Research article

Children and young people's views on institutional safety: It's not just because we're little

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ABSTRACT

The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has set in motion a number of systemic and organizational approaches to identify and respond to child sexual abuse. These include increased child abuse awareness, developing and enhancing child-safe organizational cultures and policies and more thorough screening and supervision of staff in child and youth serving organizations. Although these advances should be applauded, many of the concerns that children and young people have raised about interpersonal safety have not been fully addressed. There is therefore a risk that children's physical, relational, generational, and organizational powerlessness are reinforced through child-safe practices that restrict their meaningful participation, ignore their agency and capacity and fail to respond to their felt safety needs or wishes. This paper presents the findings of a qualitative research project conducted with 121 Australian children and young people and presents their perspectives on issues of vulnerability and the ways that they would like adults and institutions to respond to their safety concerns. The value of adult-child alliances, of formal mechanisms that are child-friendly and accessible and having external agencies monitor and review institutional strategies to preventing harm are discussed.

1. Introduction

In 2013, the Australian government established the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse to examine the failure of institutions to effectively respond to child sexual abuse. For the first time in Australia a national inquiry examined how a wide range of institutions such as religious organizations, child care centres, out of home care services, schools and sporting groups, had responded or failed to respond to child sexual abuse.[1] A key role for the Royal Commission was to recommend strategies to prevent child sexual abuse and provide advice on how institutions could better respond when abuse does occur. A particular interest for the Royal Commission was what makes an institution 'child safe'.

Commissioners recognized that children's lack of voice has rendered them vulnerable to abuse. As the Honourable Justice McClellan AM, chair of the Royal Commission remarked:

> The societal norm that 'children should be seen but not heard', which prevailed for unknown decades, provided the opportunity
> for some adults to abuse the power which their relationship with the child gave them… When the required silence of the child was

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accompanied by an unquestioning belief by adults in the integrity of the carer for the child, be they youth worker, teacher, residential supervisor or cleric, the power imbalance was entrenched to the inevitable detriment of many children. We must ensure that in the future the institution does not silence the child. The institution must work to ensure that the child can be heard (McClellan, 2015)

Children and young people have, to date, played only a limited role in the development of approaches to improve child safety (Kent, 1997; Shaw, 2007; Skinner, 1992). In 2014 the Royal Commission contracted the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University and researchers from Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology to conduct a study that aimed to develop a better understanding of how children conceptualize safety, what children and young people think about safety in the context of institutions and what they think needs to be done to better meet their needs and concerns. Participants in the study identified issues of power as important and discussed how their physical, relational, generational and institutional power-lessness manifested and influenced their subjective sense of safety. Drawing on the larger study conducted for the Royal Commission, this article explores young people's perceptions of power and considers the implications of young people's views for the development of 'child safe' organizations.

1.1. Background

How children experience and negotiate risk is of growing interest to researchers, policy makers and practitioners. The embrace of child-centred perspectives is predicated on the view that children and young people experience the world in ways different to adults and that better outcomes can be achieved when children and young people are able to express their needs and wishes (Moore, Saunders, & McArthur, 2011). Existing studies have examined how children consider risks in their families and at home (Kelley, Mayall, & Hood, 1997), at school (Leonard, 2006; Miller, 2011; Wiebe et al., 2013) and within their neighbourhoods and communities (Farver, Ghosh, & Garcia, 2000; Milne, 2009; Nayak, 2003; Negreinos, 2010).

Within this literature there has been an increasing focus on children's experiences of safety and their concerns about their lack of safety. While offering important child-centred perspectives, this literature typically begins with pre-conceived ideas about what risks children might encounter rather than first establishing how children understand and conceptualize risk and what risks *they* believe exist within their worlds (Negreinos, 2010). As such, research to date has largely failed to consider the challenges that children encounter, the risks they perceive or the worries and concerns they hold. Instead, adult researchers have asked child participants about things that adults *think* are risks to and for children.

When children and young people have been asked to consider how to manage risks and what they need to be safe, they have generally identified the importance of relationships (with trusted adults or peers), of having some autonomy and control over their environments and of having opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives. They have demonstrated awareness of risks to their safety and the protective strategies that adults (such as police or teachers) have put in place to prevent harm (Blanchet-Cohen, 2013; Chan, Lam, & Shae, 2011; Collins, 2001; Eriksson, Hochwälder, & Sellström, 2011; Taber-Thomas, 2013).

Within the literature on children's perceptions of safety there has been very limited consideration of issues of power and how children's interpersonal, generational, organizational and structural powerlessness, rather than just their physical vulnerability, may influence their experiences and perceptions of safety. Researchers have found that children generally feel safer when they are surrounded by trusted adults and are at greater risk of abuse when they are socially isolated. However, research has not considered how other forms of interpersonal vulnerability play out in practice (Negreiros, 2010).

1.2. Methodology

The study aimed to develop an understanding of how children perceive safety within institutional contexts. Specifically, the study aimed to explore:

a how children and young people conceptualize and perceive safety, particularly in relation to safety from abuse and harm;
b children and young people's perceptions of safety within institutions;
c children and young people's views on what gives rise to these perceptions;
d what children and young people consider is already being done to respond to safety issues and risks in institutions;
e what children and young people consider should be done to respond to safety issues in institutions.

This article considers the first and fifth research questions as they relate to the themes of power and vulnerability, that is, how children and young people conceptualize safety and what they think could be done to make them safer in institutional settings.

The methodology was developed in partnership with the Royal Commission and was guided by an Adult Stakeholder Group and three Children and Young People's Reference Groups. The Children and Young People's Reference Groups helped to ensure that the overall approach was youth-friendly and that the language and questions used in the focus groups were accessible and appropriate for children and young people. The Reference Groups also considered potential difficulties and ethical challenges that might arise for participants and helped develop strategies to minimize and/or redress those issues. In addition, they played a part in "member checking" data and provided feedback on the research findings and their implications for practice.