

Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement

Inquiry into law enforcement capabilities in relation to child exploitation Public

Hearing – 20 February 2023

Questions on notice

Not My Kid, Mrs Jen Hoey

1 PROOF HANSARD, p. 13

Mr WOOD: Thank you for the evidence today and especially coming out as victims; it really helps us as a committee understand what is required when it comes to recommendations. You spoke about the reporting. We had similar issues with modern slavery. If you could put something on notice to the committee about how you think that should work it would be greatly appreciated. ...

Response

The proposal I have suggested could be comparable with the Kids Helpline or Lifeline, however, the support/report line should be dedicated to victims of online child exploitation under the age of 18. Many victims are afraid to speak with their parents and are equally afraid there will be repercussions should they approach law enforcement given that many are aware, through education at school, that the sending or receiving of sexual images is a crime¹. Additionally, many are aware that counsellors, psychologists, doctors, and teachers in New South Wales are mandatory reporters², which further prevents them from seeking support and making a disclosure.

In my experience, many children firmly believe they are at fault and are filled with self-blame and shame. Furthermore, because this is not a crime type that is openly spoken about, they feel alone.

A support/report line may provide a safety net for these victims where they know they will receive support, reassurance, and assistance in making a report, if need be, and would provide a safe space for them to make a disclosure.

¹ <https://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/publications/factsheets-and-resources/sexting>

² <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/families/Protecting-kids/mandatory-reporters/about>

The support/report line could be manned by trained volunteers similar to the Lifeline model.

Whilst there are currently report lines available through Crime Stoppers, the Kids Helpline, Act for Kids, the Alannah & Madeline Foundation, Bravehearts, to name a few, none of these are dedicated solely to online child exploitation for victims under the age of 18. Given the exponential increase in this crime type³, I believe a support line would further assist victims in finding support and potentially making a report, which in turn would assist law enforcement.

³ <https://www.accce.gov.au/resources/research-and-statistics/statistics>

Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement

Inquiry into law enforcement capabilities in relation to child exploitation

24 February 2023

Written questions on notice

Not My Kid, Mrs Jen Hoey

Questions from the Hon Jason Wood MP

- 1. Could you explain your recommendations regarding education of parents with regard to child abuse prevention?**

Response:

My primary recommendation is that there should be mandatory education of parents that specifically relates to the prevention of child exploitation online. It is my firm belief, based on the publicly available data cited below, that most parents of school aged children are unaware of the dangers in the online world for children. Let me outline the case for mandatory education of parents by describing the bald facts of which the majority of parents are unaware.

Parents need assistance in understanding that the internet is not age-segregated, and that no child is immune to dangers online. These risks have increased significantly and yet children have access to devices at an increasingly younger age. The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation¹ in their report of February 2020, found that four out of five children aged four are using the internet; and 30 per cent of these children have access to their own device. Coupled with the immaturity of a child's developing brain, it is unsurprising that we are seeing an escalation in issues stemming from exposure online.

One such risk is exposure to online pornography. For many children, their innate curiosity about sex frequently leads them to the online world to find answers to their questions. What they find is not what we can define as sex, but often violent pornography. Furthermore,

¹ Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation 2020, *ACCCE Research Report 2020*

finding or stumbling upon pornography inevitably desensitises the child. Initial shock or confusion can lead to further curiosity, exposing them to a world of degrading material. This plays a role in assisting predators in grooming a child — a child desensitised to pornography is far easier to coerce.

This desensitisation may lead to children producing and sharing self-generated child sex abuse material (SG-CSAM).

In their annual report of 2021, The Internet Watch Foundation² reported that 81 per cent of self-generated child sexual abuse reports involved girls aged between 11 and 13, and of all the webpages actioned during that year, nearly three quarters were assessed as containing self-generated imagery. Thorn³ reported similar findings in their report of 2020, stating that 20% of girls aged between 13 and 17 admitted to creating and sharing SG-CSAM. An alarming 40% of children surveyed felt that ‘it’s normal for people my age to share nudes with each other’.

The issue of online child exploitation is growing exponentially. In 2021, the Internet Watch Foundation ‘assessed a webpage every one and a half minutes, and every two minutes, that webpage showed a child being sexually abused’. In 2021, The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children’s Cybertipline⁴ received 29.3 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation, an increase of 35% from the previous year.

A report from February 2020 by the Australian Centre for Child Exploitation⁵, found that, of parents surveyed:

- 21 percent of participants felt there was a likelihood that online child exploitation could happen to their child.
- 3 per cent listed online grooming as a concern.
- 52 per cent of participants talk to their children about online safety.

² Internet Watch Foundation 2020, *Face the Facts: Internet Watch Foundation Annual Report 2020*

³ Thorn 2020, *Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Attitudes and Experiences*

⁴ National Center for Missing & Exploited Children 2021, *Cybertipline Data*

⁵ Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation 2020, *ACCCE Research Report 2020*

- 21 percent of participants felt online child exploitation was too repulsive and sickening to think about.
- 23 per cent of parents sit with their children while they use the internet.
- 51 percent of participants did not know what they could do to keep children safe from online child exploitation.

Parents, in most cases, are the primary carers of their children. As such they should be equipped with as much knowledge as possible to protect and guide them. Due to the lack of education those who are proactive are in the minority, which makes parenting challenging when most of their childrens' peers are online unsupervised. Many parents report feeling overwhelmed and not sure where or how to start. Parents require education with strategies they can implement in their homes. Education around protective behaviour is fundamental and includes using the correct names for body parts, and the discussion of safe and unsafe secrets, early warning signs and safety teams. Robust annual education about online safety is necessary if we hope to change the trajectory of online child exploitation. As mentioned previously, schools are offering education, however, attendance is poor and is usually missed by those who most need to be there. For this reason, my proposal for mandatory education via schools seems the most logical solution, although I am admittedly uncertain as to how this may be implemented in practice.

I further recommend to compel all schools to include in their newsletters access to regular and updated information about online safety. They could, for example, include a link to the Office of the eSafety⁶.

⁶ https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents?gclid=CjwKCAiAjPyfBhBMEiwAB2CCInZKnVHaP-SuDDVWhVUB825_3-fkG_6rqk-JQVWgDZJC_ekRr_RcGxoC-0sQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds

2. Could you outline further your recommendations regarding education of children with regard to child abuse prevention?

Response:

I believe education for children should start as soon as they start school, preferably earlier. Within the current curriculum in New South Wales, children receive child protection education⁷. The difficulty arises when this education does not amalgamate with what is happening at home, which draws me back to my first response regarding parent education. We really need a consistent message coming from both school and home for children to clearly understand the risks and boundaries.

3. Could you explain your position on a national child sex offender register or disclosure scheme?

Response:

This question is out of my area of expertise but when considering the question, my position would be in support of a national child sex offender register or disclosure scheme made available to law enforcement.

⁷ <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/key-learning-areas/pdhpe/media/documents/pdhpe-cpe-es1-s1-s2-s3-s4-s5-pl-child-protection-education-resource.pdf>