

Royal Commission anniversary highlights need to also safeguard children in non-institutional family settings

ACU Institute of Child Protection Studies Director Professor Daryl Higgins has issued a call to action for more supports to help families safeguard their children and spearhead conversations around topics including sex and sexuality, consent, respect, online safety, and pornography.

Speaking in the lead up to the fifth anniversary of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Professor Higgins said a similar focus on children's safety in non-institutional settings was urgently needed.

"Governments need to prioritise the role of parents and caregivers in the safety and safeguarding of their children," Professor Higgins said.

"The Royal Commission shone a spotlight on serious problems and risks to children in institutional settings and resulted in a raft of measures to safeguard children in youth-serving organisations.

"But research has shown time and time again that the same problems and risks exist in non-institutional settings. We now need a similar nation-wide focus on safeguarding within families."

Professor Higgins said all families needed:

- Clear guidance about good parenting practices and access to evidence-based parenting supports.
- Dedicated services to help build their capability and skills to create safe environments.
- Strategies to address behavioural issues without smacking or using other forms of violence.
- Education to be able to identify signs of and reduce the risk of grooming.
- Background knowledge and facts to help them have informed discussions with their children about sex and sexuality, respect and relationships, consent and coercion, and boundaries.
- Advice on how to have regular check-ins with children and how to notice warning signs they may be at risk or experiencing harm.
- Tips on how to respond to online threats including pornography, and interaction with strangers.
- Easy-to-follow instructions on how to implement online safety options, as well as advice on more intensive strategies of direct supervision and collaborative engagement through playing the same online game with children to understand and mitigate risks.

"As a society, we need to support families to be primary protective agents in the lives of their children, and not just rely on youth-serving organisations," Professor Higgins said.

"We need to build the literacy of families to have these crucial conversations. It is highly unlikely that a child will speak up about feeling uncomfortable or seek help if they are at risk if we don't build that foundation first.

"And as we go into Christmas holidays where children are spending more time in family settings, the importance of parents and caregivers having these skills, strategies and resources is magnified."

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