



## Finding the right words uncover child sexual abuse

By **STEPHEN LUNN**  
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Emma Hakansson is a survivor of child sexual abuse and is now spearheading a project to build a better understanding of the language designed for parents, teachers and carers to help to communicate. Picture: Aaron Francis/The Australian

Emma Hakansson is 22. Her words chill, but her determination is clear.

“When I was a small child, still scared of the dark, still years away from having my ears pierced, I was repeatedly sexually abused by a person my family trusted, my community trusted, I trusted,” she said.

“My abuser was a woman, which is unusual and means at times people think the abuse wasn’t ‘as bad’, but of course I know how bad it really was.

“I changed. My confidence was shattered. I suffered from depression. I started self-harming.

“I was completely different from the little girl my parents knew before.”

Her parents, desperate to understand, tried to speak to her. And her to them. But both in their own language, which didn’t work. While her symptoms were treated, she was left to continue to navigate the abuse and trauma alone. It took more than four years before they found themselves having a conversation both could understand.

“I was asked directly if I was sexually abused. We speak to children with such adult words. At the time I didn’t really even know what sex was, let alone an abusive form of it,” she said.

“I was asked if I was inappropriately touched. I thought inappropriate was something like bad table manners. I was asked if someone hurt me. At that age, I - associated being hurt with playground bullies.”

Ms Hakansson said she did try to broach the subject with her mother in her own way, with all the weight of being a “good girl” and not wanting to get anyone in trouble.

“Saying what was actually happening was just too much, so I said I thought the woman was weird. It was the best word I could find to sum up a whole mess of feelings.

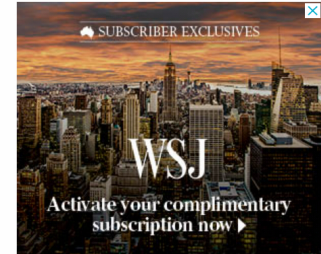
“It took all I had to dare to use that word to Mum, but she says she didn’t really pick up on it.

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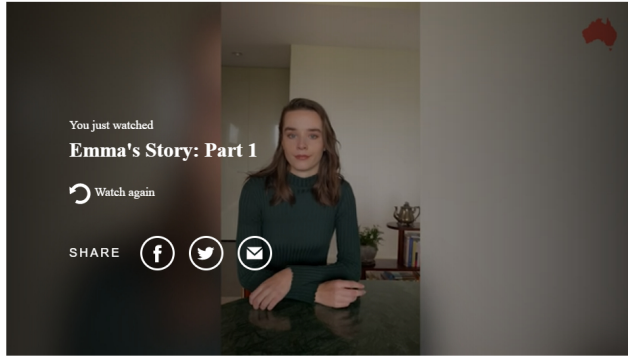
“From that moment, I kind of shut down.”

On finally hearing the truth, from Ms Hakansson’s psychiatrist, her parents were horrified, devastated, and have been incredibly supportive since that moment. It had been a vital part of her progress since, she said.

The experience continues to shape Ms Hakansson’s life.

“Trauma like this is something you grow around rather than it ever disappearing,” she said.

Yet her determination shines through the grim self-assessment. It’s a determination that has led her to Emma’s Project.



Emma's Story: Part 1.

Partnering with the Australian Childhood Foundation, Ms Hakansson is launching a confidential survey, collecting first-person responses from child sexual abuse survivors, their families and industry professionals about what more they think could have been done to prevent the abuse from occurring.

Part of that knowledge is better understanding how, or even if, survivors may have been communicated to, or listened to, as they were enduring the abuse, she said.

“Child sexual abuse is talked about more now, but the prevention programs are still too theoretical and not based enough on the experience of survivors.

“We’re hoping this project can change that, with the knowledge gained built into programs and toolkits that can support parents, carers and teachers to better protect kids.

“We’re even hoping it might inform better future legislation,” she said.

Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive Joe Tucci said the project was one of the first of its kind in Australia.

“It can only now be done because of the strength and courage of survivors like Emma who are unwilling to stay silent any longer.”

For more information, visit [www.childhood.org.au/emmas-project](http://www.childhood.org.au/emmas-project). If this story raises concerns for you please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732)

**STEPHEN LUNN, SOCIAL AFFAIRS EDITOR**

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