



Statement on the development of a responsive system of care for those affected by child sexual abuse

The *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* highlighted that the impacts of child sexual abuse are different for each person. These impacts are complex, interconnected and affect many facets of a person's life. They can lead to an increased risk for adverse outcomes across all domains of development and have a lifelong impact.

A responsive service system is required to support people affected by child sexual abuse - a system that is person-centred and provides trauma-informed care and ongoing therapeutic support.

While individual experiences in mental health services vary, trauma is often ignored or minimised; and frequently the focus is on treating a "diagnosis" or symptoms, rather than the root cause.

The way in which organisations respond to the disclosure of child sexual abuse can also have significant impacts. Institutional and organisational responses to the disclosure of child sexual abuse have the potential to either significantly compound or ameliorate the impacts of the abuse.

This includes not only the institution where the abuse took place, but also the responses of the police, criminal justice system, complaint and oversight bodies, support services and health services. The Royal Commission found that negative responses such as being dismissive or disbelieving, hostile or non-supportive, may deter further disclosure or re-traumatise victims.

As flagged in the Consensus Statement by the mental health commissions of Australia in 2017, services and systems established in response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission must not only provide better responses to adult survivors, but also optimise opportunities for children and young people to disclose as early as possible and receive the right response and care¹.

An optimal responsive service system for those affected by child sexual abuse is one that:

- understands how child sexual abuse can affect people and shape their support needs
- ensures services are trauma-informed, collaborative, available, accessible, acceptable and high quality
- actively seeks to prevent re-traumatisation, including providing a safe and welcoming environment
- provides relevant services as part of a cohesive systems approach, including warm referrals and brokerage between services
- supports staff to work safely, efficiently and effectively
- ensures services are person-centred, targeted towards individual needs, including Aboriginal healing approaches.

A well-equipped workforce is necessary in order to carry out this task.

There remain barriers to effective service responses within the current system. These include an inconsistent level of knowledge about how to recognise and respond to survivors needs; ad hoc availability of expertise in trauma care; inconsistent practice standards; and limited development and collaboration opportunities within and between service systems.

Governments, institutions, service providers and other community organisations are strongly encouraged to work together to ensure the development of a comprehensive system of care capable of responding sensitively and effectively to the needs of those affected by child sexual abuse.

ⁱ <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/media-centre/news/nine-vital-actions-we-must-take-following-royal-commission.aspx>

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