



**yourtown**  
POWERING **kids**helpline

## **Media guidelines for responsible reporting on child sexual abuse**

A submission to: The University of  
Canberra and National Office for Child  
Safety

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**yourtown** is a trusted provider of services for young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, as well as support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. **yourtown** has evolved to helping hundreds of thousands of young people each year by powering a range of service offerings that support them through difficult challenges.

## Our services

- Kids Helpline, providing professional counselling and support to 5–25-year-olds across Australia since 1991,
- Kids Helpline @ School and Kids Helpline @ High School, which delivers early intervention and prevention programs through primary and secondary schools
- My Circle, a confidential, private, online peer support network for 13–25-year-olds to share information and build coping skills
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0-11 years old and their families, with moderate mental health needs
- Domestic and family violence refuge, accommodation, and therapeutic supports for women and their children, including post-refuge support
- Accommodation and therapeutic supports for young parents and their children at high risk
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in the Northern Territory and Queensland
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse, or been exposed to violence
- Young Parents Program providing parenting support to help with child development, life skills and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments, and
- Employment, education, and social enterprise programs to help long term unemployed young people re-engage with education and/or employment.

## Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25. It offers children and young people a range of care options that are right for their needs and circumstances.

Our commitment to being there anytime, and for any reason, has meant that we have responded to more than 8.6 million contacts from children and young people nationally in the 31 years since our service was first established, whilst also providing tens of millions of self-help interactions via our website and social channels.

In 2021, children and young people across Australia attempted to contact Kids Helpline almost 460,000 times – approximately 1,260 contacts per day, one contact every 69 seconds. Our counsellors provided almost 100,00 counselling sessions. The top issues children and young people contacted us about were mental health and emotional wellbeing (one in two), suicide-related concerns (one in six) and family relationships (one in six).

There was a 109% increase in children and young people requiring an immediate emergency response including the assistance of ambulance, police or child protection compared to 2020; 37% were related to child abuse, 33% to suicide attempts and 10% to sexual assault.

## Children and Families

**yourtown** provides accommodation and intensive individualised support to vulnerable young parents and their children through our San Miguel service. For over 40 years, San Miguel has provided a place to call home for vulnerable and at-risk families.

**yourtown** welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the University of Canberra News and Media Research Centre consultation being conducted on behalf of the National Office for Child Safety (NoCS) regarding the development of guidelines for journalists to refer to when reporting on child sexual abuse.

While **yourtown** supports the existence of clear guidelines governing engagement with the Media it is not clear how the proposed guidelines will align with existing media guidelines, such as the draft media guidelines developed by the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN), or whether organisations such as NAPCAN are supportive of the development of new guidelines. It is also not clear whether gaps have been identified in existing guidelines, or inaccuracies warranting the development of additional guidelines, or why it is necessary to develop new guidelines rather than support or update existing guidelines.

Another critical issue is the lack of guidance for those who use social channels in both a professional and non-professional setting. Increasingly media extends to those who use social channels, with commentary carried out by people who are not professionally trained or connected to a professional journalistic association. This is where the greatest risk lies in the way child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation is reported. Any approach/guidelines developed must have consideration for this burgeoning sector. **yourtown** strongly recommends the second round of consultation should include a greater focus on providing guidelines/advice around the use of social media channels.

Using the right language to talk about child sexual abuse is essential to reduce stigma and empower those who have experienced abuse. **yourtown** strongly supports resources that will assist media to raise awareness of child sexual abuse, while encouraging responsible reporting.

For more than 31 years, **yourtown** through our Kids Helpline has been at the forefront of providing digital mental health and wellbeing services for children and young people in Australia. Kids Helpline is available 24/7 for children and young people no matter where they live in Australia, anytime they need help, and for any reason. Our service is provided by a professional and experienced workforce comprised of paid qualified psychologists, counsellors and social workers specifically trained in supporting children and young people through digital mediums.

Our responses to the survey questions are set out below:

## 1. What do you think are the main issues around the media reporting of child sexual abuse?

**yourtown** has identified the following issues around the media reporting of child sexual abuse:

- **Use of language:** 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. Unfortunately, the use of language in the Media often obscures, or deliberately misleads with titillating headlines to sensationalise or maximise the news coverage (e.g., headline clickbait including 'body in a barrel', 'Man and his teen girlfriend 'killed girl, 17, in payback over STD', 'Sugar Daddy: Shopping centre sleaze pays for teen sexy Snapchats, or 'Does a monster live near you?')<sup>1</sup> regarding allegations or findings of child sexual abuse. Media reporting of child sexual abuse can often use incorrect language, misidentify or group together child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, effectively leading to confusion about (and sometimes conflation of) these different types of abuse. For example,

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<sup>1</sup> See Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Child Abuse and the Media', Policy and Practice paper, (June 2001) (<https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/child-abuse-and-media>).

cases of child exploitation can be reported by the Media as a child or teenager being 'in a relationship' with an adult this includes the use of terms such as 'teenage girlfriend'.

- Further inflammatory language may often be used misleading the community on the critical issue and have a catastrophising effect.
- Undifferentiated media coverage can play a critical role in perpetuating public stigma by falsely equating paedophilia and child sexual abuse. The use of the term 'paedophile' in a news report can foster 'myths' or 'rumours' and potentially detract from the positive work of practitioners engaging with these groups of people in effective interventions.
- **Media lens:** While the experience of child sexual abuse is traumatic, media stories regarding child sexual abuse often treat child sexual abuse as the worst type of trauma a person can experience. A quick scan of the current news will quickly demonstrate how media reporting is skewed towards reporting on the heinous nature of child sexual abuse and the perpetrators; with only minimal reporting of recovery, and positive outcomes, or even victim impact statements following successful court outcomes.
  - The reporting reinforces the narrative that those who have experienced or are experiencing child sexual abuse will inevitably experience mental health problems, be further victimised, and have/engage in poor parenting experiences. Media outlets should also actively highlight stories/experiences of those who have survived well and are effectively managing their trauma.
- **Reinforcing the monster myth:** 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. It is important to for the Media not to generalise abuse to something that happens out there, especially when it is likely to be occurring in places that should be safe, such as homes.
- The Media have clear social responsibilities in the way that they report child sexual abuse, and there are significant risks to the child. A young victim of child sexual abuse may be told that it's their fault, and as a result of their abuse, internalise messages of guilt and self-blame. These feelings can be exacerbated by media coverage, not only at the time, in later years, only to see the trauma resurface as the feelings of guilt and shame are re-awakened.

It is also important to note the critical role that good investigative journalism can play nationally and internationally. In the past, such journalism has contributed both to the community's understanding of the full extent of child abuse and has also led to major policy and legislative reform. The Media as well as the wider community have a role to play in ensuring all children are safe from harm. However, it is critical that the guidelines find a balance between the journalists 'liberty to report' and the right to (current and future) privacy, anonymity, and protection from harm for those children who are victims of sexual abuse.

## 2. What are the main issues around interactions between the media, including journalists, and victims and survivors?

**yourtown** has identified the following issues around interactions between the Media, including journalists:

- **Interactions:** Journalists, editors, and media professionals do not always have the appropriate skills to engage appropriately with those who have experienced child sexual abuse. Of particular concern is:
  - engaging in an approach that is overly curious,
  - leading the person who has experienced child sexual abuse and not letting them guide the direction and tone of the conversation, and

- pressuring them to share parts of their story that they may not be allowed to because of legal requirements.
- Children, as the evidence suggests, also often blame themselves for their own victimisation. This is another reason why journalists covering these issues should be particularly sensitive to the needs and issues of child victims.
- **Offering inducements:** Journalists often demonstrate their lack of understanding of the complexity of the situation when they pressure the person who has experienced child sexual abuse or their parents/care givers to talk. This can involve:
  - direct pressure (including telling the person experiencing child sexual abuse that they must tell story to make other people feel safe) or
  - indirect pressure (including suggesting that if they do not tell their story others will).
- **Using a heavy hand:** Journalists often take a heavy-handed approach without regard to the impact that the process has on the person who has experienced child sexual abuse.

### 3. What is your ideal outcome of both media guidelines for the reporting of sexual abuse, and a guide for victims and survivors to support them in their dealings with the media?

**yourtown** would like to see a 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'<sup>2</sup>; specifically, when interviewing children to do no harm or reactivate the child's pain and grief from traumatic events.

The guide for people who have experienced child sexual abuse should provide advice regarding -

- **Participating on their own terms:** While persons who have experienced child sexual abuse may be ready to tell their stories or share their experience, the guidelines should reiterate the choice they have to only share what they are comfortable disclosing and in manner that supports them 'being safe' and 'feeling safe'.
- **Clarifying the relationship with the journalist/interviewer:** Persons who have experienced child sexual abuse should be empowered to request information from the journalist about the process and interview, including about how their story will be shared and what purpose it serves.

Media guidelines for the reporting of child sexual abuse, and child sexual exploitation should provide clear standards around -

- **Ensuring supports are available:** Journalists should have consideration for the vulnerability of the person who has experienced child sexual abuse. They have a responsibility to ensure support is available for those who require it, whether it is by directing them to support services or checking if they would like a support person to be present at any stage during the process.
- **Minimising stigma:** Journalist should ensure they do not further stigmatize any person who has experienced child sexual abuse. This includes avoiding categorisations or descriptions that expose them to negative reprisals - including additional physical or psychological harm, or to lifelong abuse, discrimination, or rejection by their local communities.
- **Long term effects of media coverage:** Critically, consideration should also be given to the long-term effects of media coverage of children as victims of crime. In the

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF. (2022). Ethical reporting guidelines: Key principles for reporting on children and young people' (<https://www.unicef.org/media/reporting-guidelines>).

modern world of the internet – a report of child sexual abuse remains accessible forever. ‘Liberty to report’ should not mean a ‘licence to report’ without considering the long-term implications on the child, regardless of whether the parents’ consent to the media coverage on the child’s behalf. It is sad to note that far more attention is often paid to the privacy of children as perpetrators of crime, than as victims.<sup>3</sup> Privacy protections should ensure that the child cannot be identified, through any person identification of their own, or family/guardians responsible for their care.

Media guidelines should also require consideration of additional sensitivities in media coverage in cases where there is intra-familial child sexual abuse, given the victims of such crimes face unique problems that are not faced by other victims.

#### **4. What do you think are the essential elements that should be included in media guidelines for journalists, editors, and media professionals?**

The essential elements that should be included in the media guidelines for journalists, editors, and media professionals are -

- **Using appropriate language:** Journalists, editors and media professional should adopt person-first language for example, person experiencing child sexual abuse and person charged with child sexual abuse. Such an approach to language focuses on the needs of the individual by displaying deep empathy, a non-judgemental attitude, and non-emotive expression. The Media is responsible for setting the tone, using appropriate and person-first language will help to shape the narrative around child sexual abuse.
- **Obtaining consent:** Permission from the person experiencing child abuse, where they are under the age of 18, should be obtained from their guardian for all interviews, videotaping and, when possible, for documentary photographs.
  - Journalists should have consideration for circumstances where it is not possible to gain the consent of a guardian or doing so would put the child in danger and consult a practitioner on the best course of action, including ensuring the child is able to understand the process and any consequences of participating.
  - Journalists should be responsible for also warning parents or guardians providing consent on behalf of the child of the long-term effects of media coverage and given the modality of media that the child will be able to access media material about themselves on the internet.
- **Reinforce general principles for media reporting:** The Australian Press Council<sup>4</sup> outlines four key principles for journalistic integrity including accuracy and clarity, fairness and balance, privacy and avoidance of harm and integrity and transparency
- **Ensuring children and young people are safe and feel safe:** Journalists should limit the number of interviewers and/or photographers and trying to make the person experiencing child sexual abuse, especially children, as comfortable as possible and supported to tell their story without outside pressure, including from the interviewer.
- **Enabling a support person/guardian to be present:** The interviewee should be made aware that they can always have a support person/guardian present and throughout the process should be reinforced of this.

It is critical that journalists, editors, and media professionals have regard for the impact they have on the person experiencing child sexual abuse and the person charged with child sexual abuse. Under the principles of avoidance of harm, they should be obligated to ensure the platform they provide for people to share their stories does not increase vulnerabilities. As such there must be consideration for the purpose of reporting the story and the Media

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<sup>3</sup> Holsinger, R.L. (1991). *Media law*. McGraw-Hill, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Press Council. (2022). Statement of principles (<https://www.presscouncil.org.au/standards/statement-of-principles>).

outlet's role in doing so, adhering to the facts of the story without catastrophising or being inflammatory and checking with subject matter experts when necessary.

## 5. What do you think are the essential elements that should be included in a guide for victims and survivors in their interactions with the media?

The essential elements that should be included in the guide for victims and survivors in their interactions with the Media include guidance around –

- **An objective overview of the impact of media coverage:** This should provide an objective approach regarding the pros and cons of engaging with the Media, and being on the news, including short-, medium- and long-term impacts for victims and survivors who are children where consent is being provided by a parent/guardian. It should include information to help inform victims and survivors whether to interact at all.
- **Allowing for a pre-interview stage:** The preparation time leading up to the interview would allow the interviewee an opportunity to inform the journalist about the limits of the information they are willing to share, think through the consequences (both intended and unintended) of speaking about their story, and ask a support person/guardian to be present throughout the process.
- **Clarifying the nature of the interview:** Prior to the interview the person experiencing child sexual abuse could (where appropriate) reach out to the journalist to them an idea of the questions they will be asking and attempt a practice run.
- **Inquiring about the behaviour/approach of the journalist:** The person experiencing abuse should have opportunities throughout the process to ask questions about the approach, including asking the journalist to speak clearly and slowly throughout the process, informing them that they do not have to answer every question, clarifying the purpose of the interview and what types of information they need to know. This may also include understanding the type of journalist conducting the interview, including if they are an investigative or reporting journalist.

## 6. Are there any areas or topics that should be avoided, or treated with particular sensitivity?

Journalists, editors, and media professional should treat child sexual abuse within First Nations, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities with particular sensitivity. Diversity and inclusion however should be embraced across representations, where possible, featuring children from all backgrounds, including children with disabilities, and maintaining a balance of gender, religious and cultural identifications. 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. The journalist should also tailor questions/interactions to the developmental stage and cultural background of the person experiencing child sexual abuse. Questions must be planned and should be open not leading questions.

## 7. If you have additional comments or thoughts on this formative stage of guidelines development, please let us know here:

**yourtown** recognises the importance of developing clear guidelines for media reporting on child sexual abuse and considers this provides an opportune moment to provide clear definitions for child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation to highlight their differences and nuances. Unfortunately, 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. At **yourtown** we use the following definitions to differentiate between child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation:

### Child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur using technology"<sup>5</sup>.

Child Sexual Exploitation has been called many things over the years, including 'child prostitution', 'opportunistic prostitution', 'survival sex', 'sex for favours', 'transactional sex', 'commercial child sexual exploitation', and even 'quasi-commercial sexual transactions'. These different terms blame and stigmatise the young person being described in the activity, or how they suggest a tolerance of the violence. In practice, these terms are frequently used in place of the CSE definition:

- A young person 'in a relationship' with an adult
- Having sex for favours (or sex for drugs)
- Having 'survival sex',
- Opportunistic prostitution
- A young person in a DV relationship, and
- A child being prostituted out.

### Child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse occurs when an adult, or a more powerful child or adolescent (including a sibling) involves a child in sexual activity. This may involve physical contact between the alleged abuser/offender and child, or no physical contact between the alleged abuser/offender and the child. Sexual abuse can cause emotional, psychological and/or physical harm. The intended use of power and control, secrecy and silencing, and the distortion of adult-child relationships to coerce the child into compliance with sexual activity are key factors in the sexual abuse of children. Behaviours that are sexually abusive to a child include:

- Sexually suggestive, obscene comments made in person, by telephone, or through social media to a child
- Speaking to a child about graphic sexual matters
- Using technology to send messages with obscene or sexual content or images to a child (this can include 'sexting')
- Persistent, unwanted intrusion of a child's personal space that increase the child's vulnerability to sexual abuse
- Showing pornographic material including films, magazines, photographs or internet websites to a child
- Using the internet or social media technologies to lure a child for sexual purposes
- Forcing a child to watch a sexual act
- Covertly or overtly watching, taking photographs or electronically recording a child in bathrooms, bedrooms or toilets, or in various states on undress
- Being inappropriately nude, partially nude, disrobing in front of a child, 'flashing' or exposing a sexual body part to a child
- Engaging in a sexual act in the presence of a child
- Kissing or holding a child in a sexual manner

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<sup>5</sup> Beckett, H., Holmes, D., & Walker, J., (2017). Child Sexual Exploitation. Definition & guide for professionals: extended text. University of Bedfordshire & Research in Practice.



- Fondling a child's body in a sexual manner or asking the child to fondle another person's body
- Engaging a child in acts of child prostitution
- Masturbating while child observes, observing a child masturbate, engaging in mutual masturbation with a child including child masturbating another child/person
- Clothed or unclothed dry intercourse (a person rubbing their genitals against the child's genitals and/or anal areas)
- Fellatio (oral to genital contact for males)
- Cunnilingus (oral to genital contact for females), and
- Penile or digital penetrations or using an object to penetrate the vagina or anus.

Taking this opportunity to define and understand the differences highlights the importance of using language appropriately and reporting accurately.

Further, it is important to reiterate the role that journalists, editors and media professionals have in setting the tone of the national conversation around child sexual abuse. This subject area taps into an intensity where the public have a strong and emotive reaction to cases/stories of child sexual abuse. As such journalists have a role to play in advocating for/providing a platform to educate the public about other ways of healing intergenerational and cultural trauma in the child sexual abuse space. Creating space for these discussions will support the best interests of a child, their right to have their views considered and given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

It will also be important to consider where the final guidelines will sit in term of developing a 'resource library' for journalists, editors, and media professionals. The media guidelines for reporting child sexual abuse would be well placed to sit alongside Mindframe's national guidelines to support safe and accurate media reporting, portray and communication of suicide, mental ill-health and Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviour.

**8. Would you like to be involved in the next consultation phase, where you can provide feedback on the draft guidelines? If so, please provide your preferred means of contact here (i.e., email or mobile).**

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas in further detail and be involved in the next consultation phase.

Should you require further information about any issues raised in the submission or engagement in the next phase of consultation, please do not hesitate to contact Kathryn Mandla, Head of Advocacy and Research at **yourtown** via phone on 0435 081 939 or email at [kmandla@yourtown.com.au](mailto:kmandla@yourtown.com.au).