

Youth voices the key to safety in faith-based organisations

Faith-based organisations need to address issues of power dynamics, familiarity, concerning behaviour and judgement to make young people feel safe and prevent child abuse, according to new Australian Catholic University research released in the lead up to National Child Protection Week.

The Institute of Child Protection Studies, which conducted the research, has also called on clergy and religious leaders at youth-serving organisations to ask young people directly what safety means to them, how they perceive risk, and what they need from adults to feel safe.

“We think we know what they want, but we haven’t asked them,” ICPS Senior Research Officer Douglass Russell said.

“What adults perceive as safe is not the same as how children and young people perceive safety. For adults it’s about kids being safe, but when young people were asked about it, it was also about *feeling safe*.”

The Safeguarding in Church: Children and young people’s perceptions of safety in religious and other faith-based settings study involved focus groups with children aged 11 to 17 from two youth-serving organisations of different Christian denominations.

It identified four themes linked to children’s sense of safety: power, familiarity, concerning behaviour, and judgement.

Power dynamics in religious organisations impacted on safety with young people feeling like they could not refuse requests made by adults. And while misuse of a trusted relationship could facilitate abuse, a lack of familiarity was also found to make young people feel unsafe.

“It’s a two-edged sword. We know that to become familiar without balancing oversights you can end up with grooming, but young people tell us without familiarity and comfort with people they don’t feel safe either,” ICPS Director Professor Daryl Higgins said.

Concerning behaviour related to behaviours young people considered inappropriate or distressing, while judgement referred to how other people’s views of them impacted on their sense of safety – particularly if they were same-sex attracted or non-binary.

“Feeling judged or inadequate impacts on their sense of safety,” Professor Higgins said.

“We need to make improvements in the area of safeguarding, and we need to do this through the voices of young people.”

The research findings have been used to form scenarios as part of ICPS’s Children and Young People’s Safety research project, which provides surveys for organisations to use to assess young people’s perceptions of safety and improve safeguarding practices.

Questions faith-based organisations can ask youth members to ensure their voices are heard:

1. Have you noticed things in our organisation that make you feel concerned or unsafe?
2. Are there particular places, activities, or times where you have felt concerned or unsafe?
3. What do you think we could do to make our organisation a safer place and help build relationships to make you feel safe?

Link to the research: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2Fo8862605221117548>

Link to the Measuring Safety surveys: <https://safeguardingchildren.acu.edu.au/measuring-safety>

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