



commission for
children and young people
and child guardian

Reporting on issues concerning children and young people

Children and young people are each day constructing their self identities and in this, the media plays an important role. The media frames public discourse¹ and although there have been many studies into the harm stemming from media effects, it is important to consider media responsibility in its influential role as creator of perceptions rather than concentrating purely on these effects.

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian believes children and young people have a right for their views to be considered seriously and to have a voice in the media. It is hoped members of the media who read this fact sheet will take these tips as they are intended: as non prescriptive suggestions to help make media more children and young people friendly. Children and young people are resilient and, if the media represents them in a true and inclusive manner, the impact could be very positive.

Useful tips

Avoid negative stereotyping of young people

An Australian survey² of 600 people found more than half the respondents thought news stories about young people were negative – only 18% could remember positive stories in the previous 12 months. While this may reflect the amount of good news in the media overall, such perceptions have the potential to reinforce negative stereotypes about young people.

It is important children and young people are not stereotyped as powerless victims (young women and children) or perpetrators of crime (young men). Regular negative stereotyping of any group, including children and young people, can contribute to feelings of alienation and hopelessness.

There is a variety of guidelines and principles to which the media may refer if they would like to learn more about ethical and responsible reporting practices. These include UNICEF's *Principles for Ethical Reporting on Children*³, which encourages reporting on children and young people that does not place them at risk of retribution or stigmatisation.

Try not to generalise

Attempts to make statistics easier to understand or more accessible to the public can sometimes change their meaning and leave stories open to misinterpretation. Care needs to be taken not to sensationalise or generalise, from a few examples, to the whole population of Queensland children and young people.

Stories can also benefit from providing website and phone details for organisations that help young people reading the story to get information on their issues or concerns.

When reporting on suicide

Reporting on health issues, particularly mental health issues, concerning children and young people can be sensitive and present challenges in terms of key messages being promoted. This is particularly

1 Livingstone, S and Milwood Hargrave, A (2006). "Harm and Offence in Media Content: A review of the evidence". Intellect Ltd, Bristol. p11.

2 Colman, A (1999). "Media". Youth Studies Australia. March, Vol.18, Issue 1, p9.

3 United Nations Children's Fund (2007). "Principles for Ethical Reporting on Children". www.unicef.org/media/media_tools_guidelines.html

pertinent to dealing with suicide⁴. Research shows that sensationalising and ‘romanticising’ suicide can ultimately result in copycat behaviour through what is known as a ‘contagion’ effect.

It is highly recommended that reports dealing with particular self-harm events should be brief and factual. Also, consider including information on associated warning signs and contact details for organisations such as:

- Beyond Blue www.beyondblue.org.au
- Lifeline www.lifeline.org.au
- Kids Help Line www.kidshelp.com.au
- Reach Out! www.reachout.com.au

When reporting on abused children and young people

When children and young people have been in contact with the child safety system there are particular restrictions on disclosing their identity in that context:

- Under s189 of the *Child Protection Act 1999* a person must not, without the Chief Executive’s written approval, publish information that identifies, or is likely to lead to the identification of, a child as:
 - a) a child who is or has been the subject of an investigation under this Act of an allegation of harm or risk of harm; or
 - b) a child in the chief executive’s custody or guardianship under this Act; or
 - c) a child for whom an order is in force.

Reports on abuse sometimes depersonalise the child involved by referring to them as ‘it’ instead of ‘him’ or ‘her’, when journalists are attempting to avoid identifying of the child involved⁵. This ‘gender neglect’ can reduce the impact of stories of abuse on the reader. Some reports also use language which implies that cases of child sexual abuse occur in a consensual relationship (particularly where young women have been abused by older men). By downplaying the seriousness of such offences, stories may unintentionally blame the abuse on the child.

When reporting on young people in contact with the youth justice system

There are provisions under the *Juvenile Justice Act 1992* which ensure that a young person’s identifying information must not be publicly reported. There are however, exceptions to this rule. Examples of these are as follows:

- Under s301 of the *Juvenile Justice Act 1992*, the publication of identifying information about a child is prohibited:
 - 1) A person must not publish identifying information about a child.
 - 2) Subsection (1) does not apply to—
 - a) publication in a way permitted by a court order; or
 - b) publication under written authority given under subsection (3).
 - 3) The chief executive may give written authority to a person to publish identifying information about a child if the chief executive is satisfied the publication is necessary to ensure a person’s safety.
- Under s234 of the Act, the court may allow publication of identifying information:
 - 1) This section applies if—
 - a) a court makes an order under section 176(3) relating to a child found guilty of a serious offence that is a life offence; and
 - b) the offence involves the commission of violence against a person; and
 - c) the court considers—

4 Smith Bailey, D (2003). “Help the media prevent copycat suicides”. *Monitor*. Vol.34, No.9, October. p14.www.apa.org/monitor/oct03/media.html

5 Goddard, C and Saunders, B (2000). “The Gender Neglect and Textual Abuse of Children in the Print Media”. *Child Abuse Review*. January/February, Vol.9, Issue 1, p37-48.

- i. the offence to be a particularly heinous offence having regard to all the circumstances; and
 - ii. that it would be in the interests of justice to allow publication of identifying information about the child.
- 2) The court may order that identifying information about the child may be published.
 - 3) The order does not authorise publication of identifying information before the end of any appeal period or, if the child gives notice of appeal or of application for leave to appeal, before any appeal proceeding has ended.

It is recommended however, before publishing or broadcasting a child’s name, consideration be given to the long term impact this can have on young offenders. Perceptions created by media stories can follow people for the rest of their lives and prevent rehabilitation.

When covering crime involving children and young people, writers should consider balancing stories by talking to youth justice advocates and young people about why such crimes occur.

Respect the privacy of children and young people

To minimise breaches of privacy and possible safety risks, public reports should not disclose personal information which identifies children and young people⁶. Restrictions on identifying children and young people involved in the child safety and juvenile justice systems are there to protect their privacy and to safeguard children from the risk of harm.

Journalists should respect the privacy of vulnerable children and young people, as identification of a child involved in the child safety system could, for example, lead to them being located by an abusive parent or family member. It is also a legislative requirement under s189 of the *Child Protection Act 1999*, as outlined above, not to publish information that identifies, or is likely to lead to the identification of, a child in these circumstances.

In addition, there are privacy issues affecting the best interests of all children and young people under 16. The Commission provides guidelines on matters to consider when taking photos or film of young people in Fact Sheet 3.

When interviewing young people, it is important to conduct the interview in a manner which does not exploit, misrepresent, or give unrealistic expectations to them about their contribution or editorial control.

For more information

Australian Press Council	www.presscouncil.org.au
Commercial Radio Australia	www.commercialradio.com.au
Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts	www.dcita.gov.au
FreeTV Australia	www.freetvaust.com.au
Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance	www.alliance.org.au
MediaWise	www.mediawise.org.uk
Office of the Federal Privacy Commissioner	www.privacy.gov.au

⁶ Australian Press Council (2006). “Privacy Standards”. www.presscouncil.org.au/pcsite/complaints/priv_stand.html