

# HARMS AND BENEFITS

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## **Interviewing young people on sensitive topics: An iterative approach**

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### ***Background context:***

In 2015, a Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was established to understand the nature and extent of sexual abuse that occurred in Australian institutions and to determine ways that past failures might be avoided into the future. In addition to private sessions with survivors, public forums and case studies that investigated occurrences of abuse and organisation's responses the Royal Commission implemented an ambitious research agenda to gather new knowledge to enhance strategies for identifying and responding to child sexual abuse. As part of this agenda, the Royal Commission contracted us to complete a series of studies to understand how children and young people think about and experience safety and ways that they would like adults and organisations to prevent abuse and respond when children are harmed. One group of children and young people who were deemed most vulnerable to institutional child sexual abuse, peer sexual violence and exploitation were those living in residential care. Understandably, the Royal Commission and various stakeholders and gatekeepers were anxious about researchers engaging children and young people about issues such as child sexual abuse. In addition to concerns that discussing such topics might be triggering for survivors of abuse, stakeholders were fearful that in participating in the study some young people would be introduced to content and safety threats to which they had not previously been exposed. However, the Royal Commission was adamant that children and young people should be provided an opportunity to engage in this important discussion.

### ***The ethical challenge:***

As with other research with children and young people, we were confronted with the ethical and practical challenge of both providing young people an opportunity to contribute to discussions about child sexual abuse but also protecting them from material that was sensitive and might cause them discomfort or distress.



### **Choices made:**

The exploratory nature of the study helped with this ethical challenge: we wanted to know how young people living in residential care understand and experience “safety” and to then capture the ways that adults and organisations meet (or fail to meet) their identified safety needs. This allowed us to put aside our own ideas on what safety means for young people and be driven by young people themselves. Rather than developing interview schedules with pre-determined questions focusing on areas that we thought were relevant to young people we needed to develop a method where we could be curious and where the focus of the interviews was driven by young people themselves. This made methodological sense and also enabled us to work ethically and avoid introducing new ideas that might cause potential harm.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed which was iterative: it began with an invitation for young people to share what they felt safety was for young people *like themselves* and what it was like for young people to live in residential care that was either “safe” or “unsafe”. By inviting young people to consider the safety needs of “people like them” we attempted to provide young people the opportunity to distance themselves from the content and not disclose their own experiences, particularly in relation to child sexual abuse or exploitation.

In setting up the interviews, participants were offered a choice over where and when the interview would take place, whether they were interviewed by a male or female researcher and if they had a support person present. Young people were then also provided some control over how the interviews unfolded, as follows.

During the interview, young people’s safety needs and safety concerns were captured on mind-maps labelled “safe” and “unsafe” which assisted young people to consider “when”, “where”, “who” and “what” helped them feel safe or compromised their safety. Researchers then asked young people to choose some of the safety needs from their own maps and consider ways that organisations were or were not responding to either prevent or respond to these needs. Young people were therefore given the chance to determine what they did and didn’t speak about. In some instances, this meant that the interviews considered tangential topics but ones that were of importance to them. Young people were then asked to prioritise the topics that they had identified, particularly those most relevant to the work of the Royal Commission.

Finally, young people were asked what young people like them would need from adults and organisations if they encountered the risks that they had identified and

prioritised and to gauge the extent to which residential care was meeting young people's safety needs. Young people shared their observations, their critiques and determined expectations for adults and organisations.

The data that was captured through individual interviews were often quite varied. This proved to be tricky during analysis in that we were only able to consider topics determined important for young people themselves. For example, as most of the younger participants did not choose to talk about concerns related to inappropriate adult-child relationships we were only able to account for older participants views and experiences. However, the younger group spent time talking about how experiences like bullying compromised their sense of safety (a topic that was deemed secondary to older participants) so we were able to write more deeply about this topic area.

### ***Reflexive considerations:***

Our approach proved to have both strengths and weaknesses. It required us to be flexible and responsive and, in many cases, to be intuitive. We needed to deeply listen and work reflexively, asking:

- What are young people telling us and where should the conversation go?
- What topics that young people raised were more important to them and to what extent do we probe?
- How do we use our professional judgment to ensure that young people could talk about things that were important to them but in ways that were safe?

In writing about the findings, we also needed to check that we were using the data and young people's lived experience to shape our discussions:

- Are the topics we are prioritising the ones that young people were preferencing?
- As the project had set research questions, how did we balance the project's priorities with those the young people had established?
- How, through member checking, might we ensure that our accounts of young people's experiences reflect their needs and wishes?

By no means do we believe that our approach was infallible but by allowing young people to self-navigate through interviews we found that we were able to implement a process that was ethical and balanced young people's need for

protection and their right to engage in a study on a topic that proved to be important to them.

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### **References**

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