

# SUMMARY

## Royal Commission Research Project

*Child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers: A synthesis of current evidence*

**March 2015**



The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse commissioned and funded this research project. It was carried out by Dr Claudia Pitts, Senior Research Officer, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

The research project reviewed the available literature about the effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention programs aimed at pre-school aged children (0-5 years). 113 potential articles were identified. This list was refined to 23 relevant articles (once abstracts and full texts were examined). The report summarises the findings outlined in these 23 articles.

The primary purpose of the report is to ascertain what is known, from the existing literature, about the extent to which pre-school child sexual abuse prevention programs are effective, and in particular, to examine whether the programs:

- Increased pre-schoolers' knowledge of child sexual abuse, and resulted in retention of pre-schoolers' knowledge of sexual abuse over time
- Resulted in adverse effects
- Resulted in pre-schoolers learning protective behaviours in the event of an (attempted) abuse event
- Resulted in disclosures of child sexual abuse, and
- Were cost effective.

### **Key findings**

- Baseline knowledge of concepts related to child sexual abuse was found to be low among pre-schoolers and also their parents. For example, less than a quarter of Australian mothers had discussed issues related to abuse from known and trusted adults with their children, and were more likely to have had these discussions with children in the 5-12 age bracket, rather than the preschool age.
- Generally, pre-school child abuse prevention programs appear effective at increasing children's knowledge about sexual abuse and increasing their skills about what to say and do, who to tell and what to report, following an inappropriate touch.
- The studies also suggest that the knowledge that pre-school aged children gain in child sexual abuse prevention programs is retained over time.

- The programs were found to be more effective when both parents and teachers were the educators, and when the focus was on behavioural skills rather than on interpreting one's feelings, and also when 'explicit' rather than 'abstract' concepts were taught.
- Five of the studies measured adverse effects such as fear and anxiety experienced by children as a result of undergoing child abuse prevention training, and none of these studies detected any such adverse effects. Parents, children and pre-school teachers generally view such training positively.
- The research is not able to measure how effective pre-school programs are at increasing the use of protective behaviours among young children because the method of testing this outcome is not considered ethical for pre-school children (children's self-protective skills are measured using simulated abduction/abuse situations – these not appropriate for very young children).
- To accurately measure the relationship between participating in prevention training and disclosure of abuse, more extensive studies are required than have been conducted to date.
- Studies to date have not evaluated the cost effectiveness of prevention programs for pre-schoolers. The report recommends future studies should evaluate cost effectiveness and also examine ways to reduce program delivery costs.
- Some studies assert that children under five years of age are too young to understand and act upon prevention information, and in particular, to understand concepts such as 'safe', 'strong', and 'free'. This extends to a concern that whilst children may understand the difference between a 'good' and a 'bad' touch, it's in the 'grey' areas such as might be involved in grooming that are more difficult for children to appreciate. The report however concludes this section by stating that:

“The majority of research supports child sexual abuse prevention programs for pre-schoolers, however more research is needed to determine the size of the effect; the extent to which training during pre-school years acts as a critical foundation for later learning; whether some groups benefit more than others; and optimal instructional techniques to maximise learning and behavioural outcomes for young children.”

### **Limitations**

- The studies were generally conducted in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s
- The studies used small sample sizes (in the 20s and 30s)
- A lack of culturally-specific programs for ethnically diverse pre-schoolers and their parents
- Inconsistent reporting of the psychometric properties (eg reliability and validity) of assessment instruments
- A failure to statistically account for the similarity of children within individual pre-schools (ie clustering) which may over-estimate the effect of the prevention program
- No subgroup analyses were conducted, making it difficult to identify groups of pre-schoolers who may benefit more or less from child sexual abuse prevention programs.
- The literature is not clear about whether knowledge about child sexual abuse and its prevention translates to higher rates of disclosure or lower rates of abuse.

### **Conclusions**

The report concludes that:

“Program evaluations are currently of insufficient quantity and quality to make strong assertions about the overall efficacy of prevention programs for pre-schoolers. While there may be little harm associated with prevention programs in the form of increased anxiety or fear among participating pre-schoolers, there is insufficient evidence of the benefits of pre-school prevention programs relative to cost. ... More methodologically rigorous studies are required, ideally using Australian pre-schoolers as participants.”