MEDIA RELEASE

Strengthening safeguards for children

Background

The WA Ombudsman administers the Reportable Conduct Scheme, overseeing allegations of harm to children by employees of more than 4,000 organisations. Subject to new legislation, the WA Ombudsman will also oversee national child safe standards for approximately 30,000 organisations, clubs and associations that engage in child-related work. These functions are performed by Ombudsman staff with experience across health, education, child protection, policing and law.

The power of a sole case

The investigation began after a parent raised concerns about how an early learning centre responded to harmful sexual behaviours involving their young child and another child.

Reviewing this case helped identify wider opportunities to strengthen child safe practices and showed how independent oversight can support practical system learning and prevention. Although this particular case examines how the Department of Communities performed its statutory role, requirements to respond appropriately to a child displaying harmful sexual behaviours can arise in a variety of early learning and education settings including in government, not for profit and for-profit agencies.

About harmful sexual behaviours

The term harmful sexual behaviours is widely credited to UK Professor Simon Hackett as early as 1995 and became commonly cited in the literature from about 2014. Its terminology was adopted by the 2017 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse to replace stigmatising language. There is no universal profile of children who display harmful sexual behaviours although age is a relevant factor.

Research associates harmful sexual behaviours with traumatic experiences, being influenced and pressured by peers and a lack of positive sexuality and relationship education, guidance and support. Young children aged 4-6 years might behave in sexually harmful ways because they find it hard to manage their emotions, have been exposed to pornography or adult sexual activity and are re-enacting what they've seen, or are themselves experiencing sexual or other forms of child abuse. Children who have learning difficulties and disorders or difficulties with impulse control, social skills or rules can also be more vulnerable to engaging in harmful sexual behaviour.

Prevalence

Due to a lack of national data, low levels of community awareness and likely under-reporting by professionals and parents, prevalence is hard to ascertain, particularly in the younger age bracket. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (2023) found 18.2% of Australians aged 16-24 (nearly 1 in 5) experienced sexual abuse by an adolescent (generally a person aged 13-19) before the age of 18. Even with conservative estimates, problematic and harmful sexual behaviours arguably present a significant public health and child safety issue.

Some further references for journalists

- HR Inspectorate of Probation, Children and young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour, Academic Insights 2026/08
- NSW Health, A Case for Change – preventing and responding to problematic and harmful sexual behaviours by children and young people
- Raising Children Network, Childhood sexual behaviour at 4-6 years: parent education guide
- National Centre for Action on Child Abuse, Sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people that can be harmful

Media Statement

'Beyond the Behaviour: Systems Responses to Harmful Sexual Behaviours', tabled in State Parliament today, examined how the Department of Communities responded to repeated concerns about a child's harmful sexual behaviours raised in different settings over more than two years.

The investigation highlighted how misplaced efforts to support the child ultimately meant neither the child nor the other children involved received the support they needed.

Although Communities provided the child with referrals for therapeutic intervention and a review by a Paediatrician, these responses did not appropriately consider the level of risk associated with the child's behaviour. The child was not interviewed in an age-appropriate way after concerns were first raised, and notifications and disclosures were too often considered separately, rather than brought together to form a complete picture of the risks to the child and other children.

The child's behaviours were not assessed along the harmful sexual behaviours' continuum. The investigation also identified inconsistent information sharing, gaps in recordkeeping and a response that was fragmented and reactive.

WA Ombudsman Bevan Warner said, "Behind this report are children and families, and our focus throughout has been on what can be learned and what needs to change to better protect children in the future."

"When concerns about a child are raised repeatedly, across different places and over time, the system needs to be able to join the dots.

"One incident viewed on its own may not reveal the full extent of a risk. But when information is brought together, a vastly different picture can emerge."

Strengthening systems

The Ombudsman also acknowledged important reforms undertaken by Communities during the investigation to strengthen practice.

These include new information-sharing and referral practices as well as the introduction of harmful sexual behaviours Response Mapping Tools and associated changes to the Child Protection Guide.

Mr Warner said the reforms demonstrated the practical value of independent oversight.

"The role of the Ombudsman is not simply to look backwards and identify where a system fell short," he said.

"We independently examine what happened, why it happened and what can be done differently to improve the way systems work.

"It is encouraging that this investigation has already contributed to change. The task now is to make sure those improvements are embedded and the lessons extend beyond one child and one case."

The Ombudsman has recommended that Communities review and audit relevant Education and Care Regulatory Unit records involving children in the care of the CEO who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour in an early learning centre.

The review must confirm that service providers have received the information needed to meet each child's needs. Communities will report back to the Ombudsman by the end of 2026.

Protecting children requires a coordinated response

Principal Assistant Ombudsman, Child and Family Safety, Alison Cameron said harmful sexual behaviours involving children were complex and required careful, child-centred responses.

"Children who display harmful sexual behaviours are children. They may themselves be vulnerable and need care and support, while the children around them also need to be kept safe.

"That requires early identification, sound assessment, effective information sharing and people working together across organisational boundaries.

"Complexity cannot be a reason for concerns to fall between the gaps. It makes a coordinated response even more important," she said.

The report uses a de-identified case to examine how the broader system operated and was not intended to assign blame or determine individual intent.

Ms Cameron said the investigation showed the wider value of independent oversight in strengthening the systems designed to protect children.

"This investigation began because a parent raised serious concerns about the safety of their child. Those concerns led us to look beyond one case, identify broader weaknesses and drive practical change.

"Our role is to follow the evidence, ask the difficult questions and use what we learn to make systems stronger. The measure of this work is whether children are better protected in the future."

National Children's Commissioner

The National Children's Commissioner, Deb Tsorbaris, received the finalised report because its subject matter is relevant to their role and to all Australian jurisdictions. They have authorised the following remarks to be attributed to them.

The National Children's Commissioner Deb Tsorbaris has called for greater access to specialist responses for children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviours, saying timely intervention can prevent behaviours from continuing or escalating.

"Children who display harmful sexual behaviours, and children who are subject to them, need timely intervention and support. Specialist interventions must be available to children across Australia," Ms Tsorbaris said.

"Research shows that when a child is appropriately assessed and receives a therapeutic response tailored to their individual needs, harmful sexual behaviours are more likely to stop and less likely to escalate."

Ms Tsorbaris said stronger responses must also extend to the people supporting children, including frontline workers, kinship carers, families and communities.

"There is limited understanding of harmful sexual behaviours within the community, and carers and families can be left trying to navigate extremely challenging situations without adequate information or support."

The issues raised in the WA Ombudsman's report are particularly timely as work progresses under the Second Action Plan of the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030, led by the Australian Government.

ENDS

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