



**Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry:
A Community Based Approach to Protect Victoria's
Children**



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A Community Based Approach to Protect Victoria's Children

Child Wise is an international child protection charity established in 1992. Our Vision is for a world where children live free from abuse and exploitation. We work in Victoria, across Australia and in Asia and Pacific.

Our programs and CEO have received many national and international awards from the United Nations, the US Government for world's best practice in child protection and we have won many Australian child protection, human rights and crime prevention awards. Our CEO and founder has also won numerous awards including an AO, Australian of the Year for Victoria, Telstra's Women in Business finalist and others. There is no other organisation in Australia that focuses on the prevention of child abuse but we do understand we cannot prevent all abuse so our programs do cover prevention, protection and recovery. However our main aim is prevention. Our programs are shaped on the principles on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Child Wise is one of Australia's leading child protection charities working to protect children's futures. Our programs seek to prevent child abuse by providing greater awareness and understanding of child abuse and exploitation; as well as providing the tools and strategies for individuals, organisations and communities to address these issues in culturally relevant ways.

1. The factors that increase the risk of abuse and neglect occurring, and effective preventative strategies.

Child Wise believes that the biggest threat to children's futures is abuse. It destroys lives and communities. This is why Child Wise is dedicated to protecting children from abuse and exploitation. Child abuse affects everyone and therefore, it is everyone's responsibility to take action to prevent abuse from ruining the lives of children. Child Wise provides culturally and community specific services to assist people everywhere in empowering themselves, their families, their communities and their children to prevent the cycle of abuse. **Therefore we firmly believe that the Victorian Government would benefit enormously and cost effectively by institutionalising some of our prevention programs which would dramatically improve a child protection system that is inherently dysfunctional and crisis driven whereas it should be more focussed on prevention and community based solutions.**

Through a Community Based Approach, increasing community awareness comes with an increased understanding of what the problem is, how we can deter and identify children at risk, identify the signs of abuse, and importantly, how we can assist children and young persons to become empowered and involved. Community education also empowers communities to take more responsibility about children in their communities rather than

what we have at present which is a very individualistic and isolated approach to families rather than linking them up with each other and with community services that can help and support them.

For over 20 years Child Wise has been conducted community education awareness programs that targets parents, carers, teachers, and professionals working with children and young people with the aim to:

- Raise awareness about what child abuse is (in all its forms), the indicators of child abuse and the short & long term impact on children.
- To be able to identify children who are at risk of being abused
- Empower people to speak up if they have concerns that a child may be being abused or at risk of abuse.
- Work with parents, carers and communities to recognise the warning signs of risk and abuse including grooming strategies of offenders
- Educate parents and professionals on how to respond to a child that discloses abuse or where you have concerns that the child is being abused eg. Sexualized behaviours, self harm and many other signs
- Educate the community about how to prevent child abuse through personal safety education which build the resilience of children and their capacity to identify risk as well as providing them with safety nets i.e. people to contact if they feel they are at risk of being harmed
- Understanding the dynamics of child sex offenders. By knowing their strategies people can identify when adults are acting inappropriately with children and stops the grooming process
- Develop a trusting and protective social environment for children
- Extensive national dissemination and promotion of both training and relevant education booklets and other materials including those sensitive to a variety of cultural groups and communities
- Encouraging people to talk about child abuse to dispel the taboos and myths around child abuse
- Making child abuse everyone's business because at the end of the day the tax payer has to pick up the pieces of all the harm that results from child abuse criminality, drug use, mental health services etc

Given the period from birth to eight years of age children experience more rapid brain development and acquire more skills and knowledge than in any other period of their lives, therefore the focus primarily for prevention should be directed at the ages of children up to eight years, with a flow on this intervention reaching right up until the ages of 18 and beyond.

The prevention of child abuse is critical and possible if parents, the community and early childhood professionals can identify the signs of risk to ensure intervention before the abuse and identify signs of abuse to increase early intervention which would lessen the long term effects on the child. A child who is abused is often damaged for life and never tells. The impact on the community flows on for years after the abuse has ceased. Therefore it is imperative the community is educated to prevent abuse, to ensure children

grow up into healthy, happy individuals who are connected to their society, which will in turn have enormous cost benefits to society long term.

Many of the calls currently received on the Child Wise Child Abuse Prevention Helpline are from carers, teachers, parents, grandparents and other members of the community that have been too scared to contact authorities for fear that their enquiry will result in protection intervention (even though they are acting protectively), require a confidential impartial intermediary. The recent NAPCAN report testifies to this by revealing in their survey of over 100,000 Australians that approximately 36% of people who were aware a child was being abused would go to the police and a similar percentage would go to protective authorities. This is of great concern as it demonstrates that the majority of children who are being abused are receiving no intervention. The main reason for this hesitancy is that people are too scared to report abuse in case they are wrong, in case it is a family member, in case they have to be taken to court and many other reasons that we Child Wise helps them to navigate through the system but ensures that ensures that the abuse stops whether they go to authorities or not. The Child Wise Helpline which is a free and anonymous service provides another avenue for parents or carers to seek support and clarification. Similarly, mandated professionals too demonstrate fear in their legal responsibilities, and often require support and clarification in navigating the system. Child Wise receives over 250 calls and contacts via email per week from people asking questions about how to keep their children safe to enquiries "is this abuse" or full on disclosures.

We also receive many calls from people speaking up about their childhood abuse for the very first time; in some instances these callers need affirmation that this happened to them but they do not necessarily want or are able to pursue the matter any further.

The Child Wise Child Abuse Prevention Helpline maintains a contact between Child Wise, other help lines such as Kids helpline, authorities, support services and communities in need. When we deliver training to communities it often results in disclosures of child abuse by attendees, whether it be personal or an incident that they are aware of and need assistance to speak up about. The Helpline provides a hub for communities to respond to child abuse with the guidance and support from trained counsellors. Although pertinent to Child Wise's mission to prevent child abuse, **the organisation does not receive any funding for the Helpline which is desperately needed** for the continuation of this much needed service to the community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 7.5 times more likely than other children to be subject of confirmed reports of abuse or neglect than non-indigenous children (source: National Child Protection Clearinghouse, June 2010).

Yarn Up is a Child Wise culturally relevant indigenous program designed in partnership with ACCA. The program aims to strengthen community's response to child abuse and empowers communities to take responsibility to prevent, monitor and seek redress for all forms of child abuse and exploitation on behalf of children. Mostly and importantly, the program aims to strengthen the voice of children and assist adults and children to work together to end child abuse.

The Yarn Up program has been written to empower and educate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers of Aboriginal children to protect and help them keep children safe within their care. The programs aim is to work with communities to prevent abuse before it happens. If abuse has occurred the program will educate parents and carers about the signs of abuse, empower them to make decisions and interventions e.g. reporting, counselling etc. and take steps to stop any abuse that is happening to children in the community.

2. Strategies to enhance early intervention of, and intervention targeted at, children and families at risk including the role of adult, universal and primary services. This should include consideration of ways to strengthen the capacity of those organisations involved.

It is evident through the work of Child Wise with both government and non government services, that there is an obvious need for more intensive training on how to identify children at risk, risk indicators, and how to respond to these children, as well as how to practically implement personal safety strategies within the classroom, community and at home.

Community education needs to be targeted not only at universal and primary services, but would benefit with a whole-of-community approach involving parents receiving similar information in a parent/carer session, in a more informal, parent friendly manner.

Personal Safety programs aim to teach children from birth to eight years and beyond, at their critical age and stage of cognitive development. This will not only increase their safety, improve their ability to learn, develop social competencies, resilience, confidence and connectedness to their community. This is also essential learning for educators within special needs settings, as children with a disability or special needs are at greater risk of abuse. Child Wise has recently developed personal safety training for children with special needs and will be trialling it soon.

Early childhood practitioners can be teaching and implementing these personal safety strategies within their programs, with a particular focus on child care, family day care, kindergarten and the primary/secondary school setting. A fundamental principle is that children are taught from an early age that they have a right to be safe and they will not get into trouble if they tell of something distressing. Based on our experience with thousands of

survivors of child abuse, most children never tell of the abuse because they believe they are responsible and by speaking up they will get into trouble. The messages that we can provide parents to equip children with safety life skills will counter the negative self talk that keeps children silent. International research has found that only 3% of children will ever report that they are being sexual abuse due to the stigma and the disempowerment that occurs during the grooming process.

Personal Safety programs should be incorporated into our school curriculum, ensuring every child has the opportunity to receive this information.

Every parent upon enrolling their child into the school system, should receive a Child Wise information pack that clearly outlines the ways in which to identify abuse indicators, promote with their personal safety strategies, and tips to ensure choosing child safe organisations.

In addition, education programs achieve the following:

- Strengthen community capacity to respond to child abuse through empowerment and effective solutions;
- Provide disadvantaged Victorian communities crucial services to prevent child abuse whilst addressing vulnerabilities;
- Reduce child abuse, although an increase in reporting is expected this is a positive outcome to ending the cycle of child abuse;
- Create a child safe Victoria; and
- Empower and support children to push child abuse in to the light.

Community education programs need to focus on recognising their role in maintaining the safety of children, what to teach children to prevent abuse, and the 'what, when and how' to report their concerns.

(Note: Refer to Choose With Care recommendations under section 3 & 8, for both government and non government organisations.)

5. The appropriate roles and responsibilities of government and non-government organisations in relation to Victoria's child protection policy and systems.

7. Measures to enhance the government's ability to: plan for future demand for family services, statutory child protection services and out-of-home care; and ensure a workforce that delivers services of a high quality to children and families.

Statistics show that there is at least one report of child abuse every minute in Australia, however these are official statistics, which are only the tip of the iceberg. The average age of child sexual abuse is six years (CPS, 2003.) Recent research (NACPCAN 2010) has found that only 36% of people would

report child abuse to police, less than half would contact child protection authorities, and 51% of those surveyed believe that schools had the responsibility for children's wellbeing and safety.

We need to raise the mindset within the community that child protection is "everyone's responsibility". The reason why many organisations and individuals shy away from the subject is because of the "nature" of the topic and the fact that people are unsure about how to pick up and act on the signs of abuse. Some professionals will advise that they are "scared of saying the wrong thing" when a child discloses, or they are unsure about the signs. Feedback within the community comes back as a consistent theme "what if I am wrong" Once people have been educated in understanding and responding to abuse concerns they feel more confident and understand their obligations and responsibilities to report. A direct result of this education assists in people contacting statutory authorities when they have relevant concerns. The community needs to recognise that they are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of children, as well as government and non government organisations. However Child Wise firmly believes that education of Victorians about abuse will not lead to more disclosures and a greater burden to society but through our decades of experience have found that this education keeps children safe from abuse and therefore reduces incidences of abuse taking place.

Parents advise that they come away feeling confident to discuss issues and themes with their children at home and then this is reinforced in the class room. All of a sudden everyone is on the same page and we are all speaking the same language. Children feel empowered, parents feel informed and aware and professionals feel confident about dealing with children and following their policies and procedures that have been put in place to protect the communities most vulnerable as well as themselves. This then takes the pressure off our child protection system allowing them to intervene where is most needed.

The information above is clearly documented in feedback forms from training provided. On completion of training sessions people state that they feel more equipped to manage the issues that can sometimes present. They are also aware that it is their responsibility to educate, detect and prevent further abuse.

Research has also found that one in five children will experience some form of sexual abuse, and experts in the field anecdotally report that sexual aggressive behaviours amongst children are increasing and are being displayed more at schools and other public places. Additionally, cyber safety, 'sexting' and bullying are rapidly growing problems, even with children as young as seven and eight.

Child Wise has been inundated with calls from parents, teachers, and those working with children, concerned about protection. We have had over

500,000 requests for more publications including booklets, posters and postcards. Training packages have already been developed and have proven successful based on an increase in phone calls and community responses.

Helpline Case example:

A grandmother called the helpline anonymously due to concerns for her grandchildren. After going through her concerns in detail the helpline staff advised that there were no grounds (or evidence) at this stage to make a notification but acknowledge her actions in a very positive way. The Grandmother was sent some information about indicators and personal safety strategies etc with the opportunity to call back at any stage.

3. The quality, structure, role and functioning of: family services; statutory child protection services, including reporting, assessment, investigation procedures and responses; and out-of-home care, including permanency planning and transitions; and what improvements may be made to better protect the best interests of children and support better outcomes for children and families.

8. The oversight and transparency of the child protection, care and support system and whether changes are necessary in oversight, transparency, and/or regulation to achieve an increase in public confidence and improved outcomes for children.

Statistics gathered by the Victorian Police Child Exploitation Squad for the period 1988 to 1996 found that 43.5% of offenders they investigated gained access to child victims through children's organisations (Petraits, O'Connor 1999). Extensive research has found that abuse of children is more likely to occur in organisations with the following features: lack of resources, gaps between policy and practice, poor coordination and consistency, inadequate guidelines, lack of specialised skills, minimal staff support, children unheeded, and a lack of information (Cashmore, et al 1994.)

Transparency within the child protection, care and support system that promotes public confidence and improved outcomes begins internally in our own organisations. Organisations can build safer environments for children through for children's organisations to be proactive and examine their own activities and work towards developing preventative approaches to child protection.

Education programs that will assist organisations build their capacity through knowledge, skills development, structures, networks, policies and procedures which will enable them to manage risk, and create open and aware child safe environments.

Organisations that receive any funding from local, state or federal government should be linked with an audit process to ensure they meet specific and rigorous standards regarding their child protection policies and procedures.

Choose With Care® is an innovative information and training program that Child Wise developed as far back as 1994 and has been delivered to tens of thousands of organisations. The Singapore Government have made Choose With Care mandatory training for early child care staff which we have been training for the past three years and will continue. Additionally Choose With Care has been taken on by all State Community Services Ministers as best practice in how a child safe organisations. Child Wise also were engaged by the Federal Government to write the AusAID child protection policy and train all their funding recipients who provide overseas aid, making it mandatory that all organisations and contract companies etc have child protection policies and practices even if they are not a child focussed organisation. Using a systemic approach, the program reduces the risk of child abuse occurring in organisations, through employing a range of strategies with staff, volunteers, children, young people and parents.

The Choose With Care® (CWC) program consists of a handbook, video and training workshops and access to the Helpline. It provides simple and practical child abuse prevention strategies, step-by-step guides, and models of best practice. Key components of CWC include: tailored training, Help line and ongoing child protection and policy support via phone and email.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For decades now the Victorian child protection system has been crisis driven, never focussing on prevention nor understanding how to prevent child abuse. Therefore like with sun damage and cancer; prevention is the answer rather than the incredible cost of the damage child abuse costs society. Child Wise's programs are demonstrated to be effective, cost efficient and keep children safe and out of the hands of abusers and the child protection system.

Child Wise believes it can play a pivotal role in assisting the Victorian Government Protect Victoria's children and revolutionise the child protection system if the Government adopts some of Child Wise's cost effective and preventative approach measures as demonstrated in our long term programs.

1. Community education sessions across Victoria on "Understanding and Responding to Child Abuse". These can be tailored to meet the needs of parents, carers, families and community organisations.

2. Choose With Care - becoming a child safe organisation training to ALL child and youth focussed organisations in Victoria to ensure that they have child protection polices and practices. Child Wise would also appreciate the opportunity to implement a certification process to all of the organisations

that provide support services to children and young people. Including residential care, out-of-home care, family services, schools, and other relevant government and non government organisations. This certification process would involve a 360 degree audit and a thorough examination of their policies and participants knowledge of the policies (including children).

3. Personal safety/protective training to primary, secondary and special need schools throughout Victoria on an ongoing basis directly to teachers and school staff.

4. Finally Child Wise would greatly appreciate that the Victorian Government fund a proportion of the Child Abuse Prevention Helpline that provides ongoing advice and support as both a follow up service to the training sessions, and a service to parents, professionals and the community. Our statistics indicate that most calls and emails come from Victoria despite it being a national service.