



Creating a culture of safety

**Key considerations for Early
Childhood Education and Care and
Outside of School Hours Care settings**



Content Warning

The content in this guide has been developed in collaboration with educators in the Early Childhood Education and Care and Outside School Hours sector. It contains content about keeping children safe from harm.

The content may be distressing or triggering for some readers. The Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) recognises that staff working closely with children may be personally or professionally impacted by this material.

We encourage you to prioritise your wellbeing and to engage with the content at your own pace. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, please take a break, seek support or discuss your response with a trusted colleague or supervisor.

Managers and team leaders are encouraged to be mindful of staff reactions and to foster a safe, supportive environment for reflection.

Creating a Culture of Safety:

Key considerations for responding to safety concerns in Early Childhood Education and Care and Outside of School Hours Care settings.

Developed in collaboration with attendees of the ECA/NOSHSA
Child Safe Standards forum on 12 April 2025.

Introduction

This guide offers practical strategies to help embed the ACT Child Safe Standards and uphold the rights of children (and young people)¹ in your organisation. By being proactive and protective, every adult has the potential to be a safe adult in a child's life, regardless of their role. Creating a child safe culture is not just a leadership responsibility. All staff must all play their part to create the conditions where children feel safe, heard, and empowered.

When everyone demonstrates attitudes and behaviours that uphold the rights, safety, and wellbeing of children, organisations build a child safe culture.

A child safe organisation is one that puts the best interests of the child before the organisation's reputation or the wishes of any individual within it. When difficult interactions occur, it can be challenging for staff or volunteers to step in or know what to do, particularly if other adults involved are more experienced or senior. However, child safe organisations empower their staff to advocate for children when they see or hear concerning attitudes or behaviours towards children.

Organisations must have robust processes and clear guidance in place, along with leadership that encourages open and honest dialogue to safeguard against complacency, apathy or fear of repercussions.

Staff and volunteers will feel more confident taking deliberate steps to protect children from harm when safety is part of the everyday fabric of the organisation. The research shows that having policies and public commitment statements alone does not create a child safe culture. It is the actions safe adults take that makes a difference. This means knowing how to protect the rights, safety, and wellbeing of children and how to support others to adopt these practices.

Please note: this guide should be read in conjunction with the National Quality Standards and Child Safety Guide. Managers and staff may also wish to consider the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics to learn more about how to embed responsive and respectful child safe practices in their service.

1. All future references to children will be deemed to refer to both children and young people, in the context of Outside School Hours Care where a student is over the age of 12 years, recognising the majority of attendees are children.

1. Staff selection, training, and ongoing development

A child safe culture where staff, visitors, and volunteers respect children and interact positively with them starts with attracting, training, and retaining the right people. It is critical that a child safe organisation can identify and recruit people who understand safety, value children, and have the skills to build positive, respectful relationships with them. How your organisation values children will be conveyed through your job descriptions, advertisements, and recruitment processes. Applying good practices also extends to how you select visiting providers, such as music, dance, and health professionals, as well as pre-service educators on field placements.

If children are visible, and the focus on their safety is clearly articulated through all your processes, this supports existing and potential staff and visitors to understand the culture and values that exist within your organisation. Risks to children thrive in environments where secrecy occurs, where the focus is diverted from the needs of children, and where staff knowledge, skills, and attitudes are not regularly tested and checked.



[Click here to Learn about child safe recruitment practices](#)



What staff and managers can do

- Make sure all staff involved in recruitment understand how to embed the child safe standards into your practices.
- Conduct thorough reference checks and background checks.
- Make sure there is more than one person involved in interviews and background checking.
- Ensure child safety is mandatory in induction and ongoing training.
- Have a child safe policy and code of conduct policy written in simple language and ensure all staff have read and understood them.
- Include all staff in training on your procedures for raising and reporting concerns.
- Include 'Protecting and promoting child rights, safety, and wellbeing' as a regular agenda item for discussion in team meetings.
- Ensure all staff, volunteers, and visitors have a Working with Vulnerable People (WWVP) registration. This helps create a culture of safety by setting clear expectations for everyone.

2. Setting expectations and leading by example

How your organisation interacts with children on a day-to-day basis sets the standard for its staff and volunteers. If children feel valued, respected, and listened to, they will be more likely to communicate to staff (verbally or through their behaviour) when they are worried about something. When children feel safe to talk about the little things that worry them, they are more likely to trust adults with more serious issues.

Although managers and executives are responsible for establishing clear mandates, every person in the organisation must lead by example, maintain professional boundaries, and treat every child with respect and dignity. Staff help to hold each other accountable for creating a safe environment by modelling appropriate behaviours, speaking up if they are concerned about behaviour that does not align with appropriate standards of care, and reporting attitudes or behaviours that undermine children's feelings of safety.



Talk about difficult topics and create opportunities through training, team meetings, and individual supervision to teach staff how to respond to children and other adults in a protective and supportive way. Creating a culture of openness, asking questions without judgement, and seeking advice will encourage curiosity, create greater consistency, and ultimately increase individual and group accountability.



What staff can do

- Use language that is inclusive, encouraging, and developmentally appropriate.
- Support each other as a team, especially if you notice another staff member is having a challenging day.
- Give each other feedback and use this as an opportunity to grow as a team.
- Diffuse difficult situations in a proactive and supportive manner, ensuring the welfare of the child is upheld as the primary consideration.



What managers can do

- Display a public statement to show your commitment to child safety at your workplace and use team meetings to discuss how a child or parent/carer would know you are meeting this commitment.
- Positively reinforce and encourage those actions that demonstrate awareness, transparency, and communication.
- Use language that is inclusive, encouraging, and developmentally appropriate.
- Give staff regular feedback, including highlighting what they are doing well.
- Provide training on how staff can raise concerns safely, and practice this during team meetings.
- Be clear with staff that the organisation takes a zero-tolerance approach to abuse, neglect, bullying, racism, and belittling of children, and reinforce this through actions and words.
- Encourage staff to raise their concerns and ensure there are no adverse consequences for speaking up.
- Be clear with staff about what they can expect from their manager when a concern is raised.





What staff and managers can do

- Use the correct names for body parts to empower children to have the language to talk about things that worry them.
- Believe and affirm children's experiences when they raise concerns.
- Listen with both your eyes and your ears: pay attention to non-verbal cues and body-language. Notice how children respond to adults or other children. If they are not engaging, closed off, or seeking more personal space, it may be a sign that something is worrying them.
- Normalise personal space by talking about it with children. Show them how you are respecting their personal space and how they can respect others.
- Model consent by always asking permission before physical contact.
- Review all practices and make sure children's consent is clearly included.
- Empower children by giving them the time and skills to do things for themselves.
- Be alert to the interactions other adults have with children, especially if those interactions are taking place away from others. Ensure staff and volunteers know their interactions are being observed. This helps to create a culture of accountability.
- Be aware of the indicators of abuse, neglect, and trauma responses in children.



Important note: There is an important difference between asking a child if something is worrying them and asking questions to elicit detailed and specific information.

If a child discloses that another adult has made them feel or be unsafe, staff and volunteers must report this to a person in your organisation. It must also be escalated to their sector regulator.

Staff must not report this disclosure to anyone the child has named as the person responsible for causing harm.

4. Managing risk

Risks are those things that may occur in an organisation and mitigation is about putting measures in place to prevent those risks occurring. Risk in the context of a child safe organisation is about identifying the factors that can leave a child vulnerable to sexual exploitation, physical or emotional abuse, or neglect if left unchecked. A clear way to reduce risk is to ensure the needs of children are prioritised above individual or organisational reputations.



**Talk about what risk looks like in your organisation.
Make sure all staff and volunteers know about risk in the day-to-day activities of your organisation and how these should be managed.**



What staff can do

- Understand what risks exist in your organisation and how they should be mitigated.
- Follow all agreed procedures in your organisation and talk to a manager or person in authority if a procedure is not followed.
- Know how to step in to redirect any interactions from staff that are not respectful and follow up with your colleague afterwards. Check they understand why you stepped in and offer to role play/work through how they could have managed the interaction differently.
- If you see something, say something! Talk to a manager or person in authority in your organisation if something troubles you, even if you are unsure whether it is a problem or not.
- Always speak up if you notice patterns of behaviour that cause you concern or that may (or do) cause harm to a child.
- Document your concerns.
- Ensure children are not left alone with an adult. This protects both children and adults.



What managers can do

- Be clear with all staff about what unacceptable behaviour towards children looks like. Ensure there are clear procedures and that everyone has read and understood them, so all staff know what to do if they observe any of these unacceptable behaviours.
- Provide examples and use staff training sessions to help staff practice what they can say to each other to interrupt actions in ways that will not undermine their relationship with the children.
- Have agreed processes for staff to step in to redirect interactions that are not respectful and follow up with all staff involved afterwards.
- Ensure managers are available to help staff discuss their observations or actions. Build these discussions into staff meetings and staff supervision.
- Have clear procedures for all hands-on activities with children, particularly personal care, so staff understand expectations.
- Encourage staff to speak up when procedures are not followed and seek to understand why they were not followed. If needed, revise procedures to ensure they are fit-for-purpose and provide clarity for staff.
- Be clear about what staff should do if an incident is directly witnessed, or a child makes a disclosure.
- Document concerns and know when and how to report an issue. Follow your organisation's reporting procedures.
- Ask parents/carers, community members, and children (where developmentally appropriate) to review your procedures and act on their feedback.



5. Safe toileting

Independently managing toileting is a critical life skill that takes time to develop. This means that young children are dependent on adults to manage this for them and to teach them good toileting behaviours in a manner that is developmentally appropriate. Some children take longer than others to master this skill, and there are other factors, such as medical issues, disability or trauma that can influence what and when children are able to do for themselves. In direct care settings, this is an important but high-risk activity (refer to topic 3, Managing Risk). Having clear procedures that balance privacy with safety and empower children will help your organisation to reduce risks or anxiety about providing personal care services.



Talk about the physical layout of your service and how you can balance privacy with supervision to help children feel safe during nappy changes and toileting assistance. Identify any factors in the environment, such as noise, blind spots, or adults on site and how safety can be addressed.



What staff can do

- Seek consent from the child before commencing nappy changes or assisting with toileting. Tell the child what is involved in undertaking the nappy change or toilet training and respond to questions positively and accurately.
- Use correct terminology for body parts and correct others when they use incorrect names.
- Stop if the child becomes distressed and calm them. If you are not able to calm the child, acknowledge their feelings and show genuine concern. If necessary, ask another staff member to step in.
- Where possible, have gender neutral toilets. If this is not possible, allow children to choose which one they use.
- Implement each child's individual toileting plan in line with the parent/carer's instructions, while respecting the child's developing autonomy.
- Review toileting plans with parents/carers and reduce adult involvement as the child's skills develop.



What managers can do

- Make sure that only those staff who are authorised to do so are doing nappy changes or toilet training.
- Enable children to manage their toileting in line with their developing independence, in a way that balances their need for privacy as well as their safety.
- Ensure children are safe when toileting independently by having clear procedures that maintain privacy from other children and adults.
- Create a personalised plan in partnership with parents/carers for children who are not yet toileting independently, particularly those with additional needs.
- Ensure each child's individual toileting plan is regularly reviewed and adjusted to reflect changes in their developmental needs.
- Ensure there is clear line of sight to these areas and step in immediately if unauthorised people are in these areas. Ask questions and document the behaviour, responses, and follow up actions.
- Have clearly displayed signs stating that children's toilets are not for adult use and/or are off limits to all visitors and non-designated staff.
- Ensure all staff have been trained to understand child developmental stages.
- Have active and ongoing conversations with staff about each child's toileting needs and review your staff practices and procedures regularly.



6. Positive connection

Children communicate with adults both verbally and non-verbally. Even children who are not able to form words can often communicate with sounds to tell us what they are feeling or to get our attention. It is important for adults to observe both the verbal and non-verbal cues used by children and try to understand what they mean for each individual child.

Behaviour that does not conform to adult requests or expectations should be understood as communication and can help to indicate that a child may feel unsafe, anxious, angry, or has unmet needs. Staff and volunteers working with children need to have a strong understanding of child development, and the ability to form meaningful connections with them.



What staff can do

- Get to know each individual child in your care and learn their communication style.
- Provide time and space for children to safely express strong emotions and make sure that an adult who the child trusts is present to help the child regain self-regulation.
- Identify what each child likes and what they are sensitive to and create daily rituals that provide choice to foster autonomy and empowerment.
- Teach children about feelings and help them learn to use the correct words to describe what they are feeling.
- Have a plan that everyone knows and can follow. This should be developed in partnership with the parents/carers and must be non-punitive and supportive.
- Remain calm and try to understand what is happening from the child's perspective.
- Check in with team members who are dealing with a child's strong emotions. Do they need help to create the time and space to support the child? Encourage or support debriefing afterwards, to ensure they are okay to resume care responsibilities with the child or other children.



What managers can do

- Ensure your recruitment practices are effective for identifying staff with a good grasp of child development and the ability to connect with children.
- Ensure staff are trained in responding supportively to strong emotions.
- Observe interactions and ensure that all staff are using supportive techniques to address big behaviours.
- Provide induction and ongoing training on communication, empowerment, and understanding the needs of children.
- Immediately intervene if multiple staff become involved in a situation as this is disempowering and potentially frightening for the child.
- Provide debriefing to staff who are dealing with children's strong emotions, to ensure they have appropriately dealt with their own emotions before resuming care responsibilities.
- Monitor staff and child interactions to ensure these remain positive and free from bias, bullying, or racism.
- Use staff meetings to communicate expectations, as well as creating a culture of understanding, safety, and care.



Conclusion

Embedding the ACT Child Safe Standards is about creating environments where children feel safe, valued, and heard. When we act together—by being trustworthy, truly listening and taking action, we uphold their rights and create spaces where they feel confident to speak up and know they will be protected.

Because feeling safe is being safe!





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