



Northern Territory Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Framework

Discussion Paper Response
August 2019



CHILD WISE
creating child safe communities

Executive Summary

Child Wise welcomes the opportunity to participate in this public consultation on developing a Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Framework in the NT. Child Wise has reviewed the discussion paper, consulted with stakeholders and made a number of recommendations, including:

- A whole of system approach should be implemented;
- A range of stakeholders, including community leaders, should be supported and enabled to deliver child safe education across communities;
- A shift in community awareness and response should be facilitated through awareness campaigns, community and organisational training and the development of service systems;
- There should be a specific treatment response for children who present with sexually harmful behaviours;
- Personal safety education for children and young people should be prioritised across the service system;
- A public health approach should be adopted, which addresses the complex intersection of factors related to sexual violence, and engages the broadest range of stakeholders in the response.

Child Wise

- Established in 1991, Child Wise works with communities and organisations to create and embed systems, processes and approaches that build child safety capacity. In Australia, Child Wise introduced the use of child safety standards within organisations where children and young people spend time and has developed an in-depth understanding of the approaches which are most effective in ensuring child safety. Child Wise is a Social Enterprise of Save the Children Australia; Save the Children Australia and Child Wise share a common vision – that all children are safe from violence, exploitation and abuse.
- Our work includes child safety training, consulting, coaching and accreditation. Child Wise has also worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to build child safe capacity and develop culturally relevant resources.
- Child Wise has supported hundreds of organisations to build sustainable child safe capacity, across a variety of sectors, including:
 - Local Government
 - Health & Community Services
 - Hospitality and Tourism
 - Housing & Homelessness Support
 - Sport & Recreation
 - International Development
 - Migrant and Multicultural Services



Responses to Consultation Questions

1. What are the problems related to sexual violence in your community and in the NT that the Framework should consider?

- As in many communities, sexual violence is often considered a taboo subject, which can result in a lack of open discussion thus inhibiting preventive education and robust responses.
- Cultural understanding of Men's and Women's Business in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can inhibit an open dialogue about sexual violence. Careful consideration, which engages community, will be important to explore how this can be addressed.
- The impact of intergenerational trauma and shame is a significant consideration; it will be critical to ensure a trauma-informed approach is applied to all aspects of the framework. A trauma informed approach is also essential to address a) historical trauma b) intergenerational trauma c) lateral violence enacted by sexual violence.
- Too often government and service sector responses have focused on a tertiary end focus (after the trauma has occurred). A whole of community prevention focus is essential to address the issue more broadly, prioritise preventive strategies and enable attitudinal changes.
- As is the case with most jurisdictions, there is a lack of evidence-based interventions to reduce the risk posed by perpetrators of sexual violence.

2. What can be done to prevent sexual violence in your community and across the NT?

- Prevention is a whole of society process. The *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses To Child Sexual Abuse* indicated that community prevention messaging must start from childcare, early learning centres and preschool and include all services which have contact with children; effective prevention must include children and young people, teachers, support workers, parents/carers and families. Child Wise endorses this ecological approach, and our experience over decades tells us that such a holistic approach is most effective.
- Child Wise recognises that preventive approaches must be tailored for communities, and would encourage the NT government to promote community-led initiatives in its framework. Child Wise has seen the potential of community driven prevention programs to deliver culturally appropriate and accessible programs. Child Wise, for example, co-designed Yarning Up, a prevention program developed with Aboriginal community members, elders and service providers.
- Child Wise encourages the development of preventive programs designed to address the needs of children and young people across developmental stages, recognising that a one-size fits all approach will not be sufficient to address needs, risks and levels of understanding which change across the age range.
- Child Wise also encourages the development of education programs designed to reach adults in the community, including elders and service providers, in order to raise awareness, encourage engagement and challenge myths.

2. What can be done to prevent sexual violence in your community and across the NT? – continued.

Sexually Harmful Behaviour in Children

- Child Wise has extensive experience in educating community members and service providers about appropriate responses to children who demonstrate sexually harmful behaviour. Further, we have considerable experience in designing and delivering personal safety education to children. As such, we strongly advocate for prevention approaches which address this group of children, including:
 - Programs designed to support professionals, parents and carers to respond effectively to children who demonstrate sexualised behaviour and sexually harmful behaviours.
 - Specific victim survivor oriented programs designed to address the needs of all children impacted by sexually harmful behaviour, including those who are victims of sexually harmful behaviour from another child, and those children who demonstrate sexually harmful behaviour.
 - Personal safety education programs which address risk associated with sexually harmful behaviour in age appropriate ways.

3. What are the key elements of a successful sexual violence prevention program?

- A successful sexual violence prevention program will be trauma informed, victim survivor-centred, and be underpinned by relevant theoretical frameworks, including attachment theory and models of child development.
- A systemic approach which clearly centralises children and young people, and recognises the importance of engaging key stakeholders who have a role in child safety, is critical.
- Clear messaging that is about prevention and healing for the community, not blame, is vital.
- Non-stigmatising language that situates sexually harmful behaviours in children as requiring a treatment response, means that this important issue can be more openly discussed and appropriately responded to. Utilising a sexual development approach which clearly sets out normal, concerning and harmful sexual behaviours in children, is a helpful approach to opening up such a dialogue.
- It is key that a prevention program includes audience/age appropriate education designed to ensure all stakeholders (children, young people, professionals, community members, elders, parents and carers) are equipped to notice signs and respond effectively to risk of abuse. Programs should define sexual violence in age appropriate ways, whilst addressing key issues such as grooming, offender behaviour and how to access support.
- A prevention program should also consider the important role organisations have in reducing sexual violence, and responding robustly when it occurs. This includes effective child safety policies and procedures, rigorous recruitment processes and the adoption of the 10 Principles for Child Safe Organisations, developed by the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*.

4. Where should sexual violence prevention programs be delivered e.g. youth detention centres, schools?

- Sexual violence prevention programs, including protective behaviours, consent awareness and respectful relationships education must be delivered across the organisational/societal spectrum that matches children's and young people's developmental needs, i.e. early childhood education through to young adult education.
- Children and young people who are uninformed about their rights may find themselves in environments where they are vulnerable to sexual violence; some children suffering sexual violence may not be aware that what is happening to them is wrong. Hence, there is a need to provide age appropriate programs in places where children spend time, with a caveat that the adults delivering program content are equipped and confident to do so, and the content is appropriate to the context, e.g. personal safety education delivered in schools by teachers with longer-term relationships with children may be able to delve more deeply into issues, whereas education delivered in a short-term sports club may be more somewhat more limited. The aim is to ensure that there is a cohesive network operating around children to ensure core safety messages are delivered and understood.
- In our extensive experience of developing and delivering personal safety programs, it has been vital to engage parents and carers in the work, ensuring that messages children and young people learn in the community, are reinforced at home.

5. Who should deliver sexual violence prevention program?

- Sexual violence prevention programs should be delivered by people who are confident, equipped and carefully trained to do so. Traditionally, such programs have been delivered by professionals such as teachers, social workers and psychologists. However, it is possible, and may prove helpful in reaching wider audiences, to build the capacity of other individuals to deliver such programming, such as community elders, leaders and youth workers. Based on our experience of training people to deliver personal safety education, it is first critical to develop an evidence-based program, then develop a robust approach to ‘training the trainer’ which is facilitated by highly skilled educators.
- Capacity building programs for potential trainers should address core issues including: trauma, self-care, offending behaviours, sexually harmful behaviour in children and models of learning.
- Based on our experience of delivering capacity building programs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and across the country, it is of the utmost importance to ensure trainers are either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or are highly attuned to the cultural experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

6. What words should be used when we talk about people who have experienced sexual violence and people who commit sexual violence?

- Child Wise generally refers to people who have experienced sexual violence as victim survivors, but would adapt this language depending on what stakeholders felt was most appropriate – for example, some people who have experienced abuse may want to be referred to only as survivors, without use of the term victim.
- Where children pose a risk of sexual harm, Child Wise refers to this as children with/demonstrating sexually harmful behaviours. We are careful and intentional about maintaining a treatment oriented, trauma-informed approach, which recognises that such behaviours may be indicative of a child also being a victim survivor of abuse.
- Where adults perpetrate sexual violence, Child Wise generally refers to these adults as perpetrators of abuse/violence.
- Child Wise however, recognises the importance of community-centred, community-driven language which reflects cultural experiences. As such, Child Wise would fully support community determining the language which is most effective and appropriate, with the caveat that whatever is agreed upon is clearly understood by all stakeholders, including children and young people, without ambiguity.

7 and 8. What can be done to support and respond to children/young people who have experienced sexual violence in your community and across the NT?

- Children and young people who have experienced sexual violence need to feel assured of access to safe adults who know how to respond to indicators and disclosures of violence in age-appropriate, victim survivor-centred ways, including how to access protective and therapeutic intervention. This need underscores the importance of training and awareness campaigns aimed at all parts of community.
- In addition, children and young people who have experienced sexual violence require supportive therapeutic interventions that build trust and empower non-offending parents/carers to foster safety and belonging with children and young people in order to enhance secure attachment. Therapeutic interventions should be trauma-informed and underpinned by attachment theory. Where possible, support should be provided by a range of providers and in a range of formats (individual, group, family) to ensure children/young people and families have choice. Response times are also key. Whilst it is appreciated that the service sector is under pressure, wait times for services should be minimised to ensure a swift response.
- Training for the broader service sector, including schools, should build the capacity of professionals to respond to victim survivors in trauma-informed ways, in order to complement and augment therapeutic work.
- Therapeutic family interventions which emphasise safety within the home are also important to reinforce individual therapeutic input, and build confidence of family members to support the healing process.

9. What can be done to support and respond to children with problem and harmful sexual behaviours in your community and across the NT?

- Children who display harmful sexual behaviours need to be responded to in trauma-informed ways which recognise the potential that they have experienced abuse.
- Sexualised behaviours that become harmful may be a way that the child is communicating their internal distress. Interventions need to address their underlying distress and their need for safety, secure attachment and behavioural boundaries.
- A trauma-informed attachment focused therapeutic approach provides an appropriate and effective framework to support children who demonstrate sexually harmful behaviours.
- Primary prevention initiatives are directed to the whole community and aim to educate adults, children and young people in order to help prevent children from engaging in sexually harmful behaviours. Primary prevention should:
 - outline the difference between developmentally appropriate and harmful sexual behaviours by children in a non-stigmatising way; and
 - give children clear guidance on what sexual behaviours are acceptable, what peer and adult behaviours are wrong, and where they can seek help if they feel unsafe.
- Secondary prevention focuses on early intervention to prevent children's problematic sexual behaviour from escalating to the point where they might harm other children.
- Secondary intervention should be directed to children who are at higher risk of displaying harmful sexual behaviours than other children and towards institutions with higher situational risk.

10. What can be done to support and respond to young people with problem and harmful sexual behaviours in your community and across the NT?

- The principles set out in the preceding Q9 response are also applicable to this question.
- In addition, specialist treatment services for young people demonstrating sexually harmful behaviours should be available in order to address the potentially increased risk posed by young people nearing adulthood, and other possible complexities related to mental health and dual diagnosis.

11. What can be done to support and respond to adults who have experienced sexual violence in your community and across NT?

Over many years of sector experience, Child Wise has heard the stories of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Based on this work, Child Wise would recommend the following in response to this question:

- Rapid response, crisis services which can respond swiftly after sexual violence has occurred.
- Specialist counselling services for victim survivors of sexual violence, which are attuned to the cultural experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Support services which assist victims survivors in navigating the legal system, and related services, e.g. legal aid.
- A well trained, trauma-informed, collaborative service sector (including police, courts, housing services etc) which works in concert to facilitate the healing process.
- A service sector which co-designs services with community, continuously seeks community feedback and is responsive to the needs of community, including a commitment to service responses, which consider the impact of intergenerational abuse on communities.

12. What can be done to respond to adults who commit sexual violence in your community and across the NT?

Whilst Child Wise has considerable expertise in building victim survivor-centred child safe capacity in organisations and communities, advising on specific responses to offenders is outside the scope of practice of the organisation.

Child Wise would support responses which:

- Are victim/survivor centred;
- In line with principles of natural justice;
- Consider possibilities for restorative justice;
- Consider possibilities for rehabilitation.

13. How can we strengthen the systems that respond to sexual violence in your community and across the NT?

- Government, community leaders and leaders of organisations must drive a culture change, which means that women's and children's safety and their best interests are at the core of a systemic response to sexual violence. This includes supporting women and children to raise concerns and ensuring a swift, robust and victim survivor-centred response to concerns.
- The critical importance of personal safety/protective behaviours education, which empowers children and young people to speak up, must be a priority for community, organisations and government.
- Leaders of organisations must ensure that policies, procedures and organisational culture are focused on safety.
- Education programs focused on prevention, detection and response to abuse and violence must enable organisations to develop sustainable capacity.
- Government, community leaders and leaders of organisations must also be called upon to collaborate in order to ensure that systems work together seamlessly, are victim survivor-centred and that there is 'no wrong door' for anyone seeking help.

13. How can we strengthen the systems that respond to sexual violence in your community and across the NT? – continued.

- Government should prioritise the adoption and implementation of the 10 Principles for Child Safe Organisations developed by the *Royal Commission Into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, as a framework for building child safe organisations and communities.
- Further, it is recommended that government continue to collaborate with community, sector experts and peak bodies to support communities as agents of social change.
- A Public Health approach provides a useful framework for considering a whole of system approach to preventing and responding to sexual violence – this is explored further in the following two slides.

A Public Health Approach

- One of the most strategically effective ways of minimising the prevalence of sexual violence across a whole population is to take a Public Health Approach to prevention. A Public Health Approach to tackling social issues has been recognised and recommended by the World Health Organisation, numerous other international bodies and governments and by the Council of Australian Governments in its *National Framework For Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020*.
- A Public Health Approach incorporates prevention strategies that are able (a) to minimise or eliminate one or more risk factors and/or (b) to create or maximise those factors that are likely to protect women and children from sexual violence.
- A Public Health Approach works best when there is a *shared understanding* across all relevant service systems and agencies about the overall prevention framework that is being used.
This kind of shared understanding will:
 - enable other service systems and agencies to see how each prevention strategy or program sits alongside and complements their own work;
 - enable better collaboration between service systems and agencies;
 - provide a rationale for both government and non-government bodies to fund a diverse yet intersecting range of prevention initiatives; and
 - enable governments to use the findings from the various strategies in a way that optimises both the integration and effectiveness of its prevention framework.

14. What kind of changes does the justice system need to make to respond better to sexual violence?

- Child Wise would support changes which strengthen the victim survivor voice within the justice system and are focused on improving victim survivor safety.
- Child Wise would also support any changes to the justice system which would better ensure collaboration across the system, enabling victim survivors to navigate the system more seamlessly.
- Child Wise would also recommend that any sector-wide education on sexual violence includes key component parts of the justice system.

Child Wise has welcomed the opportunity to contribute to this public consultation, and would invite any questions arising from this response to be directed to the contact details noted below.



Contact Us

Jane French

Executive Director
Child Wise

T: +61 3 9002 4493

M: +61 411 478 301

E: jane.french@childwise.org.au