Creating Safe Environments For Children -
Organisations, Employees and Volunteers

National Framework

protected from harm within the community

Schedule: Guidelines for Building the Capacity of Child–Safe Organisations

Overview

Objective: to identify nationally agreed characteristics of a child-safe organisation and promote best practice which takes account of the diverse range of community services.

A Schedule for building the capacity of organisations to maintain child-safe environments is part of a developmental process which effectively links with a commitment to quality improvement. This means that organisations can remain engaged with these guidelines rather than view child safety as a set of expectations to be met once and forever.

Elements within this Schedule can be understood as benchmarks which organisations will seek to achieve and reference points against which organisations can assess their child-safe capacity. The strategies are not exhaustive but represent nationally agreed good practice to guide organisational development. The connecting theme is the identification of practices which have been found effective in establishing, maintaining and strengthening the child-safe capacity of organisations.

The Schedule takes into account the scope of community services, encompassing large government organisations and non government organisations with substantial infrastructure; organisations which rely upon volunteers for their survival; and private (for profit) providers. The governance of some organisations resides with management committees and advisory bodies whose members are volunteers and therefore included within the scope of the Schedule.

The Schedule does not state precisely what organisations should do to protect children in every situation or prescribe a series of procedures which must be followed. The precise strategies and methods ('the how to') which organisations adopt are likely to be service specific, reflecting variations in the nature of activities, organisational structure and resources, and differences between jurisdictions.

Community services organisations work with children who are vulnerable in many different ways. Their vulnerable status as children may be compounded because they are an Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, have a disability, or have experienced homelessness or abuse. Other circumstances or experiences may be significant although less visible. As part of building capacity for child safety, organisations need to take account of the nature of vulnerability experienced by children who come into contact with their service.

The responsibility for implementation of this Schedule resides with each of the States and Territories and will rely upon guidance and strategies which take account of local circumstances. Implementation approaches will be tailored to build upon existing initiatives and respond to identified needs and priorities within the community services sector in each jurisdiction.

Foundation practices and strategies are identified in the Schedule, acknowledging that capacity for a child-safe organisation is built up over time. Enhanced practices and strategies will be influenced by risk assessment and other factors specific to an organisation or jurisdiction.

The intention is to encourage and support organisations to engage in a process of continuous improvement towards enhanced levels of child safety. The quality assurance and quality improvement methods which governments adopt will be determined with consideration to existing programs and mechanisms for ensuring that organisations are aware of, and able to fulfil, their responsibilities.

Capacity Building initiatives are grouped according to the following key elements:

- **Systems to ensure Adaptation, Innovation and Continuous Improvement**

- **Governance and Culture**
  - A Child-Safe Policy
  - Risk Management
  - A Code of Conduct
  - Privacy and Data Protection

- **Participation and Empowerment of Children**
  - Enabling and Promoting the Participation of Children
  - Inclusive and Empowering Language
  - Strategies to reduce the potential for undiscovered or ongoing harm

- **Human Resources Management**
  - Recruitment and Selection Practices acknowledge the importance of child safety
  - Job Descriptions / Duty Statements
  - Staff Support, Supervision and Performance Management
  - Complaints Management and Disciplinary Proceedings

- **Education and Training**
  - Awareness and Understanding of Child Abuse and Organisational Responsibilities
  - Support for Organisations in Building, Maintaining and Strengthening Child-Safe Capacity

These elements acknowledge that building the capacity of organisations is a dynamic process involving a range of strategies, aspects of which are sequential. This is the 'building' component of 'capacity building'.

Organisations demonstrate their commitment to creating and maintaining child-safe environments through adopting the following policies, procedures, practices and strategies.

1. Systems to ensure Adaptation, Innovation and Continuous Improvement

Organisations must remain vigilant and responsive to new challenges in order to maintain a child-safe environment. This commitment to child safety is expressed in an ongoing cycle of assessment, action and reflection. Child-safe organisations regularly review, update and refine policies and practices to assess their effectiveness, and strive for excellence. These processes require openness to external influence and accountability, and commitment to quality assurance and improvement practices.

A broad application of duty of care requires that the importance of child-safe practices is acknowledged within government organisations; in the government allocation of public funds associated with delegation of service provision; in issuing licences for provision of particular services; and in other forms of funding agreement.

Guidelines and expectations for organisations will be influenced by the nature of the work undertaken and will be negotiated with State and Territory funding bodies. Provisions could include the adoption of a Child-Safe Policy; a Code of Conduct; screening of employees, volunteers and advisory committee members; and job descriptions/duty statements for all positions.

The goal is to ensure that accountability for maintaining child-safe practices and systems is understood and accepted at all levels of organisations and within systems. A culture of awareness will become embedded in the life of a child-safe organisation, so that policies and practices continue to be implemented and reviewed even though staffing may change over time[1].

2. Governance and Culture

2.1 A Child-Safe Policy

A Child-Safe Policy stating the organisation's commitment to child-safety and the actions that will be taken to meet this commitment is a central part of the policy and practice base of organisations working with children. It reflects the organisation's values and assists in maintaining commitment to child-safety when there are organisational changes.

An effective Child-Safe Policy articulates principles and provides the foundation for procedures and decision-making on child protection matters. The policy states the duty of all those employed by, or involved with, the organisation to prevent harm to children with whom they have contact[2]. Employees and volunteers are required to comply with reporting obligations concerning suspected or discovered abuse, and guidelines provide a reminder of the duty to prevent abuse. Roles and responsibilities for ensuring implementation and accountability are identified in a Child-Safe Policy.

A Child-Safe Policy can be expected to refer to a range of specific provisions: child protection awareness training for employees and volunteers; processes for reporting and managing concerns/incidents; disciplinary processes and grievance procedures; guidelines for physical contact between adults and children and outside hours contact with children and their families; standards for adult/child ratios; cyber safe guidelines; and the provision of support and guidance for employees, volunteers, children and their families when concerns are expressed about harm to a child. In some circumstances a Child-Safe Policy may require attention to situations where a child may harm another child.

Although certain provisions may not be applicable in some organisations a Child-Safe Policy should not be overlooked because specific circumstances have not arisen recently or are infrequent.

It is vital that a Child-Safe Policy is accessible and understood by employees and volunteers; children, parents and caregivers; members of advisory bodies; and other stakeholders. The policy should be developed in consultation with stakeholders to ensure that it makes sense to the organisation's circumstances, and can be implemented.

1 Child Wise (2004) *Choose With Care: Building child-safe organisations,* Melbourne, p.18.
2 In the context of the National Framework for Creating Safe Environments for Children harm means physical, sexual, emotional or psychological, abuse and neglect of children. Reference to *"a child"* or *"children"* is inclusive of children and young people up to the age of 18 years.

2.2 Risk Management

Risk management has been defined by the Standards Association of Australia as: *the culture, processes and structures that are directed towards realizing potential opportunities whilst managing adverse effects*[3]. In the context of creating safe environments for children, risk management means identifying, assessing and taking steps to minimise the risks of harm to children because of the action of an employee, volunteer, or another child.

Risk management includes planning the work of the organisation to reduce or minimise situations where children may be abused. It involves assessing all aspects of the organisation and looking at the 'what ifs' within the work of the organisation[4]. Risk management approaches are influenced by a range of factors specific to the organisation including the size, location, funding arrangements, staffing structure and focus of activity.

The sensitive and complex nature of the work often undertaken with vulnerable persons means that community services can be high risk environments. Effective risk management strategies need to be transparent, well understood and diverse, to take account of the increased level of risk associated with the specific nature of some activities and the vulnerability of particular groups.

Child-safe organisations adopt a structured approach to risk management which demonstrates the process for reaching decisions about whether to accept or not accept certain risks.

2.3 A Code of Conduct

A Code of Conduct for child-safe organisations promotes positive work practices and establishes boundaries concerning acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in relation to children with whom the organisation has contact. The Code will also take account of the fact that community services is not a narrowly defined or predictable area of work.

An effective Code of Conduct provides guidance about the behaviour, relationships, attitudes and responsibilities expected of employees and volunteers, and outlines the process that will be followed if the Code is not observed.

A child-safe organisation is inclusive in developing its Code of Conduct and openly communicates the Code to employees and volunteers; children, parents and caregivers; and members of the public.

2.4 Privacy and Data Protection

Child-safe organisations are fully aware of their privacy obligations, and respect the privacy rights of children as well as those people who provide information. Due to the sensitive nature of personal information, child-safe organisations establish policies and procedures that provide safeguards regarding the collection, use and disclosure of such information. Organisations using sensitive and/or confidential information must protect against the compromise of this information by putting in place protective security measures.

3. Participation and Empowerment of Children

It is firmly established that a central dynamic of the abuse of children is the exploitation of power in order to gain submission or silence. There are particular power relationships inherent in community services organisations where there may be close relationships between children and adults in positions of trust and authority. Practices focused upon empowerment and participation of children and organisational structures and systems which encourage children to be listened to are key aspects of building capacity for child-safe organisations, and demonstrate commitment to creating a child-friendly organisational culture.

3.1 Enabling and Promoting the Participation of Children

Child-safe organisations seriously consider children's views and develop a culture where the knowledge, experience and contribution of children influences policies, practices and service delivery. In child-safe organisations opportunities are created for children to take on leadership roles, and they participate in planning, policy development and decision-making. The commitment of child-safe organisations to continuous improvement can be enhanced through engaging children in the review of policies and practices, and systems improvement.

3.2 Inclusive and Empowering Language

In child-safe organisations the Code of Conduct, complaints management policies and other relevant policy documents reflect a commitment to child safety, and are expressed in language which takes account of cultural differences and is not alienating for children. Involvement of children in developing these policies is part of the empowerment process and will assist in ensuring the language used is inclusive and empowering.

3.3 Strategies to reduce the potential for undiscovered or ongoing harm

Child-safe organisations ensure that children have opportunities to share their concerns in safe ways and their value base acknowledges the validity of child focused and inclusive complaints processes.

The suite of empowerment strategies for child-safe organisations includes ensuring children are aware of the organisation's commitment to child safety; providing protective behaviours training adapted to the needs of children in particularly vulnerable situations; and encouraging children to speak out. Child-safe organisations develop strategies to communicate and engage with all children who are involved with their services and programs, including those who have particular needs. Providing information about the availability of independent advocacy or persons with whom children may discuss concerns about their treatment or experience is part of the empowerment process[5]. Consulting children and seeking their views about their safety in dealing with organisations can appropriately inform the development of harm prevention strategies.

3 Standards Australia/ Standards New Zealand (2004), *Risk Management* (AS/NZS 4360:2004), Standards Australia International Ltd, and Standards New Zealand, Sydney and Wellington, p.4.

4 Child Wise (2004) *Choose With Care: Building child safe organisations,* Melbourne, p.44.

5 Tasmanian Ombudsman (2004) *Listen to the Children: Review of Claims of Abuse from Adults in State Care as Children,* Ombudsman Tasmania, Hobart; Smith, D. (1993) *Safe From Harm: A Code of Practice for Safeguarding the Welfare of Children in Voluntary Organisations in England and Wales,* The Home Office, London, p.7.

4. Human Resources Management

4.1 Recruitment and Selection Practices acknowledge the importance of Child Safety

The recruitment and selection of employees and volunteers should signal in a public way that community services organisations will take all necessary steps towards maximising the safety of children. Child-safe organisations adopt recruitment and selection processes intended to deter unsuitable persons from attempting to secure paid or voluntary positions.

An explicit statement of commitment to child safety in all advertising promotes the organisation as striving to be child-safe and can deter people who do not share the commitment or may pose a risk to children[6].

Job advertisements for child-safe organisations clearly state the commitment to child safety and information packages for potential applicants include an organisation's Child-Safe Policy, Code of Conduct, and screening and complaints/grievance procedures. The written statement of appointment to a position may also make reference to what is expected in terms of commitment and responsibility for child safety.

Child-safe organisations can be expected to adopt multiple selection techniques for prospective employees and volunteers. Although the conduct of criminal history checks is integral to establishing the fitness and propriety of persons, it is only one of a range of measures. Confirmation of identity, and verification of qualifications and professional registration where applicable, are important preliminary steps in recruitment and selection.

Interview processes highlighting the priority of child safety; work history reports; and thorough reference checks which ask specific questions about the applicant's suitability for working with vulnerable populations, can deliver factual information and provide a sense of the values and attitudes of candidates. Organisations must also avoid unfair or unlawful discrimination and interview questions should relate to selection criteria developed from job descriptions. Demonstrated commitment to maintaining a child-safe organisation may therefore need to be included in selection criteria.

4.2 Job Descriptions / Duty Statements

Comprehensive job descriptions/duty statements provide employees and volunteers with a clear understanding of what is expected of them, their responsibilities and accountability.

Child-safe organisations provide job descriptions/duty statements that minimise confusion. Regular review of job descriptions/duty statements is an important feature of ongoing performance management. Informal organisations can also make a commitment to child safety by introducing ways of describing and monitoring tasks and responsibilities.

In complex and unpredictable environments it is impossible to encompass all eventualities, and this needs to be accounted for within job descriptions/duty statements.

4.3 Staff Support, Supervision and Performance Management

Staff support, supervision, orientation and induction, apart from being integral to good human service management, are opportunities to minimise the risk of abuse as they reveal information about values, attitudes, expectations and workplace practices that may otherwise remain hidden.

Ongoing education of staff in child-safe practices, as outlined in the following section concerning 'Education and Training', is an integral part of providing staff support and maintaining performance in accordance with an organisation's commitment to child safety.

It is legitimate for review and planning of work to address working and personal relationships between employees and volunteers and the children with whom they have contact. This can be understood as part of an organisational culture that places a high priority upon the quality of the relationships with children.

4.4 Complaints Management and Disciplinary Proceedings

Child-safe organisations establish guidelines for listening to children and dealing with concerns or complaints about behaviour towards a child, and disclosure or discovery of abuse. An incident/concern reporting and management arrangement should make it clear that a child can approach any person in the organisation to express concerns about their treatment and they will be taken seriously. It should also inform employees and volunteers about whom they can approach to express concerns.

An outline of the range of responses available to the organisation and steps that may be taken in relation to a concern/complaint may offer reassurance to a person considering reporting a concern. Documentation of the processes for managing reports/incidents will also facilitate ongoing evaluation and modification.

Complaints processes and disciplinary proceedings must ensure procedural fairness and natural justice for a person suspected of abusing a child. It is therefore essential that organisations make sound and clear distinctions between complaints management processes and disciplinary proceedings. This is a complex area where organisations will benefit from independent expert human resources and legal advice.

Complaints management and disciplinary procedures should be included in an organisation's ongoing review of policies and procedures as part of the commitment to continuous improvement.

6 Child Wise (2004) *Choose With Care: Building child safe organisations*, Melbourne, p.73.

5. Education and Training

5.1 Awareness and Understanding of Child Abuse and Organisational Responsibilities

Informing and educating employees (including managers, supervisors and policy makers), volunteers, children and their families is fundamental to creating a child-safe organisation. Risk management and other preventative strategies rely upon people understanding how child abuse can occur within organisations, knowing what to look for, and accepting a sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of children. Organisations committed to the safety of children adopt a combination of induction training and refresher training to maintain an aware organisational culture.

Employees and volunteers require education about the dynamics and indicators of child abuse, and opportunities to safely explore opinions and values and deal with their feelings about child abuse. Additional components of information provision and training include responding to children who disclose; risk management; policies, procedures and reporting arrangements within the organisation; and legal reporting obligations.

5.2 Support for Organisations in Building, Maintaining and Strengthening Child-Safe Capacity

Appropriate resourcing will be required for education and training, and initiatives to create and maintain safe organisational environments. Each State and Territory and the Australian Government will determine the nature and extent of resourcing required in the context of existing supports and local needs.

Options for assisting organisations to adopt the practices and strategies contained in this Schedule include workshops for ongoing staff training and development; web-based resources; provision of templates for Codes of Conduct and Child-Safe Policies; and the development of specialised resources on child-safe environments for children and their caregivers, employees and volunteers. Links may also be established with initiatives developed by national peak bodies for child protection.
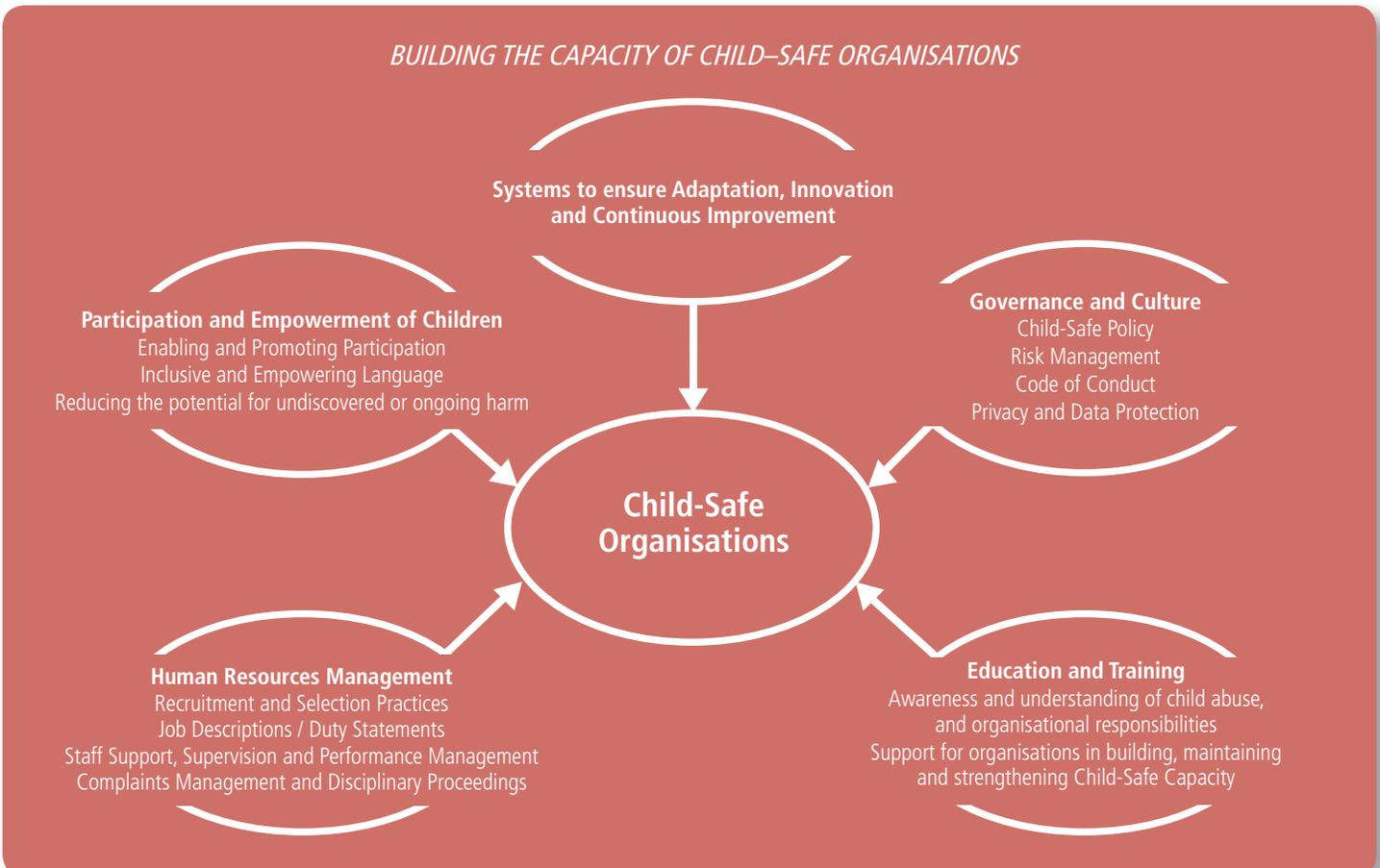
It is the responsibility of States and Territories to develop guidelines with regard to compliance and accountability for maintaining child-safe organisations. Governments may choose from a range of implementation options including provision of information; education; licensing arrangements; auditing; regulation; and legislative provisions. The processes for implementation will be tailored to offer agencies guidance and support, and demonstrate an ongoing commitment to maintaining child-safe environments.

In Summary

This Schedule of Guidelines for Building the Capacity of Child-Safe Organisations is intended to guide organisations in fulfilling their duty of care to children. The intention is to enable flexibility and encourage organisations to commence work in priority areas to strengthen their 'child-safe capacity'.

For some organisations, particularly those governed by legislation and/or licensing requirements, the Schedule may reflect practices they have already introduced and may provide a useful check-list against which they can assess their current performance. For other organisations the Schedule provides a framework for introducing policies and practices which demonstrate commitment to the broader endeavour of creating child-safe community services across Australia.

Acknowledgment: The development of these Guidelines has been directly informed by the national work of the Child Wise 'Choose with Care' program in assisting organisations to develop specific strategies to increase child safety.

BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF CHILD–SAFE ORGANISATIONS

Systems to ensure Adaptation, Innovation and Continuous Improvement

Participation and Empowerment of Children
Enabling and Promoting Participation
Inclusive and Empowering Language
Reducing the potential for undiscovered or ongoing harm

Governance and Culture
Child-Safe Policy
Risk Management
Code of Conduct
Privacy and Data Protection

Child-Safe Organisations

Human Resources Management
Recruitment and Selection Practices
Job Descriptions / Duty Statements
Staff Support, Supervision and Performance Management
Complaints Management and Disciplinary Proceedings

Education and Training
Awareness and understanding of child abuse, and organisational responsibilities
Support for organisations in building, maintaining and strengthening Child-Safe Capacity

Selected References and Resources

Australian Council for Children and Parenting (ACCAP), http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/Family/accap-nav.htm

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