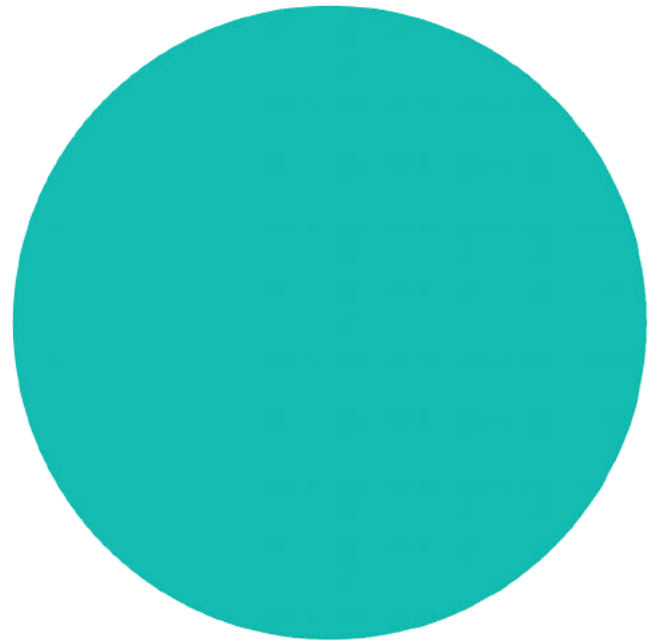


Informing the Second Action Plan in support of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032



Submission from
MacKillop Family Services and
the University of Melbourne

July 2026



Introduction

Prepared by MacKillop Family Services and the University of Melbourne, this submission will focus on children and young people and relevant insights into the experiences of violence against women and children within families engaging with our services and violence directed towards children and young people living in out-of-home care. This includes attention to responding to children and young people who are using violence. We have limited our responses to those questions in the Consultation Paper most relevant to these areas.

In preparing our response we note the intersections with work currently underway to develop the Second Action Plan under the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030*. Our view is that a clear focus on addressing violence against children is required across both plans.

*****Content Warning: This submission focuses on violence against children. Some content, particularly material outlined in the case study, may be distressing for some readers.*****

MacKillop Family Services

MacKillop Family Services (MacKillop) is a national community service organisation that works for the rights of all children to be free to enjoy their childhood in a safe and loving home. MacKillop is driven by social justice and committed to advocating for the rights of marginalized people. In 2024/2025, MacKillop supported more than 23,000 disadvantaged and at-risk children, young people and families throughout Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. Our work over this period included support to over 3,000 young people living in residential care or foster care. We provide training and consultation to all states and territories and internationally. Our vision is that all children, young people, and families are safe, thriving and connected to culture and community.

The services MacKillop provide are supported by Commonwealth and state / territory funding, fundraising and philanthropic support. Delivered by over 2,300 staff, operating nationally from 56 offices, our services and programs provide practical and accessible assistance in family therapy, family relationship services, family support, foster care, residential care, disability services, youth support, youth homelessness, education and training, mental health, family violence, early intervention, sexual assault, parenting and early childhood. We also continue to support women and men who, as children, were in the care of our founding agencies.

MacKillop operates five specialist schools for children and young people who are disengaged or have been excluded from mainstream education. Our education services aim to provide an environment that empowers students to re-engage in education and supports them academically and socially so they can experience success in learning. MacKillop Education schools specialise in assisting students with a history of school disengagement and non-attendance, mental health issues, social and emotional disabilities and/or complex trauma.

MacKillop's work is underpinned by strong governance; a deep commitment to social justice; to children and families; to the prevention of harm; and to practice based on research evidence.

MacKillop is an accredited Sanctuary Model organisation. The Sanctuary Model is a workplace culture-change program that enables safe, non-violent environments and relationships that teach people to cope with adversity, stress and trauma and supports measurable improved wellbeing outcomes for organisations and individuals. Our trauma informed approach to engaging young people is to better understand and address the question 'What has happened to this person?' rather than 'What is wrong with this person?'.

McAuley Community Services for Women

In 2023, McAuley Community Services for Women (McAuley) became part of MacKillop, forming a single entity to streamline governance and maximise the benefits of collaboration. McAuley was established in 2008 through the amalgamation of the Sisters of Mercy Regina Coeli and Mercy Care. Since this time, McAuley has continued to work at the intersection of family violence, homelessness and mental health, providing 24/7

support 365 days a year, as well as temporary accommodation, independent housing and supported community care.

The organisation's commitment to innovation and integration of services has led to the development of multidisciplinary teams and partnerships that support the holistic needs of women and babies, children and young people.

MacKillop acknowledges and strongly supports the separate submission provided by McAuley Community Services for Women. The submission identifies key priorities for ending violence against women and children, including investment in the expansion of the Safe at Home model currently being trailed in Victoria that integrates a whole-of-family approach designed to prevent homelessness, strengthen economic security, and support recovery. Other recommendations include investment in affordable long-term housing, improved access to mental health support, addressing employment barriers, increased funding of integrated service delivery and further support of babies, children and young people. MacKillop strongly supports the directions outlined in the submission.

The MacKillop Institute

The MacKillop Institute (the Institute) is a part of MacKillop Family Services, and was established to share the experience, expertise, and evidence-based and evidence informed programs of MacKillop Family Services with the wider community. The Institute draws on a wealth of experience from MacKillop Family Services' work across Australia to identify, promote, and independently evaluate good practice.

The Institute is committed to MacKillop Family Services' strategic goal to be innovative and responsive, develop best practices and advocate for social justice. We do this by building long-term partnerships that create positive and sustainable change.

The Institute empowers other organisations with evidence-informed programs and services that promote school and organisational wellbeing and strengthen child safety. We work with others to share our collective knowledge to create practical solutions tailored to the culture, strengths and needs of an organisation.

The evidence-based and evidence-informed programs delivered by the Institute include Power to Kids, Power to Kids in Schools, the Sanctuary Model and the ReLATE model. The Institute is active in all states and territories and has delivered trauma-informed programs to 2,485 schools nationally to over 24,000 participants.

The University of Melbourne

The University of Melbourne is the leading centre of higher education and research in Australia, consistently ranked among the leading universities in the world. Established in 1853, the University of Melbourne is a public-spirited institution that makes distinctive contributions to society in research, learning and teaching and engagement. With a world class reputation for research excellence, the University collaborates across research, industry and public sectors to undertake globally competitive and innovative research that generates the knowledge and resources to solve Australia and the world's biggest problems.

MacKillop has been in an action research partnership with the University of Melbourne's Violence Against Women and Children research team since 2017. The partnership has supported a program of work focused on child sexual abuse prevention and response. Together, we have achieved grants of over \$1.6M to fund innovative initiatives targeting sexual abuse and violence.

Further, MacKillop has also supported three PhD studentships in the Department of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, capacity building the work of both organisations in the child abuse prevention and response area.

Power to Kids

Power to Kids in Out of Home Care (Power to Kids) is a professional learning program developed through the MacKillop/University of Melbourne action research partnership. Power to Kids upskills out-of-home care

professionals to strengthen prevention, early identification and responses to multiple forms of child sexual abuse including child sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviours and dating violence.

Power to Kids was initially piloted in MacKillop's residential care homes and its effectiveness measured through rigorous and independent evaluations. Power to Kids was subsequently rolled out nationally to other out-of-home care organisations and has reached over 3,000 out-of-home care professionals within 50 organisations. Further evaluation following the national rollout found Power to Kids continues to make a real difference for the safety of children in care with 99 percent of participants stating it had increased their confidence to prevent, identify and intervene early.

Power to Kids in Schools is an adaptation of the successful Power to Kids in Out of Home Care program. Power to Kids in Schools is a professional learning program that upskills educators and schools to strengthen prevention and responses to child sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviours and dating violence. Educators are equipped with the knowledge and practical skills to hold 'brave conversations' around sexual health and safety. The program features three evidence-based strategies including a school-wide education approach, early identification and intervention, and connecting with appropriate services to disrupt harm.

MacKillop and the University of Melbourne have joined together in this submission to share our unique expertise and insights into the current and emerging risks for families, children and young people in Australia with a particular focus on children residing in out-of-home care.

Background:

This submission draws on MacKillop's extensive national experience delivering services to children and young people in out-of-home care, as well as providing services aimed at reuniting or keeping families safely together.

Out-of-home care

Many young people in out-of-home care, including foster care and residential care, have experienced extraordinary violence, chaos and instability prior to their placement.

Due to their adverse childhood experiences, including histories of abuse and trauma, attending to the intersecting forms of disadvantage often experienced by children and young people in care is of particular importance.

The depth and breadth of the adverse experiences of children and young people living in residential care, and their ongoing impacts, are reflected in national data collected by MacKillop through a bi-annual residential care survey. The most recent data (May 2026) demonstrated:

- 81 percent experienced family violence in childhood
- 18 percent have been a victim of partner/dating violence (past or present)
- 8 percent have used violence against a partner (past or present)
- 66 percent have had more than five placements
- 82 percent of young people have at least one mental health condition
- 56 percent of young people are misusing drugs
- 43 percent are considered to be at high risk of sexual exploitation

Most (38%) young people living in residential care attended school part time. Nearly one third (31 percent) of young people did not attend school at all, while the same proportion (31 percent) attended full time.

Family Services

This submission will draw upon learning from MacKillop's delivery of the family support program known as the Victorian Family Preservation and Reunification Response (the Response). The Response aims to safely support families referred from Child Protection, focusing on keeping children at home or reuniting those placed in out-of-home care. Families receive intensive, flexible support over a period of approximately six months, as they work to achieve their identified goals and are supported to build stronger, safer relationships and develop connection with their community. MacKillop delivers two FPRR models: a Practice Elements

approach for children 0-17 years across metropolitan and regional Victoria, and an evidence-based program, Multisystemic Therapy-Psychiatric (MST-Psych) for families with adolescent young people in Geelong and metropolitan Melbourne.

A recent evaluation (Morris et al., 2025) analysed data from 689 participants from 544 families. Of these families, 239 (45.9 percent) reported family violence as a recent issue. The evaluation demonstrated that through their engagement in the Response, significantly improved family functioning was reported by many families, with a high rate of reunifications and successful preservation of children in their homes. Despite some challenges in information sharing and implementation, the Response has supported positive, measurable impacts on both children's development and family functioning, fulfilling its goal of maintaining family unity and child safety.

Priority Area 1: Victim-Survivors

What service or system responses would make the biggest difference to victim-survivors' safety, wellbeing, healing and recovery?

Systems and services must **acknowledge and address the often-invisible forms of violence** experienced by young people, particularly those living in out-of-home care. This should include proactive public education about sexual abuse carried out by a child or young person against another child or young person as well as child sexual exploitation and forced marriage.

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study indicates younger cohorts are experiencing higher rates of peer sexual harassment and peer sexual harm compared to older cohorts, and that child sexual abuse is more likely to be perpetrated by other known adolescents than parents/caregivers or adults known to the child (Mathews et al., 2024). **Responsive, trauma informed systems** must hold adult perpetrators accountable as well as children and young people engaging in abusive or exploitation behaviours. A critical, and growing, part of the sexual abuse and exploitation ecosystem are online platforms. The companies that create and operate these platforms must recognise, address and ultimately be held accountable for their role in facilitating abuse and exploitation. We support the recent actions of government to rein in access to social media by children and, also, the work of the eSafety Commissioner to hold online platforms to account. Continued vigilance and reform is required to ensure that damage caused by these platforms is addressed.

MacKillop and the University of Melbourne support a **nationally consistent family violence disclosure scheme**. We believe such a scheme would improve victim-survivor safety by removing state-based barriers that risk critical information remaining undisclosed. Existing national initiatives such as the National Domestic Violence Order Scheme recognise that the safety of victim-survivors is dependent upon timely access to risk information, regardless of the state/territory in which incidents occur or orders or convictions were made. Such a scheme has the potential to have a critical role in keeping victim-survivors safe and prevent violence against women and children by providing access to information that can support informed decision-making, early intervention and proactive safety planning.

For victim-survivors of children's harmful sexual behaviours, **public awareness raising** regarding sexual abuse carried out by a child or young person against another child or young person is paramount. Victim-survivors report that they need to "see" their form of abuse in the public sphere and often the community do not realise that children and young people (or groups of children and young people) can be sexually abusive. Moreover if victim-survivors cannot articulate what is happening to them, they cannot seek help from a safe adult or service (McKibbin et al., 2025). Intervention, healing and recovery cannot occur unless victim-survivors recognise what they are experiencing is sexual abuse. Victim-survivors also need to see proportionate consequences for the harm they have experienced. Put simply, the system needs to view their abuse as harmful and then respond to it.

Victims of **child sexual exploitation** need to be a core focus area in the Second Action Plan. Victims are often misunderstood to be engaged in "sex work" or the production of child sexual abuse material (Bloxsom et al.,

2024) when, in fact, they are being coerced by others (often adolescent males and young male adults) and should be responded to as victims of child sexual exploitation and/or harmful sexual behaviour.

An aspect of family violence which is frequently overlooked is **forced marriage**. The Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria recommended that forced marriage and dowry-related abuse should be considered aspects of family violence. Australian law enshrines the right to choose if, with whom and when a person marries. Forced marriage remains a significant but often hidden form of gender-based violence. Incidents of forced marriage have increased from 91 in 2023-24 to 118 in 2024-25, with the Australian Federal Police reporting that forced marriage is currently the most prevalent form of modern slavery in Australia (2025). We support **further work to address forced marriage** and note the important work of My Blue Sky a specialist legal service run by Anti-Slavery Australia at the University of Technology Sydney who assist people in or facing forced marriage in Australia.

Accountability for child sexual exploitation lies with adult perpetrators and/or young people carrying out exploitation behaviours. Further, there is an urgent need to hold online platforms and resource providers (for example Amazon and Uber), to account. These organisations continue to financially profit from the exploitation of children.

For **children in out-of-home care**, it is imperative to improve information sharing provisions for online platforms and statutory child protection (Bloxsom *et al.*, 2026b). For example, currently if a child goes missing in an Uber, a carer cannot contact Uber to find where the child is, and if the police threshold for a missing child is not met, responses are limited (Sastre-Gomez *et al.*, 2026). That is, Uber knows the identity of the perpetrator who may have paid for the ride share and location of a child but do not share this information with key professionals (Bloxsom *et al.*, 2026b). Our experience indicates that Australian children are still being transported to hotels in ride shares/taxis where they are exploited, however there are minimal educational opportunities for hospitality/tourism staff to identify and report CSE unlike in other jurisdictions (for example Operation Makesafe in the United Kingdom – see www.met.police.uk/police-forces/metropolitan-police/areas/about-us/about-the-met/campaigns/operation-makesafe/).

Focusing on **healing and recovery**, MacKillop has successfully utilised **Therapeutic Life Story Work** to support children and young people heal from trauma. This therapeutic approach was developed in the UK by Richard Rose (2012) and its use in the Australian setting has been evaluated (Lucas, 2022). Therapeutic Life Story Work helps children and young people to learn from the past to reframe their future. The evaluation found children and young people who had been engaged in the program had an increased sense of self-identity, strengthened attachment with their caregiver, increased pro-social behaviours, decreased anti-social and negative behaviours and emotions (Lucas, 2022). The evaluation recommended ongoing government funding for the Therapeutic Life Story Work program as a key strategy to support trauma recovery for children and young people who have experienced family violence, child safety interventions and complex childhood trauma.

Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy is a trauma treatment recommended for adults and children (Australian Psychological Society, 2018; World Health Organisation, 2013). MacKillop works to prioritise trauma treatment for young people in out-of-home care and have piloted the use of EMDR (Dwyer, 2024) for young people who have experienced developmental trauma (van der Kolk, 2014), which includes family violence. Clinically observed changes after EMDR treatment included a reduction in trauma-based behaviours, violence, sexualised behaviours, and drug and alcohol use. Some young people were reunified with family, and some increased their attendance at school and/or returned to paid employment. MacKillop supports the wider adoption of EMDR to treat the trauma of young people in out-of-home care and support healing.

The **intersection between healing and recovery and the justice system** also requires attention. Survivors can experience the weaponisation of their help seeking attempts such as subpoenaing of counselling records or therapy attendance being used as evidence of psychological instability. Targeted professional development within the justice system is required including an accurate understanding of the role of EMDR. Survivors have found that their ability to access justice has been compromised by the way EMDR therapy is understood to impact memory and the reliability of their evidence (Baker, 2026). Survivors should not have to choose between healing and recovery or pursuing accountability through the justice system. We support

reform to ensure that accessing important and evidence-based treatment does not come at the expense of just and accountable responses to perpetrators.

What helps people access support earlier, and what barriers prevent people from seeking help or engaging with systems and services?

As noted above, education to enable children and young people, and the adults and systems who should be supporting them, to recognise overlooked forms of gender-based violence such as:

- abuse carried out by a child or young person against another child or young person
- child sexual exploitation (often misunderstood as “sex work”) and
- production or self-production of child sexual abuse material by children and young people.

What current or emerging issues should the Second Action Plan address, including in relation to coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse?

It is important to break down the apparent **online/offline dichotomy in the framing of child abuse** (Bloxsom et al., 2026a). Children do not experience their lives in this way, and so-called online sexual abuse often involves physical injury to children (Bloxsom et al., 2026b), their siblings and pets (Bloxsom & McKibbin, 2023). Often technology is used to connect with children “in real life” to perpetrate sexual abuse, assault and exploitation. The myth that “online” sexual abuse/exploitation is less severe and impactful on victims must be challenged and reframed.

What gaps remain in addressing the needs of diverse communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

The families, children and young people supported by MacKillop are very often impacted by intergenerational, intersecting forms of disadvantage and are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence. Our submission draws on MacKillop’s significant experience delivering programs and support which have been found to make a positive difference to these families.

MacKillop has engaged in targeted data collection aimed at better understanding the diverse identities and experiences of children and young people residing in our care and the families we support.

Recent data (MacKillop Family Services, May 2026) shows that 21 percent of the children and young people residing in residential care are **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander** and 21percent have **multicultural backgrounds** (from 33 different multicultural backgrounds). Of the children and young people residing in foster care, recent data (MacKillop Family Services, February 2026) shows that 27 percent are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 22 percent have multicultural backgrounds (from 42 different multicultural backgrounds).

MacKillop has also sought to better understand the prevalence and nature of **disability** experienced by the children, young people and families we support.

Our data suggests that a substantial proportion of children and families accessing mainstream family support services are living with disability, predominantly intellectual disability, cognitive impairment and neurodivergence. A 2025 scoping study conducted by MacKillop indicates that over a quarter of parents from a sample of families who had accessed the Family Preservation and Reunification Response had diagnosed or suspected intellectual disability. This scoping study also highlighted a significant overrepresentation of parents with intellectual disability in rural/regional families compared to the metropolitan cohort.

As outlined above, children and young people with disability are significantly over-represented in out-of-home care, including foster care and residential care. Data indicates 70 percent of children and young people residing in residential care have a diagnosed disability or neurodivergence (Residential Care Survey, May

2026). Within this cohort, 23 percent are recorded as having intellectual disability or neurodivergence (52 percent ADHD, 36 percent Autism Spectrum Disorder). Of those children and young people cared for by foster carers, 58 percent have a diagnosed disability (11 percent intellectual disability) and/or neurodivergence (42 percent ADHD, 26 percent Autism Spectrum Disorder).

The majority of young people living in MacKillop residential care are aged between 12 and 16 years and most (70 percent) have a diagnosed disability

There is limited national data available to support a wider understanding of the **intersection between disability and gender-based violence**, particularly as it pertains to children and young people and more specifically to young people residing in out-of-home care. This includes a limited understanding of the role of disabilities and support (or lack of support) in a child or young person's trajectory towards out-of-home care. An example of a missed opportunity to better understand this cohort was the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (Mathews et al., 2023). This study provided the first national prevalence estimates of the five types of child maltreatment together with their associated adverse impacts. The study did not capture data relating to disability. It is hoped that future iterations of this survey, or other national research, will capture data to support our understanding of the experiences of children and young people with disability, thereby allowing targeted advocacy, systems and support.

In addition, recognising and addressing **disparities between regional and metropolitan** areas is vital. The Response evaluation found families in regional areas generally experienced higher rates of family violence (Morris et al., 2025).

Priority Area 2: Prevention and early intervention

What would make the biggest difference in preventing and ultimately ending violence?

As noted above, a **nationally consistent family violence disclosure scheme** has the potential to have a critical impact on early intervention and preventing violence against women and children by providing access to information that can support informed decision-making and safety planning.

How can existing efforts to prevent violence be strengthened or built upon at the individual, community, organisational, institutional and societal levels?

Prevention and early intervention must be supported by **National Frameworks** for children's harmful sexual behaviour and child sexual exploitation (McKibbin, Kuruppu, et al., 2026). Educators and other safe adults may face confusion about definitions of sexual abuse/exploitation and need very **clear guidelines** to support early intervention, including when a criminal offence has occurred or a child or young person engages in harmful sexual behaviour. The Frameworks should set out the signs and indicators (red flags) that a child is being victimised through exploitation or harmful sexual behaviour. Widespread narratives regarding gender norms, consent and violence need to be countered. Abuse/exploitation, whether it is carried out by other children and young people or by adult perpetrators, must be identified and not minimised as "boys being boys," "a phase" or "normal sexual exploration." Safe adults must act. They cannot wait for a victim's disclosures or remain paralysed through fear of involving statutory services or "getting it wrong".

How can governments, communities, schools, workplaces, online platforms and others better support people to recognise and respond to harmful attitudes and behaviours?

Continued education of children and families, carers, teachers and professionals within workplaces and those developing and supporting online platforms will enable a shared understanding of what constitutes harmful attitudes and behaviours and facilitate effective prevention and response. As noted in further detail below, the Power to Kids program has already been adapted as Power to Kids in Schools, to equip educators to intervene early and create safer school environments with a focus on preventing, identifying and responding to sexual exploitation and dating violence.

What prevention and early intervention approaches appear most promising or effective, and what is needed to strengthen or expand them?

Primary and secondary professionals as per the public health model of prevention must be upskilled to identify and intervene in child sexual exploitation and children's harmful sexual behaviour (McKibbin *et al.*, 2024). The prevalence of child abuse outlined in the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, particularly the rising rates of harmful sexual behaviours, illustrates that the existing approaches to embedding consent, respectful relationship and sexual safety education in school curriculum has failed to address this increasing trend. We note the recent survey with 4,396 young people from across Australia indicating that while 92 percent of students received relationships and sexuality education at school, only 45 percent rated it as 'relevant' or 'very relevant' to their lives (Power *et al.*, 2026).

A National Framework supporting teaching workforces is essential. **Power to Kids in Schools** is an example of a program that would achieve this for educators, and could be adapted to health, mental health, disability and family violence professionals. **All professionals have a responsibility to identify and respond.** The notion that sexual abuse and exploitation is only for specialist sexual assault workers and school counsellors is misguided. The Framework for primary and secondary professionals should set out information sharing and data collection obligations for sexual abuse and exploitation.

Children in out-of-home care need to be recognised as vulnerable to being sexually exploited by peers or adult perpetrators due to their often significant unmet needs – attachment, social and financial. These unmet needs are leveraged to entrap children in a “web of exploitation” which is difficult to exit for children, and to disrupt for professionals (Bloxsom *et al.*, 2026a; Sastre-Gomez *et al.*, 2026). We recommend that the **Child Sexual Exploitation Exit model** (see McKibbin, Humphreys, *et al.*, 2026) should be implemented across all out-of-home care services.

Priority Area 3: Children and young people in their own right

How can governments, services, education settings, families, communities and others better recognise and respond to children and young people experiencing violence or harm?

In addition to the National Frameworks and the nationally consistent family violence disclosure scheme outlined above, we advocate for **legislative reform** to ensure that children and young people are not criminalised for consensual sharing of “nudes” or for being coerced by peers or adult perpetrators to “self-produce” child sexual exploitation material (Bloxsom *et al.*, 2024). The Commonwealth Criminal Code, Section 474.23 enables the criminalisation of children in these circumstances, which is unacceptable. For children who are coerced to “self-produce” child sexual exploitation material, the threat of criminalisation makes them fearful to seek support from safe adults and professionals (Bloxsom *et al.*, 2026a).

Recent data from Australia (Sastre-Gomez *et al.*, 2026) indicates that for **children in out-of-home care**, sexual and criminal exploitation need to be considered together and in relation to “going missing or absent from care.” Higher levels of criminal and sexual exploitation concerns across missing days suggest that missing episodes are not merely indicators of risk but may reflect ongoing exploitation-related harm. We need to move away from treating missing/absent episodes as isolated incidents towards understanding them as indicators of sustained and severe exploitation trajectories.

How should the Second Action Plan respond to current or emerging forms of harm affecting children and young people, including technology-facilitated abuse, harmful online content, and violence within peer and dating relationships?

There are emerging forms of children's harmful sexual behaviour that are not necessarily trauma-driven (McKibbin, Humphreys, *et al.*, 2024). This specifically relates to **gender-based** harmful sexual behaviour **and extremist-based** harmful sexual behaviour. Understandings and practices relating to trauma-based harmful sexual behaviour may need significant reform to be fit for purpose for these emerging forms of abuse. This includes interrogating how hypermasculinity (the ‘Manosphere’), pornography and extremist ideologies may drive children to become sexually harmful. We note the evidence that these elements are increasingly coalescing in online environments (Thorn, 2026). Interventions that focus on skill building and restorative justice are unlikely to work in circumstances where extremist views become entrenched. Research

exploring whether responses similar to a “deprogramming” type of intervention used for cult survivors could be effective and should be researched and evaluated.

Any contemporary analysis of child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse must pay attention to the **ubiquitous presence of pornography**. Meta-analytic evidence has emerged of a causal link for adolescent boys between viewing mainstream pornography and carrying out acts of sexual aggression against children and peers (Rostad et al, 2019; Hilton, 2021; Crabbe et al, 2024).

Over the past five years, we have seen an erosion of the online/offline dichotomy. Online abuse can no longer be conflated with no-contact offending. Through our work we have identified that children are being physically injured, physically injuring their siblings, cousins and pets at the direction of perpetrators. Perpetrators can quickly arrange/coerce/trick children to meet up “in-person” to commit horrific acts of sexual assault and deprivation of liberty against them.

We have observed how traditional models of grooming have transformed radically – while grooming has never been solely a linear process evolving over time, rapid changes are occurring. Perpetrators operating online can brazenly entrap children, sometimes demanding sexual activity within minutes of connecting with a child online. For example, see the case study below of ██████

██████ was 13 years old and her parents had just separated. She felt extremely lonely and like her life was worth nothing. She thought maybe if she found a boyfriend she would feel better – she longed for male attention. So she created a profile on Discord saying she was hoping to meet a 14 year old boy to go on a date with. Within an hour, she was contacted by just “such a boy” who suggested they talk on Snapchat. ██████ was elated – finally someone was interested in her. The “boy” who was actually a 23 year old man called ██████ – quickly turned the conversation sexual. He complemented ██████ and told her how beautiful she was. He then sent her a “dic pic” and asked her to send him a “nude.” ██████ was horrified and initially said no – but ██████ “nagged and nagged” her all afternoon until she eventually sent a photo of herself topless without a bra – she didn’t think to conceal her face. Although she asked him not to screenshot her photo, she saw on Snap that he had. She felt sick. She could hear her Mum in the kitchen making dinner. That’s when the threats started. The perpetrator told ██████ that if she didn’t do what he said, he would share her nude photo with all her contacts on Snap. ██████ panicked and decided to do what he said. He told her she was a “good girl” and ordered her to live stream degrading and painful penetrative acts. The pain was excruciating and she bit down on her tongue to stop herself screaming out in pain to avoid alerting her Mum. This continued for several weeks and the abuse escalated. ██████ made ██████ sexually assault her 3 YO cousin and her cat. (McKibbin, 2025)

In Australia, **peer-to-peer sexual abuse and exploitation** perpetrated by adolescent boys against adolescent girls is rapidly increasing (Matthews et al., 2024). We have also seen a shift from child sexual abuse material being located mostly on the Dark Web, to it appearing and being traded with greater frequency and openly across the Clear Net. Our police partners tell us that increasingly the child sexual abuse material they encounter is on the Clear Net on mainstream social media platforms. Our police colleagues also tell us that much of the material is “self-produced.” This means that children are being increasingly targeted by perpetrators and coerced, tricked and entrapped into creating sadistic sexual abuse content. We have identified five forms of coerced “self-produced” child sexual exploitation material: Solicitation; Peer Sexting; Viral Challenge (children uploading videos of themselves onto websites to participate in different viral video challenges); Sextortion (adults who seek CSEM from children and then use this CSEM to blackmail and extort more CSEM); and Financial Coercion (Bloxsom et al., 2024).

We are also seeing **explicit content creator platforms** like OnlyFans targeting children and young people to create profiles and sell child sexual abuse imagery. OnlyFans profits from the exploitation of children, taking 20 percent of earnings as commission. We also see pornography proliferate across all domains of children’s worlds – pornography is no longer limited to particular pornography websites. Pornography is pushed to children via algorithms on dating sites, social media platforms, TikTok, messaging platforms, market platforms and content creation platforms like YouTube. The sexual material is not limited to adult, “softcore” pornography, but to illegal material involving children, sadism, animals and incest. We are now seeing children referred to treatment services with addiction to child sexual abuse material.

Our experience indicates children and young people face ever changing and escalating risks. AI ‘nudifying’ apps are now being used by groups of boys in schools to create “nudes” of female classmates and teachers, and uploading them onto hubs like the Vault. We note the recent findings from a survey of almost 2,000 Australians aged 16 to 18 conducted by the University of Adelaide (Cubitt et al, 2026). The research indicates

that before turning 18 more than 1 in 7 experience online sexual victimisation. The research also highlighted that 14.9 percent of online sexual victimisation involved the use of AI. Interestingly, of those who experienced online sexual victimisation before the age of 18, disclosure to an AI was more common than to an authority (including teachers, doctors, counsellors, police or reporting service). Another Australian survey of young people across Australia aged between 14 and 18 years (Power et al., 2026), found with half of those surveyed (n = 1,977, 50 percent) reported that they have shared a sexual image of themselves using a mobile phone at least once. Young women were more likely than young men to have shared images of themselves. The survey found 13 percent of young people had experienced a nude or sexual image of themselves being shared without their permission (Power et al, 2026).

We are also witnessing AI bots having sexualise conversations with children. Further, gaming platforms targeted at children enable for, and profit from, child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Between 2024 and 2025 the eSafety Commissioner (2025) surveyed 2,629 Australian children (aged 10-15 years) and found 24 percent of these children had experienced online sexual harassment. A recent survey (Woblers et al., 2025) conducted with 1,953 adolescents living in Australia found 11.3 percent had been sexually extorted.

How can children and young people be meaningfully involved in shaping the policies, programs and services that affect them?

Children who experience exploitation or abuse must be approached as **“Experts by Experience”** and their voices amplified (Bloxsom et al., 2026a). They hold key knowledge and insights about their abuse and needs. Safe adults and professionals need to listen to child victims to understand what is helpful to prevent and respond to abuse. Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours also need to be consulted to help understand the socioecological situations and pathways that led them to become sexually harmful (McKibbin, Tyler, et al., 2024). The rights of children not to be sexually abused, and not to become sexually harmful, must be upheld. Children and young people also need to be supported to seek anonymous help for their sexual thoughts, behaviours or experiences. Initiatives such as **What’s OK? Australia** should be upscaled and funded appropriately (for more information see <https://jss.org.au/programs/the-mens-project/whats-ok-australia/>).

Priority Area 4: People who use violence

How can services, families, communities, workplaces, institutions and others better recognise and respond safely to people using violence or at risk of using violence?

Gaps in the collection and dissemination of data on perpetrators is a significant impediment in the design, delivery and evaluation of service responses. The collection of data relating to adolescents who use violence is underdeveloped. What data is available suggests the identification, nature and scope of the problem is not well understood. This significantly hampers the ability to intervene early.

There is limited collection and use of data specific to young people using violence in the home, in out-of-home care or in dating relationships. As noted above, data from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study suggests that the incidence of abuse, including sexual abuse, of children and young people by other children and young people is growing (Mathews et al, 2024; Hunt et al, 2024).

While data on the prevalence of adolescent family violence is underdeveloped, the Victorian Crime Statistic Agency (Phillips and McGuinness, 2020) report on police reported adolescent family violence (AFV) indicates:

- The number of AFV incidents recorded by police has increased 11.8 percent in the preceding five years.
- Intimate partner violence is the fastest growing type of AFV, increasing 21.2 percent from 2014-15 to 2018-19.
- The rate of AFV was twice as high in regional or rural Victoria compared with major cities.
- Over half of adolescent aggressors of family violence had prior contact with police as a witness or victim-survivor of a family violence incident, or with courts as a protected person on a Family Violence Intervention Order.

- Most young people (80 percent) go on to have some kind of future contact with the justice system following their first AFV aggressor incident, with 52 percent recorded as an aggressor at a subsequent family violence incident. Over half of aggressors also had subsequent involvement with police or courts as a victim of crime, a victim-survivor of family violence or as a complainant on a family violence intervention order.

This work is further supported by research (Douglas & Walsh, 2023) suggesting the number of adolescents using family violence is growing, or perhaps that families are becoming more likely to report this violence.

While data on AFV reported to police is useful, this is a high threshold and likely masks a more widespread problem.

The collection and reporting of data relating to adolescents who use violence should guide service planning including increased investment in specialist, age-appropriate early intervention initiatives. Barriers to collecting this data may include a reluctance to report or seek help due to concerns around stigmatising the young person.

How can governments and services, among others, strengthen culturally safe, accessible and evidence-informed responses for a range of communities and cohorts?

Children in out-of-home care need to be a priority group in research about emerging forms of harmful sexual behaviour and child sexual exploitation. Given their often-significant unmet needs, they may be targeted by perpetrators in the community.

Priority Area 5: System Integration and Workforce

What would make the biggest difference in creating a more coordinated and connected system response for people affected by violence against women and children and other forms of gender-based violence and people using violence?

Our view is that **improved information sharing** is the key to creating a more coordinated and connected system response. As noted above, we support reforms to improve information sharing such as a nationally consistent family violence disclosure scheme. In addition, we note the inconsistencies in state/territory-based information sharing scheme particularly the ability to share information between Commonwealth and state/territory funded service providers. Improved information sharing would support more seamless service responses, improve safety and build greater perpetrator accountability.

We also support embedding a trauma-informed, culturally safe and child centred focus across the sectors engaging with victim-survivors and those responding to violence against women and children. This focus should not be limited to 'family violence' agencies and funded providers. Our experience reinforces that the impact of family violence is manifest across the community. Sectors including health, education, family services, out-of-home care and key private sector agencies need to be calibrated towards better identifying and responding to violence against women and children including preparing staff to recognise and proactively respond to individuals who have experiences of violence. Children need to be viewed as victims in their own right. Responses to children who have experienced violence and trauma can risk compounding their distress, as emotional and behavioural dysregulation is misinterpreted as 'naughty' or "anti-social" conduct.

Reforms are required to ensure that efforts to strengthen integrated responses are grounded in trauma informed systems approach. **Silos** between children's harmful sexual behaviour, child sexual exploitation and violence in young people's intimate relationships must be broken down. These forms of abuse often overlap, and holistic responses are required that promote relational, strengths-based approaches to promote dignity and engagement.

What workforce capabilities, supports, or conditions are most needed to strengthen prevention, early intervention, response and recovery?

As noted above, the definition of workforces considered as essential to identifying and responding to children's harmful sexual behaviours and child sexual exploitation needs to expand beyond specialist sexual assault and law enforcement professionals. **All industries** that engage with children and young people should be involved, including hospitality, retail, fast food and transport should be upskilled to recognise signs and provide a response. For example, bus drivers and other workers who come into contact with children and young people to see signs of harm or exploitation and what they can do about it. Clear information sharing and reporting processes need to be set out and implemented.

For tertiary-level professionals including sexual assault workers and specialist sexual abuse police, it is important that they are kept informed about emerging forms of exploitation and abuse. **Multiagency collaboration is imperative.** Regular multiagency meetings where information is shared about perpetrators, and disruption strategies are planned, are key to protecting children from sexual abuse and exploitation (McKibbin, Humphreys, et al., 2026).

We recognise that working directly with victim-survivors exposes the workforce to profound experiences of trauma. This work is difficult and can exact a significant toll on staff working in this area. Staff can experience vicarious trauma. Our focus on trauma-informed responses is not solely directed towards victim survivors. Attention also needs to be paid to creating conditions within workplaces that better support staff.

What supports do specialist and universal services need to provide inclusive, accessible and response services?

Children in out-of-home care need particularly well-coordinated multiagency responses in relation to child sexual exploitation. Hard and soft disruption efforts need to occur simultaneously, with attention to providing for the therapeutic needs of a child being sexually exploited. Care must be taken not to cause further trauma to children by demanding disclosures and expecting them to identify as victims.

Conclusion

MacKillop Family Services and the University of Melbourne appreciate the opportunity to highlight opportunities for the second action plan to reflect diverse voices including the experiences of children and young people, particularly those living in out-of-home care.

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