

THE CONVERSATION

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Protecting children from abuse in organisations needs leadership and cultural change

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Leaders are responsible for the culture and specific practices of their organisation, and they can do much to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse. Shutterstock

The rhetoric of preventing child sexual abuse in organisations focuses mostly on screening: weeding out “bad people”. If this continues to be the main focus, institutions will keep failing children.

Screening adults vs managing situations

There is an important message we should be hearing from the research published by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: leaders play a vital role in keeping children safe in their organisations.

But this message isn’t getting the attention it deserves, from the media or organisational leaders. Instead, we hear about expanding screening processes.

Some organisations are extending screening beyond the legislated categories of child-related employment. An example is requiring soccer mums to have a Working With Children check to sit on the oval sidelines. Yet we hear little about the policies and processes that are needed to change conditions of safety on and off the field.

“Suitability” checks of volunteers and employees help prevent those who have previously demonstrated their unsuitability to work with children from becoming involved with organisations. But these processes have serious limitations: they focus on past behaviours that are relatively low-frequency, occur in private, and are typically not reported to external authorities.

And, by definition, first-time child sex offenders won't have a prior child sex offence to detect. Running checks on adult volunteers and employees also doesn't protect children from bullying or harmful sexual behaviour by other young people.

Pre-employment history checks, while necessary, can distract our attention from assessing whether adults will bring the desired values and skills for working with children and young people.

Undue emphasis on screening out those who are “unsuitable” ignores the ways that the situational context shapes or excuses individual behaviour – including harmful behaviour. And that is something leaders can directly influence.

Screening is the first chapter in the book on how to safeguard children, not the final chapter.

Situational crime prevention

Social psychology research demonstrates that the “power of the situation” – the context and norms for which leaders are responsible – shapes individuals' behaviour. My work and the work of my colleagues has stressed the value of situational crime prevention.

This approach provides a lens for understanding how abuse of children occurs in institutions. It provides a foundation for developing effective prevention strategies by reducing opportunities for sexual offending.

Child sexual abuse would be reduced if organisations had policies and practices focusing on:

- reducing opportunities to offend;
- increasing the chances of getting caught;
- reducing the “pay-offs” of offending; and
- making excuses for adults' inappropriate behaviour less plausible.

While it's difficult to evaluate how well primary prevention activities prevent actual instances of abuse, these strategies are based on research.

Primary prevention strategies are used to prevent other forms of violence, including date rape, family violence, workplace bullying and adult sexual assault.

In these areas, the focus is not on screening or checking a database for suitability. For example, **OurWatch** powerfully demonstrates that such violence is largely driven by cultures where gender inequality, discrimination and harassment are excused or supported.

Leaders are responsible for the culture and specific practices of their organisations. They must drive a process for identifying activities that might be higher risk. These might include low supervision of adult-child interactions, using adults as role models or mentors for young people, or opportunities for misusing social media.

The risks for such activities then need to be managed. Leaders also need to address issues in their organisations that promote conditions where abuse is more likely to be tolerated, excused or ignored. Does the organisation allow gender stereotyping, homophobia or other practices that make grooming of children easier, or make it harder for young people to raise concerns about the behaviour of an adult?

Young people have told us these are all important issues to be addressed for them to be and feel safe.

How do leaders keep children safe?

Leaders should:

- minimise risks for abuse to occur, by implementing strategies to limit opportunities or add protection to improve safety;
- make it very clear, in written policies and in conversation, what behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable, and encourage people to report any breaches of those codes; and
- move towards “protective participation” – our research shows that leaders must support children to better understand risks and make judgements on when to trust or be wary.

Adults should understand what safety means to children and respond to their fears. Most importantly, young people should be included in developing policies and safety strategies.

Young people need information and support for promoting respectful peer relationships, knowledge about their bodies, sexual health and sexual safety skills. This should be underpinned by a positive culture across the whole organisation. It should aim to be child-friendly, transparent and respectful.

Rather than be overwhelmed — or worse, defensive — about the challenges of making organisations safer, growing evidence points to the answer: leaders need to better manage situational risks and change organisational cultures.

Daryl Higgins acknowledges colleagues from ACU's Institute of Child Protection Studies who contributed to this article.