

reflections

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UNLEASHING WHAT YOU KNOW TO MAKE THE WORLD A SAFER PLACE FOR CHILDREN

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In December 2017, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse will report on its findings, gathered over the past five years in public hearings, private sessions, and a program of research and policy analysis. In thinking about the enormous potential of the Royal Commission's findings to generate large-scale change and how this might be achieved, I was inspired by a recent article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review which, in a very clever way, laid out eight ways to "grow an unstoppable" movement capable of transforming passion into broad social justice. It begins from the premise that we already have most of what we need to create change, and we can achieve it by thoughtfully tapping into what we already know.

I think it would apply in so many aspects of our work with children and families, but here I borrow from their eight-point framework to describe how we can unleash what we know to make the world a safer place for children.

1. Get clear

Do you know your organisation's child protection policy? Really know it? Including where to find it and whether or not families can access it? (they should be able to). Your organisation's child protection policy will tell you what can be reported; what must be reported; to whom reports should be made; when to report (i.e. in what timeframe); what type of report is required; and what records should be kept. In a nutshell your organisation's child protection policy should explain what is required of you. You can 'get clear' by participating in regular education and training on recognising, reporting and responding to child abuse and neglect (ideally once per year). You can also get clear by knowing your organisation's code of conduct which outlines what is acceptable and unacceptable practice in your interactions and relationships with children, families, and other staff. By getting clear you can stop abuse, reduce its harmful effects, enable families to get help, and assist children to reach their full potential.

2. Do your Contact House

Through most of the 1990s, I worked at a multidisciplinary child abuse treatment centre in Brisbane known as “Contact House”. As a childcare worker, I established an early childhood program for 2-5 year old children and an after-school group for older children. I was surrounded by other professionals, and more often than not, I felt out of my depth. In the early days, my only contact with other educators was in the form of two outstanding retirees, early childhood teachers, who volunteered their time in the program once per week. My work at this centre helped me to understand, deeply, the needs of maltreated children. I read everything I could lay my hands on and immersed myself in the painstaking work of learning how to work with traumatised children. This was an indispensable formative experience that has guided my work ever since. In your work, what could you strive to understand that would make the world a safer place for children?

3. Name the place and go together

Making the world a safer place for children will likely require more from us. When new initiatives come our way, and invariably they do, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Climbing that hill (of new regulations, policies, or procedures) can seem all too hard. Breaking the task down into manageable steps can enable you to climb confidently towards that vision of a safer world for children. And you don’t have to go it alone. Seek support from experts outside your organisation (note: be cautious about quality), enable passionate people within the organisation to become champions for children’s safety (note: they need high quality professional development), and play to each other’s signature strengths. Set CLEAR (rather than SMART) goals: collaborative (working together in teams), limited (in scope and duration),

emotional (tapping into colleagues’ passions), appreciable (broken down into smaller goals), and refinable (subject to change as new situations and information arises).

4. Find many ways there

When Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu wrote “the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step” I don’t think he had in mind this specific context. Yet it is reassuring to know that there are many “one steps” we can take to make the world a safer place for children. The Royal Commission’s publication, *Creating Child Safe Institutions* details 10 elements which can be conceptualised as steps towards a safer world for children. These are:

1. Child safety is embedded in institutional leadership, governance and culture.
2. Children participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.
3. Families and communities are informed and involved.
4. Equity is promoted and diversity respected.
5. People working with children are suitable and supported.
6. Processes to respond to complaints of child sexual abuse are child focussed.
7. Staff are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children safe through continual education and training.
8. Physical and online environments minimise the opportunity for abuse to occur.
9. Implementation of child safe standards is continuously reviewed and improved.
10. Policies and procedures document how the institution is child safe.



UNLEASHING WHAT YOU KNOW TO MAKE THE WORLD A SAFER PLACE FOR CHILDREN (CONTINUED)

5. Let children be your teacher

One of the 10 elements listed above refers to children participating in decisions affecting them and being taken seriously. This element reflects Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is featured in the Early Years Learning Framework's learning outcomes, principles and practices (in particular the practice of "responsiveness to children"). No matter how frustrated you become as an educator, remember there is always a reason (or reasons) that people behave the way they do. I don't mean an excuse... I mean a reason. If we let them, (by listening, observing and critically reflecting) children can teach us how to make the world a safer place for them.

6. Hug the bear

Sounds funny, but this one is about confronting our fears. A common fear is about teaching children body safety or personal safety. How do we do it? What is developmentally appropriate? What will families think? Teaching children how to protect themselves is one part of a comprehensive prevention strategy that also must include parental education, and professional development for all people who work with children. Ask your organisation to provide resources to enable the teaching of child protection education – there are some excellent picture books available! Insist on high quality professional development for staff. Provide information for children, families and the wider community. Link up with other agencies – there are specialist agencies with expert presenters who are very comfortable with this content and the best ones use engaging pedagogies involving modelling, skill practice and repetition, in group settings, using active learning in songs, actions, storytelling, and multimedia.

7. Never be a bystander

You may have read or heard about bystander effect in which people are less likely to offer help to someone in need when other people are present. Researchers have suggested two plausible explanations for this human behaviour: diffusion of responsibility wherein each person thinks someone else will intervene; and group ignorance

wherein witnessing inaction leads each person to think that what is happening is not serious enough to warrant action. This behaviour was evident in so many of the Royal Commission's case studies. To create a safer world for children, we must never be bystanders. We must always document and report concerns about harm to children. This includes harm in the physical and online environments. Follow up on your concerns if nothing seems to happen. If someone's actions make you uncomfortable, check your organisation's code of conduct and follow procedures for letting someone know.

8. See the whole

Educators are skilled at seeing the world holistically. We know how to do this. As a change movement grows, say the authors of the Stanford article, it becomes "difficult to maintain a direct line of sight on everyone taking part, which makes it hard to assess progress"... So, we need to keep track of our progress, and celebrate victories, thereby inspiring others to join us in unleashing what we know to make the world a safer place for children!

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