

## SCA Support Programs for Children Targeting Sexualised Behaviour: Overview of Initiatives and Practices

### 1 Definitions of problem sexualised behaviours

Save the Children Australia (SCA) Children and Families Team Case workers (CWs) acknowledge that sexual exploration and play are a natural part of childhood sexual development and that this helps children not only to learn about their own bodies but about the social and cultural rules that govern sexual behaviour.

SCA also acknowledges that some childhood sexual behaviours are problematic and may indicate more than harmless curiosity. In some cases, sexual behaviours pose a risk to the safety and well-being of the child or other children. These sexual behaviour problems may have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Are beyond the child's developmental stage
- Involve threats, force, or aggression
- Involve inappropriate or harmful use of sexual body parts
- Involve children of widely different ages or abilities
- Are associated with strong emotional reactions in a child – such as anger or anxiety
- Interfere with typical childhood interests and activities.

SCA acknowledges that there are a number of factors linked to the development of sexual behaviour problems which can include:

- Exposure to traumatic experiences
- Exposure to violence in the home
- Excessive exposure to adult sexual activity
- Inadequate supervision.

### 2 SCA approach to managing problem sexualised behaviours in children

SCA Case Workers (CWs) acknowledge that working directly with children who have sexualised behaviours is a specialised area of work, involving treatment and follow up. If SCA CWs identify problematic sexualised behaviours in children, the issues will be collaboratively discussed, and appropriate referrals made to cross- service escalation forums (such as the weekly Vulnerable Children's Meeting), including consultation and referral to International Health and Medical Service (IHMS).

SCA's primary consideration will be the safety and stability of the children, and to support children and parents to help understand and prevent the onset of problem sexualised behaviours. For any

children assessed as having problem sexual behaviours, SCA will also explore and assess the potential risks that children with problematic sexualised behaviours might pose to other children.

### **3 Specific support and other programs (including prevention and early intervention programs)**

SCA's approach to problem sexualised behaviours focuses on targeted early intervention programs, which are inclusive of both parents and children and aims to promote safety and positive development for children.

SCA's programs/approaches and experience have focussed on ensuring safety for children, and to help children protect themselves from other children who may have problem sexualised behaviours. SCA programs focus on supporting children (and parents) to prevent problem sexualised behaviours from occurring (early intervention), and helping children protect themselves from a child/children who may have exhibit sexualised behaviours (protective behaviour support).

Specific prevention and early intervention Activities that SCA engage in with children and parents include:

#### **3.1 Prevention strategies**

**The STAR Program:** A whole-of-SCA approach was developed in order to address ongoing instances of bullying and discriminatory behaviours between children in school and in camp. The initiative was developed by the Children and Families team following a number of significant outbursts on the playground where it was clear that children lacked respect for each other, and to an extent, service providers. After ongoing discussions with the children and families, child recreation and education employees regarding the issues faced within the Regional Processing Centre (RPC), it was identified that the program could incorporate and instil basic protective behaviour principles in children using child friendly language and concepts. This led to the STAR acronym, which stands for 'Safe', 'Think', 'Act' and 'Respect'.

Our educators initially introduced the concept of STAR through information and education sessions to primary and secondary school students. Over a number of weekly stakeholder meetings, which has included participants from Wilsons and IHMS, information was adapted to ensure relevance and appropriateness for the audience given their diverse ages and cultural groups. In order to reinforce and create incentives for children demonstrating positive behaviours, children are given a STAR. For example, in a recent week, the word was 'Respect'. Each time a SCA representative observes a child demonstrating respect for another child, adult or service provider they are awarded a STAR with their name on it. At the primary and secondary assemblies a child's name is then drawn from the box and receives a STAR certificate demonstrating their behaviour is publicly recognised.

**Individual case management initiatives:** Other preventative measures are used during individual case work with children and their parents. Examples have included engaging children to draw 'safe hands', exploring safe people, discussing what children and their families should do in times of



difficult or dangerous circumstance, and also openly discussing 'body rules', including safe touching. CWs incorporate these discussions about safety into regular sessions of case work to support the importance of the subject for both children and parents. CWs also openly discuss with children and parents the various risks in the centre, including risks of being harmed by other children.

**Case management review and team discussions:** SCA Children and Families team CW's engage in case discussions and collaborative team meetings to review processes around prevention of harm on children, and review interventions to support children in understanding safety and safe play.

### 3.2 Protective behaviours strategies/initiatives

**The STAR Program:** The STAR Program promotes the use of protective behaviours by identifying other individuals children can go to if they feel scared or unsafe. This provides children with a level of self-protection as they can identify people within their social network that they are able to approach in relation to a situation they feel is potentially dangerous or harmful to them.

**Individual case management – protective behaviours:** SCA CWs also include protective behaviours awareness training in case management processes. CWs are responsible for ensuring children are aware that there no secret is too big or small to tell, that no-one has the right to make them feel unsafe and to promote the core role of SCA CWs to help children feel protected. CWs also assist children to identify key adults who children can speak to if they feel unsafe. CWs will help guide children in identifying supportive individuals not only in their immediate family but also other stakeholders in order to increase the likelihood of an appropriate and timely response to child protection issues. CWs utilise the 'five finger rule', a best practice child friendly intervention technique, where children are invited to draw their hand and identify five people that they can approach in an unsafe situation.

**Emotional awareness:** CWs engage in working individually or with small groups of children in order to assist them in identifying and naming their feelings. These interventions assist children to identify and manage key feelings, to help build self-confidence/self-esteem. CWs utilise visual 'feelings cards', books, pictorials or act out scenarios in order to assist children in developing their emotional awareness. CWs invite children to think about how their bodies react when they are confronted with a range of feelings. An example is inviting children to name what their body feels like when they are scared or what their body feels like when they feel angry. These child protection practice techniques assist children to identify behavioural/physical responses to feelings (e.g. rapid breathing) in order to prompt them to enact protective behaviours – or to utilise a resource person to assist them.

**Education around safe/unsafe situations:** CWs regularly engage in conversations with children around identifying safe and unsafe situations which they can individually relate to within their environment. Examples include teaching children that going to the toilet with a trusted family member is a safer option than going alone. Such engagements with children during the process of case management provides additional layers of protection, as children become clearly aware of the strategies if they are faced with unsafe situations ( including situations where they may be confronted with a child exhibiting problematic sexualised behaviour intentions).

**Education around body safety and development:** CWs actively engage parents in discussions around how to explore difficult conversations with their children, including the notion of what part of the body are safe to touch. CWs acknowledge that this is an ongoing challenge in the RPC environment given the diversity of cultural groups, and where some cultural groups may traditionally avoid educating their children around body parts, sexual identity or protective behaviours. To manage these sensitivities, CWs have utilised anatomic dolls, human body diagrams and 'feelings cards'/books in order to help engage parents in these important conversations and to support parents to have these discussions with their own children. The aim of these case work initiatives is to support children to be able to be more aware of the appropriate names for their body parts, and to identify what parts of the body are private and what areas no-one else is allowed to touch.

**Girls Club:** the 'Girls Club' is an SCA recreation program facilitated on a weekly basis for teenage girls who are residing in RPC3. This group model program allows for the safe facilitation of discussion around girls issues, whilst engaging in fun activities like painting nails, dancing and hair straightening. The participants are aware that 'Girls Club' is a safe space in which they are able to disclose and discuss issues that they may be unable to bring up at home due to cultural taboos, religious reasons or through other limits to privacy.

### 3.3 Targeted support to Parents/Parenting strategies

**Strengthening parents' confidence in parenting:** CWs will commonly address ongoing child protection or parenting concerns with individual families. CWs will always work from a strengths-based approach to ensure we are reaffirming their skills and abilities as parents, and essentially capacity building their ability to parent.

**Behavioural response plans:** For parents with children with more complex or chronic behavioural problems, CWs regularly develop 'Behaviour Response Plans' in conjunction with parents to identify problematic behaviours, strategies for addressing these, and achievable goals for both the parent and caseworker. The goals are regularly reviewed and recorded in the Case Management Tool. The plans are shared with relevant stakeholders within SCA (including teaching and recreation staff), in order to ensure a consistent response from all adults involved in the child's life.

**Teaching Parents about Age appropriate behaviours:** Many parents are unaware what age appropriate behaviours are for their child/children. This is particularly the case for new parents or parents who have not traditionally had a 'hands on' role with their children before. CWs actively encourage questions and discussion with parents around these matters, including young children exploring their bodies, or teenagers demonstrating hormonal challenges. Case Managers acknowledge that many parents are uncomfortable in having these talks with their children and therefore gently encourage parents in the use of language with their children, or explore cultural expectations around these issues. SCA case workers have achieved positive results, including a single father who is raising his young daughter and who is now beginning to engage in conversations with his daughter that he would never have expected previously.

**Fathers' Group:** SCA previously facilitated a Fathers' Group, where fathers could safely discuss their feelings and thoughts around being a parent, including being a single parent, within the RPC. This group provided education and support to fathers around issues of safety for children, and also provided opportunity for parents to mutually share concerns and difficulties.

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