

Child sexual abuse raises future risk of sexual assault – so what are the solutions?

The new ABS analysis of 2016 PSS data found persons who had experienced childhood sexual abuse were at an increased risk of experiencing sexual assault later in life.

So how do we break this cycle of abuse? By ‘skilling up’ families, communities and social services to effectively identify child sexual abuse, respond appropriately and refer to specialist support services.

In many cases, children disclose what has happened to them but are dismissed or worse, disbelieved. Health, education and community services often don’t feel equipped to respond to a disclosure of child sexual abuse, and so children fall through the cracks.

Domestic and family violence services should perform a key role in identifying child sexual abuse. We know that domestic and family violence and child sexual abuse have strong co-morbidity. We need to get better at screening for child sexual abuse in our interactions with non-offending parents and caregivers.

We also need to reform our family law system so that it no longer dissuades parents from alleging child sexual assault. At present, many parents - usually mothers - are advised it is unwise to raise concerns about child sexual abuse, as they may end up being perceived as an unfriendly parent seeking to alienate the child from their father for vindictive reasons.

This practice, along with the pro-contact bias that sees just 3% of children protected from contact with an abusive parent, must stop. Children need a greater voice and agency in the family law process, and families must be followed up after family law processes to check on children’s safety and wellbeing.

We need to improve the process of reporting child sexual abuse and giving evidence in court. NSW’ pilot Child Sexual Offence Evidence Program offers a safer, more trauma-informed approach to court matters involving allegations of child sexual abuse, but it is only available in Sydney and Newcastle. Despite positive evaluation, it hasn’t yet been extended across in NSW nor adopted by other jurisdictions. **There really is no excuse for this inertia.**

Last, and definitely not least, it’s high time we funded specialist services for children and young people impacted by sexual, domestic and family violence in their own right. At the moment, children and young people are often missed, as services focus on adults involved.

It’s pretty simple, if we want to support children and young people in their safety and recovery, and prevent future vulnerability, we need to invest in specialist services for children and young people. Specialist services need to be universally available for children and young people experiencing sexual and domestic and family violence, as well as children displaying these harmful behaviours.

We're calling on the Federal Government to include such investment in their successor plan to the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children 2010-22.

We need to challenge the myth that strangers perpetrate most sexual assault on women when the most common perpetrator is someone they know. This requires community education as well as training and professional development for anyone in a frontline position supporting children and families.

The media also has a key role to play in raising awareness and we've seen this recently with the media coverage of sexual violence in the home and the workplace.

We need effective, age-appropriate respectful relationships education in all schools throughout all the learning years. Every day we delay in providing this education to children and young people is costing them their safety.

Respectful relationships education must be delivered by experts with the specialist skills and expertise to identify children and young people at risk of harm, respond to disclosures appropriately, and facilitate referrals to the right safety and support services.

We need to support survivors to report their abuse and get support. The impact of courageous leaders in this space like Grace Tame, Chanel Contos, Saxon Mullins and Brittany Higgins cannot be understated. When people impacted by sexual violence see others standing up and speaking out, it helps them better understand their own experiences and to reassign the blame and shame to the perpetrator of the abuse.

We need to ensure that everyone in the workforce who is coming into regular contact with children and families is adequately trained and supported to effectively identify, respond and refer in cases of sexual abuse. And we need to measure our performance to ensure we are in fact improving our responses.

For further information or comment, call Hayley Foster on (02) 8585 0333 / 0477 442 122 or email ceo@rape-dvservices.org.au

If you or someone you know needs support dealing with the impact of sexual, domestic or family violence (including childhood sexual abuse and vicarious trauma), our expert counsellors are available on the phone or online, 24/7.

Please see details below.

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