethical engagement. For substantial or ongoing input, payment should be made/offered for lived experience contributions. The civic generosity of victims and survivors sharing their painful and private experiences to show solidarity with others and to prevent future harm to children, must be recognised, remunerated, acknowledged and celebrated.

Creative approaches

Victims and survivors often describe trauma as a deadening experience that stifles their capacity for joy. Creative approaches to engaging with child sexual abuse can be a vital antidote to the darkness of this type of harm. Creativity enables reverie and beauty to emerge from the wake of the ugly realities of child sexual abuse and so can engage survivors and audiences alike in new forms of expression around this subject.

Before research and creative collaboration

Prior to commencing work on a project, it is important to engage with people who may participate or collaborate so that genuine relationship building can begin. Researchers and people in the creative industries should be clear at the outset about the parameters of the project, and what is being asked and offered.

Projects should be designed with a commitment to dialogue, exchange, and mutual benefit to avoid extractive approaches where victims and survivors are 'mined' for their trauma. Planning should include attention to processes that retain participants' sense of ownership and authorship of their story and how they choose to share their experiences.

A document should be developed that contains a set of expectations for the research or creative process and the collaborators and participants. It should clearly set out the project aims, steps to achieving aims, specifics of victim/survivor involvement, and their rights from the project outset to its final completion. The document should also outline how outcome/s of the project will be used, including potential future use.

Many victims/survivors would like to see the final piece prior to it being made public. This should be discussed in advance and an agreement or plan made. Also be mindful that some victim/survivors may not want to see the final project outcome.

During research and creative collaboration

Keep schedules flexible and build in time for contingencies. Creating a shared commitment to ethical engagement is vital and having the right people involved at all stages is critical. All team members and support staff or crew should be skilled, calm, kind and empathetic. Where possible, include people with lived experience as collaborators. The motto, 'nothing about us without us' is a useful guide when building teams.

Creating an environment in which victims and survivors feel comfortable requires a welcoming physical space, regular breaks and opportunities for victims and survivors to assert their needs. Provide victim/survivors with as much choice and control over the environment as possible. Think about the spaces in which you are working and where everyone is positioned. Some people, for example, may not feel comfortable when others are too physically close, and/or they may want to see the exit from where they sit.

Be mindful of the impact of lights, audio recorders and cameras when someone is sharing their experiences. Never touch someone's body unexpectedly. If a lapel microphone is required, always explain the purpose first and ask for consent before moving close to someone and touching them.

Do not overly direct victims and survivors in how to narrate their experiences. Allow people to share on their own terms. For creative projects, only direct people to alter their expression with their prior consent. If people do need to be directed for brevity or style, negotiate the best way to do this in advance.

Create a safe space for emotion for everyone involved. This does not always mean stopping or pausing but victims and survivors should be offered a break. Cultivate an environment where people feel comfortable with expressing and sitting with difficult emotions should they arise. Thank people for their contributions.

After research and creative collaboration

Reiterate thanks and appreciation. Check in on people after sharing their experiences. Seek feedback from victims and survivors on their involvement and, where possible, incorporate their insights into the work. Without pressure or expectation, offer people opportunities to be involved in promoting project outcomes. If appropriate, invite collaborators to reflect on the process, e.g. through joint authorship of an article or participating in a podcast. Such invitations should only be made where the offer is genuine, viable and may benefit the victim/survivor. Keep collaborators informed and updated on project impact in the months and years that follow.

Reflection and learning

Understand that you might not get it right. Interviews and film shoots, for example, can be stressful and decisions are sometimes made in the moment that in hindsight were not ideal. Create spaces for reflection and learning. Consult to ensure everyone felt heard and safe. There is no perfect formula. But researchers and creatives should be self-aware and employ strategies to address power imbalances.

Making support available

External sources of specialist support should be available to victims and survivors engaging in academic research and creative arts projects, but this needs to be complemented by a culture of care within the project itself.

02 Principles for safe audience engagement

Difficult conversations

Adults and young people consume entertainment and news media that relates to difficult social topics, such as true crime podcasts, violent videogames and graphic horror films. Despite this, there is evidence that many people turn away from child sexual abuse because it is a difficult topic.

Engaging people's sense of justice, their interest in the history of child sexual abuse, connecting them with individual survivor stories, and conveying that child sexual abuse is a common experience, are critical ingredients in successful audience engagement, and can help people feel that they have a role to play in improving child safety.

Narrative approaches

If survivors can be supported to communicate a clear narrative about their experiences and how to use this to prevent future harm, it is more likely to be digestible by the public and empowering for everyone involved.

Trigger warnings

While content notes or trigger warnings can be helpful in some circumstances in preparing audiences for distressing content, they can also increase anticipatory anxiety. One helpful message is to make it clear what specifically will be discussed, shown or heard about. Stories of survival, sharing of specific details, and general discussion of child sexual abuse are likely to have different impacts. Providing some information at the outset offers the audience choice about whether they wish to engage with the content at that time.

Engagement strategies

Public messaging around child sexual abuse is more likely to be successful if certain principles are followed. These include focusing on the harm child sexual abuse causes to a child victim, emphasising it is a criminal act that is everyone's responsibility to prevent, and that abuse can happen to any child.

Breaking silences

In engaging any audience around child sexual abuse there will be varying responses. Some people will be directly impacted by abuse themselves, others indirectly impacted through family members and loved ones. There may also be perpetrators, or people at risk of becoming perpetrators, who are engaging with the material. Most people will find the topic difficult. While it is useful to consider this in relation to the project output, it is vital to remember this is an important topic and social taboos and silences need to be carefully challenged. Talking about child sexual abuse may involve difficult conversations, but this is an important element of destigmatising the experiences of victims and survivors and improving child safety in the future.

Provide information about support and services

When audiences engage with content related to child sexual abuse, it can prompt a variety of responses, including new perspectives and understandings about their own experiences or the experiences of people close to them. It is important that information be provided about what they can do if they suspect a child is in danger or where they can seek support for themselves or others if needed.

Acknowledgements and terminology

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of lands across Australia, and pay respects to elders, past and present. We extend that respect to Indigenous peoples across Australia and all First Nations peoples reading this guide. We celebrate the unique contributions of all Indigenous peoples and are honoured to continue a long tradition of knowledge sharing on these lands.

Acknowledgement and thanks

We acknowledge the lived and living experiences and expertise of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. We recognise that there are children currently experiencing sexual abuse and exploitation and we are committed to addressing this ongoing injustice.

We recognise and honour the critical role that advocates and activists have made to improving child safety and in the ongoing fight for justice for victims and survivors.

This guide emerged from the 'Creating Safer Futures' research project, which brought together a group of socially engaged young people, experienced advocates, an interdisciplinary academic research team, and professionals from the creative industries. The overall project aim was to contribute to improving child safety by finding ways of raising awareness through engaging people with the topic of child sexual abuse when the urge is often to turn away.

We offer our deep thanks to the project Advisory Committee, who contributed to the development of this guidance document. We also thank the project Youth Panel. The advocates and the young people involved in the research contributed advice and guidance that was invaluable.

Terminology

People with lived experience of child sexual abuse vary in terms of how they identify. When speaking generally about people with lived experience, victims and survivors is the preferred terminology. Our research has found that both victim/survivor and non-victim survivor advocates view the term "child sexual abuse" as most favourable, while the abbreviated form, CSA, is least favoured.

Research funding

Creating Safer Futures: Raising Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse amongst Young Adults through Digital Storytelling (2023-2025), is a research project funded by the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (National Centre). Elements of the project were also supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery grant, *Reclaiming Child Rights (2022-2026, DP220100376)*.

Suggested citation

Creating Safer Futures (2025) Engaging with victims and survivors and talking about child sexual abuse: Guidance for academic research and creative arts projects. La Trobe University: Melbourne.

