

**Thursday March 9, 2023**

Dear Members of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Law Enforcement Capability in relation to Child Exploitation,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide further input on this matter. As a mother it is necessary, as a victim it's personal, as a citizen it's an honor.

## **1. PARENTAL EDUCATION**

'Sexual abuse of children'. Utter those four words in any setting, any country, over any dinner table and you are guaranteed to provoke a strong response. It's an uncomfortable topic, because the very idea of an adult seeking sexual engagement with a child is uncomfortable, abhorrent. Yet it's happening. In numbers greater than we can imagine or are willing to accept. Yet while we shake our heads and wring our hands at the thought of some monster seeking to harm our most vulnerable, most precious citizens: our children, most of us blindly refuse to acknowledge that very predation is playing out in our towns, our schools, our street, even in our very homes.

Hidden in plain sight.

In a perfect world there would be a manual outlining how to keep ourselves and others safe, especially children. Ideally we could flip straight to a checklist for 'how to spot predators', who to trust and whom not.

But this world is far from perfect, and such a manual does not exist. Parents need to ask themselves, even if it did, would we be any good at applying it? Or would we only cast a cautious gaze over strangers? We have driven home the 'Stranger Danger' warning but would you urge your kids to be similarly cautious around close friends, Neighbours, caring teachers, trusted confidantes?

Of course not.

Those people evade critical examination because time and again we confuse liking someone with being able to trust them implicitly.

We think because someone is familiar they are safe. If someone expresses warmth we think they genuinely care for our well-being. We teach our kids to engage likewise.

This is where we get it so very wrong.....

The fact is, and the statistics prove it, that the predatory monsters who molest children are far more likely to be someone you invited into your home, or someone who already lives there than a stranger loitering in a playground. And if your child has been preyed upon, it is never a one off...it happens time and again and statistics show predators, even if caught and charged, are unlikely to ever stop. Detecting these monsters, the predators who destroy childhoods, devastate innocence, fragmenting every aspect of their victims lives, is difficult. Often close to impossible. But we can *deflect* them and it begins with us as a society being prepared to face them, to understand them, to stop looking the other way. Engaging in uncomfortable but necessary conversations in our workplace, in our schools, in our homes and with our own children which acknowledge abuse and explores what it looks like goes a long way towards removing the shame, the stigma, and the burden of guilt so many survivors struggle with. It is key to them feeling liberated to report and seek convictions, and re-engage with society.

On a practical level, to better protect their children I recommend all parents:

- Seek education about their kids online habits and how to keep their kids safe on social media through providers such as Safe on Social. Insist their schools run such programs and that all students and staff attend.
- Ensure all persons your children regularly interact with have an up to date Working with children check.
- Introduce the concept of abuse and what it looks like to your kids as young as 5. Start these conversations and create a space where children feel confident sharing their concerns and observations, even when it concerns family friends and members.

On a personal level, I recommend all parents:

- stop casting strangers as the threat and look at those closest to them.
- Assume not that every adult or adolescent that crosses your child path IS a predator, but that they MIGHT be and make choices accordingly.
- With regards to friends, other family members: observe behaviors, ask questions, listen to your instincts and particularly listen to your children and how they feel around that person before allowing them into your home.
- Identify if someone is lavishing your child with gifts, attention, or seeking friendship, online or offline. Make no exception because someone is a coach, teacher, instructor, priest, school helper, or family friend. All have unfettered access to children and significant numbers of predators are drawn to those professions. Don't exclude family friends. If ANYONE seeks time with your child outside the boundaries of an arranged, supervised activity your suspicions should double.
- Single/divorced mothers are targets for predators seeking to engage with children, and often children without a significant father figure present are more vulnerable because mothers, meaning well, unwittingly encourage them to engage with adult men.
- Don't send children unaccompanied to music lessons, sports training, choir practice etc. There is no good reason a child should ever be alone with an adult beyond immediate parents and carers and even then caution should be exercised. Parents cannot is the excuse they are too busy because they cannot afford to be.
- Activities should always be in a populated centre or your home. NEVER in the home of an instructor.
- Attend your child's events. As a consequence kids are less vulnerable. Children with engaged, attentive parents are exponentially less open to grooming. Where there is no access there is no opportunity.
- Don't post about your kids on social media.
- If your office space sees a lot of public traffic, don't have images of your children or home on display.

- As children grow older arm them with a smart watch or mobile phone with a limited capacity just so they can contact you anytime.
- Create non-verbal ways your child can communicate discomfort or fear to you. It's indispensable.
- Get a dog. Statistically children with a companion pet close by are less likely to be preyed upon.

Today, I am the mum who attends every party, every playground visit, every game. Standing there on the sidelines, just quietly watching.

I am the mum hesitant to send my little ones off to sleepovers, but keen to suggest whole family get-togethers. I am the mum who has taught herself to 'game' to better understand what's going on behind the screens, and to actively engage. I put a cap on extra-curricular activities, and if it involves being alone with an adult for extended periods or I can't be in attendance, that activity simply doesn't happen.

Call me 'obsessive' but frankly I know all too well that we cannot afford not to be. It's not about assuming every person who crosses our child's path is a pedophile, it's about acknowledging they might be and making decisions accordingly. I don't focus on what my kids are missing out on, I fill their days with enough they don't even notice. Because the one thing I'm adamant they miss is exposure to an experience that could destroy their lives. I'm certainly not endorsing 'helicopter parenting' or wrapping your little ones in cotton wool, but statistically, kids who have their cup filled by engaged, attentive parents are exponentially less likely to be groomed by a predator. Where there is no opportunity there is no abuse.

As parents, we all want our kids to be safe. Only education ensures we are adequately able to assess risk, and make decisions equipped with an ability to gauge who likely predators are, how they think, and where they hide.

## **2. EDUCATION OF CHILDREN.**

I firmly believe that children should be educated about what predation, grooming and abuse looks like, online and off, from the age of 5. Naturally this should be delivered in an age appropriate manner and form part of the primary school curriculum, because statistics show the highest incident of children disclosing abuse occurs around the age they are introduced to sex education.

### **3. SEX OFFENDER REGISTRY**

As a mother, a victim, and a contributing Australian citizen I recommend the implementation of a National sex offenders registry. I have never crossed paths with another parent, survivor, therapist, or red-blooded police officer who doesn't agree with me. Done right, there is no argument against it that holds water, not in light of the incredible good it will do. If that manifests as what some offenders would regard as an invasion of their personal freedoms then they should not have committed the crime in the first place. That in itself speaks to how affective a registry would act as a deterrent, and personally, the circumstances around my own case demonstrate that had such a registry existed 30 years ago, the perpetrator would not have been allowed the access he had, and I would not be a victim today. Where there is information, there is no unwarranted access. Without access, there is no opportunity for abuse to occur in the first place. It is better to prevent than to cure.

I recommend a model which functions similar to MARAM, the multi-agency risk assessment and management framework recommended within the findings of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. A registry based on this model could also comprise reporting mechanisms like FVISS (family violence information sharing scheme) and CISS (child information sharing scheme) whereby if a child is identified as being at risk, or a person seeking employment which involves access to children, or a person is entering a relationship or household where children are present, a report or inquiry can be made to the relevant apparatus (Pursuant to this submission, a sex offense register) and those affected (the carer/school/workplace or household) would be notified that the person of question is listed as a sex offender. This would prevent

deliberate weaponization of the register as a punitive instrument or for purposes of vigilantism.

I would also recommend considered qualification around inclusion of offenses which might have otherwise fallen within the parameters of the similar age defense.

Prevention has always been superior to cure, and these offenses are an ill our society has for far too long tolerated. It's behoves us all to insist on the implementation of a sex offenders registry not just to ameliorate the undeniable cost of predation within every sector of society, but to demonstrate as a society just how much we value our children, the sanctity of their childhood, and in so doing safeguard their future.

#### **4. INDEPENDENT REPORTING APPARATUS**

As a victim and advocate, the development of an independent reporting apparatus is crucial to the prevention of child exploitation and achieving successful outcomes for those who have or are experiencing it.

The existing MDC programs rolled out in Victoria demonstrate how the model can work and could easily be replicated nationally were sufficient funding, governmental regulation, and increased exposure made available. I shall refer to the Bendigo branch by way of example.

The rationale for the development of the new SOCIT and MDC model arose primarily from the Victorian Law Reform Commission (2004) final report on sexual offenses, which was tabled in the Victorian Parliament in July 2004. The report documented widespread concerns about low reporting, prosecution and conviction rates for sexual assault in Victoria, and the high attrition rate of reported cases. The highly critical report referred to widespread anecdotal concerns that the previous service model suffered from fragmented, inadequate and inconsistent service delivery. The stress that victims

suffered was exacerbated by having to repeat their account to numerous service providers. The report also emphasized the prevalence of poor police attitudes toward sexual assault investigation. Attitudes of skepticism and disbelief toward victims were prevalent among sexual abuse investigators, many of whom perceived that a high percentage of reported rapes were false. Overall, the Victorian Law Reform Commission recommendations included the need for the following: increased specialization of investigators; improved working relationships between key players; and a response that was more cognizant of the context of sexual abuse and the challenges faced by victims.

It is well known that sexual abuse is significantly under-reported. There are many factors that have been known to be barriers to reporting, the factors that come to mind include but are not limited to:

- often a VS (victim/survivor) has experienced grooming, making reporting extremely complex as part of them has been manipulated to stay loyal to the perpetrator. This is a psychological control technique that is embedded over many years and can take just as many to overcome.
- when intergenerational abuse is present, the belief system of the family to keep the abuse a secret is strong. Going against the family system would often mean the VS will be alone.
- Where a child has previously disclosed to a trusted adult and not been believed there is ongoing fear of disclosing as an adult. This is extremely common. Believing a child at first disclosure and having a trauma informed service system to support the child is paramount in recovery.
- education to both children and adults about what is sexual abuse, how to identify it and what to do once you suspect you or someone else is being abused. This speaks to the need to introduce such education to existing primary school curriculum in early primary school years in an age appropriate manner as

some of the highest ratios of child disclosures arise around the age of exposure to sex education.

- training on how to respond to disclosures of sexual abuse
- training on non-verbal ways to disclose (and for other to recognise) sexual abuse (specifically for very vulnerable populations such as people with disability)
- fear of reporting sexual abuse to Victoria Police. It is intimidating to walk into a police station (intersectional considerations such as people who have a negative history with police, culture, disability), often positioned in the middle of a community so not wanting to be seen.
- The Victoria police member is often a junior member who has not been appropriately trained in responding to disclosures of sexual abuse. Additionally, have not been trained in building trauma informed rapport with the VS, asking that a VS tell their story and retell over and over leading to being re-traumatised. Often an untrained member does not understand the need for particularisation. It is critical to explain to a VS about particularisation, failing to do so has left people feeling disbelieved. Frequently uniform members do not know how to take a written statement, resourcing the VS with options to leave, take breaks, use regulation resources. They also aren't trained in knowing about and completing a VARE.
- duration of the reporting process
- receiving an inadequate options talk then leading to do a statement of no further police action.
- not having the victims charter adequately explained and not being kept up to date on the judicial process and linked in with support services in a timely manner ie. CASA, VAP, GP

The Bendigo MDC is one of eight MDCs in Victoria which aim to provide an efficient and effective trauma informed response to sexual crimes and child sexual and physical abuse.

CASA is within the Bendigo Multi-disciplinary Complex (MDC) along with:

- Victoria Police Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team (SOCIT);

- Child Protection Child Sexual Offences Investigation Team;
- Bendigo Community Health Services – Community Health Nurse; and
- Victims Assistance Program.

CASA counsellors and advocates work alongside the specialist SOCIT team, DHHS, child protection staff, community health nurses and forensic medical officers to provide an integrated model.

The Victorian Government funds the MDC model and the aim is to reform the way the criminal justice system responds to sexual assault.

It is hoped that the co-location of services and collaboration will:

- increase sexual assault and child abuse reporting rates;
- stem the attrition rates of reported matters through the criminal justice system;
- increase prosecution rates;
- reduce offending and re-offending; and
- assist the recovery of victims.

After three years of operation the MDCs were evaluated by Deakin University.

Both clients and MDC staff were interviewed and comments by people utilising MDC services highlighted the positive attributes of co-location:

*“I didn’t have to explain my whole story or the whole case or where things were at because I was only dealing with one or two police members.”*

*“It’s important because you don’t have to go shopping for things, everything’s in the one spot.”*

*“They let me know all the time what was happening.”*

*“They never once made you feel it was your fault or anything.”*

*“It is comforting knowing that unless somebody else has experienced this or either works here, they don’t know what building you’re going into.”*

Whilst I believe this model is significantly better than having to report via a police station, there are still areas of improvement. They are factors such as, CASACV is funded for therapeutic support and not case management. This means CASA struggles to allocate qualified staff to the early intervention phase such as working alongside a VS and transferring the relationship over to Victoria Police. The current emphasis has to be therapeutic work which has a one on one focus. I believe useful changes in this system would include:

- funding for case management dollars so specialist workers can take their time, being guided by the VS in building rapport and then pacing (if identified by the VS) to introduce SOCIT (Victoria police) and sit alongside them in an options talk and through the process.
- Faculty and funding for ongoing support to assist VS engaging meaningfully with society.
- the case manager would be a community connector, providing referral support and information to other useful services for the VS such as AOD, housing, disability. We know that if a person is well supported holistically, they have a better chance of recovery.
- Power to recommend application of Course of Conduct charges on behalf of highly traumatized VS
- National rollout overseen from federal level to ensure consistency of approach
- Where young victims (of both physical and online abuse) are identified as exhibiting behaviors which are considered sexually abusive, the agency would offer SABAT services to ensure early intervention and prevention. Over time this service could be expanded to the wider community.

Thank you for considering my recommendations. I applaud you for bringing this uncomfortable but necessary conversation to the floor and I'm humbled to play a small part in the long overdue change this will bring.

I look forward to working with you further in the future to continue improving law enforcement capability in child exploitation.

Sincerely,  
Madeleine West