

Australian  
Childhood  
Foundation

Hear us now,

act now

**First insights on prevention and early intervention from those with lived and living experience of child sexual abuse**

The first report from  
**Our Collective Experience Project.**



**March 2024**

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## About the Authors



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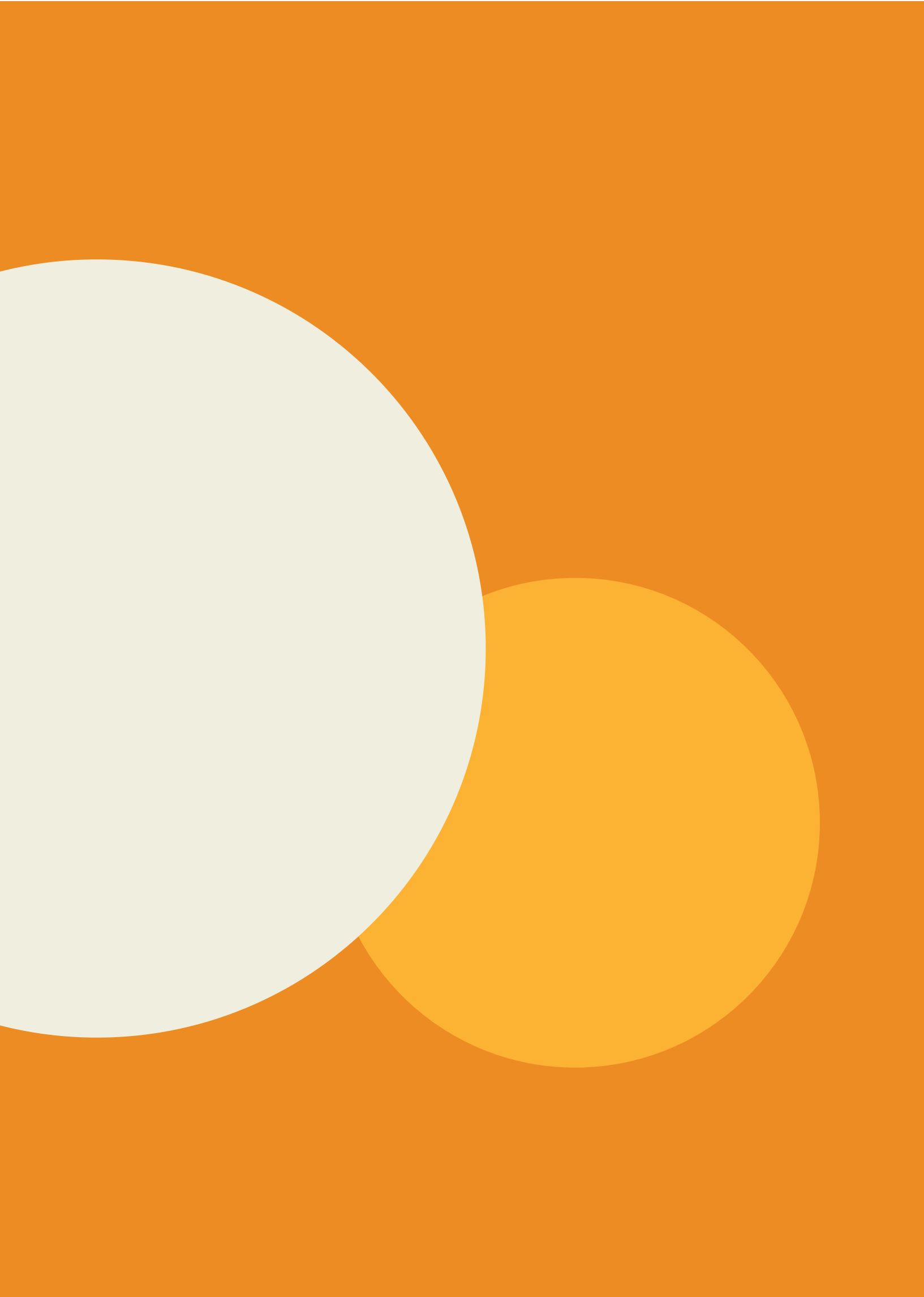
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Australian Childhood Foundation also acknowledges that this report was written on Wurundjeri land which was never ceded. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community has and continues to suffer childhood sexual abuse in colonial, institutionalised settings and it is our collective responsibility to address this crisis, as we work to protect all children from sexual abuse.

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## Note on language

We have adopted the working definitions for key terms used in this report from those developed by the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse in consultation with people with lived and living experience of child sexual abuse.





# Key terms and definitions

## **Children and young people**

Individuals under the age of 18 years.

## **Child sexual abuse**

Any act which exposes a child or young person to, or involves a child in, sexual processes beyond their understanding or contrary to accepted community standards. Sexually abusive behaviours can include the fondling of genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger, or any other object, fondling of breasts, voyeurism, grooming, exhibitionism, and exposing the child or young person to or involving them in pornography or child abuse material (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse).

## **Child sexual exploitation**

A form of sexual abuse targeting children and young people under 18 who are manipulated or coerced to undertake sexual acts in exchange for any actual or promised benefit, for example food, accommodation, affection, money and/or gifts.

## **Child abuse material**

Material that depicts or describes a child, or a representation of a child, who is or appears to be under the age of 18, and who is or appears to be in a sexual pose or sexual activity, or that shows or describes the person's sexual organs or breasts as a dominant characteristic. This definition also includes material that depicts or describes a child, or a representation of a child, as a victim of torture, cruelty or physical abuse.

## **Evidence and knowledge**

Used interchangeably and defined "inclusively" so that research and practice-based evidence is not privileged over cultural, traditional and knowledge derived through lived and living experience.

## **Grooming**

Building a relationship, emotional connection or trust with a child, young person or their family and friends online or offline with the intention of committing a sexual offence.

## **Online child sexual abuse and exploitation**

All child sexual abuse and exploitation that at any point has a connection to the online environment.

## **Victims and survivors**

People of any age, background or culture who have experienced child sexual abuse. The terms "victims and survivors" and "people with lived and living experience of child sexual abuse" are used interchangeably in recognition that different language resonates at different times and is appropriate for and with different people and contexts.

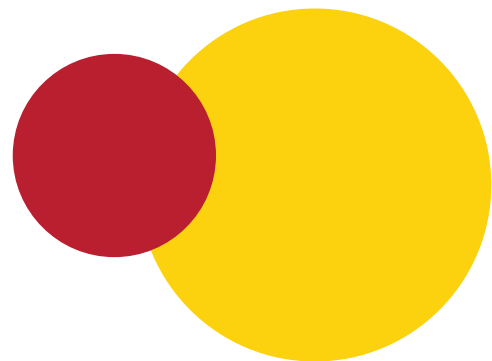
## Foreword – Emma Hakansson

When I was a child, I wasn't taught anything at school, in my community activities, or at home that protected me from being sexually abused by an adult who was supposed to keep me safe. While I had parents who loved me very much and who taught me about stranger danger, the person who abused me was not only known to me, but admired by my community, my parents, and other parents around me. I was told to count five people on five fingers who I could trust to speak to if something was wrong. But I didn't know that what was happening to me would be thought of as wrong. I didn't know the adults I was told to listen to could ever be in the wrong. So, I thought my terror, my anger and my disgust were my fault. It led me to my guilt and my quietness.

The problem wasn't that I had not been taught how to protect myself: we should never be putting that burden onto children. It's that the adults around me had not been taught how to protect me, how to build me up, how to see me in a way that could have kept me more safe. Ultimately, adults and their systems failed to create a world where I knew that how I felt was more important than what adults wanted from me, and the consequence of that destroyed my chance of safety, of a sense of value for myself, and of undisturbed childhood.

The sexual abuse of children is an adult problem, and it's time we all felt the weight of that responsibility on our shoulders. It's time we understood that weight and how to carry it, by listening to survivors of sexual abuse during childhood.

I know that when I share my story, I share lessons. My abuse by a woman demonstrates the importance of looking beyond archetypal caricatures of people who abuse children. The way that I only ever told my Mum that my abuser was 'weird' is a class on the enormous gap between how we expect children to disclose grooming and abuse, compared with what little they are capable of, beyond simply surviving. My conflating being told to hug my uncles and kiss my cousins when I didn't really want to, so that I wasn't rude, with doing what I was told behind sound-proofed, closed doors with the woman who abused me can act as a lecture on autonomy, consent and safety.



Every story of survival is different. Uniquely devastating, but also uniquely powerful in its capacity to change the world, when it is heard. For every lesson that I desperately want each adult with children in their lives to know, other survivors have their own. Efforts to protect children from abuse which do not centre the wisdom of people who were abused as children themselves are fundamentally limited in their effectiveness. We know what could have helped us, we know what hurt us. We know what could help or hurt your children, our children, too.

‘Emma’s Project’ was always the temporary name for a much more collective effort for the protection of children, guided by the shared wisdom of my fellow survivors of sexual abuse during childhood. After having read every single word from every single person who responded to our survey – three times over – we have a roadmap forward. A clear plan built on a knowing of what is missing in current efforts to protect children, and a dedication to changing that.

We know where even more learning is needed, where public education and where government intervention can help to play a role in changing the lives of children, and in freeing children from ever needing to claim the title of ‘survivor’.

While this work is hard – deeply personal, painfully important – I am so eager and excited by what is coming next. By the hope this brings me and others. I am energised by the idea of helping to mould a society which prioritises autonomy over compliance, honesty over respectability and secrecy, as well as genuine compassion and acceptance over isolation.

A society that is, as a result, far more capable of protecting children, and of seeing children as whole humans deserving not only of protection, but of rights, and liberation. This is the global community I want to live in, and it is the community I know we can create when we listen to the many diverse voices who have experienced what we hope to save children from ever experiencing again.

This better world is only an impossible utopia if it is not supported and worked towards broadly within our community. I urge everyone to join us in making it possible.

**Emma Hakansson**

## Foreword – Dr Joe Tucci

Over six years ago, a young woman approached me because she had experienced sexual abuse at a younger age and was determined to change things so that children did not continue to suffer.

We may not have realised it, but Emma's Project was born at this very first meeting.

Adults can sometimes get in the way of young people and their goals. Looking back, I think I was one of those adults. I asked Emma to finish school, which she did. The day after her exams, she was back on the phone to me wanting to get started.

I asked her to wait until a court case she was battling had finished. With the support of her family, she did that, standing up for herself throughout a long legal process. As soon as the matter was over, Emma was on the phone to me again.

I asked her to come in with her mother just to make sure that she had enough support to respond to the demands of a journey that might add even more pressure onto her. I met with Emma and her mother and found a quiet strength that ran through them both, in deep and meaningful ways.

Some four years after the first meeting, we assembled a team at Australian Childhood Foundation and began to make plans. What would we do first? What were our goals? How would we know if we were making a difference?

Slowly, Emma's Project took shape. Its main ambition is to harness the wisdom of adults with lived experience of child sexual abuse in order to change the conditions in our community that allow this abuse to occur. We wanted to create structural, legal changes which could prevent abuse and transform the attitudes and behaviours of adults which make way for this violence to begin with.

We know that such cultural change does not occur quickly. It often demands generational disruption. It is all too easy to resort to the catch cry that emphasises simple awareness raising, but we must be clear as to what the specific hurdles to child sexual abuse prevention are, so that awareness-raising is more purposeful, specific and effective. While we have long-term plans, for now, our objective is to slowly rebuild community understanding of children, their rights and how we can support them, while focussing on specific campaigns for preventative actions that can be achieved in the short term.



We decided that we would invite any adult with lived and living experience of sexual abuse as a child to become involved in the project. They are the heart and soul of the project. Their insights and wisdom offer perspectives about preventing child sexual abuse that comes directly from their own life stories. We started with an anonymous survey which we were overwhelmed with responses to. We also established a Lived Experience Advisory Committee to the Project.

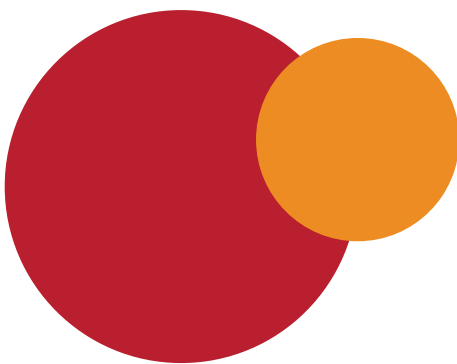
Through our project, we will continually bring together their expertise, alongside knowledge from research and the experience of practitioners who have worked in the field for many years. Together, this affords us an opportunity to reset, reflect and act over the long term to tackle what really matters.

Emma's Project was of course named after her. She has been an inspiration and force in leading the work of the initiative. She is a remarkable young adult. Her approach is to build solidarity with others with lived experience of child sexual abuse. She wants to not only make a difference, but she wants to make it collaboratively with others. Now, as decided by our Lived Experience Advisory Committee, this Project has been renamed to Our Collective Experience Project.

This speaks to the effort that we will need to take collective action. It speaks to the effort that it will take to change the way we prioritise children's inherent right to be safe from violence and violation. This report, the first to come from this endeavour, holds within it the hope of Emma and so many survivors like her whose ambition is to stop children from having to experience sexual abuse.

My hope is that you give it the attention it deserves.

**Joe Tucci, CEO**



# Introduction

**Child sexual abuse is a serious crime with significant life course consequences.**

The statistics are horrendous.

The World Health Organization (1999) estimated that globally between 8-20 per cent of children have experienced sexual abuse. In Australia, approximately 3 in 10 (28.5%) of all Australians over the age of 16 years have endured child sexual abuse (Australian Child Maltreatment Study, 2023). That equates to approximately 4.5 million individuals living today who have carried that experience with them for their whole adult life. When child sexual abuse occurs, it rarely happens only once, with almost 2.5 million adults experiencing sexual abuse more than six times as children (Australian Child Maltreatment Study, 2023). If efforts to protect children from sexual abuse are not built upon the lived experiences of this large number of people, our efforts will be futile.

**But these numbers and this data only tell a part of the story.**

The sexual abuse of children is only made possible by a number of intersecting adult failings. There is a pervasive belief that children's voices, views and feelings hold less weight than those of adults with power over them. Children are not considered to have inherent rights of their own. Their developmental immaturity is treated as a weakness that can be exploited. They are betrayed often by the very adults who are supposed to care for, support and teach them. Adults impose secrecy in order to deny children their voice. Adults create isolation so as to keep children hidden from view in ways that enable abuse to continue with minimal risk of discovery. The combination of these factors leads to the most egregious violation of what should be safe and trusting relationships.

Those living in families dealing with mental illness, substance problems and economic hardship are twice as likely to be at risk of multi-type maltreatment (Australian Child Maltreatment Study, 2023). While more research is required, lived experience advocates have repeatedly identified that as children who also navigated existing societal discriminations based on gender, sexuality, race, disability, socio-economic disadvantage and other factors, they carried additional experiences which may have increased their risk of being targeted, coerced and isolated by those who sexually abuse children.

Between  
**8-20%**  
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Almost  
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sexual abuse more  
than six times as  
children.



Perpetrators are master manipulators. They persuade children and adults to believe they are trustworthy. They give the impression that they are good, honest and respectable and that they would never do anything to harm children, whilst plotting the opposite.

Within families, communities, and when they work in organisations that provide services to children, abusers manufacture opportunities to make everyone believe that they are decent, well intentioned and reliable. They prime whole families, neighbourhoods and institutions into believing their public persona. They slowly access children through actions that they convince others are valuable, helpful and supportive.

They distort the truth in order to make it appear that they are committed to children's wellbeing. They are the adults who offer to 'go the extra mile' for children, providing extra one-on-one lessons, tucking children into bed at night, driving them to their activities, and opening up a centre early. Too often, these tactics work far too easily, particularly within a society that demands children follow the orders of such trusted adults.

Because adults, often unthinkingly, prioritise the perspective of adults over those of children, it is the contrived qualities of adult perpetrators who are seen and valued, while signs of fear, trauma and violation in children are not.

Because children are taught to always listen to and respect adults, when something leaves them uncomfortable or distressed, children are left not knowing – not knowing what is happening, what to believe, what they feel, what other adults might think, what is right and wrong. Children are given no reason to question an adult's motives and actions, or even to believe they have the right to, especially when that adult is someone who has been endorsed by their parents and other trusted adults who they know.

Even if children have been taught protective behaviours at home or school, perpetrators know how to get around these lessons. They rely on their position of trust, authority and power. They threaten them. They build on their relationship with the child and over time, gradually normalising the violation so that children do not understand that what they are experiencing is utterly unjust, wrong and abusive.

The manipulation of children extends well after the abuse ends. Perpetrators manipulate children into keeping it all a secret, complying with their demands. They instil fear and shame into children. They tell them that they will not be believed. In doing so, they isolate children from support. They keep them close, often abusing them repeatedly over a number of years, relying on the respect they have as an adult in the community, and the comparative powerlessness of children they hurt.



Children are left overwhelmed, confused and distressed. They are scared. They think they have done something wrong. They feel unsure and uneasy about themselves and others. They do not know if adults would want or care to know about what has happened, or if they would get in trouble for disclosing. Their words are taken away from them. Children are left without power, having had what little control over their lives removed from them by the perpetrator.

Children are often manipulated into protecting the person who hurt them, particularly when that person is someone in their family. They do not want to upset their families or their communities. They are forced into silence. Often when they express their distress in their behaviour, they are seen as the source of a family's problem, or a classroom disruption. They might run away. Or argue. Or shut down. They often cannot sleep or find it hard to eat. These children often withdraw into themselves and stop making friends. If their behaviour escalates even more, they can be punished or singled out for treatment – not offered curiosity about what might have caused this, or support about what has happened to them. While this is happening, they may be hurting themselves by punishing themselves for someone else's crime.

Children carry with them the trauma of these experiences into their adulthood. For some, their strength and access to relationships around them can help them to succeed in their lives. For others, the memory of their abuse is to be avoided at all costs. There are significant, deeply harmful life course effects of child sexual abuse that have been well documented over at least three decades (Brown et al, 2007; Bürgin et al, 2023; Finkelhor et al, 2007; Guajardo and Tadros, 2023; Gunnar and Quevedo, 2007; Committee on Child Maltreatment Research, Policy, and Practice for the Next Decade, 2014; Hailes et al, 2019; Lawrence et al, 2023; Leiva-Bianchi et al, 2023; Li et al, 2023; McKay et al, 2021; Scott et al 2023; Toth and Manly, 2019).

## Urgent action is needed to address child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse thrives on disempowerment, secrecy, isolation and disbelief. Repeatedly, in research undertaken by Australian Childhood Foundation, child abuse is perceived to be a problem in some other family, some other neighbourhood or in another community. There is inadequate recognition that abuse occurs at the scale that it does. It is minimised and repeatedly ignored. The effect is that children are not always believed. 1 in 3 adults would not believe a child who made a disclosure about abuse to them. Another 1 in 3 are unsure whether or not to believe a disclosure (Tucci and Mitchell, 2022).

In August 2023, the Australian community was shaken by reports that a child care worker had been charged with over 1,500 sexual abuse offences over a 15 year period (Antrobus and Brennan, 2023). He accessed and abused children in child care centres in New South Wales, Queensland and overseas. He had a Working with Children Check. He is alleged to have groomed parents and co-workers to the extent that he was given unofficial photographer status, using this role to abuse and then create child sexual abuse material which he most likely shared online with other predators.

This serious case is unfortunately not an isolated incidence. In research released only in November 2023, almost 1 in 10 Australian men have admitted to committing child sexual abuse offences, even if they have not been caught. These men were three times more likely than the general population to work with children (UNSW, 2023). Little data about female perpetrators, who dangerously fly under the radar, exists.

Systems designed by and for adults often fail children. Many perpetrators of child sexual abuse are never charged, and even fewer are successfully prosecuted. Working with Children Checks are not a fail safe way of identifying if an adult actually poses a risk to the safety of children. Predators know this and they rely on it to keep hurting children.

There is still so much to do to protect children from sexual abuse. There are no simple solutions. We need a multi-dimensional approach to tackle the problem using a range of integrated strategies.

● We need to listen carefully and act upon what victims and survivors of child sexual abuse know they would have needed when they were young, to keep them safe in the first place.

● We need to be more serious about raising awareness about the tactics of perpetrators.

● We need to mandate abuse prevention and intervention education for adults who work with children.

● We need to make the criminal justice system more accountable for children's safety.

● We need to introduce common reporting requirements across the country.

Through these strategies:

- We must treat children sensitively and compassionately when they show us that something is wrong.
- We must ensure that children are able to express their right to autonomy, voice and agency.
- We must think first about what children are telling us in their behaviour before they are labelled as having a problem.

**At its heart, the problem of child sexual abuse is for adults to solve – not children.**

Above all, we need to realise that when we continue to believe that adults know best and that children should listen and respect adult words and actions, not matter what, we leave children vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. We leave them exposed to unacceptable and avoidable pain and suffering – sometimes in ways that last a lifetime. And we should never accept that.

This is the first report of the *Our Collective Experience Project (formerly Emma's Project)*. It privileges the knowledge and insights of those with lived and living experience of child sexual abuse. It is a call to action, grounded in their wisdom that cannot be ignored. In this report we outline the key themes and some of the many insights offered by the more than 330 survivors who responded to our online survey, those close to them, and the many who joined the project and participated in further conversations. Based on these insights, we propose our first recommendation for what must happen next.

We invite all people with decision-making powers that can affect the lives of children, as part of governments, educational institutions, child protection programs, social services, public policy architects and others to consider these findings and join us to create the change that is needed for a safer future for all children.

## What is the story of the project so far?

In July 2022, Emma's Project officially commenced even though the seeds of it were planted a number of years earlier. As noted in the foreword, Emma approached Australian Childhood Foundation to share her experiences of sexual abuse as a child and what she wished adults had known about how to have kept her safe.

It prompted us to launch a confidential public survey for adult survivors of sexual abuse during childhood to share their wisdom. The response was overwhelming.

This survey invited adult survivors to offer their perspectives and insights about strategies or actions which may have helped to prevent child sexual abuse or intervene early to stop it.

Since the survey closed, the project has continued to gather momentum in the following ways:

- A steering committee made up of staff of Australian Childhood Foundation and Emma Hakansson was formed. This committee has worked together to map out the steps of this project as the insights from survivors were understood and analysed.
- A Lived Experience Advisory Committee chaired by Emma was established under the auspice of Australian Childhood Foundation to support and guide the project as it unfolds.
- The project was renamed. 'Emma's Project' gave voice to the origin story that was sourced in the inspiration of Emma and her persistence to make change for children. Today, nearly 360 other survivors, their friends and families have contributed to and will forever be a part of this project.

With the help and guidance of the Lived Experience Advisory Committee, the new name for the initiative is **Our Collective Experience Project**. It represents an opportunity to draw from the insights of those with lived and living experiences of child sexual abuse to dramatically improve the ways in which child sexual abuse is prevented and responded to for children today. The power of the collective wisdom of survivors is the critical resource that is required to move beyond the current paradigms of prevention to consider more deeply what might be effective and sustaining in the long term.



## How was the survey conducted?

The survey was hosted on a secure and confidential platform. It was promoted through social media, traditional media outlets and other forms of digital communication.

The survey questions were specifically formulated to minimise the potential for adverse impact on survivors as they participated in it. The questions were fully available on a special page of Australian Childhood Foundation website so that individuals would be aware of what was being asked of them before they decided to start the survey. Background information was only kept if provided. No identifying data was made available to the project team. Instructions about the survey ensured that respondents understood that they could answer any or all of the questions in whatever detail they chose to. Relevant helplines were provided in the event that respondents needed specific support.

Ethics clearance was provided through the survey contractor internal ethics approval processes.

### The survey consisted of the following questions:

- What do you wish you knew or were told before your abuse that may have been helpful to you?
- At the time, what do you think that the adults around you did or could have done to protect or support you in the way you needed them to?
- What made it easy or would have made it easier for you to be able to tell someone that the abuse was occurring at the time?
- What would you want children to know if they found it hard to tell someone that the abuse was happening to them?
- What are two really important things that you want all adults to know that will help protect children from sexual abuse?
- What are two really important things that you want all children and young people to know about sexual abuse?
- Looking back on what happened to you, what lessons have you learnt that you would like to pass onto others?
- Is there anything else that you would like to make sure we know that you have not already covered in your answers?

The responses to our survey were rich in detail and will be further analysed over time to ensure as much learning can be taken from them as possible. This first report is the first analysis of some of the key themes that emanate from the answers offered by survivors.

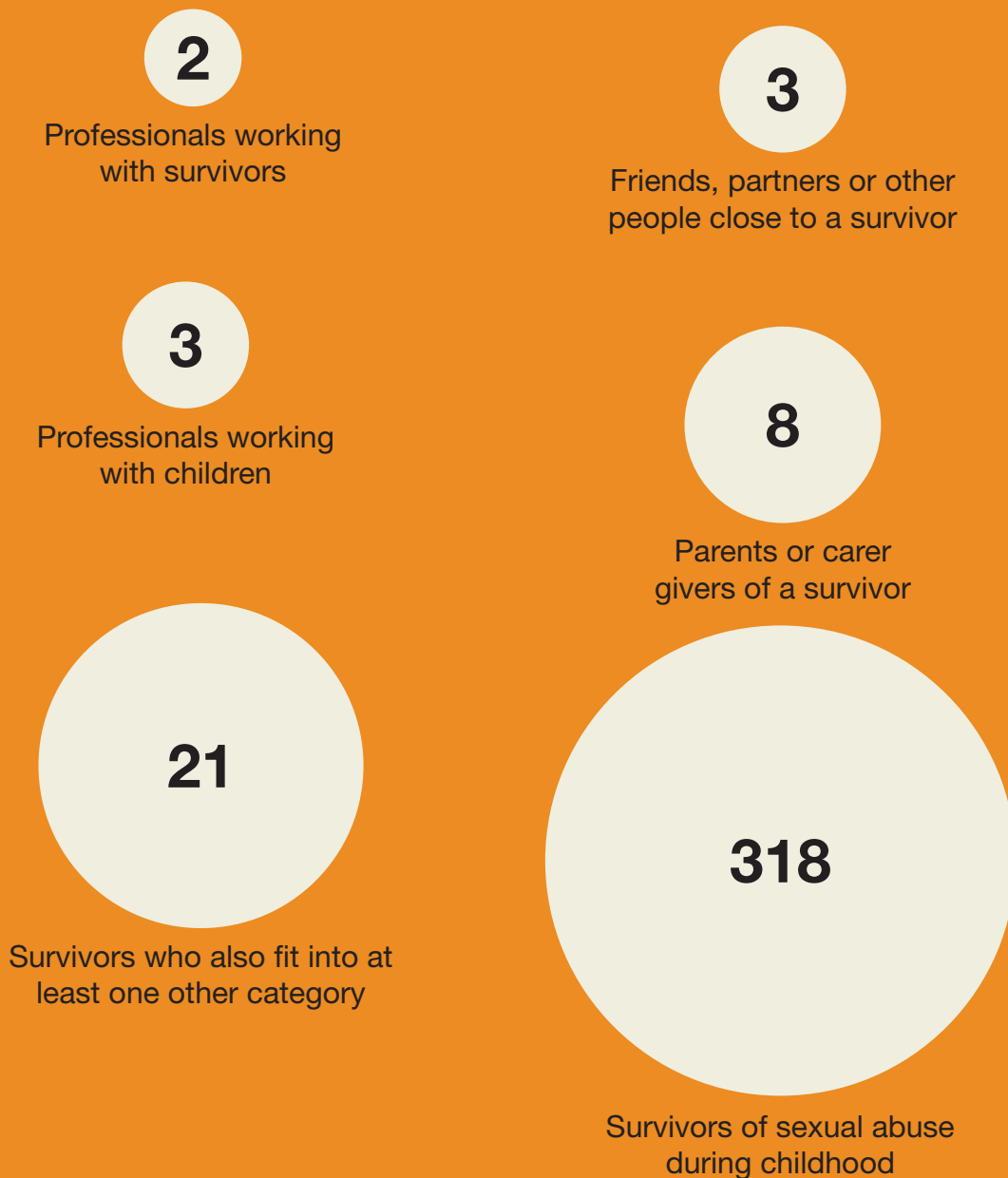
The examination of the responses will continue, with subsequent reports to focus on different issues.

We plan to publish further reports that are based on the survey results as well as other sources of information, including academic research and a major focus on integrating ongoing feedback from our Lived Experience Advisory Committee. Each of these reports will form another crucial element to the mapping of an ongoing strategy that will keep the Foundation's effort on engaging and working alongside the community to disrupt the conditions which lead to child sexual abuse.

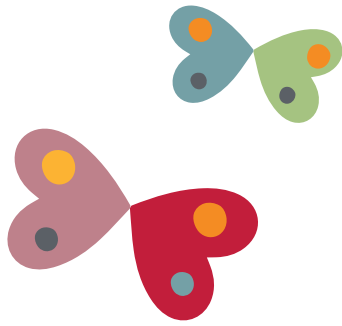
## Who responded to the survey?

A total of 355 respondents completed the survey. Of these, 339 were survivors of child sexual abuse as noted below.

### Respondents and their connection to the issue of sexual abuse during childhood



Total: **355**



The age, sex, language and geographic breakdown of respondents are described in the charts below.

| Age                | Percentage of the whole |
|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 18-27              | 6.8%                    |
| 28-37              | 17.2%                   |
| 38-47              | 27.3%                   |
| 48-57              | 29.0%                   |
| 58-67              | 15.8%                   |
| 68-77              | 3.9%                    |
| <b>Grand Total</b> | <b>100%</b>             |

Of the total respondents, the majority were female (327 or 92%) with 27 (7.6%) being male and one respondent identifying as non-binary. A total of 305 (86%) respondents spoke only English. 14% of respondents spoke a combination of 22 other languages in addition to English.

Similar to prevalence data which reflects that more girls are sexually abused as children than boys (20% as compared to 8% - ACMS, 2023), the gender of respondents in this survey was also more skewed towards women. Research shows that boys and men are less likely to share their experience of abuse, and that more years are likely to pass before they disclose (over 25.6 years, compared to 20.6 years for women, according to the Royal Commission). The insights of people of all genders were considered with the same amount of care.

Many respondents described experiences which highlighted how domestic violence, family mental and physical health crises, racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination related to their experience of sexual abuse during childhood. It marked the importance of considering a diverse range of intersecting experiences when considering the ways in which child sexual abuse can be prevented and stopped. It highlighted how the dynamics of power permeate experiences of victimisation and violation.

While respondents were not asked for specific details about the abuse they experienced or those who perpetrated it, many survivors still shared some of this information. Survivors identified their perpetrators to be a range of individuals including fathers, mothers, grandparents, uncles, cousins, siblings, teachers, coaches, priests, babysitters, neighbours, family friends, parents of friends. While the vast majority of survivors knew the person who abused them, a small number of survivors were harmed by strangers.



**92%**

of respondents were female.

**7.6%**

of respondents were male.

**0.4%**

of respondents identifying as non-binary.

**86%**

of respondents spoke only English.

**14%**

of respondents spoke a combination of English and 22 other languages.

**25.6  
years**

are likely to pass before men disclose abuse.

**20.6  
years**

are likely to pass before women disclose abuse.



## Key Findings

For this first report, the responses provided by people with lived experience were analysed with the view to identifying common themes that described their experiences of what may have helped them. Each theme is presented with some direct quotes as examples.

In subsequent reports, these and other themes will be analysed in more detail.

### A note of appreciation and recognition...

The insights from the survivors who took part in the survey were generous, powerful, moving and devastating. We have felt the overwhelming significance of ensuring that their experience is honoured.

There are so many important themes that emerge from their words. **One report would not do justice to their commitment.** We plan to publish further reports that are based on all of this wisdom. This is the first.

Each will make different actionable recommendations for community and government to implement and support.

Please be conscious that as you read the quotes, there may be times that you will need to stop and reflect on the meaning of what they have described. It may lead to your own distress as you realise the depth of pain that is often reflected in these words. If you are a survivor of childhood abuse, and in particular child sexual abuse, please be aware that reading these findings can bring back uncomfortable and complex memories and reactions. There are places for you to find support and Helplines available (refer to the last page of the report) if you need someone to talk to. Know that the courageous individuals who have participated in the project have done so because they want to make a difference to the protection of children now.

In essence, across all of the survey responses, three underlying elements of experiences were identified as the key enablers of child sexual abuse.

These were: having to comply with the views and demands of adults, being forced into holding the abuse as a secret, and isolating children in order to have total control over them. These elements form the backdrop of all the findings of this report and will also become the focus of future reports of the Project. They offer an invaluable starting point to consider the prevention of child sexual abuse in ways that disrupt current approaches and may lead to real change in the numbers of children and young people still experiencing sexual abuse today.



### **Key finding 1:**

As children, survivors needed adults to know that any person, even those they trusted, could have been the one hurting them.

A large number of survivors spoke consistently about the idea that a certain role or position in a community should not render an adult as 'safe', and that those adults who chose to harm them as children were often in positions of trust. They spoke about the need for other trusted adults to make it clear that as children, they were allowed to feel uncomfortable, unsafe, angry, and distrustful of adults in positions of power. They stated that no adult should be considered beyond doubt or consideration, particularly if a child was displaying signs of abuse.

*"Abusers are usually in positions of trust so don't build adults up to be infallible."*

*"Don't ever assume that an adult is safe just because they are family or in a position of authority."*

*"...if people are considered "safe" or "good" by your parents, with that black and white understanding, as a kid, you kind of just have to accept all they do and it's hard to explain why it doesn't all feel okay... I wish they were aware of and vigilant to indicators of abuse."*

*"I wish my family told me that even the most trusted person could be the person to hurt you wish that I knew I could speak up and be believed."*

*"Trusted adults are the most dangerous. Question everything and everyone."*



*“I feel like lots of people knew what my grandfather was like, despite his ‘good community reputation’, but no-one questioned whether I was ok.”*

Many survivors said that like most people, they had been taught about ‘stranger danger’ and believed that they may have been kept safe if the adults around them had understood that it is more common for the people known to them and close to children to pose the most risk.

*“...Yes, one more thing... that predators and child molesters are not always strangers and are not always that way... they can be dear members of the family and that makes it even more difficult to recognize ... this is why there has to be careful teaching to recognise patterns of action and behaviour....”*

*“It’s not always strangers you need to worry about, it’s those who are supposed to love and protect you.”*

*“We get taught growing up to be wary of strangers but it’s not the strangers I needed to be wary of. I wish I knew to be wary of friends as well. I wish I knew that most adults are good but there are some adults that do bad things and if an adult ever did bad things to me that made me feel uncomfortable, I wish I was told it would never be my fault and I would be believed and it’s ok to tell someone straight away.”*

*“I don’t think I had any education that abuse can happen within families - stranger danger was the messaging we got.”*



*“I wish I knew that I could say no or stop. I wish I knew that sexual abuse doesn’t only happen by way of a stranger grabbing someone and taking them.”*

*“Do not project a narrative of stranger danger. Children are at most risk of harm from those they know. Educate yourself on the statistics, stop being shocked and surprised when someone talks about their experiences of child sexual abuse. It occurs in supposed safe spaces all over the world and it should no longer be a conversation driven underground by playing down how often this happens.”*

A range of survivors spoke about their belief that the traditional archetypes of who is likely to abuse children meant that their perpetrator was never considered as someone who might be a danger to them.

*“That it is okay to tell if a woman has abused you - you will be believed, your experience will not be minimised or discounted.”*

*“Because I was a boy at the time, people believe that what happened to me is something I should feel lucky about. For men in society, sex should be worn as a badge of honour even though it happened to me at 13 from a 25-year-old woman and continued for years.”*

*“I find the level of ignorance around incest incredible, that most people think CSA mainly happens in e.g., boarding schools and orphanages and the Catholic Church. Or that people only know about the really extreme familial abuse that makes the papers. Most people don’t seem to be aware that most CSA happens in families, in family homes.”*

Some survivors spoke specifically to the fact that adults do not consider that other older children, as well as siblings, may abuse younger or perceptibly more vulnerable children, and that this meant they were left unsafe.

*“It happened to me by four different males, first time was an older kid in foster care, second time was a family friend, third time was a sibling and fourth was another family friend.”*

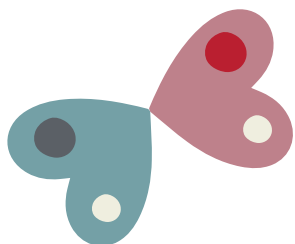
*“That it isn’t some big boogeyman or a stranger it can be other older kids you know. And how fast it can happen. I had no words to say what had happened.”*

*“It can happen to anyone and in many circumstances - I don’t think anyone would’ve suspected my brother was capable of what he did.”*

*“That anyone can abuse a child, another older child, a neighbour, a family member anybody. Do not leave a child in a situation where you do not feel or they do not feel 100% safe.”*

*“...Not allowed bedroom doors to be closed for playtime. Not leave us at home with our big brother left in charge, with the rules we were given ‘to do whatever he tells you or there’ll be trouble’.”*

*“...at that point only ‘stranger danger’ and scary uncles were talked about ...not older children.”*



## Key finding 2:

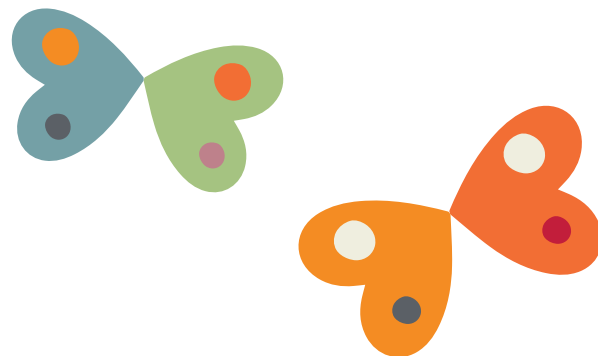
As children, survivors needed someone to reach out to them and ask them what was wrong.

Many people who had survived sexual abuse as children now recognised that the onus should not have rested on them as children to have shared discomfort about the person harming them early on, or to have disclosed the abuse they experienced. Many did not have the words to describe what was happening to them, or an understanding that their feelings were worth sharing. Many were fearful of the consequences of disclosing.

Consistently, survivors talked about needing adults to start the conversation that may have led to them feeling able to talk about what was happening to them. Survivors stated that it is up to adults to pick up on cues that children are in trouble, to understand what non-verbal and behavioural communication might mean, and to know how to talk about grooming and abuse. Adults must stand beside, support and care for children at all times, not only wait for a child to come to them and share everything.

*“...Notice non-verbal cues your child might be giving you, or differences in their behaviour when it’s in relation to a particular person and always ask the child if they are ok, if they are Uncomfortable... Listen to your child and notice your child’s behaviour - they could be trying to tell you something that they themselves don’t understand yet.”*

*“...Hoping someone would ask me specific questions and doing so in a calm environment in which hard topics felt easier with open conversations about safety and well-being...”*





*“...Noticed that I was acting “off” and asking what had happened...”*

*“My school teachers should/would have noticed I was completely withdrawn but they never questioned anything. They assumed I was lazy and not interested.”*

*“They could have noticed that I had gone from an outgoing happy child to a numb and unhappy girl.”*

*“My mum should have noticed my behaviour changes. She could have listened at my protests to be around the person.”*

*“I think adults around me could have picked up the signs better about what was occurring, being more curious about my bed wetting delays, pulling out my hair, regressing in behaviour, having nightmares and even sexualised behaviours.”*

*“...I wanted them to ask me why I was so different, why I stopped playing with dolls and why I suddenly needed to go to the toilet 16 times a day, because I loathed my body, because something wasn't right. I just wanted someone to look at me, my changes, and ask if I was ok, or if I needed a safe space to share something. Those exact words would have changed my life completely...”*



Sometimes peers noticed that there were problems, but as children themselves, they were not in a position to be able to help.

*“...The other adults I knew, mostly teachers, knew something was wrong, but never once reached out to ask what was going on. Somebody could have, should have, asked me if I was okay. I don’t remember anyone doing that, other than a friend who was the same age, and powerless in my eyes to do anything...”*

*“...Those friends didn’t know what to do. The younger one ignored it. The older friend said sorry that had happened but didn’t know what else to do or say.”*

It seemed so evident to many survivors that there were unmissable signs that sexual abuse may have been occurring. And yet, even the most simple and obvious actions were not taken, nor the most basic of questions asked.

*“...There was so much that could have been done but it just didn’t happen back then. When I was in high school even the police were involved because he made a play for one of my friends, my best friend. She was taken out of school and taken to the police station. No one at my school or even the police ever came and spoke to me about him. I was her best friend, he was my grandfather and no one thought to ask if he was making any sexual moves on me? As I got older, I did tell an aunt. She said it would be too upsetting for my parents to find out, so she didn’t want to be the one to tell them the bad news...”*

*“...Someone could have asked questions, especially when a certain family friends and family member was spending a lot of time with me or stopped them from spending time with me....”*



*"...Teachers could have checked in on me - explored why I was unhappy- one teacher was kind and let me stay in the classrooms fixing prayer and hymn books but never asked why I was unhappy..."*

*"Noticed that I was being encouraged to leave all the other adults and be alone with this man on many occasions. How could no one have noticed?"*

*"...It would have made it easier if anyone would have asked me how I really was. My parents were pretty absent (emotionally) but neither my teachers at school asked how I was. We did not have access to a counsellor at school either. It would have made easier if someone I trusted was there to provide me with a safe space for me to de-brief..."*

Survivors understood how manipulative efforts by the perpetrators put them above scrutiny, making them almost untouchable. But they also described that had they been prompted in certain ways; they may have opened up and told someone about grooming behaviours and abuse. Survivors gave plenty of examples of their attempts to signal for help, both through words and behaviours, only for them to be ignored or not recognised. They now know that it should never have been up to them as children to be burdened with that responsibility. Adults needed to ask direct questions and show unambiguously that the children's statements would be prioritised over any loyalty or respect that might be felt towards the person harming them.



*“...I often asked if he would be at social gatherings and events. I wish somebody had asked me why I kept asking. I spoke to my mum years later and she just thought I liked him and was asking if he would be there. Like Emma’s situation, my parents trusted him. It never crossed their minds that I was asking because something was happening. At the time I remember wanting someone, anyone, to directly ask me if he was hurting me. I like to think I would have answered truthfully but I’m not really sure. I wish the option had been there though because it could have made a difference....”*

*“I needed the grown ups around me to take notice of my signals that I wasn’t okay and ask me questions to check if I was ok or not. I needed the adults around me to have the courage to involve police where there was evidence of criminal behaviour.”*

Many survivors wanted the adults around them to piece together the clues that were so evident in hindsight. For some, the only focus or attention from the adults who could have helped them was misdirected, with children’s signals of trauma viewed as challenging behaviours that disrupted other students or the polite setting that was expected of them. For many, there was a longing for an unfulfilled need to be protected by the adults who instead punished them, because they had not understood the meaning behind their behaviours.

*“...I was seen as disruptive and behaving poorly at no point did anyone ask why my behaviour changed so much. My results at school deteriorated significantly and at no point did anyone put the pieces together. I was always treated and spoken to as an adult...I don’t feel like I was protected from the grooming or predatory behaviour and the focus was always on my behaviour...”*

*“The abusers are brilliant manipulators and turn your “safe” space against you. If a child start acting completely different from the norm for a period something is wrong the child is not just naughty.”*

*“...I did not think that anyone would believe what was happening if I tried to explain it. I felt that everyone was talking about me, but no-one was talking with me about what was obviously pretty traumatic at the time (I developed anorexia). Everyone was in a panic about me not eating, but I just felt they were all getting annoyed at me for not eating, rather than taking the time to talk with me and possibly understand that something far deeper was going on...”*

*“I look back and try and remember when I started to behave differently and if it was observable. And I think it may have been... I think that no one noticed the self harming (I was good at hiding it) but I wonder if in all the business someone should have noticed the changes. Acting out, getting in physical fights and aggressively verbally challenging the perpetrator came later when I was about 11yrs. Again, no-one reacted except to think I was the ‘bad kid.’”*

*“Kids don’t act naughty because they want to, they act out because they don’t have the vocabulary to express what they are feeling.”*

### **Key finding 3:**

As children, survivors needed adults to know more about tactics of perpetrators of child sexual abuse, and how they manipulated adults too.

A significant theme that emerged from the responses was the view expressed by survivors that they wanted adults around them to have been more suspicious of the behaviour of perpetrators especially when it seemed so obvious that the abuse was occurring.

*“A doctor I was taken to by my father to test if I was pregnant could have questioned the situation more and had an avenue to report through. If there is suspicion they should report it. My father may have been convincing with the story he told the doctor but it should be questioned and reported.”*

*“...The biggest one - one night, he took me for a ‘drive’. He took me to an out of the way place and in the middle of it a police car pulled up. He got out and spoke to them and they drove off. He took me home and all I can remember is seeing my mom at the door and feeling embarrassed and ashamed - he’d earlier said, don’t worry, I’ve explained to them (the police) you were upset and I was just talking to you. And then said as we pulled up, I’ll explain it all to mom. I thought he meant - about what he was doing to me and so felt ashamed and embarrassed. But mom never came and spoke to me. I don’t think he told her what really happened - I don’t think she’d have ignored it. But I was also left wondering what she didn’t ask me about the event at all, it was never brought up.....I of course needed the Police to have spoken to me and not him. I needed mum to be more curious as to why we’d been stopped by the police - assuming that he even told her. I wasn’t going to bring it up. In hindsight, I think I would have needed people to ask questions as to why my moods and behaviours had changed, why my grades at school were going down...”*

For some, it was felt that adults should have known that perpetrators use cultural, religious and traditional affiliations as a tactic to access children.

*“They should have...understood that just because someone is a charming family friend and from the same cultural heritage, this in no way normalises a 29 year old man spending private time with a 14 year old girl...”*

*“Respect is earned and should not automatically be bestowed on anyone until they have shown you they are worth your respect - especially priests, nuns...”*

*“Priests had access to individual children at any time. They were considered to be God’s representative on earth.”*

It was very clear that survivors believed that not knowing the grooming tactics of perpetrators of child sexual abuse was a barrier to adults identifying that the abuse may be beginning or was already occurring. Specifically, they believed that a greater understanding of the dynamics of grooming was needed to raise awareness of how it positions children into powerlessness and blinds other adults into missing what was really going on. Adults having a knowledge of grooming was one of the most resounding lessons communicated by survivors.

*“...None of the adults around me could have recognised that this person might one day sexually abuse a child, they don’t wear a badge or behave in that way when others are around...”*

*“...My family could have been more aware of the signs of grooming and supervising contact with certain adults...”*

*“...I believe if my parents understood what grooming looked like, in terms of the whole family getting groomed. And how they insert themselves in that family’s life often pushing boundaries and wanting access to your children. In my case a male friend always popping in unannounced and offering to babysit or offering sleepovers at his family’s house....”*



*“...The adults around me (mother and Aunt) failed to identify the grooming process that was occurring or to put into place boundaries around how much alone time I had with my Uncle...”*

*“Teach them about grooming and be suspicious of adult people who take an interest in your children’s lives. Ask about their work and talk to them about your own experiences. That the world is a good place but there are plenty of bad people and sometimes it’s hard to know the difference.”*

*“The adults themselves didn’t know what the grooming behaviours were, didn’t want to acknowledge or believe what was occurring was sexual abuse or refused to believe when the abuse was disclosed.”*

For many, the perpetrator of the abuse structured the environment and the relationships around children as part of the grooming process, making it seem like they were everywhere the child was. For these survivors, there was no escape. There was no relief. There were only opportunities to be abused again, sometimes in social gatherings in which protective adults were present but rendered blind to the manipulation and the subsequent abuse.

*“...Firstly, there should have been better supervision of me - I should not have been left alone with that person EVER. Secondly there should have been much stricter boundaries around who this person was and where they had access to. This perpetrator was in family workplace and home. He was in all the places that I had access to. He was with all the people I was with. Next - this person should not have been trusted the way he was. He was a masterful groomer and this just made it easier for him...”*



*“...My parents were either close by, at the same event or left me in the care of a trusted relative. They did what they thought was best to protect me....”*

*“...My sexual abuse as a child started when I was 9 years old. I was abused for several years by a trusted community member and ‘family friend’ who was my gymnastics coach. Because of his position, I held them in a position of respect (as you do with teachers, coaches etc).”*

#### **Key finding 4:**

Survivors needed to have their experiences validated and unequivocally told that the abuse was not their fault.

It is clear from the responses of survivors just how challenging it is to find the strength to disclose abuse. Speaking about abuse cannot be expected of children when adults are not creating safe spaces and opportunities to speak openly, or picking up on subtle cues that are challenging enough for children to share. When children find the strength to disclose abuse, and they are not believed, an additional layer of betrayal that many could not understand or ever forgive was exposed. One of the most frequently expressed views in the survey responses was the simple wish that someone had believed them when they first disclosed the sexual abuse. As they described their experience, many survivors remembered how painful it had been for them to have had reactions that reflected doubt, distrust and outright disbelief in what they had communicated.

*“...I don’t know why no one believed me over perpetrator’s persistent denial despite his history of ‘taking advantage’ of other women...”*

*“...Believe me instead of telling me to stop making up stories about their friends or others who were sexually abusing me...”*

*“...The adults around me failed me, they could have done better by listening to what I was saying and taking it seriously and then by asking me my perspective of the situation without shaming me for what I was the victim of...”*

*“I remember telling my mother the first time, it took me a long time to find the courage to say it. When I did she didn’t believe me, I told her again a year later and she told me to be quiet.”*

*“They disregarded it and didn’t believe me. Then also when I told my mum what happened and she also said “are you sure you’re not just overreacting”.*

*“It was incredibly hard for me to tell my mum. When I did she blamed me.”*

*“When I told her what my father was doing to me, she pretended not to understand.”*

*“...I tried to tell one trusted adult about the abuse I was suffering and that adult told me I shouldn’t tell lies as it would bring shame to my family. When it eventually came to light, a family member found out and accused me of being indecent and a slut for what had happened, telling me not to do it again...”.*

*“...I was disbelieved, shamed, and my abuser was protected by my parents so that no-one else would accuse them of sloppy (at best) parenting....”*

*“....Just simply believed what I was saying instead of looking down on me for telling the truth...”*

*“...My mum could have listened to me and took my side when I told her instead of pretending like the abuse didn’t happen...”*



Without certainty that they would be cared for, protected and believed if they spoke up, many survivors remained in danger for longer.

*“...Create an environment that does not punish you for something wrong. The abusers tend to paint a picture that you would be in more trouble when you speak out...”*

*“...I was terrified and not knowing who would believe me and what they would do was what the abuser threatened me with. If the adults could have taught me at a young age and told me that they would believe me no matter who the abuser was, even if they were friends or family, this would have made a huge difference...If I knew I had a network of people rather than just my mum, that also would have helped. I needed to be told beforehand that someone would believe me and this would have made me discard the abuser’s threats...”*

*“As the person abusing me was in a position of authority and very respected by my parents and in the general community, I feel the questions would have been thrown back at me about the validity of what was happening. I think I would have been made to feel like I was losing the plot if I told them the truth.”*

Some survivors reported that the adults did nothing even in response to witnessing the abuse by the perpetrator, or being sure that it was going on.

*“Mother walked in on it happening. It never happened again but was never mentioned again. She didn’t know it was worse than what she witnessed, that there was 2 of them because she never asked. I thought I was bad for taking part in it and was deeply ashamed and confused so I pushed it down and pretended it never happened. I didn’t understand what was happening was abuse. I thought I was the one in trouble. No one ever said not to talk about it to anyone. I just knew I couldn’t so I never did. I don’t think she even told dad. She could have done more to protect me from them but she saw me as equally to blame when in reality I was preyed upon by 2 family members.”*



*“...My school friend told my teacher what she saw at my slumber party when she walked in on my father sexually abusing me in the kitchen during the night when I went to get snacks. My teachers made it worse and did nothing to help me. Those teachers should have done something. It was in the late 70s early 80s, at a Catholic school and there were no services, marriages came before children in the Catholic community and Catholic school....”*

*“The adults around me pretended nothing was wrong even when they knew there was abuse happening. I needed adults around me to take an active interest in my well being and to talk to me about what was happening.”*

Like many children who are not sure of the response they would receive, some survivors described how they tested the waters of disclosing abuse, but ultimately decided not to, after what they did choose to share was responded to poorly. Others shared that when they disclosed their abuse to one person at the time, who did not believe them, they did not try again.

*“...Believed me when I tried to test their trust by telling them that my abuser was always physically abusing me, which he was. My younger self has planned to tell them about the sexual abuse too once I knew that they were on my side about him hitting me all the time, but unfortunately no one was as they were too busy with life and he was just playing....”*

*“I have never disclosed my abuse to anyone fully because the times I have tried have ended very badly.”*

*“...Listened to me and validated my feelings that what was happening wasn't right. The abuser told me that no one would believe me and when I told my mother, she told me I was lying. This confirmed his threats and I didn't tell another adult until I was in my late teens....”*



## Key finding 5:

As children, survivors needed adults to take action.

The vast majority of survey respondents highlighted that adults did not take action or protect them as children.

*"...At the time the adults around me did nothing to support or protect me. Even those who knew things weren't right .... albeit not knowing it involved sexual abuse.... did not consider it to be their place to "interfere". Years later when the abuse was disclosed, family members closed ranks and ostracised my sister and me for speaking about it...others encouraged us to forgive and forget...nobody suggested it was something we should make a fuss about..."*

*"...The adults around me should have spoken up on my behalf and protected me..."*

*"I reported to my mother and she had no idea how to cope, putting me in further danger."*

Many survivors now look back and wish they had been taken to talk to someone outside of their immediate family because it would have given them an opportunity to engage with an adult whose views had not already been manipulated by the perpetrator, or who might care when they felt no one at home did.

*"...I wish they had taken me to someone non-related (so not emotionally twisted so that I couldn't raise the topic) to talk to. Instead I buried it inside as my personal shame and failure as an emotional/physical person..."*

*"...listened when I said I didn't want to go to that relative's house for sleepovers anymore. I wish I was taken to the doctors for the constant stomach aches (anxiety). I wish someone just asked me if everything was okay or why i didn't want to go for sleepovers anymore..."*



*“I wish I had told someone at the school I attended. I felt no one at home would listen. As I was constantly told to be quiet, I thought this meant no one wanted to hear from me.”*

*“If I knew I could tell others, rather than just my immediate family, I might have.”*

Many wanted the adults around them to stop contact between the perpetrator and them as children. Then, the abuse would have stopped.

*“...I needed them to believe me, and to remove me from the source of the abuse...”*

*“...Stopped the contact immediately. Took more notice when a child says that an adult is too friendly, don't compliment the adult and talk about what a wonderful/ important person they are. It makes the child doubt their gut feeling and in my case, led to more intrusive abuse...”*

*“...Not remained in contact with the perpetrator following the assault...”*

*“...They could have removed me from the situation but didn't. He said he would stop, and they trusted that. We kept visiting this monster because my mum didn't want me and my siblings to miss out on what she thought was a wonderful holiday. I had been groomed...”*



Survivors were clear that they wanted adults to have found the courage to take action, even in the face of topics that felt awkward or hard to talk about. Many said that they continued to struggle with understanding why other adults acted as if the abuse was not taking place, despite having facts that proved otherwise. They offered an important insight to adults of today that ignoring uncomfortable or challenging topics only kept children vulnerable to abuse. It was more important to acknowledge the discomfort, ask the terrifying questions, and consider the needs of the child first and take action to protect them.

*“...They could have identified my behaviours that suggested abuse and asked the hard questions. Sex offenders are very clever and manipulative but there are some behaviours that should not be dismissed. If a child presents to a doctor with concerns around chronic masturbation at a young age, don’t ignore it because it makes you uncomfortable. Sit in the discomfort and be an advocate...”*

*“At the time she even asked me if there was anything else I wanted to tell her. But the plea in her eyes of “please don’t” crippled any response in me. As an adult I get it. As a child, I was compassionate and couldn’t hurt her more with the truth. Her silent plea broke our mother/child relationship. I never thought of her in the same way again.”*

*“...The adults around me pretended nothing was wrong even when they knew there was abuse happening. I needed adults to be brave enough to do whatever was needed to make me safe instead of acting as though things were fine...”*

### **Key finding 6:**

Survivors want to be part of making a difference for children now and for children in the future.

Finally, it was clear from so many survivors that they engaged in the survey because they wanted to make a difference to children’s safety. They wanted to use their insights to focus community attention and offer the wisdom that is required to more effectively protect children from sexual abuse.

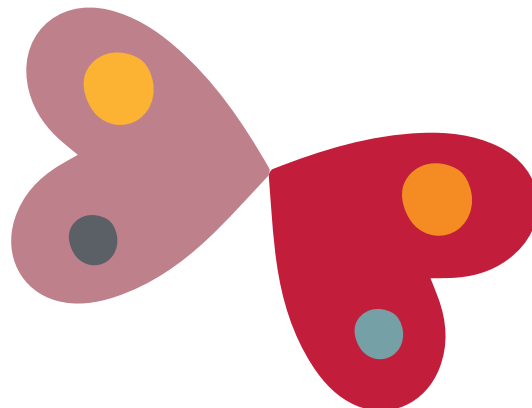
They wanted the sexual abuse of children to end with them. They did not want current and future generations of children to endure the trauma and pain of sexual abuse in the way they had had to.

These sentiments were repeated in different ways. Some thanked Emma for her courage and were able to strengthen their own resolve to have an impact through hearing and seeing how she was standing up for and alongside survivors.

*“...They could have removed me from the situation but didn’t. He said he would stop, and they trusted that. We kept visiting this monster because my mum didn’t want me and my siblings to miss out on what she thought was a wonderful holiday. I had been groomed...”*

*“...I think Emma is breathtakingly brave and strong. Please thank her for me... please tell her that what she is doing is so important and thank her. I am sitting at work in tears as finally...finally i have a chance in my life to help a little small bit towards building a way our communities can maybe stop one child being alone and I am so, so grateful for the chance to help if only a little bit...”*

It was for many the first time they had allowed themselves to share experiences of their childhood, having held onto the secrecy for so long. For some, this brought some relief and an emerging acceptance that they had healed over the years and their participation in the survey was a marker of the change.





*“...Thank you for listening. I feel like this is a secret part of my life at times which is awful. It happened decades ago and I have healed and moved on but knowing people are working on how to protect children and give words/language and have plans to change and develop this work is wonderful....”*

*“....I thank you for giving me a space to share my feelings. No one in my life has asked me these questions, and being able to take space and sit with my thoughts, feelings and memories, is a gift that I am truly humbled to receive. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart....”*

For some, the healing had not yet happened. They were cautious to be involved and still frightened that they would not be taken seriously and have their experiences validated and believed.

Many were grateful that society norms had changed and that it was already less stigmatising to speak openly about abuse experiences of child sexual abuse. They hoped that by speaking up themselves, they would encourage others to join in with this project and others that give voice and agency to the lived and living experiences of survivors.

*“...I am 73 years old and am aware my life experiences (and trauma) haunt me. There is a frustration in that - but - I am also aware of being grateful to be alive and I do my best to live a life of gratitude. I appreciate this opportunity to share my story - a reminder that I am indeed a courageous and adventurous woman who embraces all her life experiences with gratitude - and - encourages others to embrace their life experiences with no limits....”*

*“...I am grateful that talking about abuse, in particular sexual abuse, happens so much more now. There are amazing people and resources to help children and young people to understand abuse, that creates awareness of what is okay and what is not, what consent means....”*



## Discussion

In this first analysis of the survey responses, it is clear that survivors wanted the adults around them to know more and be prepared to do more to protect and support children. They did not believe that the onus should be on children and young people to protect themselves from the sexual abuse. Children should never be in the frame for such responsibility. It is always up to adults to fulfil this obligation. For example, survivors made it clear that, as children, they needed adults to

- be more conscious that any person, even those they trust, could be the one committing the abuse;
- know more about tactics of perpetrators of child sexual abuse, and how they manipulate adults too;
- reach out to them and ask them what was wrong, and know the signs that meant they should;
- tell them unequivocally that the abuse was not their fault; and,
- take action to protect them.

In order to take up this responsibility, adults need to feel capable and confident to firstly identify the need for action (suspect or discover that sexual abuse is occurring) and then understand the most appropriate course of action to take to protect and support the child.

The insights of the survivors in this project echo loudly the needs of adults in the community. Having researched community attitudes about child abuse for more than eighteen years, Tucci and Mitchell (2022) consistently found that adults themselves feel they lack the knowledge and confidence required to prevent child abuse and adequately act to protect children. These studies repeatedly identified that adults are not aware of the true scale and impact of child abuse. They do not believe that it is as widespread as it really is. They have a shallow understanding of how it is defined, what its components are, how it develops or the level of risk that children and young people face in their own homes. They lack confidence about when, what and why they should take action when exposed to information that children are being abused. There are still prevailing attitudes that stop them from stepping up to keep children safe. These attitudes have been there for at least eighteen years and they have not changed.

Combined, the messages from survivors and the views of adults in the community (Tucci and Mitchel, 2022) have argued strongly for mechanisms that will improve the awareness, understanding and confidence of all adults in the community.

The insights of survivors begin to describe the basis of a knowledge base that a community must hold to build the confidence and competence in adults to be better able to protect and support children. It includes:

**The scale of the issue of child sexual abuse:** It should highlight the responsibility of all adults, especially those working with children, to be alert to potential abuse and active in their response to it. It needs to highlight the high prevalence rates of child abuse in Australia. In so doing, it will take abuse from behind closed doors and into the public sphere.

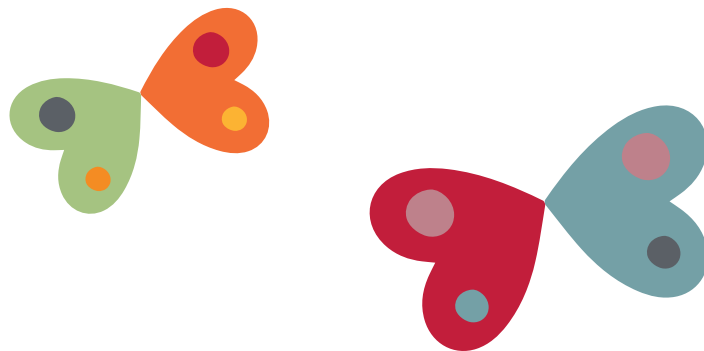
**The tactics of perpetrators:** It must combat stereotypes of what perpetrators of child sexual abuse look like in addition to teaching adults how to identify the critical signs that an individual is behaving in a way that is dangerous, grooming or abusing a child. This education must also consider the complexities associated with children being abused by those who are close to them, and who are trusted by their community, and how this is likely to be a significant barrier to disclosure. It needs to enable adults to understand the signs that someone may be acting inappropriately or abusively towards children. It should include information about the ways that children and young people are manipulated into contexts in which the abuse occurs, becomes normalised and then held secret.

**Promoting children's rights and voice:** It is fundamental that adults learn how to support a child's autonomy, so that their understanding of their rights are strong, even when a person with significant power attempts to deny or restrict these rights. It needs to support adults to know how to create safe spaces and supportive relationships in which children feel able to speak openly and honestly, even against another adult or young person in the environment.

**Recognise indicators in children:** It must include information to support adults to develop a strong understanding of the warning signs that children experiencing abuse may display, including verbal and non-verbal cues. Adults need to have an understanding that 'challenging' behaviours by children are a form of communication, rather than reasons to punish and manage without consideration.

**Talking to children about concerns:** Adults working with or supporting children must understand how to create safe spaces for children to share anything they like. Adults need skills in how to ask questions and direct conversation about any concerns they may be observing in a way that is experienced as supportive and effective and opens up the possibility to for children to talk about what may be happening to them.

**Responding to Disclosures:** Adults need the knowledge and skills to respond to a disclosure safely and effectively. Many adults lack the confidence to take action if a child discloses to them. Critically, disclosures must not only be acted on in order to protect children, but they must also be handled with extreme care, respect and compassion. This training should increase adult knowledge of how to respond to disclosures of manipulation and abuse in a way that makes children feel believed, not at fault, and validated for communicating about their discomfort and distress.



To date, efforts to educate adults in the community about sexual abuse are most commonly achieved via:

1. Episodic efforts to engage in social marketing campaigns to raise awareness.

Most often these campaigns have a call to action that invites adults to find out more by visiting a website. Whilst the social campaign seeks to change attitudes and motivate the community to learn more, it is difficult to assess their impact. Many have been vague and had very little lasting impact. Many have been short lived and not been funded properly. Currently, the Commonwealth Government has launched a new campaign entitled “One Talk at a Time”. This campaign is currently being evaluated.

2. Training offered to staff and volunteers by organisations subject to the national child safe principles.

Whilst training is required as part of adherence to the national principles by some organisations, it is variable as to who receives training and the quality of the training. For example, the State and Commonwealth Governments are only now considering a recommendation to make child safe training mandatory for approved providers of child care and early childhood education nationally. This has occurred in response to the previously cited Operation Tenterfield which led to a former childcare worker being charged with 1623 child abuse offences against 91 children, alleged to have been committed in Brisbane, Sydney and overseas between 2007 and 2022 .

Both of these mechanisms have a place and an important role to play in the protection of children from sexual abuse but we could go even further.

## Recommendation

Introduced in 2000, the Working with Children Check (WWCC) is legislated by each state and territory for the purpose of conducting background checks for people seeking to engage in child-related work. The check aims to prevent people from working with children if records indicate that they may pose an unacceptable risk to children. Assessment of a person's eligibility to work with children and involves a check of a person's criminal history and other disciplinary and police information. The process of application is administrative, with no additional requirements on WWCC holders to undertake any training in the area of child abuse or child protection.

The widespread application of current WWCC systems provides a critical opportunity to improve the knowledge and confidence of adults in the community who have involvement with children about identifying and responding to child sexual abuse.

**It is therefore recommended that all State and Territory Governments introduce a nationally consistent mandatory online training program about child sexual abuse (and other forms of abuse and violation against children and young people) as an essential requirement in the application process for all adults seeking a WWCC. It is essential that such mandatory training be implemented by all government instrumentalities and professional bodies that are responsible for the professional registration of practice disciplines who work with children and young people (e.g. Victorian Institute of Teaching).**

## Conclusion

It is a sad irony that mandatory training is a requirement for those who want to work in hospitality and hold a Responsible Service of Alcohol Certificate, and yet there is no mandatory training required to hold a Working with Children Check in any jurisdiction.

The mandatory training involved with the Responsible Serving of Alcohol includes developing the confidence and competence of staff to assess the levels of intoxication of patrons and how to engage them in conversations about limiting their further alcohol intake or refusal to serve further drinks to them. The intent of the training is to ensure the safety of patrons and compliance with licencing regulations.

Adding mandatory training to the pre-existing platform of a Working with Child Check is a small step to take that may in fact lead to a large and far reaching benefit for children and the community's efforts to prevent child sexual abuse. It is cost effective with the potential to impact the safety of children at scale across diverse geographic and demographic communities.

Our children are worth the investment.

And at its heart, the problem of child sexual abuse is for adults to solve – not children.

**The problem of child sexual abuse is for adults to solve – not children.**



## A thank you to survivors.

By its very definition, this project could not exist without the hundreds of my fellow survivors who have built it up with their raw strength, their vulnerable braveness, and their willingness to transform pain they never should have had to hold into tangible change for children.

I want to emphasise that 32% of the survivors who contributed to our project survey wrote that they would want all children to know that if they had been sexually abused, it was “not their fault”. Many, many more of us used different words to share the same sentiment: the shame and guilt which so many of us hold does not belong to us, it never has, and it never should. With over 500 mentions of the word “fault” in the survey, it is so important we carry this reminder with us. As so many of you reminded us, we are worthy of love.

I hope that the soreness and bruising that comes with working on this project and contributing to this survey, which many survivors shared, might be paired with a feeling of community, and a promise of progress to hold onto. There are many of us, and though we were bound together through suffering, here we are. Still standing. Dedicated to holding the children who roam this land today and tomorrow with the same care that we all deserved, and continue to deserve each day, without doing anything at all.

I promise that I, our committee of survivors, our steering group and the wider Foundation will continue to treat the wisdom you shared with us with the seriousness, respect and weight it deserves. It really will be life changing for children, we will make sure of it.

Thank you.

– Emma Hakansson



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## Help and Support

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

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

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

**Lifeline - 13 11 14**

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

**13YARN - 13 92 76**

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

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

**1800RESPECT - 1800 737 732**

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

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

**Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service - 1300 657 380**

9am-5pm, 7 days a week

For adults impacted by childhood trauma including child sexual abuse

**Kids Helpline - 1800 55 1800**

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

# Contact us

P.O. Box 3335, Richmond, VIC 3121

1300 381 581

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