Understanding the social impact of safeguarding services for children and young people: key findings

This is a pivotal moment in history, as we recognise the historical failings of institutions and adults to keep children and young people safe. In 2021-22, the Centre for Social Impact, University of Western Australia, conducted an impact assessment of Australian Childhood Foundation's Safeguarding Services. This was a unique study, grounded in qualitative research with organisations who have worked with the Foundation to build capacity and culture to better support the wellbeing and safety of children and young people who engage in their services.

Insights from the report, outlined below, demonstrated that the Foundation and its partners are helping to shape an Australian and global story of the evolution of safeguarding practice and impact. These insights are paving the way to an even deeper understanding of best practice in building a strong and lasting safeguarding culture in organisations, equipping leaders and practitioners to ensure that the children and young people in their care are safe and valued. The full report is available to be downloaded online.

Collaboration
Tailored + Transparent + Supportive

The report found that the key ingredient to creating a strong and sustained safeguarding culture is collaboration, through strong relationships within and beyond an organisation. Collaboration enables the shared understanding necessary for the development of a safeguarding culture that is systematic and embedded in its approach to improving child safe knowledge, governance, values and practice. Intra-organisational relationships are an essential element of this systematic approach, established through relationships within an organisation – across layers of staff, volunteers and management – and extending to service users including children, young people and their families and carers. Partnerships with other organisations in the community are an equally important element of collaboration, allowing for exchange of ideas and best practice in child safety. The report found that partnering with Australian Childhood Foundation helps organisations to make sense of and apply knowledge in practice through access to resources, advice and learning opportunities. Engaging with external organisations can validate safeguarding capability and impact, through a tailored, transparent and supportive process.

Safeguarding Culture
Deeper Knowledge + Better Practice

The report also found that a culture of safeguarding across an organisation is attained by embedding safeguarding principles within all levels of the organisational structure. Doing so leads to deeper knowledge and improved practice, informed by focusing on the four following areas.

Increased awareness of child abuse, safeguarding, and responding

Awareness of safeguarding is a crucial outcome that forms the foundation of other benefits. Not only do staff learn about identifying abuse (or the behaviours leading to abuse), but they are also provided with information that helps them effectively respond to these threats, essentially providing an understanding of their role in safeguarding. As organisations progress in their safeguarding journey, they play a role in ensuring that the broader community becomes more aware of safeguarding and that people are better informed about the organisations in which they are associated with – including the commitment that organisations possess to keep service users safe.

Increased confidence of staff and the organisation in the safeguarding process, and the wider community in identifying safe organisations

Confidence is a consequence of the organisation's staff developing a clear understanding of their role within safeguarding – what is expected of them, how they should behave, how they need to respond – which positively influences their confidence in protecting children. Among staff, this confidence also leads to an increased sense of safety that if they do the 'right thing' they will likewise be protected under the safeguarding framework. This also helps the wider community to feel more confident to engage with organisations that are perceived as trustworthy and reputable due to their commitment to keep children safe.

Increased engagement with children, young people and their families

Organisations are better able to identify the value of engaging with their service users, and supported to communicate with children, young people and their families more effectively. Engagement with service users ensures that children's voices are embedded within the organisation's structures and processes, therefore increasing safety and relevance.

Reduced risk of harm resulting from risk mitigation measures

Organisations reduce risk of harm to children by increasing reporting and self-monitoring among employees. The majority of interviewees in the report shared that their organisation's increased focus on safeguarding led to a spike in reporting within their organisation. Notably, the incidence of increased reporting was not reflective of more incidents, instead, it echoed greater responsivity to possible threats of harm. Most reports recorded within organisations were of much 'lower-level' concern, and these were associated with staff engaging in more open discussions about their commitment to protect children – and acknowledgement that, in some instances, harm may even be entirely unintentional. From an operations perspective, risk mitigation for organisations also involves the development of more child-safe processes related to human resources processes.

Safer Communities
For Children and Young People

The report demonstrated that organisations working with Australian Childhood Foundation's Safeguarding Services team have been able to create a positive impact on safeguarding culture, risk mitigation, engagement, awareness, and confidence – the recipe for producing a child safe organisation, and in due time, a more child friendly society. The way an organisation operates has a direct influence on the experience of service users, and a child safe culture ripples beyond that of an organisation (and the Foundation) to create a much safer community for all children and young people. Furthermore, the report found that a growth in the number of organisations who work with the Foundation has the potential to increase the likelihood of creating a safer society.
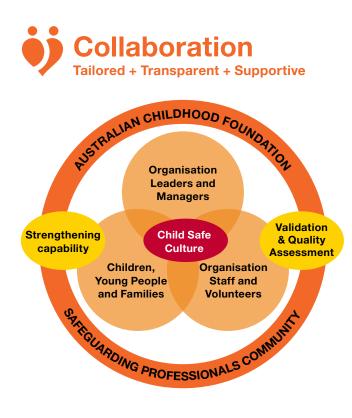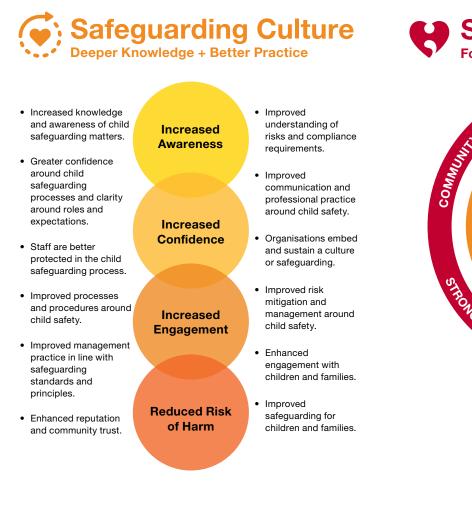
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How safeguarding services help organisations to keep children and young people safe

Collaboration
Tailored + Transparent + Supportive

AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION

SAFEGUARDING PROFESSIONALS COMMUNITY

- Organisation Leaders and Managers
- Strengthening capability
- Child Safe Culture
- Validation & Quality Assessment
- Children, Young People and Families
- Organisation Staff and Volunteers

Safeguarding Culture
Deeper Knowledge + Better Practice

Increased Awareness
- Increased knowledge and awareness of child safeguarding matters.
- Improved understanding of risks and compliance requirements.

Increased Confidence
- Greater confidence around child safeguarding processes and clarity around roles and expectations.
- Improved communication and professional practice around child safety.
- Staff are better protected in the child safeguarding process.
- Organisations embed and sustain a culture or safeguarding.

Increased Engagement
- Improved processes and procedures around child safety.
- Improved risk mitigation and management around child safety.
- Improved management practice in line with safeguarding standards and principles.
- Enhanced engagement with children and families.

Reduced Risk of Harm
- Enhanced reputation and community trust.
- Improved safeguarding for children and families.

Safer Communities
For Children and Young People

COMMUNITY COMMITTED TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

STRONG AND SUSTAINED SAFEGUARDING CULTURE

Child Safety

CENTRE for SOCIAL IMPACT

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Australian Childhood Foundation