



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.

MEDIA GUIDE

Treating every child & young person fairly

This guide was created by the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) with support from the Northern Territory Prevention Alliance (the Alliance).

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.

NAPCAN and the Alliance believe that the media can play an important and positive role in promoting the wellbeing of all children and young people.

NAPCAN PREVENT
CHILD ABUSE
& NEGLECT



This guide draws heavily on research from FrameWorks Institute, particularly in the recommendations about how we talk about adolescents.

For more information visit www.frameworksinstitute.org



MEDIA GUIDE

Treating every child & young person fairly

INTRO

PART 1

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

PART 2

What about social media?

PART 3

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

PART 4

Choosing our words carefully for ethical reporting on:

- Child Abuse and Neglect
- Adolescents

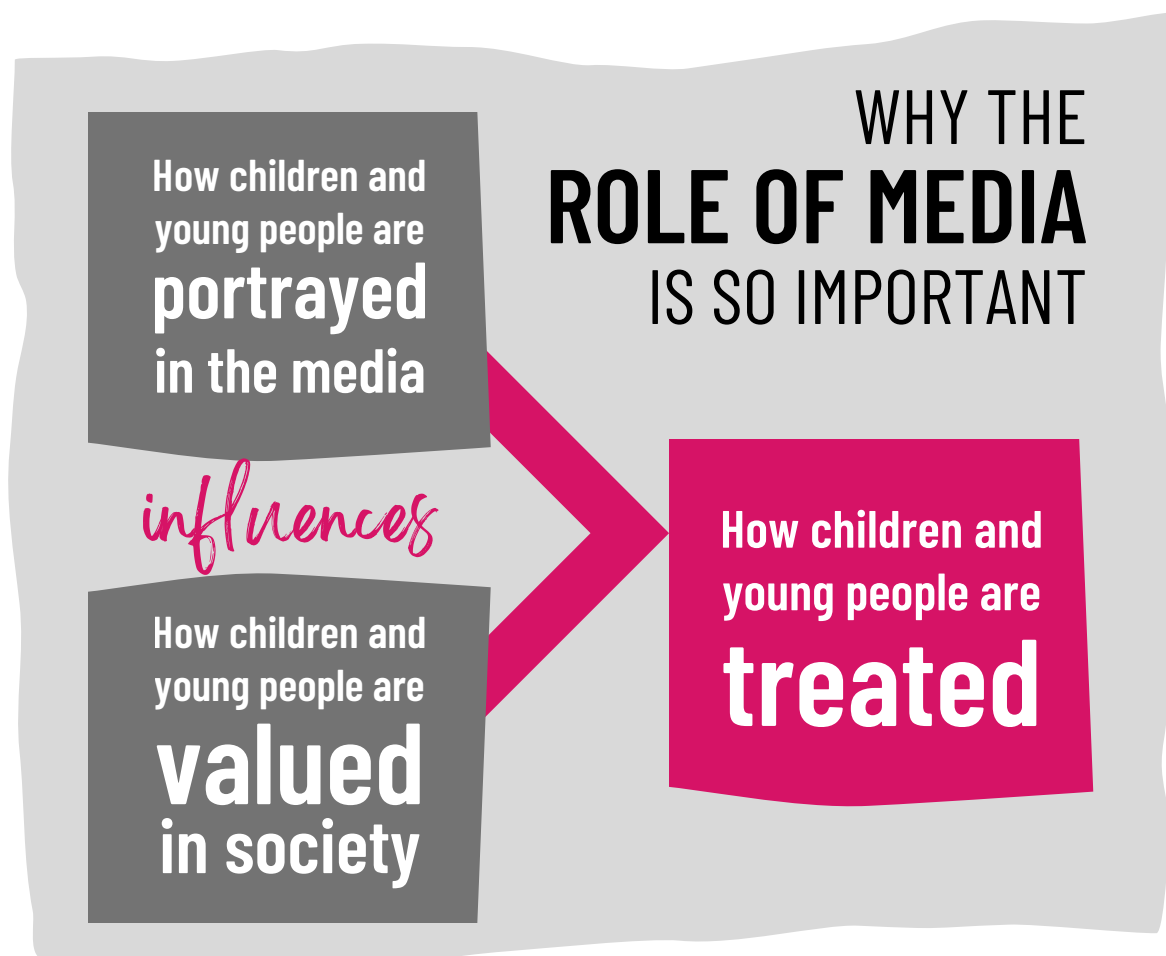
INTRO

Let's be realistic. We know that most media outlets are competitive businesses - sales, subscriptions, and now likes and shares, 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?**

NAPCAN and 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?

REMEMBER

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.

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.*

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 a 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 to protect their privacy?

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 ethical 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.

Do not post texts or images that could endanger the child, their siblings or peers - even if data is changed or shaded.

REFER TO:

UNICEF guidelines for reporting on children

These 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.



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 or featured in content?
- If so, what topics are being covered?
- Is there a balance of stories - including positive stories?
- How broad are the types of stories that you're covering about children?

RECOMMENDATION

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'.

RECOMMENDATION



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

REPORTING ON 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 4 for more information about talking about young people in a constructive way.

STEREOTYPES

Are children and young people being unfairly represented in the narrative?

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?

Don't repeat stereotypes - even in positive stories it only serves to reinforce them.

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

Children and young people have a great deal of knowledge and expertise. Are the children and young people in a story given a voice? This can be a powerful way to break down stereotypes. See suggestions in Part 3 about how to do this safely and effectively.

RECOMMENDATION

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 NAPCAN who can help to connect you.

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

"I think media, media is a big thing. If you are able to put youth - even youth in care - in a more positive light, that would change perspectives."

From children and young people:

"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'."

"... 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..."

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

"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

What about social media?

Journalists face a balancing act when it comes to engaging with their audience on social media, while protecting the young people they report about. One does not need to be achieved at the expense of the other.

VIRALITY

(... being rapidly spread or popularised)

The nature of social media and its algorithms, means that any piece of content can go 'viral'.

While this offers journalists reach and engagement, it can adversely impact a young person's life if they're the subject of a story.

Social media stories can spread quickly, widely, and uncontrollably. More so than traditional articles, content shared on social media can:

- be easily copied and shared on other websites and platforms
- get saved and re-posted by users. (Even 'temporary' content can be screenshot or recorded - creating a lasting digital footprint)
- continue to circulate, even if the original post is deleted.

This means that even if a journalist realises a story should be taken down from social media and takes action, the story will likely stay 'out there', spreading beyond their editorial control. It's crucial, therefore, to think carefully about the consequences that content may have on a young person, and their future, before posting.

What can we do to avoid or reduce harm?

It's important to understand the mechanics of social platforms, and the mitigation tools available in-app.

By understanding and addressing platform-specific risks, journalists can better protect the privacy and safety of children and young people while reporting on social media.



WHAT CAN WE DO?

WHY?



Turn off the comments when reporting on sensitive topics related to young people - such as sexual assault, or youth crime.

- *Safeguards the privacy and well-being of vulnerable children.*
- *Prevents potential cyberbullying or harassment.*
- *Maintains focus on the story's core message.*
- *Reduces the risk of platforming misinformation or harmful speculation from commenting users.*



When posting, use content warnings and in-app 'Sensitive Content' settings if needed.

- *Social media is often a space for recreational scrolling.*
- *Warnings can minimise the possibility that children and young people may see things that could be emotionally distressing.*



On Instagram, be cautious about circulating content posted by children and young people that has been geotagged.

- *Geotagging can reveal a child's whereabouts to within a 10-metre radius.*



Avoid using young people's imagery posted online.

- *The child or young person may have intended to share an image with friends only - not the public.*
- *Even in the case of a young YouTuber/influencer who has a public presence, reporting on them or using their imagery might still be doing harm to them.*



Make sure children and adults understand the potential consequences of virality.

- *This means the consent you obtain from all parties is **informed consent**.*

PART 3

How do we include the voices of children?

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

- can make for more informed and engaging content
- is in line with children's rights to have a say
- can help to challenge unhelpful stereotypes
- can provide news and interesting perspectives that other publishers may not include.

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

MYTHS & EXCUSES

**IT'S NOT
INTERESTING
OR RELEVANT**

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.

HELPFUL HINTS

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.

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

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
- NAPCAN's website includes a page that collates reports from Children's Commissioners across Australia.

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 journalists can use to learn more about what young people think about particular topics - without needing to quote identified individuals or share posts.

From children and young people:

"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 4

Choosing our words carefully – topic guides for ethical reporting

4.1 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)

- As a journalist, you are more likely to be aware of the ramifications of a story for the people involved.
- This is also important in social media reporting, where posts can go viral and become the subject of public debate in comments and reshares.
- 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.
- Know about child grooming laws - including online - in your state or territory. In most places it is a serious offence that can lead to imprisonment.

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 18 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.
- Look for 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).

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 and bio links to 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 - find the service in your state or territory here:

<https://aifs.gov.au/resources/resource-sheets/mandatory-reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect>

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
- SNAICC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families) - www.snaicc.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
- Bravehearts (child sexual abuse) - 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.



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.



4.2 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:

UNHELPFUL PUBLIC BELIEFS

SO COMMUNICATORS SHOULD...

BECAUSE...

✗ NOT useful to believe adolescence is solely a period of risk, danger, and heightened vulnerability. Or that adolescents are incapable of making good decisions.

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

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

✗ NOT useful to believe that disparities and inequities faced by adolescents are the result of poor decision-making, or deficient values or work ethic.

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

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

✗ NOT useful to believe that young people are defined by largely negative stereotypes and misperceptions.

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

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 - wherever possible, 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 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.

Want to know more?

Please feel free to contact NAPCAN on

02 8073 3300 or

contact@napcan.org.au

for more information about the topics in this guide, or to connect with spokespeople or organisations on particular issues.

www.napcan.org.au

Find out more about FrameWorks

www.frameworksinstitute.org

MEDIA GUIDE

Treating every child & young person fairly

NAPCAN PREVENT
CHILD ABUSE
& NEGLECT

MEDIA GUIDE

