

Policies

Beyond Safety...

EPIC



ETHICAL PRACTICE
INVOLVING CHILDREN

Summary of Research Findings

PHASE 1: POLICY ANALYSIS



Australian Government
Australian Research Council



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Background

This research aims to strengthen knowledge, policy and practice concerning 'child safe' organisations by examining the role of ethical practice in improving children and young people's safety and wellbeing.

Beyond important and appropriate governance, policy and procedural responses, little is known about what constitutes ethical practice with children and young people, nor how this contributes to cultural conditions that promote their safety and wellbeing. This research seeks to address this gap and, in so doing, help Australia's efforts at building and sustaining organisational cultures conducive to preventing, detecting and responding to poor treatment of children.

The findings will help improve child safety in organisational settings in schools, out-of-home care (specifically residential care) and the disability sector.

What did the research involve?

The study was undertaken in four phases:

Phase 1: Policy Analysis

A detailed comparative policy analysis reviewing current child safe discourse in relevant policy documents and practice guidelines (n=118) from different international jurisdictions, namely, Australia, New Zealand, UK and Ireland.

Phase 2: Interviews

A qualitative phase involving interviews with children, young people, practitioners and managers in eleven organisations (across schools, residential care and disability settings) to explore understandings and experiences of ethical practice.

Phase 3: Online Survey

A quantitative (online survey) phase to test the findings of Phase 2 with a larger sample of children and practitioners in a wider range of education, residential care and disability settings.

Phase 4: Knowledge Exchange

A knowledge exchange phase to guide resource and policy development and support professional learning in a range of settings.

Throughout each of the phases of the study, the research team is being guided by a young people's advisory group (YPAG) and an adult project advisory group (PAG).

This document provides a brief summary of the findings of the Phase 1 policy analysis.

What did the policy analysis involve?

This phase explored how child safety is constructed in current state and federal government policies in Australia compared to other jurisdictions namely New Zealand, United Kingdom and Ireland.

The analysis involved four stages of inquiry:



Stage 1: Collecting and mapping policies

Relevant legislation and policy documents were sourced from websites and key international contacts, and included in a comprehensive database (n=349).



Stage 2: Analysing and categorising

Then, 118 of the Stage 1 documents were content analysed in relation to several guiding questions and to ascertain whether relevant keywords featured in the documents.

To be in scope for this stage documents had to:

- Pertain to all children and their safety;
- Be specific to each of the three sectors of interest (disability, out-of-home care, schools); and,
- Be relevant to practice involving children and their lived experiences in organisational contexts.



Stage 3: Analysis of keywords

A statistical analysis of the frequency of keywords with demographic characteristics of the policy documents, such as country of origin, sector, document type, and date of publication. Relevant keywords were clustered into the following five themes:

- Safety
- Relationships
- Protection
- Rights
- Ethical /Unprofessional Practice



Stage 4: Content analysis

Content analysis was used to explore whether the language describing child safety in organisations encouraged the cultural conditions necessary for children's wellbeing and safety, beyond the promotion of compliance with procedures. Comparisons were made with the other international jurisdictions with the purpose of informing child safe policy and practice in Australia.

What did we find out?

The policy analysis aimed to answer the following three questions:



1. How are children constructed in policy?



Children are constructed in 2 key ways in policy:



As vulnerable and needing protection from harm

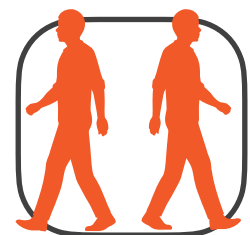


As social actors with agency, rights and capabilities

The majority of documents across all the jurisdictions make reference to protecting children (83.9%), children's vulnerability (58.5%) and rights and agency (68.6%).

- **Discrepancy in Australian policy between national and state/ territory documents**

In the national policies there is a tendency towards conceptualising children as having rights and agency (evident in 94.1% of national documents). Whereas, in the majority (87.2%) of Australian state and territory documentation children are constructed more closely in terms of vulnerability and needing protection.



- **Silence around vulnerable groups in Australian cross-sector documents**



Some children are perceived as particularly vulnerable, including children in out-of-home care and those with disability. However, references to these children are minimal in Australian national documents / cross-sector policy aimed at all children.

2.

How is children's safety conceptualised in policy?

Safety is conceptualised predominantly in terms of:



Protecting children from harm of abuse and neglect



Broader conceptualisations connected to 'wellbeing'

- The majority of Australian national documents (88.2%) and Australian state and territory documents (94.9%) make direct reference to children's safety. In these documents, safety is conceptualised predominantly as protecting children from the risk of harm and abuse.
- The policy documents that conceptualise safety in broader terms frequently make reference to wellbeing, creating child friendly environments and cultural safety for Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse children.



3.

How are children to be kept safe?

- **Compliance with procedural mechanisms is the primary approach in policy**

The 'problem' that child safe policy sets out to solve is how to protect vulnerable children from the risk of harm. Policy attempts to solve this problem primarily through compliance with procedural mechanisms. However, in some documents this sits alongside recognition of children's rights, agency and capabilities, and safety is conceptualised in the context of wellbeing.



- **Australia emphasises children's rights more than other jurisdictions**



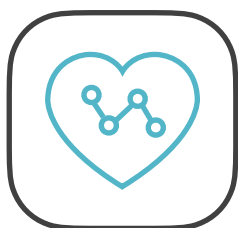
Australia and New Zealand place greater emphasis on children's rights and capabilities than on their vulnerability and protection when compared to the other jurisdictions.

- **Relationship does not feature strongly in Australian policy**

Despite the evidence pointing to the importance of positive relationships between children and adult workers, this features in only 58.8% of Australian national child safe policies and 46.2% of state and territory documentation. By contrast, these relationships are more prominent in policy documents from the Republic of Ireland (80%) and England (77.8%).



- **Reference to 'ethics' or 'ethical practice' is largely absent from Australian policy**



Use of the terms 'ethics' or 'ethical' – in the context of professional practice – is largely absent from Australian national documents (29.4%), and states and territory policy (33.3%). Australia is also less likely to include reference to 'ethics' and 'professional conduct' than the other countries.

Key insights to consider further...



- The policy analysis suggests that countries with a policy landscape which privileges children's rights, their participation and empowerment, are more likely to explicitly promote the cultural conditions for children's wellbeing and safety, which include the necessary procedural mechanisms, but are not reduced only to compliance imperatives.
- There is an apparent lack of ethical discourses in the policies reviewed and thus there is scope for a more explicit emphasis on the ethical dimensions of practice with children and young people.
- A focus on the 'ethical' dimensions of practice may help to shift understandings of children's safety from a predominantly 'risk-based' perspective – which often relies on procedural compliance – to a 'cultural' perspective that simultaneously emphasises the role of organisational cultures and environments where children are nurtured, protected and respected.

EPIC



ETHICAL PRACTICE INVOLVING CHILDREN

This document provides a brief summary of the findings from **Phase 1** of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project (DP180100465).

The research was led by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University in collaboration with researchers from the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia, Flinders University, Charles Sturt University, the Children's Issues Centre at the University of Otago (NZ) and the Centre for Children and Young People's Participation at the University of Central Lancashire (UK).

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