

Situational Crime Prevention

Situational crime prevention is an approach which can be applied to the prevention of child sexual abuse within an organisational context. Situational crime prevention seeks to reduce opportunities for crime by targeting and changing specific characteristics of the environment to:

- increase the level of effort and difficulty involved in committing a crime
- increase the level of risk associated with engaging in criminal behaviour
- remove excuses for offending behaviour
- reduce rewards for engaging in criminal behaviour.

Situational crime prevention approaches do not focus on identifying potential persons who may have the potential to perpetrate child abuse but rather require a holistic assessment of the risks to children and young people within an organisational environment.

For child abuse to occur there must be an adult or young person who has the potential to offend, a vulnerable child or young person, and environment that enables abuse to occur and an opportunity for the adult or young person to offend.
Morley & Higgins n.d

While screening measures such as a Working with Children Check (WWCC), Police Record Checks, identity checks, interviews and referee checks, when employed within an organisational context are effective in excluding persons who pose an 'obvious' risk to children and young people, they are not effective in identifying the vast majority of perpetrators. As child abuse often occurs in secret and is often not disclosed for many years or decades after the abuse has ceased, if at all, those who engage in this behaviour can remain undetected for long periods.

A focus on the organisational 'environment' – which includes the organisational culture, policies, procedures and the physical environment – is instrumental in reducing the likelihood of abuse.

Figure 1: Situational crime prevention elements



Organisational environments can contribute to child abuse occurring by:

- providing cues that prompt an individual to engage in child abuse
- exerting social pressure on the individual to participate in or perpetrate child abuse
- weakening moral constraints
- permitting potential offenders to engage in child abuse
- producing emotional arousal that provokes a person to engage in child abuse.

When we examine cases of child abuse within an organisational context presented through the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, while the perpetrator bears the ultimate

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responsibility for their actions, it is clear that failures in organisational culture, policy and practices play a significant role in creating conditions where abuse could occur and/or continue.

These following scenarios illustrate the important role that organisational culture, policy and practices can play in either creating conditions where abuse can occur or in preventing child abuse.

EXAMPLE

Jason (35 years old) has been the parish children's choir leader for the last 2 years. The choir meets after school every Tuesday from 4pm to 5pm in the parish hall. Twelve children from Grades 3 to 6 attend the choir.

VERSION A

Jason has a current WWCC but did not go through an interview or induction as the parish was grateful to have him involved in the choir and it was assumed that he would work it out. Jason leads the program on his own and says he prefers it that way. He does not like the parents who drop off their children to stay or watch the rehearsal.

Jason has recently begun communicating with a choir participant, Hannah (12 years old), through his social media personal account. He uses the social media platform to connect with Hannah through private messaging to chat and exchange photographs. Jason has asked Hannah to send him photographs of herself in her bathing suit. Hannah is uncomfortable about this but is too embarrassed to tell her parents, and does not know that she can talk to someone at the parish about what has been happening. Another parent had already reported Jason's behaviour to the parish secretary after she became aware that Jason was messaging her daughter, Susie but no action was taken.

VERSION B

Before starting in his role, Jason was provided with a role description and copies of the Safeguarding Children and Young People Policy including the Code of Conduct to help ensure that he was aware of the responsibilities of the role in relation to safeguarding children and young people. The parish ensured that Jason had a current WWCC and asked him to participate in an interview with the parish priest and another parish volunteer to ascertain his interest, skills and experience as a choir leader and in working with children. Jason provided details of three referees who were contacted prior to his commencement to ensure that there were no obvious 'red flags' in relation to his role with children.

Before commencing, Jason also attended an information evening for new volunteers where he was given important information to assist him in his volunteer role. Another volunteer, Sophie, was assigned to assist Jason with the choir.

Once Jason was appointed, he and Sophie met to discuss the choir and to consider any child safety risks (e.g. children not getting picked up on time, sign-in and sign-out processes, registration processes). Jason and Sophie were familiar with the Safeguarding Children and Young People Policy and they discussed ways to empower children to have a voice in decisions that impact them and to raise concerns. Jason and Sophie decided that in the first session with the children they would:

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- discuss their roles and their responsibilities in relation to keeping children safe
- explain that volunteers must follow a Code of Conduct (which is a set of rules) designed to keep everyone, but particularly children, safe
- explain the set of rule that volunteers need to follow in the parish when working with children e.g. including not having contact with children via social media
- encourage the children to speak with either Sophie or Jason, their parents, the parish priest or any other trusted adults, if they felt unsafe or uncomfortable about anything related to the choir.

Jason and Sophie recognise the importance of parental involvement in the choir and have encouraged parents to attend and sit in a special section in the parish hall, so that they are able to watch the rehearsal and hear their children's beautiful voices.

Both Jason and Sophie are clear about their role responsibilities and are aware of the boundaries of their role. They understand that child safety concerns, allegations and complaints are taken seriously by the parish and action will be taken by the parish and/or the Archdiocese to report breaches of conduct to the parish priest and/or Victoria Police.

PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF CHILDREN

The Victorian Child Safe Standards provide a comprehensive framework to address organisational factors which can reduce the likelihood of abuse occurring. Standard 7 ('Strategies to promote the participation and empowerment of children') highlights an important element of situational crime prevention which relates to our efforts to empower children and young people. While all children and young people remain vulnerable to abuse and still require the utmost care and protection, empowering children and young people works to better equip children to deal with possible abuse situations.

Empowering children and young people may include the following strategies:

- Consulting with them about decisions that impact them.
- Providing 'a voice and a choice'.
- Providing information about rights and responsibilities within your organisation (e.g. the Convention on the Rights of the Child)
- Partnering in the development and design of programs, activities and events.
- Encouraging open communication about concerns and providing information about who within the organisation can assist them (in addition to their parents and other trusted adults).
- Providing personal safety education (where appropriate).

REFERENCES

Morley, S & Higgins, D n.d., *Understanding situational crime prevention for child sexual abuse: what services need to know*, Institute of Child Protection Studies.

https://safeguardingchildren.acu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1388443/Situational_Crime_Prevention_for_CSA.pdf

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