

doi.org/10.61605/cha_3117

Volume 48 Suppl.1

Article type: Conference Report

The Worried About Sex and Pornography Project: The role of a national online early intervention service (What's ok? Australia) in responding to the growing prevalence of harmful sexual behaviour by young people

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CITATION: Bateman, J. (2026). The Worried About Sex and Pornography Project: The role of a national online early intervention service (What's ok? Australia) in responding to the growing prevalence of harmful sexual behaviour by young people. *Children Australia*, 48(Suppl.1), 3117. doi.org/10.61605/cha_3117

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Background/Issue

Child sexual abuse is a major public health issue with profound and lasting impacts on victims, their families and communities (McKibbin & Humphreys, 2020). Beyond the significant health and social consequences, it also creates considerable economic and societal costs (Blakemore et al., 2017; Kezelman et al., 2015).

Although public attention often focuses on adults who perpetrate abuse, child sexual abuse can also be perpetrated by young people (Quadara et al., 2015). Findings from the Australian Childhood Maltreatment Study show that, among participants aged 16–24 years, more than half of reported child sexual abuse involved a young person, with adolescent boys more likely to be responsible for the behaviour (Mathews et al., 2024).

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse highlighted the lack of a coordinated national policy to address problematic and harmful sexual behaviours among children and young people and identified a critical need for greater attention on prevention (The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017).

Although an online early intervention service for adults exists in Australia (Stop It Now! Australia; JSS, 2026), and several well-established therapeutic services provide support after harmful sexual behaviour has occurred, there is currently no online early intervention service designed specifically for young people who are concerned about their sexual thoughts or behaviours.

This gap is significant given the increasing prevalence of problematic and harmful sexual behaviours among young people (Haslam et al., 2023) and what young people themselves have shared about the kinds of support that could have helped them avoid harm and build respectful, responsible and fulfilling lives.

To address this need, Jesuit Social Services partnered with the University of Melbourne on the 'Worried About Sex and Pornography Project (WASAPP)'. The project's goal is to use targeted research to co-design 'What's ok? Australia', an online early intervention service for young people who have engaged in, or who may be at risk of engaging in, harmful sexual behaviours.

Action/Response

Work carried out as part of WASAPP has included:

- A systematic review examining pathways that lead to harmful sexual behaviours;
- Interviews with young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviours;
- A workshop with Australian experts in the field;
- Interviews with local and international experts who work in the area of harmful sexual behaviour; and
- Consultation with national and international practitioners who provide intervention services for young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours.

Young people have provided guidance on the design and content of the website and helpline. They strongly emphasised the need for anonymity, noting that a prominent '100% Anonymous'

message should feature on the website and across all promotional materials to help them feel safe accessing the service. They also highlighted the value of an 'I need help now' tab and an easily accessible search function.

Young people expressed a desire for accessible information on social rules, consent, relevant laws and the impacts of pornography. Many described the importance of being able to speak directly with a practitioner when they were worried about their sexual thoughts or behaviours.

Young people also reflected that information about problematic and harmful sexual behaviours should be provided earlier than what they had experienced. They reported that their sex education did not address these issues and was delivered too late to be useful.

Key features of the proposed service include:

- A national, anonymous and free-to-access model;
- Availability to young people concerned about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts or behaviours, as well as to parents, carers and professionals seeking guidance regarding a young person's concerning or harmful sexual behaviour;
- Multiple access points, including:
 - A helpline (via live chat, phone and other accessible modes)
 - A website with links to specialised support and response services and also offering educational content on topics such as addressing: concerning sexual thoughts or attraction to younger children; pornography use; illegal online behaviours including accessing child sexual abuse material; sex and the law; healthy sexual development; consent and respectful relationships; and developmentally appropriate, problematic and harmful sexual behaviours.

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- In establishing an Australian service for young people concerned about their sexual thoughts and behaviours, the service would aim to:
- Provide education, information and advice to young people about sexual development, sexual behaviours and pornography, supporting healthy decision making and preventing problematic or harmful behaviours;
 - Offer parents, carers and professionals accessible information, practical guidance and support to help them understand and appropriately respond to concerns about a young person's sexual behaviour;
 - Enable young people at risk of harming others to seek timely help through online resources and a helpline, to prevent the onset or recurrence of problematic or harmful sexual behaviours; and
 - Address problematic and harmful sexual behaviour through a holistic public health approach raising awareness of warning signs, promoting protective skills and strengthening the capacity of individuals, families and communities to keep young people safe.
- ## Next steps
- The social and economic rationale for establishing this service is compelling. Since the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017), ongoing prevention efforts and emerging research have created the conditions for such a service to be delivered both effectively and efficiently. With pornography becoming increasingly violent and easily accessible, and technology-assisted sexual harm continuing to rise, the development of the proposed online service is both timely and essential.
- This service would strengthen and expand the existing support system for young people who are worried about their sexual thoughts or behaviours, helping them build respectful, responsible and fulfilling lives free from problematic or harmful sexual behaviours.
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