



SAASSO report to the Education Department

Parent consultation -

- Harmful sexual behaviours
- Review of 'Responding to problem sexual behaviour in children and young people'

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## Background

The Education Department's *Policy and Planning Implementation unit* approached SAASSO to provide parent feedback into the guidelines around harmful child on child sexual behaviours.

An administrative policy for this issue already exists: *Responding to problem sexual behaviour in children and young people - guidelines for staff in education and care settings (3rd edition, revised 2019)*.

The department's agenda was to:

1. Review the current guidelines with parent feedback
2. Create two parent resources from the reviewed guidelines:
  - A resource for parents whose children are involved or witnesses to such a behaviour
  - A resource for the wider parent community.

Discussions between SAASSO, the department and Member for King; Paula Luethen MP, resulted in a plan to achieve these aims.

## Plan

The first stage was to ascertain what awareness parents had of the existing department policy or any school policy to deal with harmful child sexual behaviours and what features such a policy should contain.

It was determined the process would begin with a phone survey of parents, conducted by SAASSO, with questions agreed upon by the department and SAASSO.

It was also determined that follow-up focus groups, consisting of a selection of those parents surveyed may be scheduled to provide richer parent feedback into the creation of the two parent resources.

## The Survey

The survey was conducted by SAASSO during October and November of 2020.

Parents from a total of 53 South Australian public schools were surveyed.

The survey was conducted on a commitment of absolute confidentiality and anonymity.



## Survey Respondents

Parents from 53 public schools were surveyed.

Of these:

- 38 were metropolitan schools
- 15 were regional schools
  
- 35 were primary schools
- 10 were secondary schools
- 4 were special education schools
- 4 were combined primary / secondary schools

Most parents were active or former members of Governing Councils.

## Survey Questions

The SAASSO survey posed 7 questions to parents:

**Q1.** Are you aware of any policies your school has about keeping children safe from the sexual behaviour of other children? For example, are there any guidelines or student rules that specifically mention sexual behaviour?

**Q2.** If such an incident were to happen, what information do you think should be provided to the parents of the children involved?

**Q3.** What about the parent community in general?

**Q4.** Are you aware of any such incident happening at your school?

1. Were your children involved?
2. What do you think of how it was handled (incident or communication)?
3. What was handled well?
4. What could have been handled better?

**Q5.** Have you heard of a document named; '*Responding To Problem Sexual Behaviour In Children And Young People*' (it was clarified that this was a department document)?

**Q6.** How would you rate (out of ten) your school administration's communication with you (it was clarified that this was the general school administration efforts, not information specifically related to their child)?

**Q7.** Would you be interested in being part of a focus group to discuss this?



## Survey Results Summary

Given the nature of the some of the questions, much of the data is qualitative.

Achieving the 53 responses often took multiple efforts to make contact. It should be noted, however, that the majority of parents were positive in their communications, pleased to share their experiences and opinions with SAASSO and pleased the department was working with SAASSO.

Most were also keen to be part of the process. This is reflected in the fact that 38 of the 53 participants said they would like to be part of a focus group - most of those who were unwilling, were influenced by distance or busy family lives.

Calls frequently ran considerably longer than the few minutes we anticipated - with the resulting conversations often covering a range of topics beyond the scope of the survey.

Parents agreed the survey topic is important and one for which schools need clear and consistent policy; informed by parent input.

Given the nature of the survey, many parents mentioned their school's bullying policy. While most were definitely aware of a policy, few were familiar with it, knew if they had ever actually seen it, unclear on where they would obtain a copy and unsure if their Governing Council had a role in its development - concerning, given all SA schools reviewed their policies in 2019. This may also reinforce the need for clearer, parent-friendly policy resources. It may also reflect other surveys which have brought into question how well the policies are being implemented.

As most respondents serve on their school's Governing Council - many were surprised (and more than a few disappointed) this was the first they were hearing of a specific policy their school should have regarding child sexual behaviour. They expressed a clear intent to raise this matter with their Governing Council.

The most common sentiment expressed was that schools need to be more proactive in such areas - many explaining that it often requires significant and repeated complaints for issues like this to be dealt with.

Parents believed that child sexual behaviour is a topic that should be discussed from enrolment; with information included in enrolment packs as it is with bullying and IT use - and that this should continue throughout the school journey and not be hurriedly discussed when an incident occurs.

Many parents highlighted the need for parents to be provided with resources to discuss child sexual behaviour with their children, take home modules, that would link to activities they already discuss at school (e.g. The safe hand, where children list 5 people on their hand that they would feel safe talking too).

Many parents said they would like a 'follow up' or 'check in' somewhere down the track, after the incident has happened and been dealt with, so they can gauge how their child is tracking after and identified any need for further support or intervention.

Parents also asked what professional services would be provided to children who are involved in a serious incident.



*Q1. Are you aware of any policies your school has about keeping children safe from the sexual behaviour of other children?*

- 43 of the 53 respondents stated that they had not seen and were not aware of any such policy.
- 5 respondents stated their school had a policy specific to keeping children safe from the sexual behaviour of other children.
- 3 believed there is something relevant in place in their school, but were not certain or had not seen it.
- 2 respondents said it was on the agenda.

*Q2. If such an incident were to happen, what information do you think should be provided to the parents of the children involved?*

The most common response (34 out of 53) was that parents should know or have a role in determining what will be done.

Overall, most felt that the parents of those involved should be immediately informed and full-disclosure be the policy. A number of parents expressed the need for privacy, however, and few expressed interest in expulsion or retribution - though they were adamant that they want the matter dealt in a way that protects the victim.

Another comment made by parents during discussion, was that parents of those involved should know rights and what actions are expected of them.

**Parents were clear they would want something done, in a timely manner, with the school administration being proactive.**

*Q3. What about the parent community in general?*

Parents responded thoughtfully; acknowledging the sensitivity of the issue. Words such as 'tricky', 'hard', 'problematic', and 'depends' were commonly used.

Parents weighed the right of parents to know what is happening in their school against the importance of not creating panic or hysteria. However, a number also cited the need to head off gossip circulated by the school grapevine.

As with question 2, the need to protect the identities of those involved was paramount. The consensus opinion was that the information to be shared with the school community should depend on the severity of the incident.

Other factors influencing the level of disclosure included, primary / secondary school, regional / metropolitan and the age of the children involved.

A significant number of parents suggested a consistent scale be used to determine what information is shared with the school community.

**Again, as with question 2, parents were clear that as important as the details provided to them, was the confidence that action was / is being taken.**



*Q4. Are you aware of any such incident happening at your school?*

- 15 parents answered 'yes'
- 38 parents answered 'no'.

One parent stated they had learned via reports given to the Governing Council.

*Q4.1 Were your children involved?*

- 8 parents answered yes.

*Q4.2 What do you think of how it was handled?*

The 15 parents for whom this was applicable gave some extreme answers. 'Poorly', 'badly', 'terribly', 'awfully' were some of the criticisms levelled.

Others stated the school handled the situation 'pretty well', 'magnificently', 'well', 'really well' and 'appropriately'.

Lack of communication was an issue. One parent, whose child was involved, said they found out more from their child than the school. Another stated the police informed parents and not the school.

*Q4.3 What was handled well?*

Most who commented positively, complimented the speed with which the incident was dealt (though some cited the teacher as the driver, not the school administration).

*Q4.4 What could have been handled better?*

Better communication, quicker reaction and clearer process were the suggestions.

*Q5. Have you heard of a document named; 'Responding To Problem Sexual Behaviour In Children And Young People'? (it was clarified that this was a department document)*

Only one parent had heard of the document.

*Q6. How would you rate (out of ten) your school administration's communication with you? (it was clarified that this was the general school administration efforts, not information specifically related to their child)*

- Parents gave their school administrations an average score of 7.9 out 10.

The 8 parents whose children had been involved in an incident gave their school administrations an average score of 6.1 out of 10.