

Media guidelines for responsible reporting on child sexual abuse

– yourtown’s advocacy submission

What is it about?

The University of Canberra News and Media Research Centre on behalf of the National Office for Child Safety (NoCS) are conducting a consultation regarding the development of guidelines for journalists to refer to when reporting on child sexual abuse, and a guide for victims and survivors when dealing with the media

Why is it important?

The key aim is to empower victims and survivors when they share their personal experiences with the media.

Some of yourtown’s key messages:

1. Using the right language to talk about child sexual abuse is essential to reduce stigma and empower those who have experienced abuse

The Media have a significant role to play in influencing the public on ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ behaviour, including publicly understood meanings of what is, or is not child sexual abuse. Current media depictions tend to focus on/create a narrative around outsiders ‘hunting for children to abuse’. Media accounts often fail to identify that child sexual abuse often happens within the context of families and its trusted circle of acquaintances.

2. Stronger focus on empowering those who have experienced child sexual abuse to tell their stories if, and when they are ready to do so, without pressure and in a way, they feel ‘safe’

Such an approach would align with a rights-based approach to engagement and UNICEF’s ‘Ethical reporting guidelines: Key principles for responsible reporting on children and young people’; specifically, when interviewing children to do no harm or reactivate the child’s pain and grief from traumatic events.

3. Journalists, editors, and media professional should treat child sexual abuse within First Nations, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities with particular sensitivity

Journalists should have consideration for the incredibly complex nature of child sexual abuse within the communities and the nature of historical interactions with the media. Consideration should also be given to the age of the person experiencing child sexual abuse, this includes not publishing a story or an image which might put the child, siblings, or peers at risk even when identities are changed, obscured or not used.

4. Child sexual exploitation is often misidentified/grouped together as child sexual abuse, domestic and family violence or harmful sexual behaviours between children

The guidelines should have clear definitions of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. Taking this opportunity to define and understand the differences highlights the importance of using language appropriately and reporting accurately.



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