



Royal Commission
into Institutional Responses
to Child Sexual Abuse

Research report

Child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers: A synthesis of current evidence

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Royal Commission into Institutional
Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

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About this report

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The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse commissioned and funded this research project. It was carried out by the following researcher:

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The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the final views of the Royal Commission.

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Preface

On Friday, 11 January 2013, the Governor-General appointed a six-member Royal Commission to inquire into how institutions with a responsibility for children have managed and responded to allegations and instances of child sexual abuse.

The Royal Commission is tasked with investigating where systems have failed to protect children, and making recommendations on how to improve laws, policies and practices to prevent and better respond to child sexual abuse in institutions.

The Royal Commission has developed a comprehensive research program to support its work and to inform its findings and recommendations. The program focuses on eight themes:

1. Why does child sexual abuse occur in institutions?
2. How can child sexual abuse in institutions be prevented?
3. How can child sexual abuse be better identified?
4. How should institutions respond where child sexual abuse has occurred?
5. How should government and statutory authorities respond?
6. What are the treatment and support needs of victims/survivors and their families?
7. What is the history of particular institutions of interest?
8. How do we ensure the Royal Commission has a positive impact?

This research report falls within theme two.

The research program means the Royal Commission can:

- obtain relevant background information
- fill key evidence gaps
- explore what is known and what works
- develop recommendations that are informed by evidence and can be implemented, and respond to contemporary issues.

For more information on this program, please visit www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/research.

Contents

1	Executive summary	1
2	Introduction	1
3	Aim	2
4	Methodology	2
5	Key findings	3
5.1	Knowledge of child sexual abuse	3
5.2	Adverse effects	4
5.3	Protective behaviours	4
5.4	Disclosures of child sexual abuse	5
5.5	Cost	5
5.6	Criticisms	5
5.7	Limitations	6
6	Conclusions	6
	References	8
	Appendix A: Literature search methodology	11

1 Executive summary

The aim of this evidence review is to determine the efficacy of pre-school child sexual abuse prevention programs.

A literature search identified 113 potential articles: a review of abstracts and full text refined the list to a selection of 23 articles that were included in the present evidence review.

Child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers appear to be effective at increasing young children's ability to detect inappropriate touch requests, and increase their behavioural skills around what to do and say, who to tell and what to report if confronted by an inappropriate touch request.

Prevention programs for pre-schoolers are well received by parents and pre-school teachers, and appear not to have adverse effects (for example, increases in fear and anxiety) for pre-schoolers.

There is very limited evidence to suggest whether child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers have an effect on rates of disclosure of child sexual abuse.

Very few studies have evaluated the cost effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers.

Study limitations, including very small samples sizes, limit the generalisability of results. More methodologically rigorous studies using large, culturally diverse samples of pre-schoolers are required before strong conclusions can be made about the overall efficacy of child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers.

2 Introduction

The Royal Commission

In January 2013, The Honourable Dame Quentin Bryce AD, CVO, (then) Governor-General, appointed the Royal Commission to inquire into institutional responses to child sexual abuse.

The Royal Commission must recommend laws, policies, practices and systems that will effectively prevent or, where it occurs, respond to abuse. To ensure it provides authoritative, relevant recommendations, it has developed a detailed research program.

The Royal Commission's program of research has been developed to ensure its Terms of Reference are fulfilled, and consists of eight themes. The second theme of the program is: 'How can child sexual abuse in institutions be prevented?'

Within this theme is a subset of research questions that aim to assess the efficacy of measures designed to protect children in institutions from sexual abuse, including the efficacy of primary prevention programs. The present project aims to assess the efficacy of child sexual abuse prevention programs aimed at pre-school aged children (aged 0–5 years).

This project complements 'Audit of primary school-based sexual abuse prevention policy and curriculum' (Walsh, Brandon & Kruck, 2014) and a Cochrane review of school-based

education programs for the prevention of child sexual abuse (Walsh, Zwi, Woolfenden & Shlonsky, 2013). Together, these projects can help inform the Royal Commission's considerations for primary prevention strategies aimed at children and young people.

3 Aim

The aim of this evidence review is to determine what is known from the existing literature about the efficacy of pre-school child sexual abuse prevention programs.

4 Methodology

The researcher used a modified PRISMA¹ methodology to search for and select relevant articles. They searched four online academic literature databases using relevant truncated keywords and advanced search parameters, returning 33 possibly relevant articles. Review of the titles in the search results reduced the list to 14. Expanding the search to articles using the same keywords as those returned, as well as finding articles that cited the initial 14 articles, expanded the set to 103. The researcher identified 10 additional articles by examining the reference lists from key articles. Review of the abstracts revealed that the majority of articles did not fulfil the specified criteria (for example, they did not use pre-school aged participants) and these were excluded. The final set of 23 articles were read in detail. The majority of these articles (nine of 23) were evaluations of child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers. The researcher analysed the evaluations to determine the extent to which the programs:

- increased pre-schoolers' knowledge of child sexual abuse, and resulted in retention of pre-schoolers' knowledge of sexual abuse over time
- resulted in adverse effects
- resulted in pre-schoolers learning protective behaviours in the event of an (attempted) abuse event
- resulted in disclosures of child sexual abuse, and
- were cost effective.

Walsh et al. (2013) used the same outcome measures in their Cochrane review of primary school prevention programs. Structuring this review using the same outcome measures enables comparison of the quality of the evidence for prevention programs aimed at pre-schoolers and primary school-aged children.

See Appendix A for a more detailed description of the methodology used.

¹ PRISMA stands for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses, and is an evidence based set of items for reporting in systematic reviews. The methodology was modified to adhere to provide a more rapid synthesis of the evidence.

5 Key findings

The evaluation studies were reviewed according to five outcome measures, detailed below. They are listed here from a Theory of Change perspective in order of short-, intermediate- and longer-term outcomes. Theory of Change is a methodology for planning for and evaluating complex social change, and suggests that short-, medium- and longer-term changes can be mapped along a causal pathway. For example, while reducing child sexual abuse is the ultimate aim of prevention programs, this might logically be preceded by increases in rates of disclosure, an increased use of protective behaviours among potential victims and increased community awareness and knowledge of topics related to sexual abuse, among other factors.

5.1 Knowledge of child sexual abuse

Pre-intervention (baseline) knowledge

Baseline knowledge of concepts related to sexual abuse is low among both pre-schoolers (Zhang et al., 2013) and parents (Walsh & Brandon, 2012). For example, a pilot study of 136 Chinese pre-schoolers aged three to five years found that only 16 per cent would report 'secret' touching to an adult, and almost 35 per cent of pre-school children believed that all adults were allowed to touch their private parts. Parents report their own prevention education to be 'woefully inadequate' (Walsh & Brandon, 2012) and underestimate their child's vulnerability to being a victim of sexual assault (Swift Burgess & Wurtele, 1998). A study of 212 Australian mothers (Walsh, Brandon, & Chirio, 2012) found that fewer than one in four mothers had discussed issues related to abuse from known and trusted adults with their children. When these discussions did occur, they were more likely to be directed towards children aged 5–12 years than pre-schoolers.

Post-intervention knowledge

In general, child sexual abuse prevention programs aimed at pre-schoolers appear effective at increasing young children's knowledge about sexual abuse, and increasing their skills-based knowledge on what to do in potentially abusive situations. Studies have examined the effect of programs on children's ability to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate touch requests. Appropriate touch requests are verbal signals to children from parents, doctors and nurses to touch the child's private parts in a non-sexual way (for example, for medical or hygiene reasons). Inappropriate touch requests are verbal and nonverbal signals from adults to touch or look at the child's private parts, or for the child to touch or look at the adult's private parts (Wurtele & Owens, 1997). The studies demonstrate that prevention training appears to have little effect on pre-schooler's ability to detect appropriate touch requests; children of this age are already familiar with 'good touch' situations. In contrast, training does appear to affect pre-schoolers' ability to detect inappropriate touch requests, and also increases their understanding of effective behaviours to exhibit when confronted by an inappropriate touch request. For example, Kenny, Wurtele and Alonso's (2012) study of 123 Latino pre-schoolers found that 10 hours of psycho-education focused on teaching children and their parents concepts related to general as well as personal safety was effective at

increasing pre-schoolers' awareness of inappropriate touch requests and discerning good from bad touches. In addition, the program was effective at increasing children's knowledge about what to say and do, who to tell and what to report following an inappropriate touch request. Other research suggests that pre-schoolers learn more when both teachers and parents act as instructors (Wurtele, Kast, & Melzer, 1992); when the focus of instruction is on behavioural skills rather than interpreting one's feelings (Wurtele, Kast, Miller-Perrin & Kondrick, 1989); and when explicit rather than abstract concepts are taught (Conte, Rosen, Saperstein & Shermack, 1985).

Retention of knowledge over time

The evidence suggests that in general, knowledge gains among pre-school aged children are maintained over time. Studies employing short follow-up periods report that pre-schoolers are able to detect inappropriate touch requests one month after follow up, and retain the behavioural skills relating to what to do if confronted by an inappropriate touch request (Wurtele, 1990). Behavioural skills training (which teaches children it is inappropriate for adults to touch their private parts, and the behaviours to exert if adults attempt an inappropriate touch) tends to result in longer retention of knowledge than feelings-based training, which focuses on teaching children to distinguish between what feels good and what feels bad (Wurtele et al., 1989). Similar results are seen when follow-up periods of up to five months are used (Ratto & Bogat, 1990; Wurtele et al., 1992), suggesting young children are able to retain information related to sexual abuse prevention.

5.2 Adverse effects

Critics of child sexual abuse programs for pre-schoolers (e.g. Berrick, 1989, 1991) suggest that prevention programs may do more harm than good. For example, Berrick (1991) argues that less intrusive forms of sexual abuse such as fondling, petting or exposure may not be interpreted as negative to the child, and that training may introduce concepts of guilt and anxiety where there was none previously. However, this assertion is not supported by the available evidence. This review found five studies that included the measurement of adverse effects of training such as fear and anxiety (Nibert, Cooper & Ford, 1989; Ratto & Bogat, 1990; Wurtele, 1990; Wurtele et al., 1992; Wurtele et al., 1989); none of these studies detected adverse effects of training.

Parents and children (Wurtele et al., 1992) as well as pre-school teachers (Wurtele et al., 1989) rate child sexual abuse prevention training positively. When parents do express hesitancy towards their child's involvement in pre-school prevention programs, the reason is more commonly a lack of time or resources (for example, they require babysitting for siblings when parental involvement is required) rather than opposition to the program or materials (Kenny et al., 2012).

5.3 Protective behaviours

Children's self-protective skills (Walsh et al., 2013) are measured using simulated abduction/abuse situations. These methods have been used in studies with older children as

participants but ethical concerns have prohibited their use with young children. Thus, it is not known how effective pre-school prevention programs are at increasing the use of protective behaviours among young children.

5.4 Disclosures of child sexual abuse

Evaluations of child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers have not generally included measures for disclosure or actual rates of abuse. One study (Hill & Jason, 1987) using a small sample (n=43) of three to five year olds found that a six to eight week program incorporating child, parent and teacher training had no effect on reports of abuse at post-test, eight weeks after commencement of the program. However, given the very small sample and the relatively short follow-up period, it is unlikely that effects of training on rates of disclosure would be able to be demonstrated statistically. Future research incorporating longer follow-up periods (i.e. extending beyond one year) and much larger groups of children (i.e. over 1,000) would be required to explore the relationship between participation in prevention training and disclosure of abuse. Ultimately, prevention training aims to reduce the incidence of child sexual abuse, though empirically demonstrating the efficacy of programs for pre-schoolers using this endpoint is unlikely given the limited scope of current programs.

5.5 Cost effectiveness

The cost effectiveness of prevention programs for pre-schoolers – that is, a comparison of the relative costs and outcomes of prevention programs with no intervention – has not been studied. One study reported on the cost of a prevention program for pre-schoolers (Kenny et al., 2012). It found that the cost of the program per group (averaging 10 child and 10 adult participants each) was estimated to be US\$7,000, including costs and salaries for the research and program staff, and program materials, supplies and incentive/milestone gifts. The cost per participant was approximately US\$350. Future studies should evaluate cost effectiveness, and should investigate ways to reduce program delivery costs. For example, a recent study using adult participants found web-based training on child sexual abuse prevention concepts to be feasible and acceptable to child care workers (Rheingold, Zajac & Patton, 2012). Delivery methods that reduce direct and indirect costs for participants are likely to be welcomed by policy makers, though their relative efficacy in increasing knowledge and behaviour skills and ultimately reducing child sexual abuse is still unclear.

5.6 Criticisms

As noted in 5.2, programs for pre-schoolers are not without their critics. Some authors (e.g. Berrick, 1989, 1991; Berrick & Gilbert, 1991; deYoung, 1988; Gilbert, Berrick, Le Prohn & Nyman, 1989) argue that children under five years of age are too young to appropriately comprehend and act upon prevention information. For example, Berrick (1989) argues that pre-schoolers are too young to understand abstract concepts such as 'safe', 'strong' and 'free'. Berrick (1991) later argues that children already know the difference between black and white examples of 'good touch' and 'bad touch', but that their morality is not yet sufficiently developed to distinguish 'grey' touch, as might occur during the grooming stages

of sexual abuse. The majority of research supports child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers, however more research is needed to determine the size of the effect; the extent to which training during pre-school years acts as a critical foundation for later learning; whether some groups benefit more than others; and optimal instructional techniques to maximise learning and behavioural outcomes for young children.

5.7 Limitations

There are several limitations associated with the literature on child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-school aged children, which limit the generalisability of results. First, studies were generally conducted using pre-schoolers from the United States as participants (Wurtele, 1990; Wurtele, Hughes & Owens, 1998; Wurtele et al., 1992). Further, almost all of the studies were conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Borkin & Frank, 1986; Conte et al., 1985; Ratto & Bogat, 1990; Wurtele et al., 1992) and the majority of studies used small samples.

Sample sizes in the 20s and 30s – including control groups – are not uncommon (e.g. Ratto & Bogat, 1990; Wurtele, 1990). It is likely that results obtained from small samples of pre-schoolers from the United States in the early 1990s may not generalise to the diverse population of Australian pre-schoolers today.

One study recognised the value in designing a culturally-specific program for ethnically diverse pre-schoolers and their parents. Kenny et al. (2012) designed a program for Latino pre-schoolers with Spanish-language materials and instructors. The authors suggest that such programs are an important first step in involving parents in their child's prevention education, but note the current paucity of culturally-specific programs.

Other limitations include inconsistent reporting of the psychometric properties (e.g. reliability and validity) of assessment instruments (c.f. Conte et al., 1985; Ratto & Bogat, 1990; Wurtele, 1990) and failure to statistically account for the similarity of children within individual pre-schools (i.e. clustering), which may over-estimate the effect of the prevention program (Harvey, Forehand, Brown & Holmes, 1988; Wurtele et al., 1992). Additionally, none of the studies conducted subgroup analyses, making it difficult to identify groups of pre-schoolers who may benefit more or less from child sexual abuse prevention programs. Finally, the majority of outcome measures used in the evaluation studies were related to child or parent knowledge about child sexual abuse and prevention. Concrete, behavioural outcome measures such as disclosure of child sexual abuse or reductions in rates of abuse are rarely used. Thus, it is not clear from the literature whether knowledge about child sexual abuse and its prevention translates to higher rates of disclosure or lower rates of abuse.

6 Conclusions

The available literature generally supports the efficacy of child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-school aged children, in terms of increasing young children's:

- ability to detect inappropriate touch requests

- knowledge about what to do and say, who to tell and what to report in the event of an inappropriate touch request.

However, program evaluations are currently of insufficient quantity and quality to make strong assertions about the overall efficacy of prevention programs for pre-schoolers. While there may be little harm associated with prevention programs in the form of increased anxiety or fear among participating pre-schoolers, there is insufficient evidence of the benefits of pre-school prevention programs relative to cost. Little is known about the relative efficacy of different instructional formats for young children. Some evidence suggests that behavioural skills training has a longer-term effect on knowledge retention than feelings-based training (Wurtele et al., 1989), but there is currently insufficient evidence about program design to inform recommendations about best practice design and delivery systems. More methodologically rigorous studies are required, ideally using Australian pre-schoolers as participants.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Literature search methodology

The research question for the evidence review was:

What is known from the existing literature about the efficacy of preschool child sexual abuse prevention programs in Australia?

Keywords and their associated synonyms (identified via search of thesaurus.com and Collins Thesaurus) were combined with Boolean operators (AND; OR) and truncated searching² (*) to ensure a comprehensive literature search. The search terms were:

- Efficacy OR Adequacy OR Effectiveness OR Success OR Efficiency OR Usefulness OR Efficaciousness OR Evaluat*
AND
- Pre-school OR Preschool OR Day care OR Kindergarten OR Pre-K OR Nursery
AND
- Child sex* abuse OR Child sex* assault OR Pedophi* OR Paedophi*
AND
- Prevent* OR Safeguard
AND
- Program* OR Curriculum OR Approach OR Syllabus OR Course
AND
- Australia*

These search terms were used in the following online databases:

1. PsycINFO (EBSCOhost)
2. MEDLINE (Web of Science)
3. Scopus (Elsevier)
4. CINCH (Informit).

Searches were confined to publications with an English-language abstract that were published during or after 1980. Where searches returned a list of more than 300 references, the search results were sorted by relevance. The search was terminated when a consecutive list of 75 references failed to produce relevant articles. A preliminary search revealed that 'Australia*' was overly limiting the articles returned; this search term was removed from all further searches.

Initial searches returned 33 articles across the four databases, ranging from two article returns from Scopus, to 13 from CINCH. A review of article titles reduced this to 14 (range 0–9 across the four databases). The researcher added another 89 articles to the list by

² Truncated searching permits multiple forms of a word. For example, sex* would search for all words that begin with the string 'sex', including 'sex', 'sexual', 'sexualised' and 'sexualized'.

subjecting each of the articles in the list of 14 to a 'Find Similar'³ and 'Find Citing Articles'⁴ search. The total number of articles that were deemed relevant by review of the title was 103. The researcher included 10 additional articles after reviewing the reference lists of key articles. Figure 1 shows the results of the identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion stages of the literature search (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff & Altman, 2009). As Figure 1 shows, the initial set of 113 articles was refined to a list of 23 studies eventually included in the evidence review.

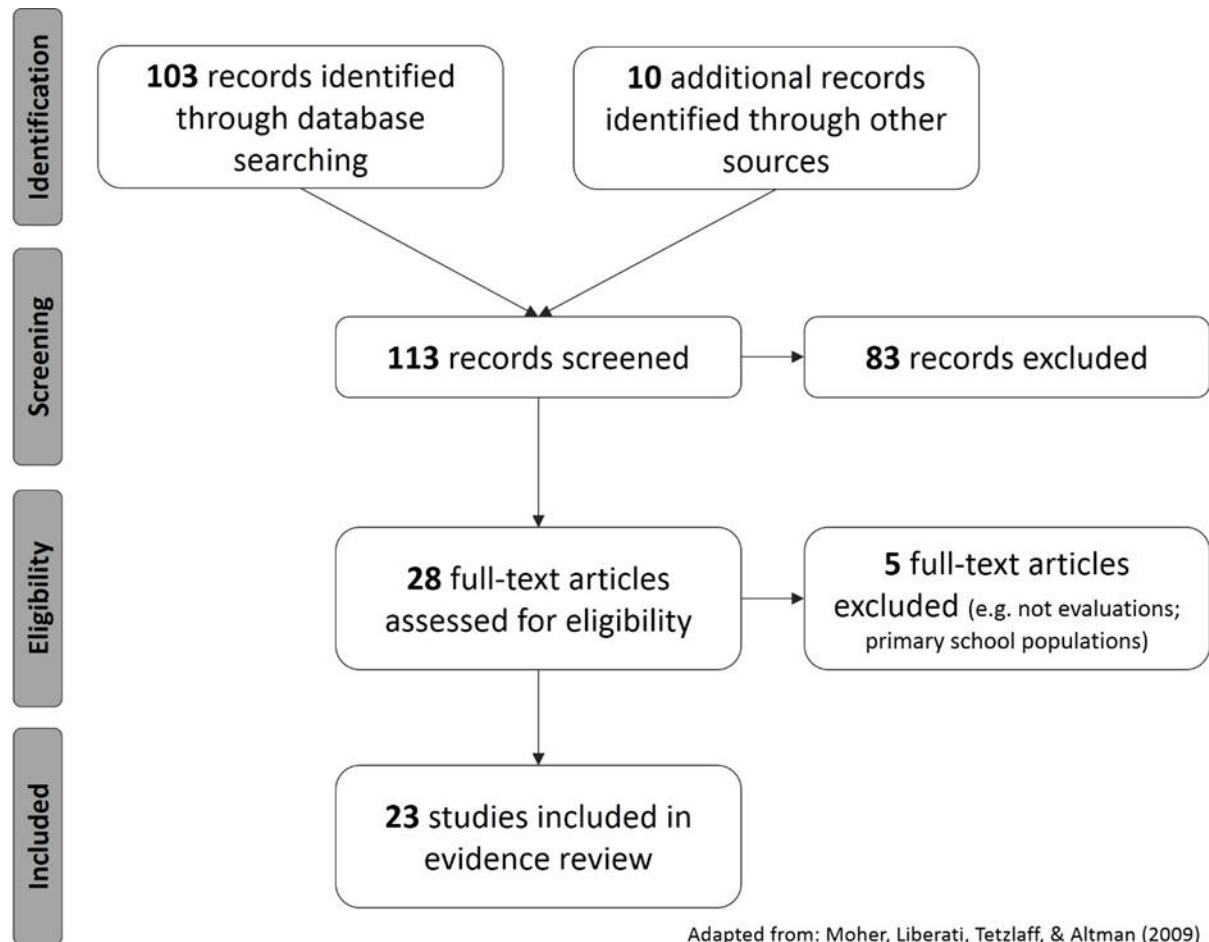


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram showing literature identified, screened, eligible for and included in evidence review.

³ 'Find Similar' is a search feature contained in most academic databases, which expands the literature search to include articles that use the same keywords as a nominated article.

⁴ 'Find Citing Article' lists the references that use the nominated article in their reference list.



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