



# MEDIA GUIDE

Treating every child  
& young person fairly



For journalists, editors, writers and content  
creators who want to help create better lives  
for all children.



NORTHERN  
TERRITORY  
PREVENTION  
ALLIANCE

# MEDIA GUIDE

Treating every child & young person fairly



This document was created by the Northern Territory Prevention Alliance (the Alliance) under the auspice of the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN).

The Alliance is a group of key agencies with NT-wide responsibilities providing advocacy, funding and services for the safety and wellbeing of families, children and young people. See back page for the organisations involved in the Alliance.

**The Alliance believes that the media can play an important and positive role in promoting the wellbeing of all children and young people in the Northern Territory.**

# MEDIA GUIDE

Treating every child & young person fairly

## PART 1

How can we give every child and young person a fair go when reporting?

## PART 2

How can we include children's voices in the media?

## PART 3

Choosing our words carefully - topic guides for responsible reporting:

- Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect
- Reporting on Adolescents

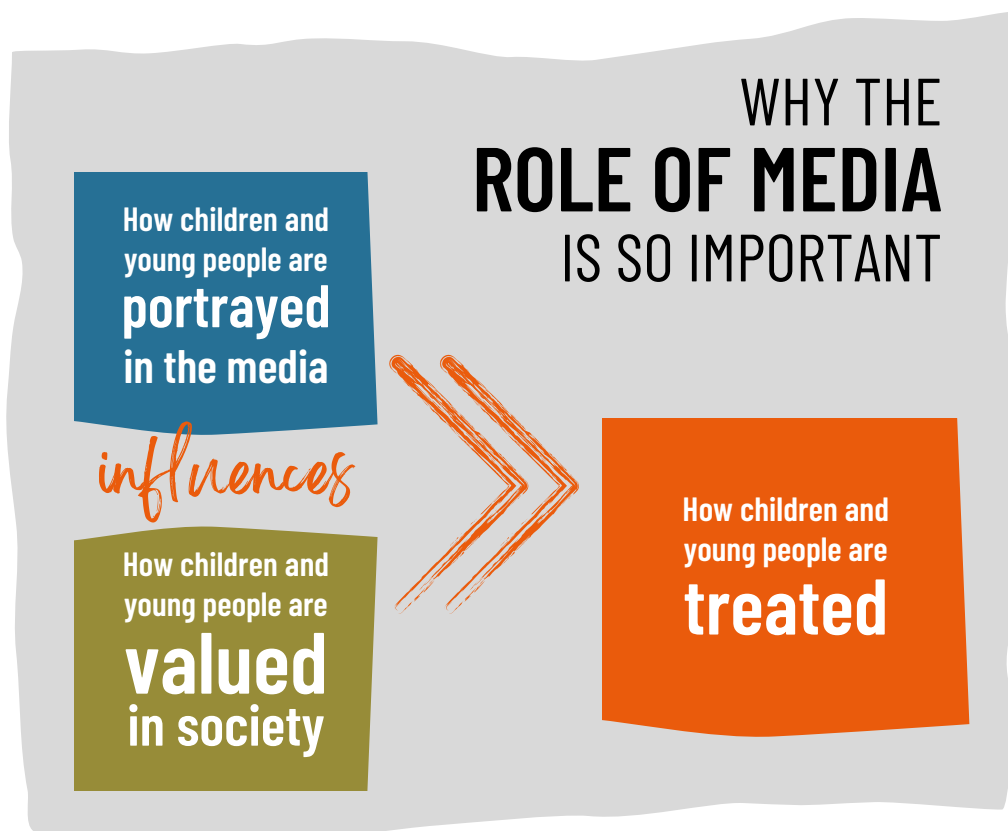
# INTRO

Let's be realistic. We know that most media outlets are competitive businesses - sales, subscriptions, and clicks pay the bills. Thanks to the wiring of our human brains, dramatic stories are almost always more likely to attract our attention.

**But could there be a way  
to keep the stories interesting while also doing the right  
thing for one of the most important groups in our  
society - our children and young people?**

**Are there clever ways of reporting that are good for business  
AND good for creating better, fairer outcomes for every child  
in the Northern Territory?**

The members of the Northern Territory Prevention Alliance believe the answer is yes.



# PART 1

## How can we give every child and young person a fair go when reporting?

Not every journalist needs to become a social justice warrior.

However, it is possible for all of us to report in a way that:

- avoids causing harm to individuals (i.e. isn't destructive)
- improves the portrayal of children and young people (i.e. can actually be constructive).

### 1.1 AVOIDING HARM

Firstly, two quick questions to ask EVERY time:

- How would I feel if this child or teenager was someone close to me?
- Am I upholding the rights of this child?

#### TIP

**Don't forget, adolescents are still classified as children until they turn 18.** Some may be operating in an adult world but they still have the same rights as children.

#### TIP

**Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

Of particular interest to the media are the following rights:

- *Article 12: Children have the right to have a say when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account.*
- *Article 16: Children have the right to privacy.*
- *Article 17: Children have the right to reliable information from the media that they can understand, and media should not promote materials that could harm children.*

Hint: Check out the [full list of rights](#). Many of them make interesting content for stories - some because they are still surprising for many people (e.g. right to play) and some because we are still not doing great job of upholding them (e.g. keeping families together).

# Avoiding harm when reporting on children and young people

## PROTECTING PRIVACY

**Privacy is even more critical for children - a NEED as well as a RIGHT - especially when reporting about distress or abuse.**

Consent from parents/carers shouldn't negate the need for privacy for children.

As a journalist, YOU may be much more aware of the ramifications of foregoing privacy than is 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. So even if an adult gives consent, it's worth asking:

- Would I give consent if this was my child?
- Is there a way to tell this story while protecting privacy?

Privacy is still a right for children who have died.

Is pixelating the face of a child or young person really enough?

## PROTECTING SAFETY AND DIGNITY

**Do we have the wellbeing of the child as our top priority? How would I feel if this was my child (or teen)?**

Who is the most trusted adult to support this child or young person in this story? Remember:

- interviewing children should be done in the presence (or at least with consent of) a parent or trusted adult
- sometimes family members are part of the abuse or problem.

How might this story affect the reputation of this child or young person - now and in the future?

How can we be particularly sensitive when reporting about a child at a time of distress? Is it ok to take photos in a time of distress?

What else is going on for (or has happened to) this child or family that I need to take into account? This is a big question, but at the very least we need to beware of the risk of vilifying those who are already facing unfair challenges.

### TIP

**Do you know about the UNICEF guidelines for reporting on children?**

These handy simple principles and guidelines are designed to help us report on children's issues in a way that serves the public interest without compromising the rights of children.

### What about social media?!!

Social media is a minefield when it comes to protecting the privacy and reputations of children and young people. It is often reasoned that if something is public on social media then it is up for grabs. However, this doesn't negate our responsibility to protect children.

- Just because a young person doesn't set strong privacy settings, does this mean it's ok to use their photos?
- Even if the child or young person has shared something, do we need to ask ourselves what was the intention of that share? Was it really intended for the public or just for friends?
- Even in the case of a young YouTuber/influencer who has a public presence, we still need to ask ourselves if our reporting might be doing harm to the young person?
- Just because it is legal does that make it ok?



## 1.2 IMPROVING THE PORTRAYAL OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

For those of us wanting to go beyond simply avoiding harm, we can be part of the solution by considering the types of stories covered and the 'roles' of children and young people in those stories.

### Types of stories covered:

Take a bird's eye view of the stories in your media.

- Are children and young people being reported on?
- If so, what topics are being covered?
- Is there a balance of positive and negative stories?
- How broad are the types of stories that you're covering about children?

### TIP

**If you really want to get honest about the types of stories you're reporting, ask young people themselves!**

Ask them to review past publications and tell you what they think about the stories related to their age groups - including the topics covered and the way the children are portrayed. They might have great suggestions for how children's voices could have been included, or ideas for articles that they would like to see covered more.

### Try to break away from the same old stories.

Reviews of media coverage in Australia suggest that stories about children tend to fall into a few typical categories - such as teenage problems/bad youths, children 'these days', high achieving individuals, and young children as cute novelties etc. While all of these aren't necessarily bad (and are possibly what people are interested in), it's worth considering ways to extend stories beyond the 'usual suspects'.

### TIP



# Checking the 'roles' of children and young people in our stories

## TALKING ABOUT YOUNG CHILDREN

**Even young children are citizens in their own rights. Be wary of treating them as possessions, appendages, decorations, or burdens to adults rather than as actual humans.**

The way we talk about young children impacts how they are treated by society and how we prioritise their needs. This Australian research provides simple evidence-based advice on the best words and phrases to help create constructive narratives about young children: [The Core Story for Early Childhood Development and Learning](#).

## TEENS/YOUTHS/ ADOLESCENTS

**Am I perpetuating stereotypes of 'bad youths'? Constant negative portrayals of adolescents are not helpful to them or to society.**

While we need to respect teenagers and give them agency, we also need to avoid reporting about them as if they are adults. Anyone under 18 is still protected by the rights outlined above.

See Part 3 for more information about talking about young people in a constructive way.

## STEREOTYPES

**Are children and young people only portrayed as victims, villains or heroes? (Sure, engaging stories need victims, villains and heroes, but let's be careful about how we put children into these roles).**

Does this story contribute to unhelpful stereotypes about young people - e.g. being lazy, spoiled, out-of-control? If it's a story related to these topics, is it possible to offer some solutions and positive angles?

Repeating stereotypes - even in positive stories - only serves to reinforce them.

When reporting on children and young people, be cognizant of contributing to other stereotypes about gender, ability, race, sexuality, class structure etc.

Are the children and young people in the story given a voice? This can be a powerful way to break down stereotypes. See suggestions in Part 2 about how to do this safely and effectively.



## TIP

### How can we find more good news stories, unique angles and solutions to challenges?

The organisations involved with this guide include many people who are working every day to improve the lives of children and young people in the NT. They see the challenges, but they also see the creative and interesting stories about what is working. If you are looking to include more diversity in your coverage of children and young people, feel free to contact some of the organisations at the back of this guide.

*The Story of Our Children and Young People* in the NT has some great case studies.

"Some young people can be portrayed extremely well, for their sporting efforts or what they've done to help the community etc. On the other hand they can be portrayed poorly, being 'technology addicted' or 'gaming addicted'."

"...in things like bullying or social media they make it out as if we're all stupid and irresponsible."

"... the news always tends to show young people's activities as bad and that what is happening in the young person's community is worse than what past generations have done..."

"I think young people aren't often portrayed in the media and whenever they are portrayed, they only show young people at opposite ends of the spectrum. This meaning either extremely negative or extremely outstanding. I believe that this makes young people feel unrelated to the young people portrayed in the media, feeling either better behaved or useless."

## PART 2

# How do we include the voices of children?

Including the voices of children in the media is a great idea because it:

- makes for excellent content
- is in line with children's rights to have a say
- helps to challenge unhelpful stereotypes
- provides news and interesting perspectives.

## So why don't we see the voices of children more often?

### MYTHS & EXCUSES



**IT'S NOT  
INTERESTING  
OR RELEVANT**

### HELPFUL HINTS



Sometimes we don't even think to ask children about their views. We may be so used to speaking on behalf of children and young people that we forget we CAN ask their opinions.

The experience of the organisations behind this guide is that children and young people almost always surprise adults with their thoughtful and insightful responses. And that adults are often more interested in reading what children think than the same old things from adults.

**IT'S NOT  
POSSIBLE  
BECAUSE OF  
PRIVACY**

Including the voices of children and young people isn't limited to public interviews with individuals. Tips to avoid problems with privacy include:

- Excluding names or identifying details (although including age can be of interest to the reader)
- Seeking the opinions of other young people (who may not be directly related to the situation)
- Using quotes from existing consultation reports
- Talking to young people who are already public advocates
- Speaking with young adults (18+) - they can be valuable spokespeople.

## MYTHS & EXCUSES

IT'S TOO HARD

## HELPFUL HINTS

Including the voices of children may seem like an extra level of work but can prove to be an easy way to generate creative, meaningful content. There are many organisations committed to elevating the voices of children who are eager to support the media. Here are some leads to get you started.

Lots of consultation reports already exist that include the voices of children and young people in the NT. Using information and quotes from these can be an easy way to start including the voices of children (the hard work of consultation is already done!). For instance:

- Keeping Kids Safe & Well - Your Voices includes quotes and views from children across Australia collated by the National Children's Commissioner, December 2021
- Youth Voice NT - stories from youth collated by NTCOSS
- Mission Australia Youth Survey is conducted every year to capture the views of youth. Includes state & territory breakdowns
- CREATE #snapthestigma report shares voices of young people with a care experience.

Many organisations already have groups set up to seek the views of children and young people. The following organisations may be able to link you to spokespeople or share existing findings:

- [CREATE Foundation](#) - representing children in out-of-home care
- [SNAICC](#) - National Voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families
- [Office of the Children's Commissioner NT](#) - regularly consults with young people to share their stories
- [Youth Week Ambassadors](#) - provide a youth perspective for Youth Week each April
- [NT Youth Action Plan groups](#) (for Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine, Tennant Creek, Mparntwe/Alice Springs, Gove Peninsula)
- [NAPCAN's Youth Speak Out](#) - national group that includes NT representatives

Social media can be a relatively easy tool for journalists to find out more about what young people think about particular topics, without needing to quote identified individuals or share posts.

"Ask for young people's comment when they're being reported on."

"Maybe just give them a fair chance to actually explain themselves and not jump to conclusions."

"I believe a young person should have a say and prevision over some aspects of what is released to the public and they have the ability to suggest changes or recommend additions..."

"I would like the media to be more positive when representing young people and ask their educated opinions on issues that relate to them also on some bigger issues as the young people are the future of our country."

**Shannieka**

"I feel like once the media gets wind of Aboriginal kids and young people in care, any experience or event that went on, the media go all out on it"

From CREATE #SnapThatStigma report

## PART 3

# Choosing our words carefully - topic guides for responsible reporting

## 3.1 REPORTING ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Child abuse and neglect is a preventable issue that impacts the whole community. It's possible to report on child abuse and neglect in a way that protects victims while helping to inform, educate and contribute usefully to public dialogue. (Note: The [UNICEF guidelines for reporting on children](#), mentioned in Part 1, will also be useful when reporting on child maltreatment.)

### RESPECT FOR THE 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 to be 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.
- Exercise discretion around involving survivors in the editorial process to make them feel more comfortable. For example, you could speak to them about the angle of the story and allow them to see a transcription of their quotes before publication.

### SAFETY COMES FIRST (INCLUDING EMOTIONAL SAFETY)

- Omitting details about the abuse may be necessary to protect the anonymity of the survivor or their family.
- Being asked to recount experiences of abuse may re-traumatise survivors. Where appropriate, allow them to see, and contribute to, a written version of their account.

## CHILD ABUSE IS SERIOUS, HIGHLY TRAUMATIC AND 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 them.
- There are no circumstances under which a child should be made to appear responsible for any aspect of the abuse they experienced.
- Never report on child abuse in a way that sensationalises, trivialises, or makes light of it.

## TAKE EMPHASIS AWAY FROM 'STRANGER DANGER'

- Most abuse is by an adult who is known to the child – and it's crucial to underscore reporting with that fact. (See 'Finding the facts' on page 16 for information about the prevalence about different types of abuse in Australia.)
- If it is legal and safe 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.

## AVOID BLAME AND DEMONISATION

- 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.
- 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.
- Most children who are the subject of stories about abuse are likely to have suffered a continuum of hardship throughout their lives where there may have been several missed opportunities for family support or intervention. This is an opportunity for media to reiterate the need for society to support every child and family, in every community.
- Removing children is a last resort and not the end of the story.

## AVOID GENERALISATIONS, STEREOTYPES, AND STIGMA

- 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 – without the proper supports – abuse can have long-lasting negative impacts for children, the media should not exacerbate the belief that 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](http://www.create.org.au/resources/snap-that-stigma)).

## LIST SUPPORT SERVICES

Always 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. Always include contact details for local support services. Useful contact numbers may include:

- For emergency: 000
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline 1800 551 800
- 13 YARN
- 1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 732
- Parentline Qld & NT 1300 30 1300
- National Domestic Violence Helpline 1800 200 526
- Mensline Australia 1300 789 978
- Aboriginal Family Domestic Violence Hotline 1800 019 123
- Child Protection Reporting Line NT - 1800 700 250

## CALL ON COMMUNITY EXPERTS FOR COMMENT

Community experts on the issue will be able to help put your story in context. Examples include:

- Office of the Children's Commissioner NT - [occ.nt.gov.au](http://occ.nt.gov.au)
- SNAICC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families) - [www.snaicc.org.au](http://www.snaicc.org.au)
- CREATE Foundation (children in out-of-home care) - [www.create.org.au](http://www.create.org.au)
- NAPCAN (child abuse and neglect) - [www.napcan.org.au](http://www.napcan.org.au)
- National Children's Commissioner (children's rights) - [www.humanrights.com.au](http://www.humanrights.com.au)
- Bravehearts (child sexual abuse) - [www.bravehearts.org.au](http://www.bravehearts.org.au)

# Choosing our words carefully

## DON'T

## WHY

## DO

✗ Don't use terms such as 'severe discipline' when a child is beaten.

This minimises and excuses physical abuse.

**Name it. Use the term *child abuse* or *maltreatment*.**

✗ Don't use terms like 'relationship', 'affair' or 'sex' to describe an incident of sexual abuse against a child or young person.

This minimises and trivialises what is the serious and traumatic crime of child sexual abuse.

**Use terms such as *child sex abuse*, *repeated child sex abuse*.**

✗ Don't claim that an accused child sex abuse offender was 'in love' or 'infatuated' with the victim.

This is another way that the crime is often softened or excused.

**Refer to it as *child sexual abuse* or *rape*.**

✗ Don't use language that suggests that adult sexual contact with a child or young person is consensual.

Adult sexual contact with a child is never consensual and involves a power imbalance.

**Refer to it as *child sexual abuse* or *rape*.**

✗ Don't use language that suggests that the child contributed to the crime e.g. by referring to what a teenager was wearing or drinking.

This suggests that the child is partially responsible. Abuse is always the responsibility of the adult.

**Use active language that refers to the *perpetrator* and the *alleged abuse*.**

✗ Don't use the term 'child porn'

This legitimises child exploitation as a type of pornography and takes away from the fact that a child has been abused.

**Use the terms '*abuse material*' or '*online sexual abuse material*'.**

**NOTE:** The Luxembourg Guidelines produced by ECPAT International provide more detail about terminology around child exploitation.



# rape and sexual abuse of NEWS Man admits sex with child

BY ERIN WILLIAMS

A 32-YEAR-OLD man had sex with his step-daughter multiple times at the family home when she was aged between seven and 11 years old, a court has been told.

step-father's bedroom.

Crown prosecutor Jamie Singh told the court the sexual offending started in May, 2016, after the man started massaging his step-daughter, who was experiencing soreness to her back and legs.

was driving with the girl when he pulled over onto the side of the road and got her to perform oral sex on him.

"He said he always had to have his penis in her mouth or she wouldn't be allowed to leave," Mr Singh said.

go back outside.

The girl, who was aged seven at the time, was shaken and scared and didn't tell anyone what had happened.

Mr Singh said the man was removed from the family home in February 2019, but

The victim told her mother about the offending on September 24, 2019, saying she did not like being alone or around the man because it scared her. The man was arrested on the same day after fleeing the family home.

Mr Beardon said a significant aspect of his client's offending was he had made full admissions and was remorseful. He said the man's guilty plea had saved the victim's mother from giving evidence in court.

Above: The importance of language is highlighted by the work of Jane Gilmore and her #FixedIt campaign.



**Update:** In 2023, the National Office for Child Safety created Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse: Guidance for Media. It goes into more detail about how to develop and frame stories appropriately, language and terminology to use and avoid, and sensitivities to consider when engaging with victims and survivors.

## FINDING THE FACTS...

In 2023, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study was released, providing world-class evidence about the prevalence and impact of child abuse and neglect in Australia (for the first time ever!). The research shows that approximately 60% of Australians have experienced child maltreatment.

It's strongly recommended that communicators use the data from this report and be clear that this is quite separate to the statistics about child protection reports and notifications.





## 3.2 REPORTING ON ADOLESCENTS

(The following information is based on US research by the Frameworks Institute about how to positively reframe adolescence).

As highlighted in Part 1 of this guide, adolescents, teenagers and youth are often talked about in the context of negative stereotypes. It's beneficial to young people as well as the broader community - now and into the future - for us to shift to a more positive and constructive story about young people.

**We can support this story by addressing key ways that the general public thinks about young people:**

### THE PUBLIC THINKS...

✗ Adolescence is solely a period of risk, danger, and heightened vulnerability. Furthermore, they understand adolescents as incapable of making good decisions and frequently draw on negative stereotypes of youth.

✗ Disparities and inequities faced by adolescents of a particular race or class may be the result of poor decision-making, or deficient values or work ethic.

✗ Young people are defined by largely negative stereotypes and misperceptions.

### SO COMMUNICATORS SHOULD...

***Advance a positive vision of young people and their development by emphasising community engagement.***

***Explain how structural factors like racism, poverty, access to opportunities, lead to disparities among adolescents.***

***Advance stories of youth service and activism without acknowledging myths about adolescents.***

### BECAUSE...

Advancing alternative and positive stories about adolescents can start to shift the predominantly negative views towards the potential of this time of life.

When we highlight the way our social setup creates inequity, we help people to see that systems change makes sense and is necessary.

Featuring young people's civic engagement, service, and activism are especially powerful. Restating misperceptions - even to refute them - only reinforces them in people's thinking.

## Choosing our words carefully...

### AVOID

✗ Avoid focusing on risks and vulnerabilities - this is a counterproductive narrative already exaggerated in public understanding.

✗ Avoid restating myths or negative stereotypes about adolescents, even to debunk them.

✗ Avoid focusing only on individual success as a measure of positive adolescent outcomes.

✗ Avoid talking about poor outcomes among marginalised youth, unless you also show how systems contribute to disadvantage for certain groups of young people.

✗ Avoid 'othering' young people by solely referring to 'they' or 'them'.

✗ Avoid relying on the term 'teenagers'.

### DO

***Emphasise the positives about adolescents and their development.***

***Focus on examples of youth service and activism. By even mentioning stereotypes we serve to reinforce them.***

***Point out the benefits to society that result from positive social, emotional, and identity development. Young people are an important part of a connected community.***

***Talk about structural factors - like racism, poverty and housing instability - that lead to disparities and inequities among adolescents.***

***Remind audiences that we have all experienced this time of life by using 'we' and 'our'.***


***Define the term 'adolescence'. Use age or grade ranges or descriptions like 'the developmental period between childhood and adulthood'.***

## Some handy examples:


**To help advance a positive vision of young people, their development, and how this links to community, we can:**

- Tell stories about youth activism and young people's engagement in their communities.
- Draw attention to support required for positive outcomes and avoid focusing on vulnerabilities.
- Listen to - and amplify the stories - young people tell about themselves.
- Order matters - make the positive case first.
- Highlight the link between interconnected communities and positive adolescent development.
- Explain, don't just assert, the link between adolescent development and community-level outcomes.

**For instance, say:** Younger adolescents are developing skills to make good decisions and build their resilience. They need space for positive interactions with peers to fully develop these skills.

 Instead of: Younger adolescents are vulnerable to peer pressure because they're still developing the skills to make their own decisions and develop resilience.

**For instance, say:** Supporting adolescents leads to healthier and more connected communities.

 Rather than: Supporting adolescents can improve not only their personal wellbeing, but their academic and professional success.

## MEDIA GUIDE

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## Members of the Northern Territory Prevention Alliance (NTPA) include:



### Want to know more?

Please feel free to contact Helen Fogarty at NAPCAN on 0410 541997 or [helen.fogarty@napcan.org.au](mailto:helen.fogarty@napcan.org.au), for more information about the topics in this guide, or to connect with spokespeople or organisations mentioned above.

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