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National Office for Child Safety



**UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA**

**NEWS AND MEDIA
RESEARCH CENTRE**

A background image showing a range of mountains under a sunset sky. The sky transitions from a pale yellow at the top to a soft orange, and the mountains are silhouetted in shades of blue and teal against the light.

REPORTING ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: GUIDANCE FOR MEDIA

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Attribution

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements and terminology	2
Introduction	3
KEY PRINCIPLES	4
Key principles: Summary	5
Trust	7
Consent	9
Empowerment	11
Safety	13
Dignity	15
PRACTICAL GUIDANCE	16
Guidance for interviewing victims and survivors	17
Practical guidance: Considerations for reporting about children	19
Practical guidance: Reporting on victims and survivors from diverse backgrounds and identities	20
Advice for editors and sub-editors	21
Advice for court reporters	22
Using language and images	23
Where to get advice, support and further information	26

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Acknowledgement of Country

The University of Canberra and the National Office for Child Safety acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands across Australia. We wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and contribution they make. We also acknowledge all First Nations Peoples who may engage with these Guides.

Acknowledgement and thanks

We acknowledge and pay our deep respects to those people who have been impacted by child sexual abuse and any people that may be impacted by this document. We thank the victims and survivors, advocates, service providers and media professionals who gave their valuable time and insights to contribute to the development of the Guides.

A brief note on terminology

In these Guides we use the term ‘victims and survivors’ to describe people who have been subjected to child sexual abuse. In line with a trauma-informed approach, we acknowledge that as part of the informed consent process, victims and survivors have the right to define their identity and the terms ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ can for some be considered as existing on a continuum of recovery. We also recognise that some people may not identify with either of these terms.

Content note

This document includes material about child sexual abuse and its portrayal in media that some people might find disturbing.

Where to get help

These Guides may bring up strong feelings and questions for many people. Help is available if you or someone you know has experienced, are experiencing, or are concerned a child or young person may be at risk of harm including child sexual abuse. If you need assistance or support, the National Office for Child Safety Support Services page (<https://www.childsafety.gov.au>) provides a list of dedicated services.

Bravehearts – 1800 272 831

Blue Knot Foundation – 1300 657 380

SAMSN Survivors & Mates Support Network – 1800 472 676

1800RESPECT – 1800 737 732

Lifeline – 13 11 14

Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800

13YARN – 13 92 76

QLife – 1800 184 527

INTRODUCTION

These Guides are designed as a practical tool to support media professionals in the reporting of child sexual abuse.

For journalists, child sexual abuse is an issue 'like no other' that requires understanding and reflection about the ongoing impacts of trauma on victims and survivors.

Child sexual abuse has long been hidden from public discussion and media have a powerful role to play in breaking the silence about abuse – now and in the past - within our families, online, and in organisations. Media organisations and journalists take on considerable responsibility when they report on child sexual abuse. Reporting can empower victims and survivors and increase community awareness, but can also reinforce stereotypes and cause further harm, stigma and trauma.

To date there has been limited support for Australian media professionals about the best way to tell such an important, personal story. The University of Canberra, in partnership with the National Office for Child Safety in the Attorney-General's Department, have developed *Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse: Guidance for Media* and its companion *Engaging with Media about Child Sexual Abuse: For Victims and Survivors* (the Guides) to fill that gap.

This Guide introduces the five Key Principles for reporting on child sexual abuse and offers practical advice, rather than rules, for journalists, editors and court reporters. It includes tips on avoiding harmful language and imagery, along with valuable statistics, information and links to further resources.

Child sexual abuse is a widespread issue that may be affecting your readers, colleagues or yourself. It is estimated that more than one in four (28.5%) Australians have experienced child sexual abuse.¹ Abuse can leave lasting impacts including on mental health, relationships, education, employment and finances.

That is why we have taken a trauma-informed approach to the Guides, asking media professionals to return to the core principles: Why are you reporting on this story? Who will it help? How might it harm?

“... when people tell their story, they're inhabiting the child that was affected. It's a dramatic thing for a person to do. When they tell their story to a journalist, they're giving something of themselves in such a big way.”

(Paul Auchetti, LOUD fence Inc)

The Guides acknowledge that the burden of child sexual abuse does not fall evenly across the community. Some voices and experiences are heard more clearly than others and some groups may be disproportionately affected. Special consideration has been given to the needs and sensitivities of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and their advocates, children and young people and their support networks, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, people with disability, LGBTQIA+ people, and people living in regional and remote communities.

To develop the Guides, we undertook research to analyse news media reporting and consulted with people with lived experience, stakeholders across the child safety sector, and with media professionals. You can find out more about the project here (<https://www.canberra.edu.au/nmrc-media-guides>).

These initial Guides are intended as living documents that will develop and grow. Importantly, this guidance for media sits alongside the companion *Engaging with Media about Child Sexual Abuse: For Victims and Survivors* and they should be read together.

KEY PRINCIPLES



REPORTING ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: GUIDANCE FOR MEDIA

KEY PRINCIPLES



TRUST

Trust is the basis for good reporting on child sexual abuse

Trust between victims and survivors and media requires choice, respect, consistency and clear expectations. Aim to ensure there are no surprises for victims and survivors. Allow them choice and agency in the process.



CONSENT

Secure full informed consent from the outset

Victims and survivors need to know how their story will be told, right from the start: the who, what, when, where, why and how.



EMPOWERMENT

Consider your story's impact

Victims and survivors everywhere can be empowered or retraumatised when stories of child sexual abuse are told through the media. Media have an important responsibility to do no further harm. Be respectful during the process, choose language and images carefully, and include details of relevant support services wherever possible.



SAFETY

Keep yourself and others safe

Establish and maintain safe physical, emotional and cultural environments for victims and survivors and media professionals. Clarify personal and professional boundaries and ensure support networks are in place.



DIGNITY

Foreground the voice, experience and dignity of the victim and survivor

Where possible, place the story in the wider social context, supported by facts, and consider stories of resilience and growth.

What is trauma?

Trauma is the psychological, physical, social, emotional, cultural and/or spiritual harm caused by exposure to an event, or series of events that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening.

It impacts an individual's sense of self, safety, social connection and ways of coping. For this purpose, 'trauma' can be defined both in terms of an event/s causing harm, and the harm that exposure to that event/s causes.

Paton, A., et al. (2023). *Minimum Practice Standards: Specialist and Community Support Services Responding to Child Sexual Abuse*. Canberra: National Office for Child Safety.²

What is trauma-informed practice?

Trauma-informed practice is framed within several core principles: safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment and respect for diversity. Based on the foundational principle of 'Do No Harm', it is a practice that everyone can adopt, rather than a form of 'treatment'.

Putting these principles into action for journalists, trauma-informed practice:

- Understands how stress and trauma can affect the brain and the body, and that 'symptoms' can be a way of coping.
- Considers what has happened to the person (not what is 'wrong' with the person).
- Is sensitive to the victim and survivor's experience when conducting the reporting process.
- Collaborates with the victim and survivor as an expert in their own experience.

Based on Blue Knot Foundation: *Becoming Trauma Informed – Services*.³

TRUST

KEY PRINCIPLE: TRUST IS THE BASIS FOR GOOD REPORTING ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Trust between victims and survivors and media requires choice, respect, consistency and clear expectations. Aim to ensure there are no surprises for victims and survivors. Allow them choice and agency in the process.

Victims and survivors may have experienced profound trauma and should be treated with compassion and empathy. Understand that victims and survivors may have been silenced, ignored or not believed, and may continue to feel this way. For some, a power imbalance or betrayal of trust is part of their experience of abuse, and it is important their interaction with the media does not replicate this experience.

Always remember that it is the victim and survivor's story to tell.

- It is important to manage expectations of victims and survivors; avoid making unrealistic promises regarding publishing or broadcasting the story.
- Try to actively engage the victim and survivor in decision-making throughout the reporting process – from the first approach through to any interviews, photography, meetings and writing.
- Building trust can include being transparent and upfront about:
 - o what is in and outside your control.
 - o your purpose and story angle, and where and when it will be published.
 - o the length and type of the story.
 - o the editorial and fact-checking process.
- It can be retraumatising for victims and survivors if agreed terms change mid-process and trust can be easily lost. Keep victims and survivors fully informed at all stages.

- The impact of trauma can make hard deadlines difficult for victims and survivors, so incorporate flexibility into these discussions.
- Victims and survivors may want to see a story or quotes before publication. This can ease anxiety and produce a better outcome for all.
- Explain to victims and survivors that they have agency at the start of the process, but at some stage their story will become part of the editorial process. Once released into the public domain, control of the story can be lost.

“

... when you're dealing with childhood sexual abuse, you're right at the highest level. This is where the sensitivities are, the ... potential harm is the greatest and the awareness and self-restraint of a journalist has to be at its greatest.

(Media)

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“

Story-telling is not just healing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survivors, it's a sacred cultural practice in our communities. Our lived experiences matter and we deserve to be seen and heard. However, before we invite any victims and survivors to share their lived experiences, we must make sure they feel safe and the space is actually safe. We make spaces safe by ensuring victims and survivors are given as much information upfront as possible, are offered anonymity and prior informed consent is given freely. Victims and survivors should be given the opportunity to review questions in advance and should never be asked “why did you....” but rather “what happened to you?” Victims and survivors should be offered assistance with understanding defamation laws, so they know if or how they can refer to their perpetrator, and the possible impact on legal proceedings. Victims and survivors should receive a copy of a media package to review before it is published. Victims and survivors need to know they get to control how their story is shared and we want to empower them with the information, tools and confidence to do that.

(Amanda Morgan, Advocate for survivors of child sexual abuse)

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CONSENT

KEY PRINCIPLE: SECURE FULL INFORMED CONSENT FROM THE OUTSET

Victims and survivors need to know how their story will be told, right from the start: the who, what, when, where, why and how.

At the very start of the process ensure the interviewee understands the principle of informed consent and check in with them regularly.

Consider how the understanding of informed consent may be different for victims and survivors given the profound trauma they experienced in their early development.

The guiding principle of informed consent is that the interviewee is fully aware of the consequences of telling their story to the media including:

- At some point the victim and survivor will lose control of the story.
- Other outlets will use the story and may not treat it with the same respect.
- The online environment means their story will be on the internet forever. It is very unlikely your media outlet will agree to taking the story down.
- The nature of social media means there may be instances of trolling and hurtful comments and the possibility of the story going viral.
- Unauthorised images may also be downloaded from social media pages.

While it may feel counterintuitive to give a victim and survivor all the facts about the journalistic process so they can make an informed choice, it is empowering. It gives the person a chance to regain the sense of control they may have lost through their abuse.

- Talk with the victim and survivor upfront about whether they have professional or personal support or networks around them.
- Seek further informed consent if the nature of the story changes.
- Respect the right of victims and survivors to withdraw consent at any time.

“

Piece by piece we must correct the narrative and take control away from child sex offenders who for so long have sought solace in our systems and institutions that shield them from the full extent of what they've done. The experience of child sexual abuse needs to be reframed once and for all from the perspective of boys and girls whose lives were taken away from them before they even had a chance to live them on their terms.

(Grace Tame, CEO The Grace Tame Foundation)

”

What is vicarious trauma?

Vicarious trauma is generally regarded as a reaction to ongoing, cumulative engagement with survivors of trauma. But everyone reacts differently, and journalists can develop vicarious trauma from even one interaction with a victim and survivor.

“Vicarious trauma refers to psychological changes resulting from cumulative, empathetic engagement with trauma survivors in a professional context.”

Thompson, I. (2021). The Dart Center Style Guide for Trauma-Informed Journalism.⁴

What is complex trauma?

Complex trauma usually occurs as a result of repeated ongoing interpersonal trauma experienced by a child, young person, or an adult, or across the lifespan, occurring at different ages and stages. Complex trauma can affect victims and survivors in countless ways and each experience will be different.

Because people with complex trauma experiences have often been betrayed and often struggle to be and feel safe, developing a trusting relationship can take a long time. People can and do heal from the impacts of complex trauma but this process may not be linear.

Blue Knot Foundation.

EMPOWERMENT

KEY PRINCIPLE: CONSIDER YOUR STORY'S IMPACT

Victims and survivors everywhere can be empowered or retraumatised when stories of child sexual abuse are told through the media. Media have an important responsibility to do no further harm. Be respectful during the process, choose language and images carefully, and include details of relevant support services wherever possible.

- Try to include the victim and survivor's story, voice and perspective in your reporting. Media reporting is vital to bring awareness, challenge taboos, increase public understanding of child sexual abuse and drive social, policy and legal change. It can also encourage other survivors to tell their story.
- How a story is framed and who is quoted can have a positive or negative impact on victims and survivors, and the wider community. If done poorly, it can perpetuate harmful and inaccurate perceptions of child sexual abuse.
- Victims and survivors who are reading, watching or listening to your story will be impacted so the inclusion of support services is crucial. Individuals may also reach out to you directly with their story, which can be overwhelming, but is also an opportunity to provide details of support services directly to them, in an automatic message or by other means.
- Sharing a preview of the story and allowing victims and survivors to have a say in the choice of the images used will ensure that they are empowered in the telling of their story.
- All efforts should be taken to not retraumatise with language and images (See 'Using Language and Images' on pages 23-25).
- Add a content warning to stories.
- Provide tailored support services when reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, LGBTQIA+, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and different age groups (e.g., children, young people, older people).
 - For further guidance on reporting on diverse communities, see 'Practical Guidance: Reporting on victims and survivors from diverse backgrounds and identities' on page 20.
 - For a list of support services for reference see page 26 or visit the National Office for Child Safety Support Services page (<http://www.childsafety.gov.au>).

“

The currency of offenders is silence – we need to strip that currency dry.

(Alison Quigley, Doctoral Candidate in Law and advocate for victims and survivors in sport)

”



“

Victim survivors identify as many different things. Most people have a preference. If you don't know someone's, ask. Sexual assault takes away choice, so it's especially important to respect choice of terminology. For many, articulating identity in relation to sexual assault is fluid. If moving from 'victim' to 'survivor' is a process, it isn't linear or progressive. It might be cyclical, we might be both at once, and we might not end at one term or another. There are many reasons, many of which are personal, as to why a victim and survivor will identify as a 'victim' or a 'survivor'... it is okay that they be one or the other, or that they are both. And a journalist should always ask.

(Sarah Rosenberg, Director and Co-Founder of With You We Can)

”

SAFETY

KEY PRINCIPLE: KEEP YOURSELF AND OTHERS SAFE

Establish and maintain safe physical, emotional and cultural environments for victims and survivors and media professionals. Clarify personal and professional boundaries and ensure support networks are in place.

Strategies to keep victims and survivors safe:

- Ask the interviewee what they need to make them feel comfortable and safe.
- Be flexible and considerate throughout the interview and editorial process.
- Have on hand information about relevant support services that you can give to the interviewee.
- For guidance on interviewing victims and survivors, see 'Guidance for interviewing victims and survivors' on page 17.
- Keep defamation law in mind when reporting details, including images that may inadvertently identify victims and survivors or their families, or alleged perpetrators (unless express permission has been provided). (For more detail see: 'Advice for court reporters' on page 22).

“

The hardest, consistently the hardest stuff that I've had to deal with, ever, has been child sexual abuse... the vicarious trauma is just so overwhelming and if you've got any empathy at all, you're going to have a very strong emotional response.

(Journalist)

”

Strategies to keep yourself and colleagues safe:

- Be aware of vicarious trauma and its effect on journalists who report on child sexual abuse.
- Colleagues who may be affected by vicarious trauma can include other journalists, sub-editors, camera operators, photographers, sound recordists and production personnel.
- Manage your relationship with victims and survivors by establishing clear boundaries (in consultation with your editor, experienced colleagues and/or professional counsellors) with victims and survivors. A journalist's limitations should be made clear: they can't give legal advice and/or counselling.
- Seek support for yourself if or when needed. Your organisation may have access to an Employee Assistance Program. You can also contact 1800RESPECT for help and advice. (See page 26 for more information on support services).
- Check on the wellbeing of colleagues who are reporting on court cases, commissions and inquiries.
- Senior colleagues should mentor and support younger journalists in reporting on child sexual abuse.

Defining and measuring the prevalence of child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is a crime. While there is no universal definition, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse defined child sexual abuse as 'any act that exposes a child to, or involves a child in, sexual processes that are beyond their understanding, are contrary to accepted community standards, or are outside what is permitted by law'.⁵

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS)¹ estimates that more than one in four (28.5%) Australians have experienced child sexual abuse. Those who identify as females were twice as likely to have experienced child sexual abuse compared to males (37.3% of females compared to 18.8% of males).

The ACMS found that child sexual abuse rarely happens once and it often co-occurs with other forms of child maltreatment. Most victims and survivors of child sexual abuse (78%) reported that the abuse occurred multiple times. Around four in ten victims and survivors (42%) experienced child sexual abuse more than six times. Around one in ten victims and survivors (11%) experienced it more than 50 times.

The ACMS further identified the profound impacts of child maltreatment, including on mental and physical health outcomes. When compared with people who have not experienced child maltreatment, those who experienced child maltreatment: are more likely to have a mental disorder (48%), compared with around one in five (21.6%) of those who did not experience maltreatment; are three times more likely to have Major Depressive Disorder (24.6% compared with 8.1%); are 3.9 times more likely to have self-harmed in the past year; and are 4.6 times more likely to have attempted suicide in the past year.

For more information on the ACMS see <https://www.acms.au>.

DIGNITY

KEY PRINCIPLE: FOREGROUND THE VOICE, EXPERIENCE AND DIGNITY OF VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS

Where possible, place the story in the wider social context, supported by facts, and consider stories of resilience and growth.

Journalism can be a powerful tool for education on, and prevention of, child sexual abuse. However, victims and survivors are often silenced in media reporting, or blamed, and perpetrators are often valorised which can cause great harm. Stories also often focus on the abuse only and ignore the stories of dignity, resilience and bravery that many victims and survivors demonstrate.

Reporting on child sexual abuse can be an opportunity to educate the community about the social prevalence of child sexual abuse and highlight stories of resilience from victims and survivors.

Reporting can situate child sexual abuse as a societal problem and not only an isolated event. Nearly 30% of all adults in Australia have experienced some type of child sexual abuse.¹ Research shows that when children experience child sexual abuse, it rarely happens only once (for research and statistics, see 'Defining and measuring the prevalence of child sexual abuse' on page 14).

- Be aware of the hierarchy of sources in the story. Whose voice is used first in the story, and whose voices are missing?
- Contact advocates and support groups in your area for comment and perspectives on stories on child sexual abuse, where appropriate.
- Note that court reporting is subject to legal constraints (see 'Advice for court reporters' on page 22).
- Ensure you verify the data and statistics. You can go to the Australian Child Maltreatment Study website for the most recent statistics on child sexual abuse (<https://www.acms.au/>) and

the National Office for Child Safety website for more information on this issue (www.childsafety.gov.au).

Ask yourself

- Do the voices and experiences of victims and survivors frame your story?
- Does the language convey the gravity of the issue?
- Is child sexual abuse described in a way that reflects its gravity and impacts?
- Are you victim blaming, discrediting the victim and survivor, or focusing on their behaviour? If so, you should revisit.
- Are you valorising the perpetrator (focusing on career, achievements, character)? If so, you should revisit.

“

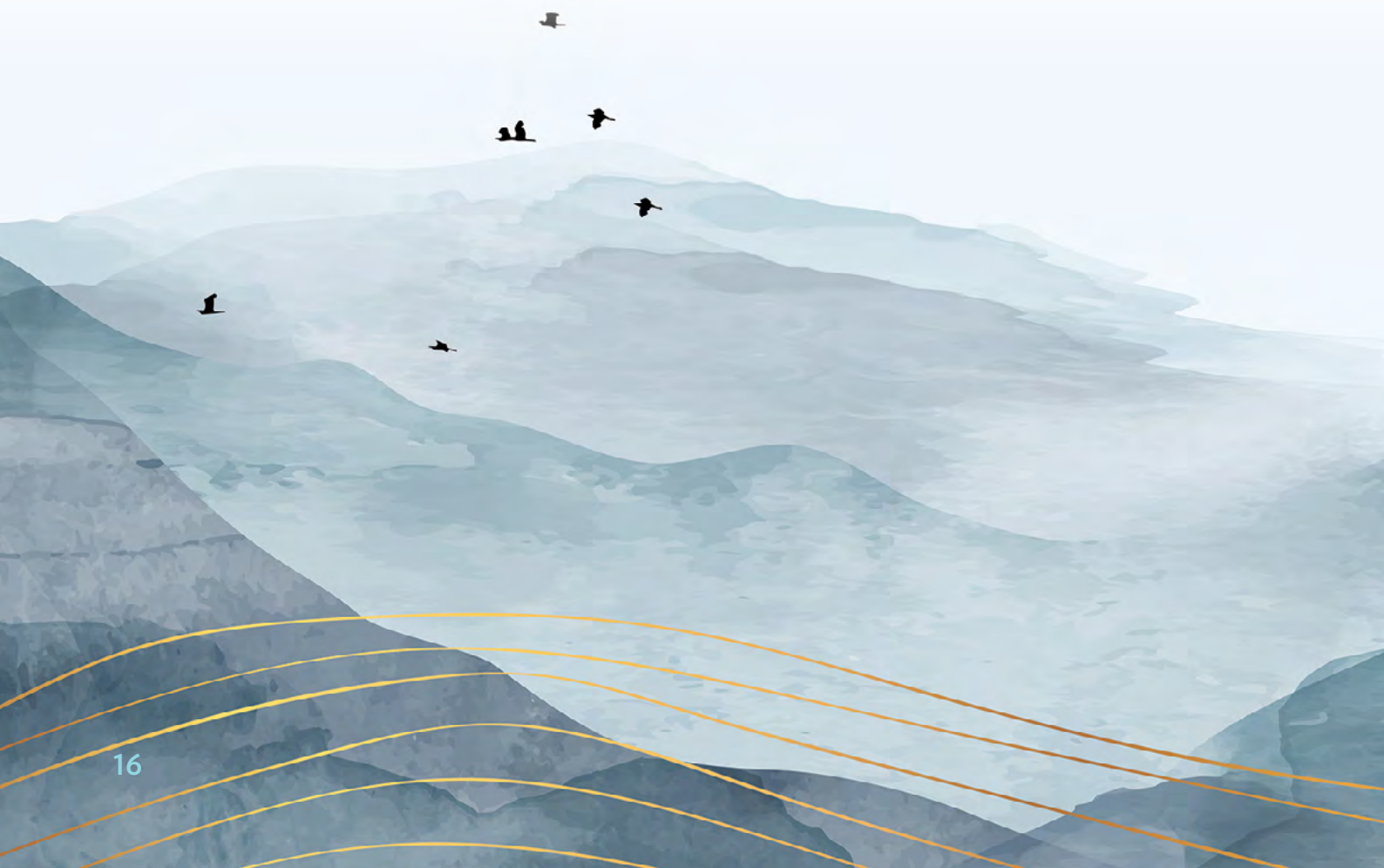
... we're starting to try and bring a bigger picture to our story, hoping that the journalist is able to grasp that, rather than individualise us. We rely on journalists to tap into the bigger picture.

(Victim and survivor and advocate)

”

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

The following guidance builds on the Key Principles by suggesting how to interview, write and present stories on child sexual abuse. Guidance is given on interviewing victims and survivors, reporting on children, reporting on victims and survivors from diverse backgrounds and identities, advice for editors and sub-editors, advice for court reporters, and using language and images.



GUIDANCE FOR INTERVIEWING VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS

Interviewing victims and survivors

Victims and survivors have a legal right to remain anonymous, but there are some cases where they cannot legally speak even if they want to (for example, during the legal process).

Before the interview

- A victim and survivor is within their rights to refuse an interview.
- Only approach a victim and survivor or advocate if you know that you are sure you wish to interview them.
- Ask the victim and survivor how they'd like to be referred to – this is different for everyone. Ask if they would like to share their identity, use a pseudonym or remain anonymous. Check whether they use the term 'victim', 'survivor' or something else to refer to themselves.
- Explain the purpose and angle of your story to the interviewee, how their interview will be used, when it will be published/shown and who else will be in the story and any other caveats.
- Give the interviewee a choice as to where, when, how, and for how long the interview will be conducted.
- Check whether they would like a support person to be present.
- Explain the process of news production including fact-checking, how the story will be written/recorded, the process of headlines and editing, the length of the story, and how the news cycle may affect publication. Further information for victims and survivors can be found in the companion *Engaging with Media about Child Sexual Abuse: For Victims and Survivors*.
- Provide questions ahead of time if requested and ask if there are aspects of the story they do not want to talk about.
- Ask the interviewee what images they might suggest for illustrating the story, if relevant.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.

Some tips on planning your interview

Ensure there are no surprises for the interviewee and that they are comfortable with the setting and timing of the interview.

Carefully consider where the interview will be held or ask the interviewee for their preferred location. For example, while a church might be visually interesting, it may be retraumatising for victims and survivors of institutional child sexual abuse.

A lapel microphone is less intrusive than a hand-held microphone but ask the interviewee what they're comfortable with. If using a lapel microphone, ask the interviewee if they would prefer to fit it to themselves, rather than having you or a crew member do it.

During the interview

- Have a list of support resources on hand if the interviewee needs it.
- Asking the interviewee to keep retelling their story may retraumatise them.
- Consider the level of detail needed for the story, and why you want to include/ask about it.
- Let the interviewee know they can take a break or end the interview at any time.
- If the person is visibly distressed, stop the interview (including filming), unless they explicitly express they would like to continue. Ask before physically comforting someone.
- Consider asking, at the end, if they have anything to say to conclude the interview.
- Don't promise to share the final product if you can't guarantee it. Different organisations have different policies.
- Spend the time to go over the interview and make changes if requested.

After the interview

- Check on the interviewee's wellbeing, especially on the day of publication.
- Keep in touch and inform the interviewee when the piece is being published/shown and if it will not be shown.
- Let the interviewee know if something has been discovered that may be difficult for them.
- Don't put anyone at risk and do not inadvertently identify someone.
- Ensure self-care and get support for yourself as necessary.

“

I just wanted to sit down with my boss and have a chat with him and say, like, just so you know, this is the terrible stuff that I've heard today. I need to say it out loud. Like some of the stuff I'm not going to put in the report. But it's going to stick with me so I need to talk to someone about it.

(Media)

”

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE: CONSIDERATIONS FOR REPORTING ABOUT CHILDREN

The voices and views of children can help to break the stigma around child sexual abuse; children have a right to be heard. Not talking to children can silence the profound impacts of child sexual abuse. However, their right to privacy must be respected and the child's best interests must always be considered.

The *Key Principles* for the reporting of child sexual abuse – **Trust, Consent, Empowerment, Safety** and **Dignity** – also apply in the reporting of children.

This area of reporting is legally fraught and we suggest that you check with your outlet's legal team. Along with the Key Principles for reporting on child sexual abuse, consider:

- Reporting should be guided by the principle of “best interests of the child” (see United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child⁶).
- Someone is legally a child until the age of 18.
- Different states and territories have different laws for reporting on children and when they can be named. Follow the laws of your state or territory about disclosing the identity of the child or any identifying information.
- A child has a right to privacy, even if the parent or caregiver has given consent. Explain the consequences when discussing informed consent.
- Even if a parent agrees for a child to be interviewed, consider whether this is a good thing.
- Take the time to sensitively interview children.
 - Tell them you are a reporter and what you are doing.
 - Focus on the child's story and don't ask about anything outside of their own experience.
 - Limit the number of people in the room, e.g., photographers and interviewers.
- Always interview children in the presence of non-offending parents or caregivers.

The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** has two Articles that are relevant for reporting on children:

- **Article 12:** Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account.
- **Article 16:** Children have the right to privacy. The law should protect them from attacks against their way of life, their good name, their family and their home.

UNICEF also provides excellent principles and guidelines on how to report on children: **Guidelines for journalists reporting on children.**

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE: REPORTING ON VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS AND IDENTITIES

Child sexual abuse can happen to anyone, but often the stories in the media show a narrow type of victim and survivor. Some groups can be disproportionately affected by child sexual abuse and deserve to be represented in media in a respectful and culturally safe way.

These victims and survivors may include: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, LGBTQIA+ people, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

- Be respectful and mindful of cultural, religious and spiritual practices and obligations.
- Understand the compounded impacts of child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse can intersect with race, gender, sexuality, poverty and geography.
- Speak to advocacy groups, peak bodies and other relevant organisations to gain a better understanding of child sexual abuse and trauma in diverse groups.
- Seek advice or training on culturally safe approaches and practices from expert organisations and services.
- Consider engaging a trauma-informed interpreter.
- Be mindful not to stigmatise through your reporting (i.e., suggesting child sexual abuse is a problem primarily affecting a particular group).
- Understand that one person does not speak for a group and each victim and survivor has their own experience of child sexual abuse.
- Child sexual abuse and sexual orientation or gender identity are entirely unrelated and should never be conflated.

“

It’s complex being queer and being a survivor. The intersection of those two things has often been handled badly by the media. It’s important to acknowledge how fraught it is to have media coverage of victim’s and survivor’s stories happening in close proximity to LGBTQIA+ communities. Avoiding the harms of false equivalency is crucial.

(Victim and survivor)

”

Further resources

Disability Reporting Handbook
Indigenous Reporting Handbook
Reporting on Gender Identity
Media Changing the Story
For links see page 26

ADVICE FOR EDITORS AND SUB-EDITORS

Reporting on child sexual abuse is important but can be challenging for journalists and victims and survivors and this extra guidance will help you support them. You are responsible for the impact of your news organisation.

Journalists involved in reporting on child sexual abuse need time to develop trust with victims and survivors and write these stories.

Recognise the power of language, images, headlines and advertising.

- Take care with headlines. Consider accuracy and impact, and avoid headlines that could be seen to sensationalise stories.
- Consider tagging the story as “sensitive” to ensure advertising is excluded for stories about child sexual abuse.
- Be aware that any mention of child sexual abuse, exploitation or paedophilia, even if it’s incidental or in a story about a high-profile celebrity, can be triggering for victims and survivors.
- Graphic images should not be used nor images that stereotype, sexualise or portray victimhood. Develop a database of images that can be used. (Refer to ‘Using language and images’ on pages 23-25.)
- Ensure images do not identify a victim and survivor or alleged perpetrator if you do not have permission or there are legal proceedings.

Provide support, training and resources for your staff.

- Tailor policies, guidelines and training on how to report on child sexual abuse. These can be based on this *Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse: Guidance for Media*.
- Facilitate training for journalists on best practice reporting on child sexual abuse and vicarious trauma.
- Allow a journalist time to sensitively interview victims and survivors.

“

... if you want to make an impact and you want to actually make a change ... it needs time. You know, you've got to give it respect and time 'cause people continue to lose their lives over this.

(Victim and survivor)

”

- Have a database of experts for journalists to call on. The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse is also a useful national resource: www.nationalcentre.org.au.
- Provide wellbeing support for staff and ensure the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is easily available.
- Constant or prolonged exposure to these stories is damaging for journalists. Rotate journalists who cover commissions or inquiries or extended court cases.
- Consider only putting senior, experienced journalists on stories of child sexual abuse.
- Don't push a journalist if they show reluctance to cover a story as they may have a personal history with the issue.

ADVICE FOR COURT REPORTERS

Court reporting has strict legal guidelines that must be followed. However, you can use your professional discretion when reporting on child sexual abuse to minimise harm.

- Reporting on court cases that involve child sexual abuse follows the same laws as other cases. However, care needs to be taken with the narrative and framing of a court report.
- Discuss any doubts with your editor or producer and refer to your outlet’s legal team if possible.

Language

- Journalists and editors do have some discretion with the language they use. Just because it’s been reported in court doesn’t necessarily mean it’s appropriate to report.
- There is a tension between the level of detail to include and the effect on the victim and survivor. Is there editorial and ethical justification for including graphic detail? As a general principle, include only as much as is necessary to show the gravity of the offence and not minimise the significance of the crime.
- Journalists have a legal responsibility to give a fair account of what happens in a courtroom but also understand that a defence lawyer’s job is to protect their client. They will develop a narrative to do that (“they led me on”, “it was alcohol and drugs”). Use specific phrases to show that you are reporting on evidence that has been presented to the court. Examples could include:
 - o ‘Claims/claimed’ can carry a connotation of doubt: “the victim claimed”, “the offender claimed”. A better phrase to accurately report on any defence that is mounted is “Defence said”.
 - o ‘The court heard/the jury heard’: the best term to use here is, again, “Defence said” to accurately report on what is said in court.

“

You still have a job to do as a journalist to think about the implications of the level of detail you're going to provide ... but you don't want to minimise the seriousness and the impact of the offense that's occurred – sometimes language and vagueness can serve to undermine the real significance of something. That's the tension.

(Media)

”

Other key considerations

- Are there any suppression orders on the case before the court?
- Be aware of legal obligations in relation to the identification of children.
- Even if it is legally permissible, give careful consideration as to whether it is in the best interests of the child for them to be named.

For detailed information on court reporting, please visit [County Court Victoria](#).⁷

USING LANGUAGE AND IMAGES

“

It is not only one’s spoken or written words that are powerful; body language captured in a photo and descriptive tone are equally impactful. From a victim’s perspective, it is critical that they are always shown respect. Twenty years on and we are constantly referred to in the media, “as the parents of slain schoolboy”. Comments like that are gut wrenching.

(Bruce and Denise Morcombe, Founders Daniel Morcombe Foundation)

”

LANGUAGE

- Avoid language that minimises or trivialises child sexual abuse. For example, ‘child sex’ or ‘child porn’.
- Avoid language that implies consent between the child and perpetrator: ‘sexual relationship’, ‘sexual intercourse’ or ‘child pornography’. Place all responsibility on the perpetrator.
- Use accurate and specific language with correct terminology. Child sexual abuse is a crime.
- Take care not to blame the victim or suggest they contributed to the abuse.
- Include sentencing remarks in quotations as court proceedings can include offensive language.
- Do not reinforce stereotypes or employ sensationalist language. This includes in celebrity reporting.
- Sensationalised or derogatory terms about perpetrators, or valorisation of them, is damaging for victims and survivors. Perpetrators are people, not “monsters”. They should be held accountable for their actions as such. Reflecting on the role or contributions of the perpetrator in society in a story about child sexual abuse can be interpreted as a mitigation or form of valorisation.
- Avoid commenting on: a child’s behavioural problems, private life, physical appearance, age, habits or clothing; gender identity or sexual preference as a reason for abuse; implying someone other than the perpetrator is responsible (e.g., blaming parents or caregivers).

Consideration should be taken before using the following language:

Adolescent, teenager, teen: when these terms are used in the context of child sexual abuse, it is important to distinguish between adolescents or teenagers up to age 18 (who are legally children) and adolescents or teenagers aged 18 and above. Consider using the term ‘child’ for clarity.

Allegedly, allege: the term ‘allegedly’ can be appropriate and/or legally required in some circumstances. Notwithstanding, the terminology should not be used in a way that casts doubt on victims and survivors or their reports of child sexual abuse.

Paedophile: ‘Paedophilia’ or ‘paedophilic disorder’ refers to a clinical diagnosis of a mental health condition. While there may be some perpetrators of child sexual abuse who have been diagnosed with paedophilic disorder, this isn’t always the case. Similarly, not all paedophiles have committed sexual crimes against children. Ensure use is accurate.

“

I feel like the media dehumanises victims and humanises perpetrators and I'd really like to see that changed.

(Victim and survivor)

”

IMAGES

- Take care that images do not stereotype, sexualise or portray victimhood. Images of children who look afraid or in despair can be further triggering for victims and survivors. This is also applicable for stock images.
- Ensure any images do not identify a victim and survivor (unless express permission given) or alleged perpetrator.
- Choose strong images of victims and survivors when they can be identified – or work with the victim or survivor to determine how they want to be depicted if you can.
- Including images of the alleged or convicted perpetrator, or giving them a right of reply, can be retraumatising for victims and survivors and can result in legal ramifications.
- If you are using an image of a victim or survivor who has passed away, consider including a warning at the front of the article, or choosing a different image.

Ask yourself

- Do you need to include graphic descriptions?
- Can your article harm those in the story?

Sensitive use of language and images

TERMINOLOGY AND LANGUAGE TO AVOID		INSTEAD USE	
Relationship Affair Engaged in Child sex Sexual activity Sex scandal Teenage lover	Implies the child has consented or is complicit in their own abuse, shifting blame from the perpetrator(s) to victims and survivors. Perpetuates community misunderstanding of what constitutes abuse.	Child sexual abuse Sexual violence against children Grooming	Clearly refers to a perpetrator or offender subjecting a child to abuse and does not imply the abuse is in any way the fault of the child. Consider using one or a combination of terms, as appropriate. Ensure terms are used accurately.
Child prostitute Child prostitution Child sex worker	Implies the child has consented or is complicit in their own abuse, shifting blame from the perpetrator(s) to victims and survivors.	Child sexual abuse Child sexual assault Sexual violence against children Rape of a child	Clearly refers to a perpetrator or offender subjecting a child to abuse and does not imply the abuse is in any way the fault of the child.
Child pornography Child porn Kiddie porn	These terms are offensive. They imply the child has consented or is complicit in their own abuse, shifting blame from the perpetrator(s) to victims and survivors. This normalises the material, as consensual pornography is legal and legitimate.	Online child sexual abuse Child sexual abuse material Child sexual exploitation material	Consider using one or a combination of terms, as appropriate. Ensure terms are used accurately.
Pedo or paedo	Trivialises child sexual abuse and paedophilic disorder. Obscures that child sexual abuse is perpetrated by ordinary people in the community that are known and trusted by 'diagnosing' an offender.	Offender Perpetrator Perpetrator of child sexual abuse Perpetrator of sexual crimes against children	Avoids stigmatisation and trivialising serious crimes. Ensures terms are used accurately.

IMAGES TO AVOID	INSTEAD USE
Sexualised images of children Stock images that focus on the actions of victims and survivors Images that portray violence Stereotyping victims and survivors to a particular group Images that show a perpetrator in a position of power over a child Shadowy figures in doorways Images of scared children	Images that demonstrate resilience Images of strong victims and survivors Check with the victim and survivor for an image of their choice Stock images that represent people finding their voice or feeling empowered.

WHERE TO GET ADVICE, SUPPORT AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Support services

These Guides may bring up strong feelings and questions for many people. Help is available if you or someone you know has experienced, are experiencing, or are concerned a child or young person may be at risk of harm including child sexual abuse. If you need assistance or support, the National Office for Child Safety support services page (<https://www.childsafety.gov.au>) provides a list of dedicated services.

Child sexual abuse support and advice

Bravehearts: 1800 272 831 or www.Bravehearts.org.au

Blue Knot Foundation: 1300 657 380 or www.BlueKnot.org.au

Survivors & Mates Support Network (SAMSN): 1800 472 676 or www.Samsn.org.au

PartnerSPEAK (peer support for non-offending partners): (03) 9018 7872

National Redress Scheme: 1800 737 377 or www.NationalRedress.gov.au

Care Leavers Australasia Network (CLAN) Inc: 1800 008 774 or www.Clan.org.au

Lifeline: 13 11 14

1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732

MensLine Australia: 1300 789 978

Kids Helpline (for children and young people aged between 5–25): 1800 55 1800 or www.kidshelpline.com.au

13YARN (crisis support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples): 13 92 76 or www.13yarn.org.au

Beyond Blue: <https://www.beyondblue.org.au>

QLife: 1800 184 527

ASKIZZY (for people with disabilities, carers and their families to connect with services across Australia): <https://askizzy.org.au/disability-advocacy-finder>.

For more information on media reporting

Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA): <https://www.meaa.org>

Media Diversity Australia: <https://www.mediadiversityaustralia.org>

Australian Press Council: <https://www.presscouncil.org.au>

OurWatch: <https://www.ourwatch.org.au>

The DART Centre for Journalism and Trauma: <https://dartcenter.org/asia-pacific>

Mindframe: <https://mindframe.org.au>

Disability Reporting Handbook: <https://www.mediadiversityaustralia.org/disability-reporting-handbook>

Indigenous Reporting Handbook: https://www.mediadiversityaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ReportingonAboriginalandTorresStraitIslanderPeoplesandIssues_QuickGuide_A.pdf

Reporting on Gender Identity: https://rainbowhealthaustralia.org.au/media/pages/research-resources/guide-for-media-reporting-on-gender-identity/1434036552-1650953507/guide_for_media_-_gender_identity.pdf

Media Changing the Story: [https://genderinstitute.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021_docs/Media_Changing_the_Story_Media_Guidelines_for_the_reporting_of_DFSV_in_the_Northern_Territory_\(1\).pdf](https://genderinstitute.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021_docs/Media_Changing_the_Story_Media_Guidelines_for_the_reporting_of_DFSV_in_the_Northern_Territory_(1).pdf)

QUICK REFERENCE TEMPLATES FOR JOURNALISTS

Links to support services and how to make a report

Make a report

If you need to report a crime contact your local police on 131 444 or call Crimestoppers on 1800 333 000. In an emergency, call 000.

If you suspect a child or young person is at risk of harm, abuse or neglect you can contact your relevant state or territory child protection agency.

Report online child abuse material

To report online child sexual abuse, including child sexual abuse material, please contact the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation using the Report Abuse button.

You can also report illegal and harmful online content, and online abuse, to the eSafety Commissioner at <https://www.esafety.gov.au/report>.

Support services

Bravehearts (support for child sexual abuse survivors) on 1800 272 831

Blue Knot Foundation on 1300 657 380

Survivors & Mates Support Network (SAMSN) on 1800 472 676

1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732

Kids Helpline (for children and young people aged between 5–25) on 1800 55 1800

For more information and links to support, visit <https://www.childsafety.gov.au>

Further information

If you want further information about child sexual abuse, including statistics, please see:

- **National Office for Child Safety:** <http://www.childsafety.gov.au>
- **The Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report:** <https://www.acms.au>
- **The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse:** www.nationalcentre.org.au
- **Media Reporting of Child Sexual Abuse in Australia, 2020-2022:** www.canberra.edu.au/nmrc-media-guides
- **Media Guides for the Reporting of Child Sexual Abuse: Consultation Summary:** www.canberra.edu.au/nmrc-media-guides.

References

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- 2 Paton, A., Parsons, V., Pitts, C., Adamson, K., Bromfield, L., Horch, G., Herbert, J., Hovane, V., and O'Leary, P. (2023). *Minimum Practice Standards: Specialist and Community Support Services Responding to Child Sexual Abuse*, Canberra: National Office for Child Safety.
- 3 Based on Blue Knot Foundation: *Becoming Trauma Informed – Services*: <http://blueknot.org.au>.
- 4 Thompson, I. (2021). *Dart Center Style Guide for Trauma-Informed Journalism*. Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma. <https://dartcenter.org/resources/dart-center-style-guide>.
- 5 *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, Final Report: Our Inquiry – Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse Volume 1*, p.9.
- 6 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- 7 <https://www.countycourt.vic.gov.au/files/documents/2018-09/covering-courts.pdf>.



REPORTING ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: GUIDANCE FOR MEDIA

For more information please contact:
The National Office for Child Safety at
<https://www.childsafety.gov.au>

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This guide and its companion guide, *Engaging with
Media about Child Sexual Abuse: For Victims and
Survivors*, are available online at
<https://www.childsafety.gov.au/mediaguides>