

# ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH  
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY  
*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

National Office for Child Safety  
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## **Re: National Strategy to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse – Final Consultation Paper**

Dear Rebekah

ANROWS thanks the National Office for Child Safety for the opportunity to respond to the National Strategy to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse final consultation paper.

ANROWS is an independent, not-for-profit company established as an initiative under Australia's *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (the National Plan). Our primary function is to provide an accessible evidence base for developments in policy and practice design for prevention and response to violence against women, nationally. Every aspect of our work is motivated by the right of women and their children to live free from violence and in safe communities. We recognise, respect and respond to diversity among women and their children, and we are committed to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Primary (core) funding for ANROWS is jointly provided by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia. ANROWS is also, from time to time, directly commissioned to undertake work for an individual jurisdiction, and successfully tenders for research and evaluation work. ANROWS is registered as a harm prevention charity and deductible gift recipient, governed by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission (ACNC).

The information provided below is focused on the questions outlined in the consultation paper. It draws on evidence from rigorous peer-reviewed research, including relevant ANROWS research.

We would be very pleased to assist the National Office for Child Safety further, as required.

Yours sincerely



**Dr Heather Nancarrow**  
Chief Executive Officer

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## Response to final consultation paper questions

### **Vision, objective and values (Q1 & Q2)**

ANROWS supports the vision, objective and values outlined by the National Office for Child Safety. It is our view that the values reflect the consistent feedback from non-government stakeholders represented in the final consultation paper, and cover the paper's five priority themes well. As Australia's only independent national research organisation for women's safety, we strongly support the use of evidence-based initiatives as outlined in "Value Five: All initiatives are evidence-based and use data and research to build understanding of what works to prevent child sexual abuse."

Responding to the needs of children and young people emerged as a top priority in the development of [Australia's National Research Agenda to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children \(ANRA\) 2020-2022](#). ANRA was developed by ANROWS as a framework for, and guidance on, priority areas of research and research topics for academics, researchers, research funding bodies and governments across Australia working to prevent and respond to violence against women (VAW). As a result, the [2020-2022 ANROWS Core Grant Research Program](#) is focused on producing evidence to support policy and practice design responding to the needs of children and young people, with a focus on children and young people in marginalised populations. Comprising eight projects that collectively address the research gaps identified in ANRA, this body of research will advance the evidence base in relation to effective prevention and response strategies to identify and address:

- the impacts on children and young people of exposure to violence against women
- harmful sexual behaviours of children and young people
- violence against women perpetrated by young people.

We look forward to delivering this body of rigorous, peer-reviewed research to the National Office for Child Safety, and playing a key role in helping you achieve the objective of this National Strategy.

ANROWS research also emphasises the importance of seeing children as victims and survivors of domestic and family violence (DFV) in their own right (Humphreys et al., 2020). This research points out that good practice at the intersections of DFV and other adult-focused services includes strong risk assessments for children and an emphasis on seeing the child as a client in their own right, so assessing and supporting their needs (Humphreys et al., 2020). The importance of seeing children as victims and survivors in their own right is captured well in "Value Two: The diverse voices of victims and survivors must and will continue to shape the design and implementation of the National Strategy".

The proposed values could be strengthened by highlighting the importance of early intervention. Early intervention in childhood experience of trauma and violence is recommended across a number of ANROWS reports, including research into adolescents exhibiting violence in the home by Campbell, Richter, Howard, and Cockburn (2020). Some research points to additional benefits that may stem from early intervention with trauma-exposed boys and girls, like reductions in some future incidences of complex trauma (Salter et al., 2020). The evidence base also indicates that intervening early in child sexual

abuse may help to prevent DFV, with the 2016 Personal Safety Survey showing that around one in three women who experienced abuse before the age of 15 also experienced partner violence as an adult (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Women who experienced childhood abuse were nearly three times more likely to experience partner violence than those who had not been abused as children (ABS, 2017). Including early intervention for children experiencing DFV and/or child sexual abuse in the National Strategy's values would help to facilitate the important link between the National Strategy and the successor plan to the National Plan.

### **Strategic priority themes (Q3)**

ANROWS supports the five strategic priority themes identified in the consultation paper. Again, we commend the National Office for Child Safety for recognising the importance of evidence-based initiatives, and see potential for partnership under "Priority Theme Five: Improving the evidence base".

We welcome the priority emphasis on support for both victims and survivors, and for children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. ANROWS research indicates that mothers can encounter a lack of services and responses when seeking therapeutic assistance, particularly for older teenagers or young adults with mental health problems linked to exposure to violent and abusive behaviour (Kaspiew et al., 2017). Sourcing appropriate services can be even more difficult when adolescents exposed to childhood trauma themselves begin to use violence, as the report *The PIPA project: Positive Interventions for Perpetrators of Adolescent violence in the home* points out (Campbell et al., 2020).

As indicated above, young people with harmful sexual behaviours are a focus of our new research program, the [2020–2022 ANROWS Core Grant Research Program](#):

- [“Whole-of-family Responses to AVITH Program \(WRAP\) around families experiencing AVITH” \(the WRAP Around project\)](#) led by Associate Director Elena Campbell will provide new evidence to support the development of interventions which can address all family members in households where adolescents are using violence in the home.
- [“Adolescent family violence in Australia: A national study of prevalence, use of and exposure to violence, and support needs for young people”](#) led by Associate Professor Kate Fitz-Gibbon will help to inform policy decisions on the number and type of support services needed and allocation of resources for responding to adolescent violence in the home.
- Associate Professor John Rynne will lead [“Adverse childhood experiences and the intergenerational transmission of domestic and family violence in young people who engage in harmful sexual behaviour and violence against women”](#), which will examine the nature and extent of adverse childhood experiences, including DFV, for male youth who have perpetrated harmful sexual behaviour and sexual violence against women and children.
- Dr Georgina Sutherland will focus on the increasing evidence of the significant intersection of adolescent violence in the home with disability in [“Building a framework to prevent and respond to young people with disability who use violence at home”](#).

The findings of this subset of our research program will no doubt be useful to inform evidence-based initiatives relating to “Priority Theme Three: Support services for children exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours”.

## **Working in partnership (Q4 – Q6a)**

It is ANROWS's view that victims and survivors of DFV are an important omission from the stakeholder list. With the rate of co-occurrence of Australian children experiencing sexual abuse and being exposed to domestic violence estimated at 40 per cent (Bedi & Goddard, 2007 cited in Richards, 2011), there is demonstrated need for this inclusion. Contemporary ANROWS research into DFV highlights the importance of “pivoting to the perpetrator” to maintain the onus of responsibility for abuse on the perpetrator of violence (Mandel, 2014 cited in Healey et al., 2018). By partnering with the non-offending parent and strengthening the (usually mother–child) bond, outcomes for the child are also improved, as practitioners “found that in pivoting to the perpetrator and partnering with women, the children’s needs were brought into view through the focus on parenting” (Healey et al., 2018, p. 14).

Australian research into family law cases highlights the impact on children when systems fail to partner with victims and survivors. Parental alienation, which has been widely discredited in a clinical sense, continues to be raised by fathers as a “defence” to child sexual abuse allegations (Death, Ferguson, & Burgess, 2019). The raising of these issues is gendered, with “mothers primarily being constructed as manipulative, mentally unwell, suffering from delusions, and ultimately harming their children with the intent of punishing the other parent” (Death, Ferguson, & Burgess, 2019, p. 2). Other Australian research has also found that our family law system does not respond as well as it should to child sexual abuse, and sometimes accepts perpetrator-generated narratives of mental illness to explain allegations, rather than investigate them (McInnes, 2013). The raising of mental health in Family Court matters is also gendered, with it being given as the “reason limiting child contact with mothers in 30% of such cases, but only in 2% of cases limiting fathers”, which does not align with general mental health prevalence (McInnes, 2014 cited in Death, Ferguson, & Burgess, 2019, p. 7). Unsurprisingly, both women and some of the professionals they had contact with reported they were fearful to raise allegations of child abuse in the Family Court system lest they be seen as an “alienating” parent (Kaspiew et al., 2017). In achieving the successful reduction of the risk, extent and impact of child sexual abuse and related harms in Australia, victims and survivors of domestic and family violence are important stakeholders.

ANROWS research also points to the way that abusive perpetrators can use migration law, policy and visa status as leverage for control over migrant and refugee women and their children (Vaughan et al., 2016). This type of abuse shapes the victim’s and survivor’s experiences of seeking help and accessing services. There may be utility to widening the stakeholder group of “culturally and linguistically diverse communities” to specifically include refugees and migrants, to ensure the needs of children and young people in these higher risk groups are met. This might include ensuring accessible information for women in different visa classes about their and their children’s rights to safety and access to support services (Koleth, Serova, & Trojanowska, 2020).

ANROWS has commissioned research relevant to all of the diverse stakeholders listed and would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the design and implementation of individual actions under the National Strategy once it is launched.

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