



## Understanding sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people - National principles and key terminology

A submission to the National Office for Child Safety within the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department

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

### Our services

- Employment, education, and social enterprise programs to help long term unemployed young people re-engage with education and/or employment
- 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.
- 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, and
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0-11 years old and their families, with moderate mental health needs.

### Kids Helpline

**yourtown's** Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for any young person 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 8.7 million contacts from children and young people nationally in the 32 years since our service was first established, whilst also providing tens of millions of self-help interactions via our website and social channels. In 2022, our Kids Helpline counsellors responded to nearly 145,000 contacts from children and young people across Australia, including 5,026 crisis responses for children and young people at imminent risk of harm.

### Family and Domestic Violence Refuge and Transitional Housing

**yourtown's** refuge offers supported accommodation for up to 12 weeks. A specialised team provides women and children with a safe and welcoming environment and creates opportunities for mothers to re-build self-concept and experience control and empowerment over their lives. The wrap-around care also includes linking with transitional housing and community outreach programs for women and children exiting refuges. Transitional housing is a vital steppingstone for women and children moving towards long term, safe and sustainable independent living in the community. **yourtown's** transitional housing offers a safe and supportive environment for 6 – 12 months, with support for legal and financial matters, accessing pre-employment support, and helping children into school. In 2022-23, we supported 73 mothers and their young children in our refuge and 14 families in our transitional housing.

### 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. In 2022/23, San Miguel supported 35 parents and 38 infants and young children.

## **Early Childhood Development Programs**

We support vulnerable pre-school aged children to make a successful transition to school by using prevention and early intervention approaches to create health families and strong, child-friendly communities. This includes working with parents to better understand their child's barriers to reaching social development milestones, how to help them thrive at school, collaborative case management and support, and in-home help. In 2022/23, we supported 179 families in Queensland and Tasmania.

## **Employment Services**

For over 20 years **yourtown** has been delivering specialist youth employment services. Our employment services programs, including Transition to Work, Skilling Queenslanders for Work, Get Back in the Game, and ParentsNext, provide young people with training to expand their options and help them find sustainable employment. Over the last seven years we have secured more than 37,000 job placements for young people. During 2022/23 there were more than 4,000 commencements in our employment services in Queensland, New South Wales, and South Australia.

## **Social Enterprises**

**yourtown** has worked with young people and employers to break down barriers to sustainable employment for more than 20 years. As a leader in work-based enterprises we provide young people at risk of long-term unemployment paid jobs in the following areas: construction, landscaping, and asset maintenance to help their transition to open employment. In 2022/23, 201 young people were employed in our social enterprises across Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, and Tasmania, with 90% transitioning into longer term employment in the open labour market or progressing into education.

## **ParentsNext**

We provide specialised support for parents with children under six years of age, to plan and prepare for their future employment in regional South Australia, from Port Pirie. Our primary goal for ParentsNext is to empower parents to embrace life changes, improve their skills and self-confidence, and achieve their education and employment goals. More than 1,200 young parents participated in our ParentsNext program since it commenced in July 2018.

## **Parentline**

Parentline offers free confidential phone and webchat counselling and support for parents and carers of children in Queensland and the Northern Territory. It offers a safety net for families by providing support when it is most needed. This includes after hours and weekends, where families feel isolated and where local services are unavailable. In 2022/23, parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory attempted to contact Parentline over 12,000 times.

**yourtown** welcomes the opportunity to respond to the National Office for Child Safety's draft document *Understanding sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people: National principles and key terminology* (the national principles). **yourtown** supports the development of foundational principles to underpin a national policy approach in preventing, identifying and responding to harmful sexual behaviours displayed by children and welcomes the right-based approach that underpins the draft principles. We welcome the approach of ensuring that children who have displayed concerning or harmful sexual behaviours should obtain a proportionate and supportive response, including therapeutic support.

We also concur with the intent of the national principles to not minimise the impact of harmful sexual behaviours, nor negate the need for criminal justice, support for survivors of sexual abuse, child protection, and other statutory interventions.

We note, however, that the national principles will need to be accompanied by future specific work (e.g. national workforce, sector and population specific guidelines/standards for preventing, intervening early and responding to concerning and harmful sexual behaviours; and a National Clinical and Therapeutic Framework for responding to children and young people who have displayed concerning and harmful sexual behaviours) for organisations to effectively implement the principles.

### **How would the national principles be used in your work? How would the national principles inform programs relevant to your area?**

It is anticipated that **yourtown** could use the national principles to inform our practice of supporting expected sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people. Once we establish the baseline of our knowledge, understanding and responses in this space, we would ascertain areas for improvement and track progress for each principle.

The principles would be most useful in informing an overarching strategy for our organisation in responding to emerging harmful behaviours. Specific toolkits and resources could be tailored to the different areas of the organisation, whether face-to-face or online, in programs aimed at children, families, or young adults. Regular toolbox conversations would be used to share knowledge what works and effective referral pathways; and how to adapt these approaches to individual children and young people in keeping with their context, circumstances, and developmental needs.

### **Are the national principles understandable and practical? Would they translate well into your organisational context? What would assist you or your organisation with the implementation of the national principles?**

The national principles are understandable and practical. It should be noted that the national principles will inform: the development of national workforce, sector and population specific guidelines/standards for preventing, intervening early and responding to concerning and harmful sexual behaviours; and a National Clinical and Therapeutic Framework for responding to children and young people who have displayed concerning and harmful sexual behaviours. Organisations will need to take responsibility for how the principles translate into their organisational context and to adhere to upcoming guidelines/standards and frameworks.

**yourtown** delivers a wide range of services and programs for children, young people, and families. We support diverse populations across different modes (face-to-face and digital). The 12 principles are intentionally broad to be applicable to all sectors, services, settings, and populations. This broad approach means the national principles translate well across the various areas of our organisation. Given the diverse range of services we deliver and cohorts we support in the face-to-face and digital mediums, we would need time, funding, and dedicated resources to implement the national principles to ensure we adhere to the

upcoming standards and frameworks. The National Office of Child Safety will also need to provide information and guidance to assist organisations with their questions. We would need to develop assessment tools, referral pathways to appropriate support, training to upskill staff, and psychoeducation resources for children, young people, and families. Some of these resources could be informed by future work of the National Strategy, including population specific standards/guidelines, family and community standards/guidelines, sector specific standards/guidelines, workforce capability, and awareness raising. The national principles will be useful to ensure we use appropriate and common language with children and young people.

Human-centred design<sup>1</sup> and co-design<sup>2</sup> will be integral to implementing the national principles in our organisation. As part of **yourtown's** service design process, we used human-centred and co-design approaches to challenge and test what we do and how, so that our services are designed, with young people, and centred around their needs. This has also led to us re-designing the look and feel of our services, so that they are inviting to those we are seeking to engage, whether face to face, or online. Learnings from this work can inform how the principles can be implemented in the organisation and what resources are needed for staff and the diverse cohorts of children and young people we support.

### **Do the national principles adequately capture the entire public health response (primary, secondary, and tertiary)?**

Unfortunately, in endeavouring to cover the entire public health response the principles are not as comprehensive or directed as they could be. They would be stronger, if they were focused on principles of how to respond to concerning or harmful sexual behaviour in keeping with the identified gap by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child Sexual Abuse.<sup>3</sup>

We agree with the national principles that responding to concerning or harmful sexual behaviours requires a nuanced approach and involves prevention, early intervention and targeted support that is proportionate to the behaviours displayed. The primary responses in the national principles should not only focus on universal education but also align with the Royal Commission<sup>1</sup> recommendation to focus on concerning and harmful sexual behaviours, including education on what are concerning and harmful behaviours, guidance on what behaviours are acceptable from peers and adults, and where to seek help.<sup>3</sup> Further, there is an assumption that at the secondary stage (including the instance of disclosure or raising the topic when these behaviours are observed), responses will be timely, and referrals will readily available. This is not always the case, and yet it is integral to ensuring that children and young people are provided with effective therapeutic support and decreasing the likelihood of concerning or harmful sexual behaviours continuing or escalating.

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<sup>1</sup> A problem solving technique that places real people at the centre of the development process, enabling the creation of products and/or services that resonate and are tailored to the audience's need.

<sup>2</sup> Design process that is participatory, in which community members are treated as equal collaborators in the design process.

<sup>3</sup> Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017). Final Report: Children with harmful sexual behaviours Volume 10

**Do the national principles meet their intended purpose (i.e. to provide guidance on how to talk about sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people and to provide an adequate foundation for all people to support developmentally expected sexual behaviours and prevent and respond to concerning or harmful sexual behaviours)?**

The national principles cover many concepts, which makes it difficult for service delivery staff to understand how the principles link clearly to the purpose and can be implemented in the organisation without additional information and guidance.

The Royal Commission noted that there are inconsistencies and gaps in the way governments, services, communities, and people respond to this issue.<sup>3</sup> These disparities can lead to children and young people facing stigma and not being able to access the support they need when they need it. While the national principles are broad enough to be applicable across sectors and provide people with a general understanding of the issue and the principles, they fail to cater to specific populations. It is vital that organisations have access to specific guidance on developing their own resources and capabilities that are relevant to their context and client groups. These toolkits and resources could be informed by detailed documents such as the upcoming: national workforce, sector, and population specific guidelines/standards for preventing, intervening early and responding to concerning and harmful sexual behaviours; and the National Clinical and Therapeutic Framework for responding to children and young people who have displayed concerning and harmful sexual behaviours.

**Are there any elements missing from the national principles? Are there any existing elements that should be removed? If so, which ones and why?**

**yourtown** is mostly supportive of the following 12 principles for supporting developmentally expected sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people:

1. Human Rights
2. Safety and wellbeing for all
3. Prevention and early intervention focused
4. Approaches are knowledge-based
5. First Nations-led
6. Inclusive and accessible
7. Trauma informed
8. Child-centred
9. Family and community connected
10. Multi-agency approach
11. Skilled and well supported workforce
12. Non-stigmatising language

We acknowledge that the 12 principles are intentionally broad to be applicable to all sectors, services, settings and populations. However, we believe it is important to recognise the diversity of cultures in Australia by adding a principle that focuses on culturally accessible and safe support. The Royal Commission found that children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds were more likely to encounter circumstances that increased their risk of abuse in institutions, reduced their ability to disclose or report abuse and, if they did disclose or report, reduced their chances of receiving an adequate response. Furthermore, they found that assessments conducted by professionals with insufficient training in culturally appropriate practice and harmful sexual behaviours can lead to a choice of therapeutic intervention that is ineffective for a child or young person. The Royal Commission noted that it is imperative for assessment tools and interventions to consider cultural context for children and young people from CALD backgrounds and for Aboriginal

and/or Torres Strait Islander children and young people.<sup>3</sup> These findings should be reflected in the national principles.

**yourtown** suggests renaming the fifth principle as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led. The term, First Nations, may be interpreted as encompassing all First Nations groups across the world, whereas the term, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, denotes the specific First Nations groups of Australia.

It is also notable that while a public health approach underpins the principles, there is no express reference to health or mental health under the principles (except under Principle 5 and reference to culturally competent sexual healthcare). It is recommended that given the detrimental immediate and long-term impacts of harmful sexual behaviours upon a young person's physical and mental health, Principle 2 should also include reference to the physical and psychological *health* of the young person, as well as to their safety and wellbeing.

**yourtown** recommends:

- adding a new principle regarding cultural safety to support children and young people from CALD backgrounds
- replacing the term 'First Nations' under Principle 5 with 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' to accurately describe the specific First Nations groups in Australia, and
- amending Principle 2 to state 'Safety, Health and wellbeing for all', and including 'physical and psychological health' of a young person under the explanatory material for Principle 2.

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these issues with you in further detail. Should you require further information about any issues raised in the submission, please do not hesitate to contact Dr Marion Byrne, Head of Strategic Partnerships and Advocacy at **yourtown** via email at [mbyrne@yourtown.com.au](mailto:mbyrne@yourtown.com.au).