

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.

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. For further information and resources: nationalcentre.org.au

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.

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