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# Reporting on child sexual assault

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**A guide for ACT media**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document is designed to provide information to those in the ACT media who report about violence against women and their children in the ACT.

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### About the Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc.

The Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc. (WCHM) is a community based organisation which works in the ACT and surrounding region to improve women's health and wellbeing. WCHM believes that the environment and life circumstances which each woman experiences affects her health outcomes. WCHM focuses on areas of possible disadvantage and uses research, community development and health promotion to provide information and skills that empower women to enhance their own health and wellbeing. WCHM undertakes research and advocacy to influence systemic change with the aim to improve women's health and wellbeing outcomes.

### About the author

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# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The media plays a significant role in the way people understand complex social issues. At the local level, the media has a key part to play in communicating messages about violence against women and children in the ACT and in ensuring that the public knows and understands the facts about this issue.

Local journalists have asked for guidance on how to report about domestic violence and sexual assault against women and children because they can be difficult issues to investigate and report on. If not accurately and appropriately portrayed, media reporting can help to perpetuate negative stereotypes and social beliefs and may cause additional harm to victims through public shame and stigma.

The *Guides for ACT Media – Reporting on Violence against Women and Children in the ACT* have been developed as a resource for those in the ACT media who have any involvement with the reporting of domestic violence, sexual violence, child sexual assault and Indigenous family violence.

The guides aim to support ACT media to gain an understanding about the nature of these issues, through the provision of local information, relevant evidence and research, and advice about the sensitivities of the use of language in reporting.

We hope that they will find this a useful reference and that, through better awareness and understanding, they will be better able to play their vital role in the prevention of violence against women.

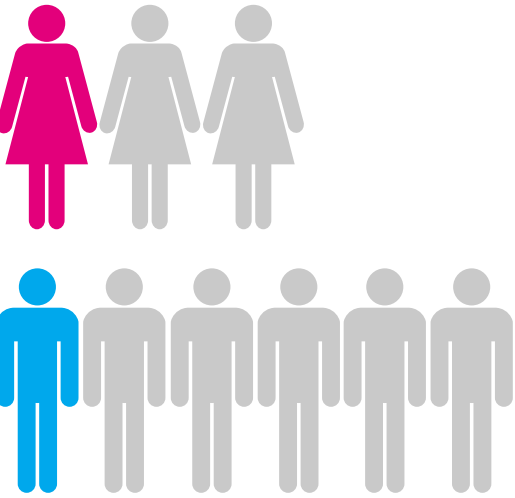
# DEFINITIONS

**Child sexual assault** refers to any sexual behaviour between an adult and a child below the age of consent (in the ACT, 16 years). It can also refer to non-consensual sexual activity between two minors, and any sexual activity between someone younger than 18 and a person in a position of power or authority (like a parent or teacher).<sup>1</sup>

- Sexual activity in this context can include:
- vaginal or anal sex, with a penis, finger or another object;
  - oral sex;
  - touching genitals, breasts or other intimate areas;
  - exposure to or involvement in pornography;
  - voyeurism (being watched doing intimate things);
  - exhibitionism (deliberately exposing genitals or other intimate body parts, for example); and
  - other behaviours, such as talking about sexually explicit things which are developmentally inappropriate for the child's age, including sending sexual text messages or emails, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Child sexual assault can happen to anyone, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, cultural background, or any other aspect of their identity.

# FACTS AND FIGURES



IN AUSTRALIA,  
**1 IN 3 GIRLS** AND  
**1 IN 6 BOYS** WILL  
BE SEXUALLY  
ASSAULTED  
BY THE TIME  
THEY TURN 18

<sup>1</sup> Child Family Community Australia, 'The prevalence of child abuse and neglect', Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/pubs/factsheets/a144254/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, 'Child sexual abuse', retrieved March 2014: <http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/protecting-children/what-is-child-abuse/child-sexual-abuse>

# FACTS AND FIGURES

## THERE IS NO NATIONAL SOURCE OF DATA THAT CAN TELL US HOW MANY PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL ASSAULT AS A CHILD.

The most reliable statistics that we have on child sexual assault come from child protection data; however, since these figures represent only those cases which were detected and reported, it's likely that they are only the tip of the iceberg. It is highly probable that child sexual assault is vastly underreported, given the 'hidden' nature of the crime, the vulnerability of its victims, and the many barriers children (especially those who are very young) face to disclosing sexual assault. Many reports about child sexual assault are only made by survivors much later in life, and many children who experience sexual assault will grow up without ever telling anyone about the abuse.

### NATIONAL STATISTICS

- IN AUSTRALIA, 1 IN 3 GIRLS AND 1 IN 6 BOYS WILL BE SEXUALLY ASSAULTED BY THE TIME THEY TURN 18.
- THE ABS ESTIMATES THAT IN 2005, AROUND 1.3 MILLION AUSTRALIANS WERE SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT.<sup>3</sup>
- MOST CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT IS COMMITTED BY SOMEONE THE VICTIM KNOWS AND TRUSTS, OFTEN A FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND, AND MOST OFTEN A MAN.<sup>4</sup>
- DATA SHOWS US THAT CHILDREN VERY RARELY LIE ABOUT BEING SEXUALLY ASSAULTED.<sup>5</sup>

### ACT STATISTICS

There is currently no data that can indicate exactly how many people in the ACT have experienced child sexual assault, given that the majority of incidents are not reported to authorities. The Canberra Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC) keeps statistics on their service users which can give some sense of the size of the issue—however, it's likely that many incidents do not even come to the attention of services.

- CRCC reports that 60% of its clients are survivors of child sexual assault.
- CRCC finds that childhood sexual assault can leave a platform of vulnerability where the child can be vulnerable to further sexual assaults as a young person or adult.

Some people assume that all child sex offenders are gay men, or have a mental illness, or have been sexually assaulted themselves as children. However, CRCC finds that perpetrators of child sexual assault can be any age, are usually heterosexual, and can come from any cultural, religious, or socioeconomic background. The commonality across offenders of child sexual assault is a lack of empathy for the victim.

### AT-RISK GROUPS

Anyone can be a victim of child sexual assault. However, statistics suggest that women are more likely to have experienced child sexual assault than men.

For a range of complex reasons, some people may be more vulnerable to child sexual assault and its effects than others. This is particularly the case for people who may already live with social or economic marginalisation (for instance, because of cultural background, financial status, intergenerational patterns of abuse, domestic violence, drug and alcohol use, or mental illness).<sup>6</sup> These people might also experience more barriers to reporting abuse and accessing support. One example is that children with a disability are up to four times more likely to be sexually abused than non-disabled children.<sup>7</sup> We also know that children who are exposed to one kind of abuse (whether it is sexual, physical, emotional, or takes some other form) are at risk of being exposed to other forms.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For instance, see: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Child sexual abuse research: Risk Factors', retrieved 26 March 2014: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/carc/riskfactors.php>

<sup>7</sup> M. Charlton, et al., *Facts on traumatic stress and children with developmental disabilities*, National Centre for Child Traumatic Stress, Los Angeles, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, see: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Child sexual abuse research: General information', retrieved 26 March 2014: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/carc/general.php>

# IMPACTS OF CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT

## CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT IS A HIGHLY TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE, WITH VARIED AND PROFOUND IMPACTS.

Its effects can stay with someone for a lifetime (although it's important to emphasise that survivors of child sexual assault do have the ability to overcome the effects of the assault, especially with the right support). Ultimately, because of the widespread and impactful nature of child sexual assault, it has a range of consequences for families, communities and society as a whole.

### PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

- While the immediate impacts of child sexual assault vary, common emotional and behavioural consequences can include problems with behaviour; difficulties with emotional stress; low self-esteem; attachment issues; and problematic sexualised behaviour.
- Child sexual assault may leave victims with physical injury or illness, including sexually transmitted infections.
- Children who have been sexually abused may go on to develop depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>9</sup>
- People who were sexually assaulted as children suffer from more physical health problems than the general population, and have higher healthcare costs.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, 'Child sexual abuse', retrieved March 2014: <http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/protecting-children/what-is-child-abuse/child-sexual-abuse>

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Reeve, 'The truth is that the effects of child abuse are long-lasting, not just on its victims but on the health system's bottom line', *The Age*, October 7 2013: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-truth-is-that-the-effects-of-child-abuse-are-longlasting-not-just-on-its-victims-but-on-the-health-systems-bottom-line-20131006-2v282.html>.

- Adults who experienced child sexual assault are more likely to have problems with drug and alcohol use than the general population, and are much more likely to have attempted suicide.<sup>11</sup>
- ### ECONOMIC IMPACTS
- The average annual healthcare costs of people who were sexually assaulted as children are more than double those of people who were not abused.<sup>12</sup>
  - The precise impact of childhood sexual assault on the Australian economy is not known, but it is likely to be very high indeed (in the billions of dollars) once costs related to lost productivity, healthcare, mental health services, emergency services, child protection and justice responses, and so on, are accounted for.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Carol Ronken and Hetty Johnston, 'Child sexual assault: facts and statistics: [http://www.bravehearts.org.au/files/Facts%20and%20Stats\\_updated141212.pdf](http://www.bravehearts.org.au/files/Facts%20and%20Stats_updated141212.pdf)

### SOCIAL IMPACTS

- The impact of child sexual assault extends beyond the victim and their immediate family. The whole community experiences flow-on effects, ranging from the impacts of self-harming behaviours (such as using drugs or alcohol) that victims might use to cope with the trauma, to the loss of social cohesion resulting from poor outcomes in education and employment, and the social isolation linked with physical and mental health issues.<sup>14</sup>
- Some studies estimate that up to 85% of women in Australian prisons are survivors of childhood sexual assault.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Rebecca Reeve, 'The truth is that the effects of child abuse are long-lasting, not just on its victims but on the health system's bottom line': <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-truth-is-that-the-effects-of-child-abuse-are-longlasting-not-just-on-its-victims-but-on-the-health-systems-bottom-line-20131006-2v282.html>

<sup>15</sup> Carol Ronken and Hetty Johnston, *Child sexual assault: facts and statistics: [http://www.bravehearts.org.au/files/Facts%20and%20Stats\\_updated141212.pdf](http://www.bravehearts.org.au/files/Facts%20and%20Stats_updated141212.pdf)*

# SYSTEM RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT

### LEGAL

Anyone who engages sexually with a child under the age of 16 in the ACT is committing a sexual offence. For children between the ages of 10 and 16, if a child freely engages in a sexual activity with another child who is within two years of their age, the legislation allows a 'defence to the charge' of sexual assault to be enacted—however, if any coercion is used or threats made by one of the children, the 'defence to the charge' cannot be used. ACT legislation stipulates that children who are under the age of 10 are unable to give informed consent to engage in any sexual activity.

The ACT has a specialised policing unit called the Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Team (SACAT), which investigates child sexual assault and provides support to victims through their victim liaison officers. Children who have experienced sexual assault can make a statement to police with a support person if they want. Sometimes the first person who heard the child's disclosure is asked to give an interview to police; in this instance, this person may not be able to be a support person for the child during their statement, in which case a worker from a support service such as the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre can fill this role. The Canberra Rape Crisis Centre can also offer developmentally appropriate therapeutic interventions to children who have experienced sexual assault, including providing support to children in the lead up to, during and following criminal court proceedings.

In instances where a child experiences a recent sexual assault and there is possible forensic evidence, the Child at Risk Health Unit (CARHU)—which is based at the Canberra Hospital—has

qualified medical practitioners to conduct a forensic and medical examination of a child and can also offer therapy to children and their families.

Children's recorded statement with police is used as evidence in chief in sexual offence trials and children can be cross-examined by defence regarding the incidents they have experienced. This process is undertaken via a remote witness facility to curb the likelihood of the child seeing the person who sexually assaulted them. Criminal court processes can be very challenging and confusing for children, and it is important that they receive support to reduce further traumatisation.

### COMMUNITY

There are a variety of services and supports in the ACT for child victims of sexual assault, and for adults who experienced sexual assault as a child—regardless of whether it was ever reported to the police. The Canberra Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC)—which includes the Service Assisting Male Survivors of Sexual Assault (SAMSSA)—is the only sexual assault specific service in the ACT. The CRCC and SAMSSA offer specialised services to victims/survivors of sexual violence in the ACT and non-offending caregivers and other supporters. The service operates a crisis counselling line, provides counselling to victims and families, and conducts community education programs about responding to disclosures of sexual violence. The service also has a program called Nguru which offers culturally appropriate support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients as well as education within the community.

Victim Support ACT also provides counselling and other support services, as well as information about legal entitlements and advocacy.

The Child At Risk Health Unit (CARHU) is a health service based at Canberra Hospital, which responds to children and families where a child has been sexually assaulted.

### GOVERNMENT

The Australian Government has responded to child sexual assault at a policy level in a number of ways. The key national policy documents that deal with child sexual assault include COAG's *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010–2022*. In the ACT there is the *ACT Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children Strategy 2011–2017*.

In 2013 the Australian Government launched the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Commission will enquire into how institutions with a responsibility for children have responded to allegations of child sexual abuse. Ultimately the Commission will investigate where systems have failed to protect children, and will make recommendations about how laws, policies and practices can be improved to make children as safe as possible from sexual abuse in institutions. The Commission is currently set to report back at the end of 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Personal safety survey Australia 2005*, Cat. no. 4906.0, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Carol Ronken and Hetty Johnston, *Child sexual assault: facts and statistics*, Bravehearts Inc., 2012: [http://www.bravehearts.org.au/files/Facts%20and%20Stats\\_updated141212.pdf](http://www.bravehearts.org.au/files/Facts%20and%20Stats_updated141212.pdf)

# HOW TO REPORT ON CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT

## CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY.

There are ways you can report on child sexual assault that will help listeners, viewers and readers to see it as an issue that affects everyone in some way, and that everyone can take action on. Remember: you can report on this issue in a way that informs, educates, and contributes usefully to public dialogue!

**Name it.** Always use the term 'child sexual assault' where it applies. Using terms like 'affair' or 'sex' to describe an incident of sexual assault against a child minimises and trivialises a very traumatic, damaging experience. Plus, readers who consistently come across this terminology will get a better understanding of the extent of the problem.

**Safety comes first.** When reporting on child sexual assault, it is especially important that you do everything you can to ensure that your reporting does not compromise the victim's safety. This might involve leaving out details of what specifically occurred in the assault to preserve the victim's anonymity, if that's appropriate.

**Child sexual assault is absolutely never acceptable.** The adult perpetrator is always solely responsible for any incident of child sexual assault. NEVER use language or contextualise the story in a way that suggests that the child victim of the assault was in any way to blame for what happened to him or her. Children are vulnerable, impressionable and are dependent on adults to protect them and care for them—there are no circumstances under which a child should be made to appear responsible for any aspect of the assault they experienced.

**Child sexual assault is serious and highly traumatic.** It is never appropriate to report on child sexual assault in a way that sensationalises, trivialises, or makes light of it.

**Contextualise the story with statistics.** Use local, national, and (where appropriate) international statistics on child sexual assault to frame the story.

**Take the emphasis away from 'stranger danger'.** While incidents of child sexual assault by strangers tend to dominate the headlines, most victims are actually assaulted by an adult who they know and trust—and it's important for you to underscore your reporting with that fact. Where there is a relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, acknowledge it (if you are able to).

**Use your best sensitivity and good judgement when reporting victims' stories, especially when the victim is a child.** Make sure you do all you can to report on sexual violence in a way that upholds the victim's right to dignity, remembering that there might be trauma associated even with an incident that occurred many years ago. If possible, it would be best practice to provide an opportunity for victims and/or their families to look at what you're reporting before it is published or aired publicly.

**Know the law.** There are laws about what information you can and cannot divulge when you're reporting on a situation which may involve child sexual assault, or where a Domestic Violence Order has been issued. See the list of resources at the end of this document for more information about this.

**Be fair.** Child sexual assault is a highly emotive issue. Be sure to report what you can from both sides of the story in a balanced way, always keeping in mind that children are exceptionally vulnerable members of our community.

**Humanise the story with appropriate terminology.** Where possible, refer to the victim of violence by name. If that's not appropriate (for example, if you're talking about a victim who is still a minor or you need to protect their identity to keep them safe), be as specific as you can—for example, 'child who has been a victim of sexual assault.' The term 'survivor' is also sometimes used for people who have experienced child sexual abuse in the past.

**It is important to include information about available support options for people who have experienced child sexual assault, as well as for people who suspect that they know a child who is being assaulted.** In the ACT, you can list the following options:

- In an emergency, always dial 000
- If you have experienced child sexual assault, contact Canberra Rape Crisis Centre on 6247 2525, or text 0488 586 518
- If you believe a child you know is being sexually assaulted, you can contact Child Protection Services on 6207 0720.

**Call on community experts for comment.** Don't just rely on the police or the judiciary for comment when reporting on sexual violence. Community experts on child sexual assault will be able to put the issue in context. In the ACT you can contact:

- Canberra Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC)
- Victim Support ACT
- The Child At Risk Health Unit (CARHU), or Forensic And Medical Sexual Assault Care (FAMSAC).

# RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

## STATISTICS, RESEARCH AND COMMENTARY

Australian Institute of Family Studies:  
Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault:  
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/>  
Child Family Community Australia (CfCA) information exchange: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/>  
AIFS collated resources on child sexual abuse:  
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/carc/index.html>

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare – Child Protection:  
<http://www.aihw.gov.au/child-protection/>

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/>

## RESOURCES ON LEGAL REQUIREMENTS SURROUNDING REPORTING

Children and Young People Act 2008 – see 'Chapter 25: Information secrecy and sharing': <http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/a/2008-19/current/pdf/2008-19.pdf>

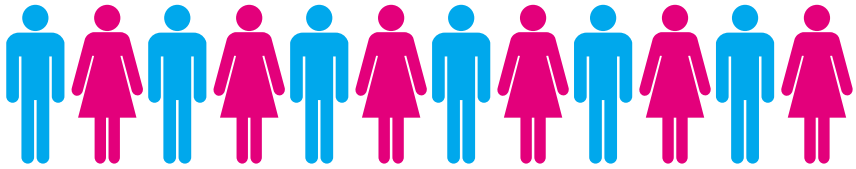
Domestic Violence and Protection Orders Act 2008 – see 'Part 13: Public access and publication': <http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/a/2008-46/current/pdf/2008-46.pdf>

## RESOURCES FOR SURVIVORS

1800 RESPECT (national sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service):  
<http://www.1800respect.org.au/>

Canberra Rape Crisis Centre: <http://crcc.org.au/>

Victim Support ACT: <http://www.victimsupport.act.gov.au/>



# DATA SHOWS US THAT CHILDREN VERY RARELY LIE ABOUT BEING SEXUALLY ASSAULTED

