
Inquiry into the Child and Family Centres

Sexual Assault Support Service Inc. (SASS) Submission

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Sexual
Assault
Support
Service

For further information please contact:

**Jill Maxwell, CEO – Sexual Assault Support Service
Inc. (SASS)**

Phone: (03) 6231 0044

Email: jill.maxwell@sass.org.au

Postal: PO Box 217, North Hobart, Tasmania, 7002

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Introduction

Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS) is a free and confidential service for people of all ages who have been affected by any form of sexual violence, including intimate partner sexual violence. We also provide counselling to children and young people who are displaying problem sexual behaviour (PSB) or sexually abusive behaviour (SAB), along with support and information for their family members and/or carers. Approximately one third of all SASS clients are children.

The range of support options available at SASS includes counselling, case management (including safety planning) and advocacy. We also provide information and support to professionals, and deliver training workshops and community education activities in a range of settings including local schools and colleges.

SASS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Legislative Council Select Committee's Inquiry into the Child and Family Centres. Please note that in this paper, the term 'problem sexual behaviour' (PSB) refers to children's behaviour that is "of a sexual nature irrespective of age that is both outside that behaviour accepted as "normal" for their age and level of development and occurs to the detriment of the child's or young person's engagement in activities of normal functioning."¹

We provide comments relating to the following Inquiry questions:

1. The challenges to and benefits of the provision of an integrated collaborative health and wellbeing and early education and care service delivery model.
3. The role of Child and Family Centres in providing education and support to families and carers in their parenting role and participation in early learning programs.
4. The outcomes and broader impacts of Child and Family Centres to the communities which they are located in.

Submission

The establishment of the 12 Child and Family Centres (CFCs) across Tasmania has been a crucial initiative in improving child wellbeing and family support and functioning, and was listed as a major Tasmanian child protection initiative within the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* (the National Framework). The initiative strongly aligns with Outcome 2 of the National Framework, that 'Children and families access adequate support to promote safety and intervene early'. Evidence suggests that area-based interventions are an effective form of delivering services to vulnerable children and families, particularly if they focus on "increased service provision and capacity to work with families previously disengaged from early childhood services and those from groups traditionally considered 'hard to reach'."² A central element of the CFC approach was to situate the centres in communities with high need, and key considerations in the selection process included that a community:

- exhibited one or more of the following characteristics at a percentage higher than the state average: Aboriginal families, sole parent families or very young parents (maternal age less than 19);
- had high scores on individual measures of social and economic exclusion including, for example, low educational attainment, housing stress, adult unemployment, and family income supplements; and
- experienced high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage.³

Evidence strongly suggests that children living in communities with high socioeconomic disadvantage are more likely to be exposed to a higher concentration of risk factors,⁴ which can place them at increased risk of experiencing sexual abuse.⁵ In the six years since they commenced operating, CFCs have established significant connections in their communities, building trust and rapport with families and strong professional relationships with other service providers.⁶ In the context of child sexual assault and problem sexual behaviour, this is important from a prevention perspective and a response perspective.

Prevention

The CFCs play an important role in primary prevention of child sexual abuse and problem sexual behaviours, by helping families to strengthen their skills, knowledge, and levels of functioning, as well as social connectedness. In a national audit of child abuse primary prevention programs, experts Poole and Tomison identified child and family centres as one of six key categories, stating the following:

Child and family centres, frequently referred to as “one-stop shops”, adopt a holistic approach to preventing child maltreatment and promoting healthy communities... Designed to be non-stigmatising and easily accessible, the centres offer highly integrated services that can promote parental competence, meet the diverse needs of children and families, and facilitate a sense of community and the development of social support networks within neighbourhoods.⁷

In a 2015 evaluation of the Tasmanian CFCs, parents reported that accessing their local CFC “had resulted in increased parenting skills and knowledge... enhanced social support and connections, strengthened family relationships... and resulted in increased parenting and self-confidence.”⁸ The same evaluation found that “[p]reviously socially isolated parents reported feeling supported by staff and volunteers at the Centres as well as by other parents”, and “parents felt safe and able to fully engage with the services and supports available to them and their families.”⁹

As indicated in the National Framework, raising children’s, families’ and the broader communities’ awareness and knowledge of sexual abuse fosters protective behaviours, and can help increase detection of abuse.¹⁰ Community education is also identified as an important primary prevention strategy in addressing children displaying problem sexual behaviours or sexually abusive behaviours,¹¹ based on the argument that adults need to understand that children can be capable of sexual violence.¹² Given their established relationships with families and the integrated nature of the CFC model, CFCs would appear to be well-placed to provide community education activities; raise awareness about harm prevention; and connect families to a range of supports, as required.

Response

CFC staff themselves can play a vital role in identifying and responding to suspected child sexual assault and problem sexual behaviours. Child sexual abuse is one of the least reported crimes, with estimates that fewer than 30 per cent of all sexual assaults on children are reported.¹³ The ongoing relationships that CFC staff

have with the children who access their centres means that they are well-placed to recognise when something is not right, provided they have the knowledge of what to look for. For many families, CFCs may be the main (or most consistent) service accessed, further highlighting the importance of staff having the expertise and knowledge to respond to suspected child sexual abuse.

Summary and recommendations

Given their work with Tasmania's most vulnerable children and families, the CFCs would appear to have crucial roles in terms of violence and abuse prevention, by supporting families to develop the protective factors known to lower the risk of child sexual assault. Prevention activities plus early identification of, and response to, child sexual assault and problem sexual behaviours should be prioritised as vital elements of CFC service provision.

In light of the above, SASS makes the following recommendations.

- i. All CFC staff and volunteers are appropriately trained in responding to child sexual assault and problem sexual behaviours.
- ii. All CFCs have comprehensive child protection policies that specifically detail how the centre will respond to child sexual abuse and problem sexual behaviours.

¹ CEASE (2016). *Standards of Practice for Problem Sexual Behaviours and Sexually Abusive Behaviour Treatment Programs*. Auspiced by ANZATSA, p6.

² Council of Australian Governments (COAG). (2009). *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020*. Canberra, p17

³ Taylor, C.T., Jose, K., Christensen, D., & Van de Lageweg, W.I. (2015). *Engaging, supporting and working with children and families in Tasmania's Child and Family Centres. Report on the impact of Centres on parents' use and experiences of services and supports in the Early Years*. Perth: Telethon Kids Institute, p25.

⁴ Ibid, p64.

⁵ Quadara, A., Nagy, V., Higgins, D. & Siegel, N. (2015). *Conceptualising the prevention of child sexual abuse: Final report*. Research Report No. 33. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁶ Taylor et al (2015).

⁷ Poole, L., & Tomison, A. M. (2000). Preventing child abuse in Australia: Some preliminary findings from a national audit of prevention programs. Paper presented at the 7th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Sydney, pp. 3-4.

⁸ Taylor et al (2015), p66.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ COAG (2009).

¹¹ O'Brien, W. (2010). *Australia's response to sexualised or sexually abusive behaviours in children and young people*. Canberra: Australian Crime Commission.

¹² Carrington and Pereira (2009) cited by O'Brien (2010), p26.

¹³ Stanley, J, Tomison, AM & Pocock, J. (2003). 'Child abuse and neglect in Indigenous Australian communities'. *Child Abuse Prevention Issues*. No. 19.