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Research to Practice Series

Not Everything is Imaginary: Children's Conceptualisations of Interpersonal Safety

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families.

Not everything is imaginary: Children's Conceptualisations of Interpersonal Safety

Issue 11 of the ICPS Research to Practice series explores children and young people's conceptualisations of interpersonal safety, and what gives rise to these perceptions. This issue is based on the findings of the first part of a study conducted by ICPS, commissioned by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which examined children's experiences and perceptions of safety in institutions. This component of the study included focus groups with 121 children and young people aged 4 – 18 in the ACT, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. These included three focus groups with young carers, students at an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school, and children and young people in out-of-home care. More information about the project is provided at the end of the issue.

A follow-on Research to Practice issue will be published in 2016, focusing on children's safety in institutions.

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Section 1

How do children and young people conceptualise safety?

Children and young people in the study differentiated between *being* safe and *feeling* safe, and felt it was possible to experience one without the other; or both at once. They were often more concerned about feeling safe than being safe, and believed that adults often dismissed children's need to feel safe - sometimes in an attempt to keep them safe.

'I think that adults think they know what kids need to be safe but I don't think that they do. They base it on what they remember from when they were kids and the world is different now. So they need to talk to kids and find out what it means to them.' (YP-1)¹

Children and young people most often defined safety as the absence of unsafe people, things and experiences but recognised that it was more than this. They defined safety in relation to how they felt and behaved, along with the things that surrounded them; using synonyms such as 'protection', 'security' and 'looked after', feelings or emotions such as 'comfortable', 'relaxed' and 'carefree', and personal characteristics such as 'confident' and 'resilient'.

Being unsafe was often defined in relation to risks, dangers, and the people, places and things that could cause harm. The level of control that young people had over a situation or risk seemed to determine their level of safety.

'Kids are all worried about adults these days – that every adult is going to be a paedophile or is going to throw them in the back of a white van...like stranger danger . . .

That means that kids don't trust adults anymore and they won't have anyone to go and get help from if something's wrong or if they've been abused or something.

How does that make them safer? I think they feel less safe because adults have tried to make them safer. Do you know what I mean?' (MX-1)

Safety as Relational

Children and young people reported that they felt most safe when they were with people they trusted, such as parents, family members, friends, other children or adults that they knew and who they believed would protect them. Trusted adults were often people in their families, people they knew, people who showed a genuine interest in them, people who they could tell were 'watching out' for them and people their families and friends vouched for.

They did not automatically assume that an adult was safe until they got to know them, and young people reported that they observed adults' behaviours before determining whether they were safe or not. Young people reported that they were more likely to rely on peers, and noted that as their reliance on adults diminished, so did their comfort in seeking support.

'Little kids are safe because they've always got someone around them.'

'We're alone so it's more likely that we'll go somewhere unsafe or someone might take us.' (MX-1)

1. Quotes provided in this issue have been sourced from the focus groups with children and young people. 'YP' refers to young people aged 12 – 18, and 'MX' refers to mixed groups with children and young people. Some quotes capture the conversation of multiple participants.

Safety and Familiarity

Familiarity was a key feature of children and young people's conceptualisations of safety, and many identified 'home' as the place they felt safest. They often said they felt scared or anxious with unknown people and in unfamiliar places and needed time to develop confidence. They felt that adults sometimes dismissed their feelings of discomfort, and they needed adults to better appreciate their sense of being unsafe in unfamiliar environments and with unfamiliar people.

'I feel safe in my bedroom when I'm by myself. You can escape from everything under the covers and you know that nothing will happen.' (YP-1)

Children and young people in each group identified adults who were different to them as being unsafe. People of different races, religions, and living in different areas were often considered to be less safe than adults who shared these characteristics with children and young people. Young people raised concerns about the way that younger children assessed risk based on people's appearances, and felt that sometimes children judged adults unfairly because the children had been told that particular types of people were unsafe, even though they weren't necessarily a risk. They also thought that sometimes children wrongly assessed someone as being safe if they looked familiar, or if they didn't fit the profile of a 'dangerous person' that they had conceived based on looks.

'It's not that black and white so you can't tell little kids not to trust people who look a certain way because they'll take it literally.'

'like not everyone who has tats is unsafe'

'and they'll think that because you didn't tell them about a certain type of person that they'll think that that person is safe.' (YP-1)

Safety and Power

Children and young people often talked about safety in relation to the power that they did or didn't have at different times. They identified bullies, older teens who used physical power to intimidate or hurt them and adults who used their power to belittle them as being significant threats.

'Adults might use their power against kids, make them feel small or stupid or whatever.' (YP-3)

'Adults can do whatever they like and you can't challenge it.'

'Yeah, some adults can be on a power trip.' (MX-2)

Children and young people's discussions about power generally related to their relative powerlessness compared to adults. They felt that children and young people were vulnerable without having choices, physical strength, respect and processes that allowed them to regain some power within relationships.

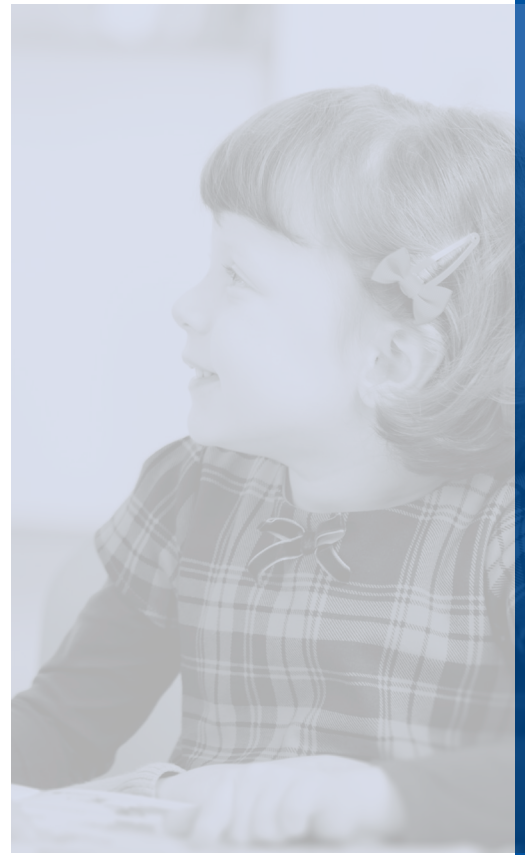


Safety within environments

Being safe at home or with parents was of particular interest to several children. Many spoke about making sure doors and windows were locked, of being tucked up in bed as a safe place or under the couch (hiding from monsters). Pre-schoolers focused primarily on staying physically safe, road safety and personal safety. When asked to determine whether a place was unsafe, children and young people most often talked about the purpose of the place, who was in it, what people were doing, what unsafe things were in it and whether it was child-friendly.

Safe things

When asked to identify things that were safe or helped kids feel safe, their responses often fell into one of two categories: things that acted to protect them from harm and things that provided them comfort when they were unsafe. Protective things were those that children and young people looked for when entering a new space or situation that could reduce their concerns, such as locks on doors. Sometimes they included items they could take with them to a situation – such as a weapon – but more frequently mobile phones or change to use a payphone. They also identified things that helped ease their discomfort, fears or concerns, such as stuffed animals, photographs of people who loved them, and safety blankets.



Section 2

What gives rise to these perceptions of safety?

Their own gut feeling

1 Children and young people often talked about a 'gut feeling', aware that they were reacting to a particular person, place or thing. Although they were aware they sometimes 'got it wrong', they often relied on their physical sensations. Some participants discussed that it was hard to explain their feelings to adults or to convince them they were unsafe based on their body's response to a situation, person or place. They felt that adults relied less on their gut feelings and more on their thoughts and what they, themselves had observed, and were unable to appreciate children and young people's concerns. Children and young people felt that they were better at picking up on their feelings than adults, and expressed frustration if they raised concerns due to gut feelings, if these were dismissed by adults.

'You kind of just know.'

***'Yeah it might be in your gut; you might feel it and you don't know why because your brain isn't saying that you're unsafe but your body is.'* (MX-1)**

'They need to trust our gut feelings because it's real,' 'and even if it's not, if a kid feels unsafe adults have to take notice because it's real to them.'

***'Yeah adults shouldn't ignore it or say "don't worry, settle down" just because it's a kid.'* (YP-2)**

Previous experience

2 Children and young people who had experienced unsafe situations or people often drew on these experiences when determining whether someone or something was safe. Young people believed that because they had more life experience than younger children, they were more likely to judge a situation based on the threats they had previously encountered, the impact the threat had had on them and how they had managed them in the past. Children said that if they had negative experiences in the past they more likely to be worried that similar things would happen again.

'We are more likely to have experienced it ourselves rather than just heard about it.'

***'We've been through it so don't worry 'cause we know we can get out of it.'* (YP-4)**

A number of young people felt that children assessed risk based on what they thought was 'normal': that children felt uncomfortable when things were worse than usual and would be motivated to seek support during these times. However, they noted that children who were surrounded by risk all the time would be less likely to experience similar discomfort and would be less likely to seek support.

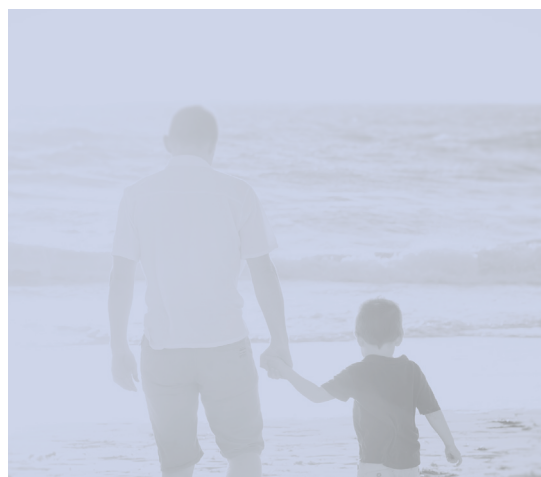
Children and young people in the young carer, Aboriginal school and out-of-home care groups reported specific needs and issues related to their experiences within systems. Young carers reported that they had less confidence in medical staff and within hospital settings, based on times they had been let down in the past; and Aboriginal participants reported a heightened sensitivity to issues of race; feeling they were more likely to experience unsafe situations because they were more vulnerable to being targeted by racist people, and be untrusting of adults based on the experiences of their families and peers. Young people in the out-of-home care system reported that they were more likely to have been hurt by adults and let down by adults and systems, which led them to a point where they had little faith in adults.

The way that others behave

3 Children and young people often talked about taking cues from others to determine whether something was safe or not. They watched to see if their peers, in particular, looked uncomfortable or were hesitant in the way that they related to others. Although they often trusted others' accounts (particularly parents, teachers and trusted adults), they did reflect that they only felt safe when they had assessed the risk themselves.

Stories they've heard

4 Children and young people reported that they often drew on what they had heard from their parents, siblings and peers about particular people, places and activities when assessing risk. This sometimes led them to the wrong conclusions, but some did recount times they had been told that someone, somewhere or something was safe, and had turned out to be unsafe.



'You hear things: from your siblings, from your friends, from adults when they think you can't hear.'

'Siblings tell you stuff to freak you out and sometimes you haven't heard things right but you know about stuff.'

***'Most kids know when things aren't right. They've heard something.'* (YP-4)**

The media

5 Children and young people often felt that movies and the media presented them with images, stories and ideas that made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable. They said that much of what they knew about risks and danger was gleaned from the news or current affairs programs, and they identified that the issue with such reporting was that the extent of the risk was not conveyed (e.g. how likely it is for children to experience kidnapping, child abuse, cyber-bullying or bashing), or the ways that adults were managing the risk. As such, children and young people were aware of the problems, but now how they were being kept safe or how they might deal with an encounter in the unlikely event that it occurred. They felt this was dangerous and made children and young people unnecessarily scared.

'Kids, they see things [on TV] that make them scared. They don't know if they're real.' (YP-4)

'[Children] base [their assessment of risk] on what they see on the news and it's only bad things on the news. Bad things or the royals.' (YP-1)

Things they have been taught

6 Children and young people shared examples of times they had encountered unsafe adults, or when adults had warned them about unsafe people in the vicinity. In these instances, adults had raised children's awareness of these risky individuals and given them advice on how to avoid them. Young people felt it would be helpful for them to have similar discussions based on new threats, such as harassment by peers or adults taking advantage of them. They also reported having participated in protective behaviour classes at school, particularly during the younger years, and felt these should be repeated and made more age-appropriate to students as they got older.

Difference in perception

7 Young people believed that children generally assessed risk based on what was immediately in front of them, whereas they placed the risk in context and related it to past experience. They felt younger children were more likely to base their fears on what was imagined or how they felt in the moment, but were more likely to take adults' guidance in relation to what was and wasn't safe. They were concerned that adults often didn't appreciate the extent to which kids worried, and saying things like 'don't be silly' or 'that's just imaginary' didn't acknowledge children's fears. They also felt that children were more at risk in that they were more likely to trust unsafe adults and feel pressured to do what adults told them to do.

'Not everything they fear is imaginary. That's what parents get wrong. They think that 'cause they're little they're not telling the truth or they've imagined it but most of the time they're telling the truth but people don't believe them because they're little. And anyway it's real to them so adults should listen.'

'They need to understand their child and accept what they're saying, instead of just hitting them because they think they're lying.'

'Trust their kids, try and help them through it.' (YP-4)

Older children felt teenagers were more likely to put themselves at risk because they enjoyed the thrill, while children their age were more cautious. Young people felt they were less likely to seek out adults to get help than children, and were expected (and had expectations) to deal with issues themselves. In most instances they believed they had the skills to do it, but thought it was still important for adults to be accessible to them when necessary. Young people felt that young women were more likely to be unsafe and young men were more likely to place themselves in unsafe situations.

Children and young people often believed that adults primarily assessed risk based on their own experiences as children. This meant that adults would minimise children's concerns rather than recognise that what children experience now might be different from what adults experienced when they were children. They stressed that adults need to be better informed about what was going on for children these days.

Some participants felt that adults were more anxious and over-protective of children because they were more aware of the risks than in previous generations. They felt this led to children and young people having less freedom than before. Older young people felt that younger children spent too much time inside watching TV and playing computer games because adults didn't trust they would be safe outside the home. At the same time, they had the idea that adults spent less time with children these days, and children were less safe and felt less cared for than before.

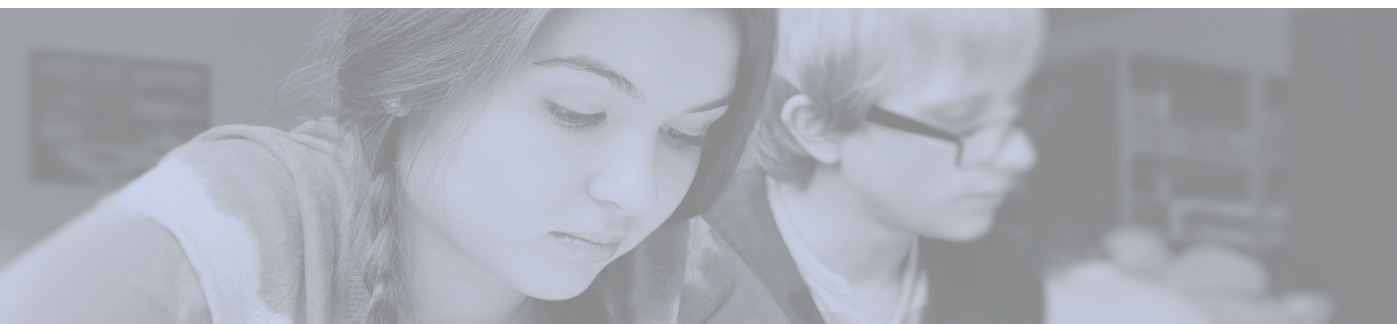
'I think they overthink too much. They always think about the bad stuff and when they think about when they were young they only think about the bad stuff not how they were always safe... And they see stuff on the news, and it's all about the bad stuff and they get overprotective.' (YP-1)

Section 3

Talking and listening to children and young people about safety

This study was based on the view that children and young people understand and experience safety in different ways to adults, and without an appreciation of what children and young people need to be and feel safe, responses may fail to adequately respond to their concerns. Children and young people felt that it was important for adults to take time to really listen to them. They felt that even caring adults often unwittingly stopped them from talking, focusing more on what they would do rather than taking the time to understand children's feelings, validate them and find out what they needed in the moment. Children and young people felt that adults often tried to downplay their concerns, which they found belittling and unhelpful. They most trusted adults who listened to them and recognised that they were unhappy and wanted something to be done. Children and young people felt that adults required skills and knowledge to respond to children's concerns, and should develop relationships with children and young people based on trust and openness. This study reinforced the critical importance of engaging children and young people in supported discussions about sensitive issues – by asking children and young people how they believed adults would respond when they were unsafe, we were able to consider some of the barriers that influence their help-seeking.

'It was good that you talked to us about this stuff and let us have a say ... We had fun and even though it was like serious for bits it was OK because it's something we should talk about and think about and it's good to hear what other people think because we don't talk about this stuff that much.'
(YP-3)



About the Study

This research project was commissioned by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and explored what children and young people experience and think about safety in institutional contexts.

The first part of the study held 10 focus groups with 121 children and young people aged 4 – 18 years in the ACT, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, about their perceptions and experiences of safety, including in institutions. The second part of the study conducted a national online survey of children and young people aged 10 – 18 about their views and experiences of safety in institutions. The report from Part 1 of the study, upon which this issue is based, was published in August 2015. The final report will be published in 2016.

More information about the project, along with links to associated publications, is available at www.acu.edu.au

References and Useful Resources

Moore, T., McArthur, M., Noble-Carr, D., & Harcourt, D. (2015). *Taking us seriously: children and young people talk about safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns*. Melbourne: Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University.

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