

# Promoting the Safety of Children and Young People with a Disability

Children and young people with a disability often face wide-ranging barriers to active participation in our community. As a society, our focus is often on the 'disability' rather than on ability and diversity as they relate to the child or young person. This devaluing of children and young people with a disability at a societal level can create the conditions within families, organisational contexts and our community that contribute to discrimination, disempowerment and/or abuse (Llewellyn et al 2016).

While there is a lack of prevalence data on the abuse of children and young people with a disability in Australia, international research suggests approximately 13.7 per cent of children with a disability are likely to experience sexual

The abuse and neglect of children and young people with disability is a long standing and pervasive social problem.

Robinson 2012

abuse (Jones et al 2012). The relative risk reported by Sullivan and Knutson (2000) suggests that children with a disability are 3.4 times more likely to be abused than children without a disability, and 3.14 times more likely to be sexually abused than children without a disability.

As for most children, abuse is more likely to occur within a family context during childhood; however, in adolescence, young people with a disability at are increased risk of abuse from service providers and other service users within an organisational context.

As a diverse community, children and young people with a disability can be vulnerable to abuse (including harassment and bullying) for varied reasons:

- Children and young people with a disability may be viewed as soft targets, reflecting a perception that they are less competent, unable to reliably report abusive behaviour and less likely to be believed.
- Physical limitations can contribute to opportunities for abuse to occur and for abuse to continue (e.g. inability to move independently, high personal care needs, being physically isolated).
- A child or young person with an intellectual disability may be targeted because perpetrators believe the child or young people is unable to understand what is happening, lack understanding of inappropriate sexual behaviour, and that therefore abuse is not harmful.
- Communication, speech and literacy barriers may prevent the child or young person from reporting concerning or abusive behaviour. A child or young person's distress may be viewed as a feature of their disability rather the child or young person attempt to communicate that they are experiencing harm.
- Limitations in relation to social skills or experience may mean the child or young person is less able to deal with situations involving inappropriate behaviour (e.g. bullying).
- Social isolation and increased dependency on services, programs and individual service providers (e.g. spending significant time in care settings, multiple care providers, expectations about being 'compliant and well behaved') may leave the child or young person vulnerable to abuse.

## Disability

Includes sensory, physical or neurological impairment or acquired brain injury, intellectual disability or development delay.

Source: Adapted from Disability Act 2006 (Vic) s 3 (definition of 'disability')

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- Variability in quality of care (e.g. inadequate training to deal with behavioural issues, poor supervision) may result in the child or young people being harmed.
- Dehumanising treatment may not be recognised as abuse (e.g. withdrawal of food, seclusion, use of physical or chemical restraint).
- Parents and carers may not be informed when incidents occur, so the child or young person may continue to be exposed to inappropriate behaviour or abuse.
- Education about sexuality and personal safety may be withheld from the child or young person with a disability because the child or young person's agency is diminished (Gore & Janssen 2007, as cited in Robinson 2012).

## ENHANCING SAFETY

Organisations can work to enhance safety for children and young people with a disability in the following ways:

- Creating an inclusive culture which respects diversity and promotes a view of children and young people with a disability as differently abled.
- Recognising that each child or young person with a disability is different and experiences their disability differently and that we need to listen to and respond to the voices of children and young people with a disability (or their advocates) in planning and decision-making.
- Work in collaboration with families to support the child or young person with a disability.
- Talk with children and young people with a disability about safety and physical environment – asking children and young people with a disability what such an environment would look like or feel like and 'what makes you feel safe here?'
- Undertake appropriate planning and risk management practices to ensure that the physical environment can accommodate the needs of the people with a disability (e.g. physical access, bathroom facilities to provide support as required and independence when appropriate).
- Consultation with disability peak bodies about meeting the needs of children and young people with a disability.
- Train and provide information to those working or in ministry to adequately support children and young people with a disability.

### Helpful questions for children, young people (or their families)

'What is the nature of your disability?'

'Can you tell me about your abilities?'

'Can you tell me what supports you might need?'

'Do you need a support person or an interpreter?'

'Are there specific things we need to know that would help you to participate (e.g. physical environment, access, medication, care needs, routines)?'

'What supports do you currently have in place?'

'What preparations would be required?'

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- Provide support for clergy, employees and volunteers working with children and young people with a disability (e.g. provide opportunities to discuss and understand behaviour that may be challenging) and implement appropriate behaviour management strategies.
- Establish clear guidelines and practices for personal care activities and supervision.
- Support children and young people in dealing with the inappropriate behaviour of peers (e.g. bullying).
- Ensure appropriate levels of supervision are provided for activities involving children and young people with a disability (e.g. including a support person, implementing a buddy system, parent or carer to promote safety).
- Seek input from families about the most appropriate way to communicate child safety information and provide personal safety information.
- Create accessible pathways for children and young people (or their parents and carers) to raise concerns (e.g. Auslan interpreters, use of communication technologies).
- Accept children and young people with a disability as credible and believe them when they report a concern.
- Be aware of potential risks to children and young people and be attuned to the indicators of abuse, particularly for children and young people who experience additional barriers (e.g. intellectual disability, mobility issues, communication barriers).

### **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

A person with a disability's right to equal treatment means that they do not always need the same treatment as a person without a disability.

## USEFUL RESOURCES

SAFESpace resources to create safe environments for children with disability– NSW Office of the Children's Guardian

<https://www.kidsguardian.nsw.gov.au/child-safe-organisations/safespace-training-for-disability-sector/safespace-resources>

Together: Building and Inclusive Youth Sector is an online resource that has been designed by young people with disability to promote inclusiveness and access for young people with a disability.

<https://www.yacvic.org.au/ydas/together/>

Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) is a state-wide advocacy service that works directly with young people (aged 12–25) with a disability to achieve their human rights.

phone: 0429 964 859 (Wednesdays and Thursdays)

website: [www.yacvic.org.au/ydas](http://www.yacvic.org.au/ydas)

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) is an advocacy service for children and young people with a disability.

phone: 9417 1025

website: [www.cyda.org.au](http://www.cyda.org.au)

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