

Preventing sexual abuse in the student boarding industry

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Sexual abuse of students can happen while the student is in a boarding residence.

The abuser could be;

- a member of staff
- another student
- some other person that the student comes into contact with.

The sexual abuse of students while they are boarders has been very much in the news as the Royal Commission investigates institutional responses to child sexual abuse. Australians have been shocked by revelations of sexual abuse by teachers and boarding staff in highly respected boarding schools and residences, and even the staff who worked in these residences have been surprised and disturbed by the abuse. However, what has not been reported is that boarding schools and student residences across Australia have been methodically and effectively putting practices into place to reduce the risk of students being sexually abused, and they have been doing this for many years. It is on every boarding manager's radar, and they are constantly aware of the risks and implement a range of strategies to ensure that the danger of their students being sexually abused is minimised. Governing bodies, principals and heads of boarding / managers will do 'whatever it takes' to ensure the safety of students in their care while boarding. The following strategies have been utilised by heads of boarding and boarding managers.

(1) Policies and procedures

In the past, Boarding organisations have relied on documents such as the residence 'code of conduct' to specify behaviour of staff towards children. Descriptions of inappropriate behaviour, staff - student boundaries and appropriate responses to reports of abuse were either non-existent or vague.

These days boarding residences have very specific child protection policies and procedures that detail the organisation's approach to preventing sexual abuse, steps to take if students disclose abuse, and reporting procedures. Many organisations (particularly international boarding organisations) have set up 'child safety teams', usually comprising the Principal and/or Head of Boarding and two or three other key members of staff). These teams have the time and resources to drive a very comprehensive, detailed and proactive child protection program. Some organisations have set up external reporting mechanisms where students from the residence and staff can report directly to a person who is not employed by the residence or connected to the residence. Students are made aware of these reporting procedures in student induction information sessions and by signs on noticeboards.

2. Careful screening of staff

Incidents of sexual abuse that have come before the recent Royal Commission clearly show that there has been inadequate screening of staff in the past. There were incidents examined, where boarding staff and school staff were accepted to work in boarding schools and residences without even the most basic of screening checks. Some of these abusers had a history or record of abuse and any elementary check would have picked this up. Sometimes it seems that if an applicant for a job was a previous student of the school, all checks were waived and the person received preferential treatment. Past history or a record of abuse was ignored.

Today boarding schools and student residences are very rigorous about staff screening processes. Most boarding residences will require both a national police clearance as well as a 'working with children' clearance or card. Past employment references are checked carefully, and most student boarding residences in Australia will not allow a supervisor to commence work until they have a 'working with children' clearance. Any hint of previous impropriety is carefully and sensitively investigated to ensure duty of care for the students and due process for the staff member is observed. If there is any suggestion that a staff member has behaved

inappropriately, the staff member is usually 'stood down' until the matter is resolved. The students' welfare is protected at all times.

3. Informing students

In the past the subject of sexual abuse was usually not discussed and particularly not discussed with students. Students who were abused did not know what to do or who to tell and very often they felt that they were somehow to blame for the abuse that was happening to them. Even when they did report the abuse they were often accused of lying or treated very poorly.

Today Boarding organisations understand that one of the best defences against abuse is to ensure that students are well informed about what constitutes abuse and what they should do about it. Students also have access to websites such as 'Bursting the Bubble' and a range of well presented written material.

A new research review supports the view that students who learn about preventing sexual abuse in school more often report abuse in their own lives than do students who are not taught about it. (1)

"This reinforces the findings of previous reviews, said lead author Kerryann Walsh of Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia.

"The programs increase children's knowledge of child sexual abuse concepts and their skills in reacting and responding to risky situations,"

The reviewers analyzed 24 trials of school-based prevention programs, including a total of almost 6,000 elementary and high school students in the U.S., Canada, China, Germany, Spain, Taiwan and Turkey.

Of the students who were involved in the prevention programs, about 14 in 1,000 reported some form of sexual abuse, compared to 4 of every 1,000 who did not participate in the prevention programs.

4. Reporting processes

In the past reporting has been difficult and traumatic for young victims of sexual abuse. There have been numerous situations where young people have reported abuse and they have not been believed, their report has been ignored, or students were punished or poorly treated because they reported abuse.

Today, boarding residences provide a range of different ways that the young person can report and feel an element of safety as they report. Some organisations have an external reporting network that is completely different to the boarding residence organisation.

5. Training and standards

Australia has introduced standards for child care (2012) and aged care (Aged Care Act 1997, and the Accreditation Grant Principles 2011) but not for student boarding care, even though standards are in place in other countries that have a boarding tradition. Until very recently, boarding staff have not required previous experience in the caring industry or any sort of qualification. Sometimes teaching staff from the boarding school were also required to perform boarding duties, with the understanding that being trained as a teacher was in some way sufficient training for working in boarding. Boarding schools and residences also employed university students who exchanged room and food for boarding duties. Gap students and volunteers also found work in boarding and it was generally known as poorly paid work for people who were unqualified and minimally trained.

In recent years Boarding Australia (BA) and the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) have been involved in developing standards for the student boarding industry. These standards will be generic but BA and ABSA will likely develop indicators that will enable auditing of boarding residences against a set of agreed standards. Included in these indicators will likely be a requirement that

boarding schools and student residences' supervisory staff are involved in nationally recognised training.

Boarding Australia has already moved to recommend a minimum level of Certificate IV, and boarding schools and residences are generally moving to ensure that all boarding staff have nationally recognised qualifications of at least a Certificate IV level. There are now nationally recognised boarding qualifications available to Diploma level. Some boarding staff are gaining training and qualifications (such as youth work qualifications) from local TAFEs and other registered training organisations. This professionalization of the boarding industry will ensure that boarding staff are trained and competent to national standards.

6. Vigilant and Knowledgeable

Many boarding residences around Australia have been affected by past occurrence of abuse in some way. The Royal commissions, court cases and media attention has ensured that all boarding residences in Australia are very aware of the potential for sexual abuse in student boarding residences. Prevention of sexual abuse is discussed in boarding conferences, Industry support newsletters and journals, professional development and staff meetings. Heads of Boarding are constantly vigilant to do whatever it takes to protect students in their care from sexual abuse.

Does this mean that sexual abuse is unlikely to occur in student boarding residences again? Unfortunately sexual abuse could still occur, but it is much less likely now because we as an Industry are far more knowledgeable and vigilant and have put in place effective measures to reduce the likelihood of abuse.

7. Sexual abuse of students by other students

Media attention and much of the preventative action is focussed on adults (nearly always males) abusing children. However, there is growing anecdotal evidence that sexual assault by other students is a growing and less reported issue. It is difficult to know how much of a problem this is amongst young people in Australia because it is *"notoriously difficult to accurately measure the rates of sexual abuse of any kind."*

Most official figures are likely to be underestimates. The dynamics of abuse itself contribute to this, as many victim/survivors feel too ashamed or are afraid of the consequences of reporting their abuse. Reasons for this include threats made by the offender and the social stigma and responses to sexual abuse.” (2)

Existing statistics show that as much as 16% of reports of sexual abuse involve abuse by other students, not adults. Research has shown that the harm that results for the victim of sexual abuse by another student is the same as the harm that is caused by an adult abuser. The abuse can cause significant, lifelong harm and cannot be considered ‘experimentation’ or a ‘phase’ that will pass with time. “Coercive or forceful sexual behaviour with children (or with peers) is always abusive, and should not be regarded as 'normal' adolescent behavior” (2)

This is a particular concern for the boarding industry because young people are living together in a boarding community and have contact in bedrooms, shower areas and other places around the residence that may not be under constant supervision. Boarding residences need effective processes for identifying and responding to sexual abuse by students in residences. There are a range of issues involved including safety of boarding students, legal implications, and strategies to change the behavior of students who are abusers or potential abusers.

If there is evidence that a student has sexually abused another student, most Australian boarding schools and residences will move to expel the offender immediately, to protect other students in the residence from abuse, and ensure the physical and psychological safety of the victim. It is also seen as necessary to show the whole boarding community and parents that this behavior is not tolerated.

There are some boarding schools and residences in Australia that may, with appropriate staffing and funding levels, and legal consultation, be able to provide a rehabilitation program for the young abuser, while protecting other boarding students. This sort of program has its own complexities, as effective rehabilitation also depends on the young person having the opportunity to engage in age-

appropriate social interaction. Some young people will be able to abide by instructions to stay within limited areas that are subject to constant supervision. Students who are unable to abide by such instructions may require more restrictive intervention, or may have to leave the residence.

All boarding schools and residences in Australia need to be vigilant for the possibility of sexual abuse by a student, and they should be prepared with effective, well planned strategies that will protect students and provide due process for the abuser.

- (1) <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/17/us-child-health-sex-abuse-idUSKBN0N81LO20150417>
- (2) <https://www3.aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/young-people-who-sexually-abuse-key-issues>