Guidelines for the treatment of children and young people in the media: a discussion paper by NAPCAN

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This document has been prepared by NAPCAN to generate discussion on this important topic. We invite comment on this document, with the aim of further developing these guidelines as an ongoing resource for widespread use.

To provide comment, or discuss, please:
Fill in our feeback survey: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/guidelines-children-and-media
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NAPCAN PREVENT CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT

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As the peak national organisation for the prevention of child abuse and neglect, NAPCAN has an interest in how the media portrays children. Our core message is that 'Protecting children is everyone's business' and this includes a strong - but sometimes overlooked - role for the media.

This is not merely a case of encouraging the media to use the correct words or terminology; more broadly, the way children and young people are represented in the media mirrors their status and treatment in the general community.

Overall, NAPCAN advocates for the media to:

- take a balanced and sympathetic view of children and young people
- include the voices of children when presenting on issues in which children have an interest
- consider a child's best interest in stories featuring children - ask yourself 'what if this was my child?'
- report on child abuse and neglect in a manner that is helpful rather than harmful, using appropriate terminology.

Note that this topic is also informed by the **United National Convention on the Rights of the Child**, which contains several related articles including:

- *Article 12: Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account.*
- *Article 16: Children have the right to privacy. The law should protect them from attacks against their way of life, their good name, their family and their home.*
- *Article 17: Children have the right to reliable information from the media. Mass media such as television, radio and newspapers should provide information that children can understand and should not promote materials that could harm children.*

Part 1: How children and young people are represented ***generally*** in the media

The way that children and young people are represented generally in the media tends to reflect the way that they are treated as members of the community. The respectful and accurate portrayal of children and young people can play a role in helping to recognise their rights and their value. If children and young people have a high status in society, then we are more likely to listen to their needs and do what needs to be done to protect and nurture them.

The UK National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse (1996: 77) *recommended that the media "take a more balanced and sympathetic view of children".*

In line with a belief in the importance of "listening to children" the Commission felt that the media should take the views of children into account when presenting on an issue in which children have some interest.

The Commission recommended that the media should have an obligation to consider a child's best interest and that the failure to do so would constitute grounds for a complaint to a relevant authority.

Recognising the power of the media

The media has a responsibility in helping to create a society where the wellbeing of children and young people is central. The power of the press includes:

- Prioritising what is uppermost in the minds of the public.
- Putting issues on the political agenda.
- Defining what is 'normal' and what is 'deviant' in society.
- Keeping the public informed about the issues of young people.
- Defining the value of young people as full humans with rights.

Bias and stereotypes

Research by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) found that young people are 'discriminated against or misrepresented through strongly entrenched media practices which remain uncontested'. Key findings of the ACIJ study include:

- Newspapers and magazines offer limited - and often negative - information about young people.

- Linguistic bias is prevalent in reports about young people; for instance, the word 'youth' often has negative connotations, i.e. 'youth gangs.'
- Topical bias is prevalent; the criminal activity of young people accounts for a significant proportion of media coverage.
- Thematic bias is prevalent; the problems of young people are emphasised.
- The voice of young people is often absent.
- The achievements of young people are frequently patronised, trivialised or ignored.

In particular:

- A lot of stories describe children as victims or as out of control.
- Although children's vulnerability and resilience are the focus of many articles, there is far less emphasis on children as responsible citizens, or on children as autonomous individuals with rights.
- Positive stories tend to focus on physical cuteness, novelty appeal, or sensational arrival into an adult-centric world.
- Children are sometimes portrayed as more of a burden, expense, or appendage to adults than as citizens in their own right or as the adults of the future.

The importance of including the voices of children and young people

Often stories about children and young people include a limited range of views, relying on regulatory reports or public opinion. What is notably missing in mainstream media are the voices of children and young people themselves. This may be due to:

- A lack of understanding of how to access these voices.
- A lack of interest in these voices.
- Simply not considering that the children and young people may have an opinion because we are so accustomed to speaking on their behalf.

It is, therefore, necessary to remind ourselves of the value in including young people's views in the media. For instance:

- They are more likely to be seen as human beings with rights and opinions, rather than merely being talked about like objects.
- Stereotypes can be challenged.
- New perspectives can bring new interest to important topics.

While there are limitations (largely related to privacy) in how we can include individual children and young people in reporting (see Part 2 of this paper), there are simple ways to start changing this culture:

- Social media can be a relatively easy tool for journalists to access young people and find out more about what young people think about particular topics.

- Talk to advocacy groups, peak bodies, schools and government agencies for advice about how to reach children and young people.

Useful contacts for accessing the views of young people include:

- CREATE Foundation (representing children in out of home care) – www.create.org.au
- Mission Australia (conducts an Annual Youth Survey) – www.missionaustralia.com.au
- NAPCAN – www.napcan.org.au
- National Children's Commissioner – www.humanrights.com.au (also look up State/Territory Children's Commissioners and Advocates)
- SNAICC – National Voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families - www.snaicc.org.au
- Youth Advocacy Networks – look up in each State/Territory

For more discussion on these topics, see the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) paper *Child Abuse and the Media*, June 2001, by Chris Goddard and Bernadette Saunders (www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/child-abuse-and-media).

Part 2: The *rights of individuals* in the media

Conversations about the treatment of children and young people in the media most commonly refer to the rights of individuals who are the subject of reporting.

The Australian Press Council has conducted some consultation on these issues with the intention to create guidelines in the future (see www.presscouncil.org.au/council-events1). Key points that have been raised with the Press Council include:

- reporting on, and especially using photos of, children in distress or extremis;
- interviewing children without the presence or consent of a parent or guardian (or the equivalent); and
- special considerations around children's privacy, for example, the appropriation of photographs from social media sites and reporting on child sexual abuse.

Until specific guidelines are developed in Australia, NAPCAN recommends the UNICEF Guidelines for Reporting on Children, as included below.

The following points may also be useful in protecting the privacy and dignity of children and young people.

Protecting privacy and dignity

- Privacy should be even more critical for children - a NEED as well as a RIGHT.
- Consent from parents/carers shouldn't negate the need for privacy for children.
- A journalist will usually be much more aware of the ramifications of foregoing privacy than a family member who is being swept along with the media attention. The average person is much less aware of the risks of publicity such as ridicule, judgement, being taken advantage of, pressure, etc.
- Sometimes family members are part of the abuse or problem and should, therefore, forego their right to answer for the child.
- Privacy is still a right for children who have died.
- Just because something is of interest to the public doesn't mean it's in the public interest.
- Always consider 'How would I feel if this was my child?'.

UNICEF guidelines for reporting on children:

(www.unicef.org/media/media_tools_guidelines.html)

UNICEF has developed these principles to assist journalists as they report on issues affecting children. The guidelines are meant to support the best intentions of ethical reporters: serving the public interest without compromising the rights of children.

I. Principles

- The dignity and rights of every child are to be respected in every circumstance.
- In interviewing and reporting on children, special attention is needed to ensure each child's right to privacy and confidentiality, to have their opinions heard, to participate in decisions affecting them and to be protected from harm and retribution, including the potential of harm and retribution.
- The best interests of each child are to be protected over any other consideration, including over advocacy for children's issues and the promotion of child rights.
- When trying to determine the best interests of a child, the child's right to have their views taken into account are to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
- Those closest to the child's situation and best able to assess it are to be consulted about the political, social and cultural ramifications of any reportage.
- Do not publish a story or an image which might put the child, siblings or peers at risk even when identities are changed, obscured or not used.

II. Guidelines for interviewing children

- Do no harm to any child; avoid questions, attitudes or comments that are judgmental, insensitive to cultural values, that place a child in danger or expose a child to humiliation, or that reactivate a child's pain and grief from traumatic events.
- Do not discriminate in choosing children to interview because of sex, race, age, religion, status, educational background or physical abilities.
- No staging: Do not ask children to tell a story or take an action that is not part of their own history.
- Ensure that the child or guardian knows they are talking with a reporter. Explain the purpose of the interview and its intended use.
- Obtain permission from the child and his or her guardian for all interviews, videotaping and, when possible, for documentary photographs. When possible and appropriate, this permission should be in writing. Permission must be obtained in circumstances that ensure that the child and guardian are not coerced in any way and that they understand that they are part of a story that might be disseminated locally and globally. This is usually only ensured if the permission is obtained in the child's language and if the decision is made in consultation with an adult the child trusts.
- Pay attention to where and how the child is interviewed. Limit the number of interviewers and

photographers. Try to make certain that children are comfortable and able to tell their story without outside pressure, including from the interviewer. In film, video and radio interviews, consider what the choice of visual or audio background might imply about the child and her or his life and story. Ensure that the child would not be endangered or adversely affected by showing their home, community or general whereabouts.

III. Guidelines for reporting on children

- Do not further stigmatize any child; avoid categorisations or descriptions that expose a child to negative reprisals - including additional physical or psychological harm, or to lifelong abuse, discrimination or rejection by their local communities.
- Always provide an accurate context for the child's story or image.
- Always change the name and obscure the visual identity of any child who is identified as:
    a. A victim of sexual abuse or exploitation,
    b. A perpetrator of physical or sexual abuse,
    c. HIV positive, or living with AIDS, unless the child, a parent or a guardian gives fully informed consent,
    d. Charged or convicted of a crime,
    e. A child combatant, or former child combatant who is holding a weapon or weapons.
- In certain circumstances of risk or potential risk of harm or retribution, change the name and obscure the visual identity of any child who is identified as:
    a. A former child combatant who is not holding a weapon but may be at risk,
    b. An asylum seeker, a refugee or an internally displaced person.
- In certain cases, using a child's identity - their name and/or recognizable image - is in the child's best interests. However, when the child's identity is used, they must still be protected against harm and supported through any stigmatization or reprisals. Some examples of these special cases are:
    a. When a child initiates contact with the reporter, wanting to exercise their right to freedom of expression and their right to have their opinion heard.
    b. When a child is part of a sustained programme of activism or social mobilization and wants to be so identified.
    c. When a child is engaged in a psychosocial programme and claiming their name and identity is part of their healthy development.
- Confirm the accuracy of what the child has to say, either with other children or an adult, preferably with both.
- When in doubt about whether a child is at risk, report on the general situation for children rather than on an individual child, no matter how newsworthy the story.

Part 3: How *child abuse and neglect* is covered in the media

The guidelines in this section have been developed as an adaptation of Our Watch's 'Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse Guidelines' issued in September 2014 and available at ourwatch.org.au.

Child abuse and neglect is a problem for the whole community. There are ways you can report on child abuse and neglect that will help listeners, readers, and viewers to see it as an issue that affects everyone in some way. You can report on this issue in a way that informs, educates and contributes usefully to public dialogue, and encourages everyone to share responsibility.

The victim of intra-familial abuse faces particular problems. The most obvious is that the crime committed by parents or caregivers does not necessarily end the relationship between perpetrator and victim. These relationships make the media coverage of such issues particularly sensitive.

Children, the evidence suggests, often blame themselves for their victimisation. This is another reason for media sensitivity to their needs.

Below are some suggestions for dealing with child abuse more sensitively in the media.

Name it

When reporting on harm to a child, it is important to name it as 'child abuse'. This is important for two reasons:

- *Firstly, if your audience consistently comes across this terminology, they will get a better understanding of the extent of the problem.*
- *Secondly, using the term abuse ensures that the event isn't minimised or trivialised.*

For example:

- *when a child is beaten, this is child abuse rather than 'severe discipline'*
- *adult sexual contact with a child is never consensual and therefore should always be referred to as abuse or rape. Using terms like 'relationship', 'affair' or 'sex' to describe an incident of sexual abuse against a child minimises and trivialises what is a very traumatic crime*
- *claiming that the accused was 'in love' or 'infatuated' with the victim is another way that the crime is softened or excused.*

Safety comes first

When reporting on child abuse and neglect, it is especially important that you do everything you can to ensure that your reporting does not compromise the survivor's safety. Omitting details about the abuse may be necessary to protect the survivor or their family's anonymity.

This also means considering the emotional safety of survivors you may interview. Being asked to recount experiences of abuse may re-traumatise survivors. Where possible, allow them to see, and contribute to, a written version of their account.

Child abuse is never acceptable

The adult perpetrator is always solely responsible for any incident of child abuse.

Never use language or contextualise the story in a way that suggests that the survivor of the abuse was in any way to blame for what happened to him or her.

Children are vulnerable, impressionable, and are dependent on adults to protect and care for them – there are no circumstances under which a child should be made to appear responsible for any aspect of the abuse they experienced.

Child abuse is serious and highly traumatic

It is never appropriate to report on child abuse in a way that sensationalises, trivialises, or makes light of it.

Take the emphasis away from 'stranger danger'

While incidents of child abuse perpetrated by strangers tend to dominate the headlines, most abuse is by an adult who is known to the child – and it's crucial to underscore reporting with that fact.

If it is legal to do so, where there is a relationship between the survivor and the perpetrator, acknowledge that fact. This could be as simple as saying that the abuser was known to the child, without necessarily identifying them.

Respect for the child

Use your best sensitivity and good judgement when reporting survivors' stories, especially when they are a child.

Make sure you do all you can to report on child abuse in a way that upholds the survivor's right to dignity, remembering that there is likely trauma associated with the abuse even if it happened many years ago.

Provide as much time as possible for survivors to tell their story in their own time. If possible, it would be best practice to provide an opportunity for survivors and/or their (non-offending) family members to look at what you're reporting before it is published or aired publicly. Where possible, follow-up after an interview to see if they are okay.

Know the law

There are laws about what information you can and cannot divulge when you're reporting on a situation that may involve child abuse or protection orders.

Be fair

Child abuse is a highly emotive issue. Be sure to report what you can sensitively and appropriately, in a balanced way, always keeping in mind that children are exceptionally vulnerable members of our community.

Avoiding generalisations, stereotypes, and stigma

Child abuse is a highly traumatic experience, with varied and profound impacts. Its effects can stay with someone for a lifetime (although it's important to emphasise that survivors of child sexual abuse do have the ability to overcome the effects of the abuse, especially with the right support).

Many children who have suffered from abuse or neglect, have the added challenge of facing stigma associated with their experience.

While there is evidence that abuse can have long-lasting negative impacts for children, the media should not exacerbate the belief the children who have experienced abuse or have lived in out-of-home care, will not achieve in life.

When reporting on children, consider that they are more than just their experience of abuse. It can help to mention other aspects of the child's life or experience to remind readers that we are talking about a real human being.

CREATE's #snapthestigma campaign is a useful example of challenging preconceived ideas about children in care (see www.create.org.au/resources/snap-that-stigma).

Blame and demonisation

When it comes to child abuse, there is a tendency to focus on blame. However, child abuse and neglect is a complex issue involving a range of risk and protective factors, rather than simple 'causes' or 'reasons'.

Stories involving child safety departments can get lost in demonising child safety officers - or political blame - rather than focusing on the underlying risk factors, the actual events, or ways to prevent abuse.

The media has the power to help improve the safety of children rather than sensationalise abuse. There are opportunities to add messages about prevention and how protecting children is everyone's business, and that we all have a role to play. See www.napcan.org.au for examples of constructive prevention messaging.

Call on community experts for comment

Don't just rely on the police or the judiciary for comment when reporting on child abuse. Community experts on the issue will be able to help put your story in context. Examples include:

- Bravehearts (child sexual abuse) – www.bravehearts.org.au
- CREATE Foundation (children in out of home care) – www.create.org.au
- NAPCAN (child abuse and neglect) – www.napcan.org.au
- National Children's Commissioner (children's rights) – www.humanrights.com.au
- OurWatch (domestic violence) – www.ourwatch.org.au
- SNAICC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families) - www.snaicc.org.au

Listing support services

It is essential to include information about available support options for people who have experienced child abuse, as well as for people who suspect that a child is being abused. You should always include contact details for local support services. Useful contact numbers may include:

- *For emergecy: 000*
- *Lifeline 13 11 14*
- *Kids Helpline 1800 551 800*
- *1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 732*
- *National Domestic Violence Helpline 1800 200 526*
- *Mensline Australia 1300 789 978*
- *Aboriginal Family Domestic Violence Hotline 1800 019 123*
- *Parentline Qld & NT*

Attachment 1: NAPCAN PLAY YOUR PART TIP SHEET

NAPCAN has created a range of Play Your Part Tip Sheets for all members of the community including the media. This provides a summary of the key ideas covered in this document and is a useful resource for anyone working with children. To see our full range of tip sheets, visit www.napcan.org.au.

WHAT ROLE CAN MEDIA PLAY?

THE MEDIA CAN PLAY THEIR PART TO PROTECT AND CARE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEIR COMMUNITY BY CHALLENGING NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES AND REPORTING ON CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION INITIATIVES.

- Communicate and work with child abuse prevention organisations to develop effective responses to instances of harmful behaviour towards children and young people.
- Avoid negative or unfair stereotypes of communities and cultural groups.
- Convey child protection and child abuse prevention as being everyone's business.
- Promote a balanced perspective of young people. Share stories of young people who are engaged positively in their families, schools and communities.
- Recognise and seek out the voice of young people in other stories, not just those that involve abuse or neglect. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that: Children have the right to express their opinions freely, and have their opinions taken into account in matters that affect them.
- Make the federal, state and local governments accountable for upholding Child Abuse and Neglect standards in terms of Australian legislation and policy.
- Feature interviews with leading child abuse prevention experts when possible, so that the Australian community has a more informed public debate on prevention.
- The digital media industry can partner with child abuse prevention experts to help keep all children and young people smart and safe online and offline. Working together, messages about the respectful use of technology in relationships and providing young people and children with knowledge and skills to manage their digital use can play a part in keeping them safe online and offline.
- Provide details of support services when possible to encourage help seeking behaviours. Increasing families' access to services and events can decrease their isolation and risk of child abuse.
- Be aware of the impact of sexualised images of young people, remembering that children and young people are also exposed to the media.
- Be a positive role model. Children and young people learn from the sources of information they are exposed to, so make your influence positive!