



aUSDANCE
ACT

Children's and Young People's Feelings of Safety Survey

2025 Report: Dance Schools ACT



Background and objectives

From 1 August 2024, the ACT introduced mandatory requirements under the *Human Rights Commission Act 2005 (ACT)* requiring organisations providing services for children and young people to commence implementing the Child Safe Standards Scheme (Scheme). The ACT Child Safe Standards (the Standards) align with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (National Principles), which were developed following recommendations by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission). The National Principles were developed to help make organisations safer for children and young people and better protect them from abuse or harm. In the ACT, the Scheme is broader than child sexual abuse, and focuses on all forms of abuse and discrimination, and centres on protecting the rights, safety, and wellbeing of children and young people.

The ACT Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) is supporting organisations and sectors in the ACT to implement the Child Safe Standards. The CYPC supports organisations to embed child rights into practice, including by facilitating opportunities for children and young people to participate and inform safeguarding practices. Hearing directly from children and young people about their feelings of safety is critical to successfully implementing the Standards, as there is a strong association between *feeling safe* and *being safe*.

In partnership with Ausdance ACT, a short survey for dance students was prepared, seeking their views about safety when participating in dance. Ausdance ACT requested inclusion in evidence-gathering activities to support their sector to better embed the Standards in practice.

The survey provided a structured mechanism to hear from children and young people directly and provided an avenue for baselining the effectiveness of current policies, practices, and safeguards in dance schools. It was also an opportunity to test whether the Standards will make a tangible difference to how safe children and young people feel in dance schools, over time.

The insights gathered from the survey data form an important part of the implementation approach in helping organisations improve their processes and practices to reduce the likelihood of harm to children and young people. Year-on-year administration of the survey is proposed to build an evidence base to support the Scheme's five-year review and show progress over time.

Background to the Survey

The original survey was developed by academics at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) for the Royal Commission to better understand children and young people's feelings of safety when participating in activities within organisations.

The ACT Children and Young People Commissioner, in partnership with Ausdance ACT, contextualised the survey for the dance sector, and restructured it to be shorter and easier for children and young people to understand.

Children and young people attending dance schools in the ACT were advised about the opportunity to participate in the survey through social media, Ausdance ACT newsletters, and posters displayed in dance studios. The survey was anonymous, participation was voluntary (with only the consent to participate question being mandatory), and respondents could exit the survey at any time. The survey was aimed at dancers aged eight to 17 years old, with parental or guardian consent required for participants under 12 years of age. The survey opened on 30 April 2025 and closed on 5 July 2025.

Methodology

The survey explored children's and young people's feelings of safety in the context of dance schools, with a particular focus on identifying safety risks, barriers to help-seeking, and the effectiveness of current safeguarding measures. Respondents were asked to consider one of three scenarios where a child or a young person might find themselves in a situation of physical harm, body shaming, or emotional harm. The scenarios are provided at **Attachment A**.

All participants were subsequently presented with a common scenario related to grooming behaviours. These scenarios, jointly developed by Ausdance ACT and the CYPC office, attempted to reflect realistic situations where children and young people may experience feelings of being unsafe in a dance school environment.

For scenario-based questions, participants were asked about:

- The likelihood a child or young person would be in that situation
- Who they would turn to if they felt unsafe
- What barriers might prevent them from seeking help, and
- Their degree of confidence in adults to appropriately respond if a child or a young person was feeling unsafe.

The survey also asked children and young people whether they felt safe within their organisation, and whether they believed their dance school was doing enough to keep them safe.

Analysis of results

Responses that included only demographic information, without substantive survey input, were excluded prior to analysis. Following this screening process, a total of **33 valid responses** remained for inclusion.

Considering the low number of responses, analysis was undertaken through a close review of individual responses and the identification of key themes. This approach yielded relevant insights.

Although the overall number of respondents was small, the responses provided a window into the dance sector with useful insights for dance studio owners and staff to consider the risks to child safety and evaluate their practices. Findings presented in the accompanying infographic at **Attachment B**, are considered reliable as they validate the findings from the original ICPS study.¹

¹ Russell, D.H., & Higgins, D. J. (2021). Children and young people's safety: 2018-2020 Report. Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University. <https://doi.org/10.26199/sjap-kn57>

Key findings

- **Younger children expressed concerns more readily:** Children under 12 were twice as likely as older peers to voice worries, yet half of all respondents believed that things would get worse if they told a grown-up at their dance school about an unsafe situation.
- **Proactive adult responsibility was expected:** Two-thirds of participants wanted adults to notice discomfort and intervene without waiting for a child or a young person to speak up.
- **Encouraging safety awareness:** 60 per cent of respondents said they knew what to do if an unsafe situation had arisen due to prior discussions at their dance school.

Feelings of safety remain mixed: While 75 per cent of respondents believed their dance schools were doing enough to keep them safe, significant risks were still reported:

- 70 per cent agreed they might find themselves facing body shaming
- 33 per cent agreed they might find themselves in a situation of physical harm
- 33 per cent agreed they might find themselves in a situation of emotional harm
- 29 per cent agreed they might find themselves in a grooming situation.²

Preferred sources of support: When unsafe, children and young people reported that they were most likely to turn to their mum/step-mum (77 per cent) and friends (48 per cent). Dad/stepdad (35 per cent) and teachers (35 per cent) were also identified, but to a lesser extent.

² In the context of our survey, *grooming* referred to a situation where a dance teacher sought to build trust with a dancer and gradually blur professional or personal boundaries. This involved suggestions of special attention, initiating contact outside the dance setting (including via social media), and engaging in behaviours that may cause discomfort or increase vulnerability to exploitation like physical touch without explicit consent.

Limitations

Several limitations to the survey findings were identified:

Dissemination bias: The survey was disseminated to children and young people by dance schools (on behalf of Ausdance ACT and the CYPC), which may have influenced its low reach and uptake. Given the low number of valid responses, there is uncertainty about transparency and consistency in dissemination in that dissemination may not have occurred randomly and on a public scale (as intended), and instead could have been more narrowly targeted, thereby constraining the ability to capture reliable data.

Low response rate: Only 33 valid responses were received from a total of 200 dance schools operating in the ACT. This equates to fewer than a quarter of a response per dance school. This significantly constrains the ability to generalise findings, as a significant number of dance schools and children and young people attending those schools did not contribute to the survey.

Consent-related bias in responses from younger children: The requirement for parent/guardian consent may have influenced participation rates by younger children, and potential moderation of responses. While it is difficult to determine if this occurred, the involvement of a parent/carer may have influenced children's willingness to disclose safety concerns. There was also the potential for responses to be filtered or minimised by the consentor if concerns were raised by a child. Parents/carers may also have contributed to responses if they helped complete the survey, and this would influence what was heard directly from the child. There may therefore be validity concerns for responses provided by children under 12 years, if parent/carer participation shaped or limited the accuracy of their perspectives.

Trust in the survey process: As this was a new approach to evidence gathering within the dance sector in the ACT, conducted under the auspices of both a statutory and peak industry body, some respondents may have been reluctant to share openly due to concerns about anonymity or potential consequences. It is anticipated, however, that trust and engagement will increase with future iterations over consecutive years, once the process becomes more familiar and embedded.

Importance of Child Safe Standards

The survey highlighted both positive perceptions and areas of vulnerability within the ACT dance sector. While most children and young people reported generally feeling safe, they expressed risks of body shaming, lack of confidence in adults, and lack of knowledge of their rights in unsafe situations, which underscores the critical role of the Standards. The Standards provide a framework for organisations to actively foster cultures where children's rights, safety, and wellbeing is prioritised.

The findings emphasised the importance of the Standards for the following core reasons:

- **Preventing normalisation of harmful behaviour:** The high proportion of respondents who expected body shaming or emotional harm to occur indicated that children and young people may perceive these risks as part of the dance environment. The Standards provide a vehicle for shifting culture towards inclusivity, respect, and wellbeing, ensuring such behaviours are challenged early.
- **Building trust and responsiveness:** Half of the children and young people surveyed believed that speaking up might make things worse. This reflects a lack of confidence in adults to listen and act protectively. Embedding the Standards requires adults in dance schools to proactively notice distress, take responsibility, and ensure children and young people are never left to manage unsafe situations on their own.
- **Strengthening participation:** Children and young people reported most frequently turning to their carers or peers for support, rather than teachers or studio owners. This builds on the previous key point that highlights a gap in organisational trust and reinforces the need for child-inclusive strategies where children and young people feel safe to seek help from adults within their dance schools.

In this way, the Standards can not only help to reduce the likelihood of harm but also create environments where children and young people are empowered to express concerns and where adults are equipped to respond with care and accountability.

Considerations for Dance Schools

The survey findings suggest several priority areas for dance schools as they work towards embedding the Child Safe Standards in practice:

- 1. *Strengthening adult responsibility and vigilance:*** Dance teachers and studio owners need to understand their responsibility for noticing when children and young people are uncomfortable, distressed, or unsafe, rather than relying on them to initiate disclosure.
- 2. *Promoting body positivity and respectful practices:*** With 70 per cent of participants indicating body shaming as a potential risk, dance schools need clear policies and staff training that affirm body diversity and prioritise respectful communication.
- 3. *Creating safe reporting pathways:*** Children and young people need to have multiple, trusted avenues to raise concerns, including confidential and age-appropriate mechanisms that do not depend solely on parents/carers. Dance schools should reinforce that no child or young person will face negative consequences for speaking up and ensure that reports are always taken seriously and acted upon.
- 4. *Embedding a culture of inclusion:*** Dance schools should actively model inclusion, equality, and respect for all children and young people, ensuring a culture of zero tolerance for discrimination and exclusion, and addressing such issues immediately.
- 5. *Engaging parents and carers constructively:*** While parents/carers were identified as the most trusted support, dance schools should engage parents/carers as partners in safeguarding, by sharing clear information about policies, reporting processes, and expectations of respectful behaviour. Dance schools should also ensure children and young people can raise concerns independently of their parents/carers.
- 6. *Prioritising the voice of children and young people:*** Regularly engagement of children and young people about their feelings of safety by teachers and studio owners helps keep safeguarding measures relevant and effective.

Focus areas for sector-wide improvement

To support lasting change across the ACT dance sector, the following areas warrant sector-wide attention:

- **Workforce development:** A structured program of ongoing training for dance teachers and administrators is required to build confidence in identifying, responding to, and preventing harm.
- **Consistent policies and practices:** Establishing minimum child safe policy and code of conduct requirements across the sector will promote consistency and clarity, ensuring all dance schools are working from the same baseline standards.
- **Monitoring and accountability:** Clear systems for tracking progress, supported by a survey process and data collection, will provide evidence of improvement and highlight areas needing additional focus.
- **Cultural change:** Embedding the Standards is not a one-off compliance exercise. It requires sustained leadership commitment and modelling of safe and respectful behaviour across all levels in organisations.

Conclusion

The survey results reinforce the importance of the Standards as both a protective framework and a cultural change tool for the dance sector. They also highlight the progress and ongoing challenges with ensuring the safety of children and young people in organisations, including dance schools.

While many participants felt supported and confident in seeking help, significant risks (including body shaming, grooming, and barriers to disclosure) were highlighted and remain a concern. Although it is acknowledged that the number of valid responses were small, any concerns raised by children and young people indicate important work is still to be done to improve child safety.

These findings emphasise the importance of actively listening to children and young people, equipping staff with the skills and knowledge to respond effectively, and embedding child-safe practices across all aspects of dance education. Over time, embedding the Standards across the dance sector will help ensure that every child and young person in the ACT can participate in dance with the confidence that they are safe, valued, and supported.

Attachment A

Scenario 1 – Emotional Harm

Casey is 8 years old and has been dancing for two years. Casey dances for fun and fitness and has not competed in competitions before. This year, Casey's class will be participating in a large regional competition in two weeks. The teacher has often criticised Casey's level of flexibility and has suggested Casey needs to go back to juniors to learn the basics. In class and in front of the other students, the teacher has told Casey they look sloppy and uncoordinated. At some lessons the teacher has removed Casey from their position in the troupe and had the class close up the gap, while Casey practices alone at the back of the room. At the beginning of yesterday's lesson, Casey told the teacher they would not be able to compete due to an unexpected family crisis. The teacher responded by telling Casey they had let the entire troupe down. Casey was then told to move to the back of the room for this class and not to bother coming to the next few practice classes.

Scenario 2 – Physical harm

Alex is 12 and loves going to dancing. Alex does a few different dance styles and goes three times a week; more if there is a workshop or a concert to prepare for. Alex's teacher said Alex has the makings of a professional dancer, if they are prepared to put in the hard work. Alex has been taking private lessons for the past six months and will perform solos at the end of year concert. Lately, during lessons, Alex has felt pressured to push their body beyond its limits, and at the previous private lesson, the teacher overstretched Alex's muscles, causing pain. The teacher told Alex there are lots of other students with talent who won't complain when they are helped to reach their potential. Alex doesn't want to disappoint their teacher, appreciates the extra help, and can see how their dancing has improved.


Scenario 3 – Body shaming

Charlie is 15 years old and wants to audition to attend a premier dance school interstate. Charlie has always wanted a career in dance and knows their family has sacrificed a lot to send Charlie to summer schools, examinations, competitions and performances. Charlie has always been a bit self-conscious, especially as the teacher repeatedly tells them they do not have the right body shape for a dancer and will need to lose a few kilos if they ever expect to be selected for professional roles. Charlie's parents have been worried about how much time Charlie spends at the dance studio and has been pressuring Charlie to eat more.


Scenario 4 – Grooming

Ash had been taking lessons at their local dance school before moving to Canberra and starting at a new studio. Ash notices the other kids in the class seem really sure of themselves and are a pretty tight group. Ash has been feeling unsure about being ready for the examinations coming up later in the year, so when the teacher takes a special interest, Ash feels relieved. Ash's teacher offers to meet up with Ash outside formal lessons for one-on-one coaching to help fast track progress and sends Ash a personal message on Facebook to arrange a time. Ash does not think meeting up with their teacher outside lessons is an issue because the teacher is helping Ash to improve their technique. The teacher also sends friend requests to Ash on Instagram and Snapchat. Ash really wants to do well and accepts. Ash notices the teacher has liked several posts where Ash has uploaded photos in costumes and poses from their previous dance school. Ash is unsure how to feel about how the teacher is correcting their body posture, especially as Ash's teacher at the last dance school was really careful to ask permission before any hands-on correction with the dancers.

Attachment B





**Children and Young People's
Feelings of Safety Survey**



Who participated?

33 Children and Young People





<10 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

≥25% Children aged 8 to 12
≤75% Young Persons aged 12-18

91% **Female**
<10% **Male**
<10% **Gender Diverse**

<10% of children and young people spoke languages other than English

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How likely would it be that a Child/Young Person is in an unsafe situation

- 33% agreed they might find themselves in a situation of physical harm
- 70% agreed they might find themselves facing body shaming
- 33% agreed they might find themselves in a situation of emotional harm
- 29% agreed they might find themselves in a grooming situation


Who would you tell if you were in an unsafe situation

77%




Mum/Step-Mum

35%




Dad/Step-Dad

48%



A Friend

35%



A Teacher

Children under 12 years old are twice as likely to voice their concerns as the older cohort

2 in 3 respondents wanted a grown-up to notice that a child is uncomfortable and to step in and do something about it

1 in 2 respondents thought things would get worse if they told a grown-up at their dance school about an unsafe situation

60% of respondents said they would know what to do in an unsafe situation because they have discussed it at their dance school

75% of respondents felt dance schools are doing enough to keep them safe

Organisational safety

Consideration for Dance Schools

Barriers to help-Seeking

Implementation of Child Safe Standards

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