

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Management of Child Sex Offender Information**

Melbourne—Thursday, 13 May 2021

#### **MEMBERS**

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

Ms Jane Garrett

Ms Wendy Lovell

Ms Tania Maxwell

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Rodney Barton

Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Ms Sheena Watt

**WITNESS**

Ms Deanne Carson, Chief Executive Officer, Body Safety Australia (*via videoconference*).

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Ms Carson, I would like to read to you the privileges in appearing before the committee today. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing but if you go elsewhere, outside the room, outside this hearing, and repeat the same things, the comments you make may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

During the hearing all evidence is being recorded and broadcast live, and at the end of the hearing you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript so that you can check it. Please go through that and make sure that you are not misrepresented in any way before the transcript is made available publicly.

Now we will begin. For the record, please state your name and any organisation that you are here on behalf of. Thank you.

**Ms CARSON:** Thank you. My name is Deanne Carson and I am CEO of Body Safety Australia.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Carson. Could you please start with some of the opening remarks, and then after that we will open it up for questions from the committee members.

**Ms CARSON:** Certainly. Thank you. Body Safety Australia, firstly, is grateful for the opportunity to provide input into the Parliament of Victoria Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Management of Child Sex Offender Information. It is a horrific and confronting fact that there are at the very least three-quarters of a million children in Australia right now who have been or will be sexually abused. While strangers are often perceived to be the greatest danger to children, this is not the case. Nearly 90 per cent of children who are sexually abused are abused by someone known to them, and tragically 58 per cent of those children are first abused before they turn nine years old. We know that children who have been sexually abused once then become more vulnerable to further abuse by other perpetrators. We also know that image-based abuse is increasing at a disturbing rate in Australia, particularly for preadolescent children. The long-term effects of sexual abuse of children include high risk of suicide, mental illness, addiction, early death and further victimisation as adults. Preventing child sexual abuse is a national imperative that requires a whole-of-community response. We understand the committee is considering the best means to, one, store data and information regarding convicted sex offenders, (b) prevent sexual offences from occurring through improved public awareness and (c) investigate the circumstances in which the details of convicted child sex offenders can be made public. Our contribution today to the committee's investigations is directed towards the second point: of prevention through [Zoom dropout] improved public awareness of child sexual abuse.

Australia is in a position at the moment to ensure that we are delivering consistent best-practice education with evidence-based national standards and a trauma-informed approach. Education has proven successful in assisting children to recognise and act on grooming and sexual abuse. Research shows that age-appropriate, best practice education does not increase anxiety in children. Truly effective education, however, must go beyond programs just for children and be delivered in conjunction with sessions for parents and teachers. As the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse noted, we need a well-informed and proactive community, our whole community, to reduce the prevalence and the ongoing nature of child sexual abuse. For the last seven years Body Safety Australia has been designing and delivering professional development for teachers, information sessions for parents and body safety awareness education for children. Whole-of-community education facilitates discussions between children and the adults in their lives and encourages families to continue to be the main providers of safety and assistance for children.

There are significant difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of education in prevention or detection of child sexual abuse. Most abuse still goes unreported, and disclosure can take decades. We can and do, however, measure the efficacy of such programs in increasing teacher confidence in detecting and addressing suspected abuse, parents' confidence in discussing body safety and their ability to disrupt grooming behaviour. Most importantly, education assists children's understanding of safe and unsafe behaviours and their ability to access help when they feel unsafe.

I have some key points that I would like to address. The first is that we want to discuss national standards. We believe one of the most important factors in the successful prevention of child sexual abuse through education is a nationally consistent program based on identifying best practice standards and ensuring that all programs meet this as a minimum. This would ensure content and delivery of effective education programs to all children in all locations. It would also ensure that we recognise the increased vulnerability of First Nations children, children with a disability and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and provide tailored protective strategies and help-seeking information for children disproportionately represented in child sexual abuse figures.

The second point is a skilled workforce. Funding for a skilled workforce in this area is essential. Our research has shown over 70 per cent of teachers prefer that child sex abuse prevention education is delivered by expert external providers. Reasons cited by teachers include not feeling equipped to deliver the programs, understanding that students may be reluctant to discuss these issues with their classroom teacher and the fear of damaging relationships with parents. And given that at least one in four women will experience sexual violence, it is inevitable that some teachers will themselves be survivors. Requiring teachers to provide child sex abuse prevention education presents a risk of retraumatising survivors in a predominantly female teaching profession. Providers need specialised skills in delivering age-appropriate education and expert understanding of the risks and protective factors and the legislative requirements of child safety. This specialised work is beyond the scope of many already overloaded teachers. We also note the increased risk of harm to children when education providers lack expertise.

The third thing that I would like to address is youth offenders. Funding for early intervention for young people who have been identified as at risk of offending or showing problematic sexual behaviours is essential. The nature of child sex abuse makes it difficult to establish exact data on victims and offenders, but the most robust research suggests that about half the offenders against children are adolescents. This is a confronting concept, but we believe the most effective remedy is educative, not punitive, especially in light of the fact that most adolescent offenders do not continue to offend as adults. This does not, however, lessen the harm done to their victims. We strongly believe that this is an area of child sexual abuse that is rarely addressed and requires immediate action. Best practice education programs would include components designed to reach adolescents at risk of offending and divert them towards psychological, social and family assistance that can prevent them from offending against each other. To the best of our knowledge, this has not been a major focus of prevention programs in Australia.

My fourth point is that education needs to be from early childhood right through to year 12. Trauma-informed and age-appropriate education programs for all age groups are essential. Sexual abuse of children can start in infancy, which makes it crucial we are delivering age-appropriate education for children in early childhood settings and continuing this right through to adulthood. Children must have the language to recognise and describe harmful or grooming behaviours by offenders, and schools are the only environment that allows for equitable access to prevention education for children.

The fifth point is taking a whole-of-community approach: education to prevent child sexual abuse must go beyond the necessary task of educating children. We know that most sexual abuse of children occurs in private homes and is perpetrated by someone known to the child and their family. We believe most parents are deeply motivated to protect their children from harm but may not always have the tools or knowledge to recognise or act on harmful behaviours. Cohesive education programs that include parents, schools and children should be the standard by which educative efforts prevent and detect child abuse. Our research has shown that after providing body safety awareness workshops to teachers, parents and children, all three groups report their ability to identify harmful behaviours and respond appropriately doubles. Our work with parents has also shown that providing detailed, informative parent workshops prior to child-focused programs results in a much higher level of engagement and support from parents.

The last point that I would like to address is technology-facilitated abuse. Australia is amongst many countries around the world recording huge increases in child sexual exploitation material during COVID-related lockdowns. The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation says it recorded a 122 per cent increase in reports from members of the public between July 2019 and mid-2020. Analysis by the Internet Watch Foundation shows a 77 per cent increase in self-generated child exploitation material between 2019 and 2020. The images and videos mostly involve girls aged between 11 and 13 who are producing this material in their homes. As with contact offending, the grooming process for technological abuse can inadvertently involve parents and carers, and we have heard reports of children as young as six being directed to produce child sexual

exploitation material in their homes where the sounds of unaware family members can be heard in the background. This demonstrates how vulnerable children can be to grooming and abuse via devices when their parents believe the children are safely within their care. Education for parents and children on the risks and indications of this form of abuse is crucial to prevention.

I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to provide input to the inquiry and would be very happy to provide further information you require.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Carson. I forgot to introduce myself. I am Tien Kieu, the Deputy Chair of the Legal and Social Issues Committee, chairing the session here today. On my right you may see on the screen Mr Grimley and on the screen is Ms Maxwell, both members of the committee.

Thank you very much for your presentation and also for your good work and very important work in educating children. I would just like to ask you from a slightly different angle about the education program that your organisation has been doing. It is very comprehensive, covering a whole-of-community approach from youngsters to teachers and parents in recognition of the size and also in reporting and in being aware of what are the inappropriate behaviours of others. From a multicultural angle, we in Australia and particularly in my electorate have a lot of different ethnic communities. They have different cultures, different cultural customs and also different faiths and different languages. How could your program approach and also spread to those communities where cultural elements may prevent the child reporting or even the parents reporting because there may be a sense of shame or stigma, or there may not even be an understanding of what rights are available to them after they report certain incidents because of a lack of appropriate linguistic information being available to them?

**Ms CARSON:** Yes. Thank you. That is a very, very important question that you have asked because this work does need to be delivered across all communities—culturally and linguistically diverse communities, faith-based communities and also within First Nations communities and for children with disabilities as well. We have a team of educators, and our educators come from the diverse communities that are represented within our Australian culture and specialise in working with those areas. Last year we received an award from the Victorian Early Years Awards for our program in early childhood, which awarded us a small grant that is being used to have the parent information sessions translated into many of the languages spoken within our Australian communities, which will obviously allow that information to be received in the home and digitally as well. And we will often have interpreters attend parent sessions too, and not just interpreters from a variety of different languages spoken from countries around the world but also Auslan interpreters for parents who may have a hearing impairment.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Grimley.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** Thank you, Deputy Chair. And thank you very much for your submission and all your work that you are doing in this space, Deanne. It is fantastic, and I really applaud you for it. I have just been jotting down some notes as you have been speaking so I may have missed a few things or misheard, but I wanted to get your understanding of a point of view which I have been trying to get my head around myself and that is in relation to the percentage of people that are known to offenders. I think you mentioned 90 per cent are known to them or family. I just wanted to explore that figure a little bit. You also went on to say that there has been an incredible increase in child exploitation material online and also a 70 per cent, I think you said, increase in child exploitation material generated or produced. Now, I would assume that that CEM would be produced or generated for people not known to the victims. Would that be correct?

**Ms CARSON:** Known and unknown.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** Yes. But we do not really know in terms of the end user of that child exploitation material, do we? We just know those images are being produced, but do we know of the offenders that are being charged/arrested in relation to those figures that you mention?

**Ms CARSON:** I do not have the figures of where that is broken down, but I would be able to contact Task Force Argos and get some figures for you.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** If you could.

**Ms CARSON:** I can speak from our personal experience of the children that we have worked with. The images are being produced by people within their homes, the images are being coerced by unknown persons online, and often older siblings and parents are inadvertently complicit in the production of those images. And then when the children are old enough to be navigating their online spaces independently, they are being coerced by unknown persons online and the children are producing those without the knowledge of their protective family members.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** That would be fantastic if we could source that information for the inquiry. That would be really, really appreciated. I have got a bit of experience and knowledge behind grooming through my work as a sexual offences detective and I have often throughout this inquiry brought up the situation where a lot of—well, not a lot, but a number of—child sex abuse occurs through coaches or friends of the family or someone who you met on a holiday or something like that.

**Ms CARSON:** Yes.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** So at the time of the abuse the abuser is known to the family but what is misunderstood is that that person has quite often spent many months grooming a particular child so they can get to that stage of committing that offence. The issue I have is around that 90 per cent are known to that abuser, because I have always said a lot of these offences begin when the person is not known to the family or the victim—that is how they start the whole process. Does that make sense?

**Ms CARSON:** Yes, I totally understand what you are saying. If we look at contact offending not from family members, often what will happen is that the person with the intention to abuse a child will groom a community first—this was quite clearly stated in the royal commission—and then will groom the protective adults within the family and become close to the family, and then will groom the child once there has been a level of trust developed with the family members and a relationship built.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** Yes. Thank you for clarifying that. One more question—just a quick one if I can, Deputy Chair—in terms of the program that you run out, do you have any data or information as to how many disclosures or reports come forward from people that undertake the program or from kids that undertake the program? I know the Morcombes previous to yourself were just online and they spoke about how there are hundreds of disclosures that come after their program. I was just wondering if it was the same for the body safety programs.

**Ms CARSON:** Absolutely. When we are working in early childhood settings—so we work with the three- to five-year-olds in early childhood settings—we would receive disclosures. I would have to clarify for you, but I would say one in every five programs that we run we will receive a disclosure. At the moment, working with teenagers, we are receiving disclosures every single session.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** Wow.

**Ms CARSON:** Yes. And most of that is image-based abuse. We only do small-group work, so we do not work with any more than 30 students at a time, because that is a trauma-informed approach, and in every single classroom from year 7 to year 12 we will receive a disclosure.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** Wow. And the process from there once a disclosure has been received?

**Ms CARSON:** Once a disclosure has been received we will work with the school—there is always a classroom teacher present when we are delivering the program, or an early childhood educator—and we will follow their reporting process and also our own reporting process as legislated.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Maxwell.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Thank you, Deputy Chair. Deanne, thank you so much for presenting here today and for the work that you are doing, and I think it is so important to be identifying these children and protecting our children and educating our children. Now, those stats that you have just given us from your three- to five-year-olds and your year 7s to 12s are phenomenal. We still know that they are not the true figures; there are so many young people and families who just will not disclose for whatever reason. They may never

disclose. So I think that the figures are always underestimated—calculated in real time and as they are disclosed, but we have still got so much further to go in protecting our children. How do you envisage that we can do that? Because these kids are going to school. What we do not want is for that sexual offending to start, to continue, whatever the case may be, and our preventative strategies have to be so rock solid. The work you are doing is a great contribution to that. What else do you see or what gaps do you see—whether it be funding gaps to broaden the work that you do or to continue the work that you do? What gaps have you identified through this work you have been doing, Deanne?

**Ms CARSON:** Yes, thank you for the question. There are definitely funding gaps. In Victoria we have access to the school readiness funding, which allows us to provide equitable education in early childhood settings. There is not something similar for school-based settings, so often their capacity to bring in a program is based on school funding, which is very inequitable. Often what we find in that space is that schools will, you know, bring in what they can afford, and often that is not best practice and not trauma informed—so, you know, if a school can only afford to deliver an assembly to the entire school and then have the children in the space where there are children wanting to disclose but there it is not that personalised care being taken. Look, one of the other things is not just the personalised care. You know, we spoke about culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, but we also need to really speak about disability, because often children with a disability are removed from the classroom, and the programs that we run need to be adapted to all children, regardless of disability—particularly when we know that 90 per cent of women with an intellectual disability will be subjected to sexual violence. It is so important that they are able to stay in the classroom and be supported and they have specialist activities that they can access.

The other thing from your question, which I appreciate, is early intervention programs. We have been finding that if we look at the fact that approximately 45 per cent of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by adolescent offenders, and we do know some indicators of the backgrounds of those young men or teenage boys, those early intervention programs, if we could work with the students—we have identified from 10 to 14 years old as being a really, really pivotal moment in preventing them enacting childhood sexual abuse—can be probably one of the most powerful pieces of work that anyone could do.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Thank you very much. That is some great information. Deanne, do you have any more information that you could provide to the committee around those statistics and that adolescent offending?

**Ms CARSON:** I do, but I do not have it right in front of me.

**Ms MAXWELL:** No, no, that is fine. Would you be able to submit that at some stage?

**Ms CARSON:** Yes, of course.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Because I am sure it is an avenue that we certainly need to consider in our work.

**Ms CARSON:** Yes, thank you.

**Ms MAXWELL:** No, thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Ms Carson, I would like to also ask you a question about a special needs age group. According to some of the witnesses earlier, the most vulnerable cohorts would be disabled children—or autism or attention deficit and so on. In your education program, is there any room to provide for special needs for those people in that cohort?

**Ms CARSON:** Yes, absolutely. We already have resources that are accessible for vision-impaired people—so resources that have been brailled or are tactile—that they can use, we have developed what are known as ‘social stories’ for children on the autism spectrum, we have worked with schools for children with intellectual disabilities and developed programs particularly for those children, and we have worked with parents of children with physical disabilities, who by the nature of the disability have a particular vulnerability because they will need lifelong care for intimate caring, which leaves them vulnerable to that being exploited. And there is a lot more work to be done, and again that is a funding issue, but we have already put a lot of thought into that, and we have educators with disabilities who have specialist knowledge in that area too.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** You told us earlier that in certain age groups there are a lot of disclosures after each session, so you have been working with the victims. Have you ever worked with the young offenders as well?

**Ms CARSON:** Yes. There are two parts to that question. We will often identify students, and we do not know if they have offended or not, but they are holding beliefs and exhibiting behaviours that we identify as young people who are at risk of offending. Again it is a funding issue, but we will work with the school and put support in place for the school to work with those young people and their parents. And then we are currently dealing with situations where offenders have been identified amongst the student cohort, and to be totally honest with you it is a really difficult situation because, particularly when we are dealing with teenagers and it is their peers and they are continuing to go to school together and perhaps the victims do not want to take further steps to go to the police and their parents support them in that, there is very, very little intervention work available for those young people who are offending.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** With your program, how far and how wide have you been able to spread out in terms of number of schools, and do you have any wish to have it integrated into the more formal curriculum?

**Ms CARSON:** We are based in Victoria and in Brisbane and we travel over all of Australia. We do a lot of work in regional and rural Victoria as well, so we service some very, very small communities who are dealing with particular complexities because of the size of their community. I would need to get you exact figures, but I believe that we work with about 500 early childhood centres, and it is about the same for schools as well—so very heavily in that early childhood area and primary and schools. Under COVID last year we were able to take our programs online, and particularly the parent workshops and the professional development were very successful in that area. However, there is a vulnerability in delivering the programs online for children unless there is a particular reason to do so, like COVID, because the program really relies on building trust between the educator and the children for the children to then step forward and seek help.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Any more questions?

**Mr GRIMLEY:** Just one more question if I can, please, Deputy Chair. Just in relation to the programs, Deanne, are there any post-program follow-ups at all that you can elaborate on?

**Ms CARSON:** Yes. Statistically in post program—and I think I said before about professional development—although still 70 per cent of teachers wanted an external provider, their confidence in being able to embed the lessons throughout the course of the year and throughout the rest of their curriculum more than doubled. Parent confidence doubled, but particularly what I find interesting with the parent confidence is not just their capacity to speak with their children. What we find is a particular vulnerability is that parents can identify grooming behaviour, but when that grooming behaviour is coming from somebody that they know they feel a lack of confidence in intercepting and addressing that grooming behaviour. One of the strongest things that comes out of our post research is their confidence in intercepting grooming behaviour. I know that we have spoken a lot about disclosures, but obviously what we want to be able to do is prevent abuse, not just have children reach out for help once they have been abused, and the parents being able to intercept and address grooming behaviours is an essential part of that. Anecdotally we have had many, many students, via their parents or teachers, come back to us and say that students who were fairly quiet and compliant actually found themselves in a situation where they were vulnerable, where an older student was behaving sexually violently towards them, and they were able to be assertive in their communication—say ‘Stop’ and immediately help-seek from a teacher in the school. It is quite extraordinary to hear those kinds of feedback.

**Mr GRIMLEY:** It is wonderful. Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Tania, do you have any more questions?

**Ms MAXWELL:** I do. Deanne, are you happy for me external to this to make contact with you, just in relation to some of the work that is not actually relevant to the committee—

**Ms CARSON:** Yes, of course.

**Ms MAXWELL:** at the moment because, yes, I love the work that you do. You have identified that vulnerable people, people with autism, ABI et cetera are often becoming victims. What do you think that says about the offenders?

**Ms CARSON:** Well, the offenders will always target people who they believe that they can offend against. They are targeting people who have a particular vulnerability, whatever that vulnerability might be, whether they belong to a particular culture or faith that raises children with a lot of respect towards adults so they are

less likely to say no, whether they are a child with an intellectual disability who will not be able to give evidence in a way that will gain a conviction, whether they are a child of a single parent where the parent is juggling multiple duties and may not be as available. Predators will always target where they think that they can get away with the offending.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Please correct me if I am wrong, but it sounds to me as though these offenders are actually quite smart. They are quite dedicated to who they want to perpetrate against. They are calculated, because if they are considering all of those things it is almost premeditated, which goes along that grooming path.

**Ms CARSON:** Yes. I think, Tania, we need to separate out the family offenders and non-family offenders. So the non-family offenders who are entering into a community looking for a vulnerable child—yes, absolutely what you have described, I believe, is quite correct and we are particularly seeing that in online abuse as well. With family offenders, again, it is power imbalances that allow for the offending to take place, whether that power imbalance is age, whether it is gender, whether it is disability—whatever it might be. People who enact harm, whether it is the sexual harm of children or family violence—will always use a power imbalance to their advantage.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Thank you.

**Ms CARSON:** You are welcome.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Ms Carson, I am curious about your resources, particularly human resources. How do you recruit your educators and what is the difficulty in terms of whether you have enough applicants, and how do you train them for this particular program?

**Ms CARSON:** Yes. Thank you. Our educators come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some of them have been teachers, one has been a principal, some have come from the youth justice system and some have come from a psychotherapy background. We try to recruit with a diversity of related skills so that they can support and have peer education from each other. At this stage we have not had difficulty in recruiting educators. I think that we have been fortunate. It is perceived as a very valuable role, and a lot of people reach out to us in order to work with us. So we have been fortunate at this stage, although I can imagine if we were to scale to service all of Australia overnight that there would be complexity with that.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** How do you train them? Is there a set-up training course or anything?

**Ms CARSON:** Yes. They will undergo a week's training initially, and that is quite specialised training by in-house and also external trainers. Then they have training together as a group once a term, and in that space they will share any trends that are occurring, particularly trends in digital technology that they are witnessing. They will share that information so that everyone can continue to have the most relevant information for the students.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. We wish you all the best and more success in the future for the program and the work you are doing.

**Ms CARSON:** Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you. Thank you, committee members, secretariat and Hansard team. I declare that we are closing the hearing session for today.

**Committee adjourned.**