



# How to protect your workplace against child abuse

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A predator will always find gaps. Like a fox circling a chicken coop, weak spots will be tested. Your perimeter fence must be secure. All too often, it is not.

As the Royal Commission into Child Abuse has highlighted with heartbreaking repetition, once a perpetrator finds a way into an institution, the damage can be catastrophic.

How is it that places that should have been safe havens for children were infiltrated in such systematic fashion, often with crimes going undetected - or ignored - for years?

A program to "child abuse-proof" organisations could provide answers. And there is hope it will go some way towards stemming the tide of institutional violence.

The Australian Childhood Foundation has analysed international and local research alongside 10 years of abuse cases to pinpoint common factors that leave organisations vulnerable to subversion by paedophiles.

Its results form the backbone of an accreditation scheme that major bodies, including the YMCA, Anglicare and Ronald McDonald House, are lining up to join as they try to assure a nervous public they are taking child protection seriously.

The foundation's chief executive, Joe Tucci, says that just as children and parents are targeted, organisations are also "groomed" by paedophiles, earning the trust of staff in a bid to gain unrestricted access to young people.



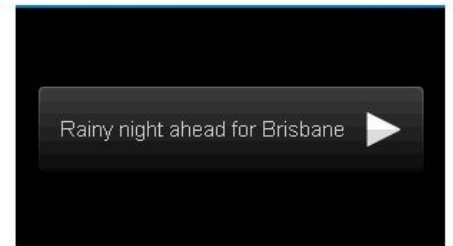
Moshe Kahn, director of Chabad Youth. Photo: Simon Schluter

"Potential perpetrators of abuse won't try to abuse a child straight up, but first they will test the perimeter in a small way. It might be something like taking a photo of a child on their phone, and even though it's a breach of policy a fellow staff member thinks it's innocent enough so the perpetrator learns that the perimeter is not strong," he said.

"Time and again the royal commission showed that these small breaches that seem innocuous are actually tests by the perpetrator to see if the response is weak or strong. If it's weak, they'll move to the next

test. If it's strong, they might move to the next organisation. An organisation's perimeter is its

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culture."

In order to qualify for Safeguarding Children accreditation, bodies with a duty of care for children must tighten up four key areas that leave them at high risk of infiltration by abusers.

Chiefly, they must address a lack of awareness of the risk, and commit to investing in child-protection measures to the same degree as other preventive areas such as workplace health and safety policies.

Staff also receive training on how sexual predators think and behave, so as to better understand how they might exploit an organisation's weak points.

Most importantly, strict policies on what constitutes inappropriate behaviour must be established, alongside clear guidance on how to report and respond to suspicious incidents.

Had these measures been in place while Jonathan Lord was a childcare worker at YMCA centres in Sydney's south, he might not have been able to molest 12 children between 2009 and 2011.

Before he was hired, nobody checked his references, failing to discover he had previously been fired from an American camp for "questionable behaviour " with an eight-year-old boy.

The crimes, which saw him jailed in 2012 for a minimum of six years, led to lawyers for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, branding YMCA NSW an "unsafe" organisation for children.

They identified systemic problems such as a lack of training for staff, failure to implement child safety policies, tolerance of inappropriate touching of children and a lack of confidential reporting system for staff. The YMCA is now putting centres from all over the country through the Safeguarding Children program as the organisation aims to restore trust with parents.

Chief executive of YMCA Australia Ron Mell said it was more than an attempt to clean up the brand's image.

"We've learnt a lot from the royal commission. No institution can ever absolutely guarantee that a predator won't have access to children, but what you can do is create an environment that ensures that that predator doesn't have any opportunity to abuse," he said.

"That environment that you create is one where there is an open culture, where there is ongoing training, good induction and, obviously, thorough referee checks ... Parents bring their children to a YMCA on the understanding that it is safe for children, and it's important we honour that commitment."

Accreditation takes up to seven months as staff are trained and policies developed. An audit is conducted each year by an independent panel of child protection consultants and legal and governance experts, who interview staff, parents and volunteers to ensure correct procedures are being followed.



One of the key issues addressed - and the biggest area of vulnerability for an organisation according to Tucci - is communication and social media policy.

"We've seen teachers who have been charged with sexual assault of a young person, and that's really the final act. The preparatory or grooming act is often hundreds of texts that engages that young person in a relationship they've kept secret from the family, and it's about socialising the child outside of the classroom," he said.

Moshe Kahn, director of Chabad Youth - the largest Jewish youth outreach organisation in Victoria, caring for 1000 children a week through after-school clubs, weekend programs, retreats and camps - says that since receiving accreditation in May it has been able to provide greater clarity to staff on what is appropriate interaction with children.

"It's things like driving a kid home, communication with a kid - texting or things like that - taking pictures of kids on your phones, giving gifts to kids. A lot of them are small things that on their own aren't necessarily a problem and could be innocent, but could also be potentially leading to grooming," he said.

While Chabad has no history of institutional abuse, a former rabbi at its sister organisation Yeshivah College last year pleaded guilty to molesting four boys under his care while teaching there in the 1990s.

Kahn says he wants to assure parents they have best practice when it comes to child safety.

"I don't want to leave any grey areas," he said. "It needs to be so clear that if you break a boundary that you've done something wrong. And if a child wants to come and tell me something has happened, it must be crystal-clear - were you alone with the child? Did you communicate with the child? And then if you've done something inappropriate, even if it is something innocent, you're to blame for being negligent and breaching one of our policies."

Manny Waks, head of Tzedek, a support group for Jewish survivors of child sexual abuse, welcomed the accreditation program, but like many who have suffered institutional abuse, he worried it would not be enough to address the history of cover-up that had been evident in so many molestation cases.

"Having an accreditation process doesn't mean that an organisation is well placed to address the issue of child sexual abuse, because there are a number of other factors, most importantly the culture which exists," he said.

"You can have great policies and procedures sitting on the shelf, yet the people involved in that organisation are people who would cause victims not to disclose allegations of abuse or not to take steps that they should be taking in order to address the issue."

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