TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Melbourne — 19 October 2012

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**Necessary corrections to be notified to
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The CHAIR — I would like to welcome Dr Daryl Higgins, deputy director of research, from the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Thank you very much for being here with us this afternoon. I will just run through a few preliminaries before you give your presentation to us. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. Witnesses may be asked to return at a later date to give further evidence if need be. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript. Please note that these proceedings are not being broadcast. Following your presentation, committee members will ask questions relating to the inquiry. I now pass it over to you to give a brief presentation of 30 minutes or so, and then I will ask committee members to ask questions of you. Again, thank you for being with us this afternoon.

Dr HIGGINS — The Australian Institute of Family Studies is very pleased to be able to be here today and present research evidence that we are aware of that relates to the matters under consideration by the inquiry. I am also happy to take questions as we go rather than have a sort of formal presentation followed by questions, if that is just as suitable for you. I am happy to be interrupted if you have questions of clarification along the way.

Largely the research evidence that I want to talk about today relates to research that has been done looking at characteristics of child abuse and neglect of perpetrators and of what that means for organisations. I will also turn my attention to a lot of work that has been done looking at best practice principles around child-safe organisations, though bearing in mind there is often little empirical research to actually say, 'Does the implementation of these mean that we end up with safer environments for children than by not implementing them?'. So it is kind of a little bit of a step of logic to say, 'If you address the risk factors for child abuse and neglect within an organisational setting, we assume that we are going to get better outcomes'. There is often not that end product being tested to say, 'Have we led to a reduction?'. Part of that and one of the difficulties that we face in Australia is that there is no national prevalence study of child abuse and neglect, and I will come to that again, which does mean that it is often difficult to do that kind of research.

Principally the research that I am drawing on was collated together into an issues paper that was published by the institute back in 2006 called *Child Maltreatment in Organisations*. In that we outline a number of risk factors that relate to organisations and the strategies for improving prevention. I also was responsible for authoring a case study that analysed qualitatively characteristics of a child sexual abuse incident that occurred in a church community, and I analysed a number of the factors relating to that. So I will talk about some of those principles, if you like, that underpin how abuse was able to occur and some of the characteristics of how responses occurred to that situation.

I thought it was also important to begin by giving a little bit of background — and please cut me off if I am covering ground that has already been covered by other presenters — in order to understand where child abuse within organisations, be they religious or other community organisations, fits within the broader context of abuse and neglect more generally.

What we know from crime prevention studies internationally is that approximately 14 per cent of females and 3 per cent of males aged 12 to 20 have experienced rape or sexual assault. We know from our own survey here in Australia, the Australian Personal Safety Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics — it is actually in the field at the moment for the next one, but the previous survey was in 2006, and that showed that nearly 1 million adult women reported that they had experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15, so that is about 19 per cent of women and about 5.5 per cent of men. So we are talking about large numbers.

What we also know from the research is that we need to look beyond the issue of stranger danger, remembering again from the personal safety survey that strangers were only identified in about 8.6 per cent of cases involving female victims and 18.3 per cent of cases involving male victims. So it is often characteristics — where a potential perpetrator is able to get to know a potential victim that abuse occurs. That is the more typical scenario, and obviously organisations are one of the ways in which that meeting can occur. I mentioned that there is no prevalence data in Australia, so we need to look at other overseas studies to try to understand that.

If we look beyond the issue of sexual abuse, we also know that the most common type of abuse is usually physical abuse. So studies from the UK, for example, have shown that approximately 21 per cent of young people have experienced child physical abuse. Approximately 11 per cent experienced sexual abuse prior to age 16, about 6 per cent have experienced neglect and about 6 per cent have experienced an emotional abuse

experience. Again, there are difficulties with trying to understand those figures, because it does depend on how definitions are arrived at and how researchers develop methodologies to assess those.

My own research has highlighted, though, that often those different types of abuse and neglect co-occur. So someone who is experiencing, for example, sexual abuse may also be experiencing physical abuse or emotional abuse. That often explains why some people may be more vulnerable to abuse in organisations, such as sexual abuse from somebody who they have encountered in an organisational context. They may be more vulnerable because they have experienced neglect or physical abuse in, perhaps, their home context. So we need to bear in mind the intersections between different forms of child abuse and neglect.

Another contextual factor that needs to be borne in mind is the overall statistics on child abuse and neglect reports to authorities, which is not the same thing as prevalence, because we know that many instances of abuse and neglect go unreported. Data from child protection authorities, including the Department of Human Services here in Victoria and counterparts in the other states and territories, collated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, show that in the last financial year 237 273 reports about harm or risk of harm to children were made, and of those 40 466 were subsequently substantiated — so about 17 per cent of those concerns were substantiated. Those 40 000 reports involved 37 648 children. We know that Indigenous children are overrepresented and that sexual abuse comprises about 13 per cent of those substantiations — so about 5000 cases involved sexual abuse. Those numbers have increased over the years, whether you consider the absolute number or whether you consider the rate per thousand children in the population.

What that shows, though, is that there is a discrepancy between the figures that I talked about earlier, which are usually based on prevalence studies internationally, highlighting again the fact that reports of child abuse and neglect typically underestimate the problem. The ones that do come to the attention of statutory authorities like the Department of Human Services here in Victoria are a small tip of the iceberg of the overall problem of child abuse and neglect, and particularly sexual abuse. Sexual abuse tends to be one of the smaller categories of reports that come to the attention of authorities, yet it seems to be the largest category if you ask individuals retrospectively to report about their own childhood experiences. We know then that the typical experience is not one that is ever coming to the attention of authorities.

Some of the barriers to reporting and to disclosure of abuse are that in many instances parents or caregivers may be the source of harm — they may be the perpetrators of that abuse — therefore the abuse remains hidden within the particular context in which it has occurred, whether that is the home environment or whether it is in the context of an organisation. Where the abuse is outside the home — where it is extrafamilial— and that is particularly the case with sexual abuse, parents may be unaware that the child has been abused and therefore are not going to report that concern. Other people with whom that child or young person is coming in contact may not be aware that they have been abused.

Some of the other barriers that particularly relate to sexual abuse are about the nature of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. There is a bond that may be established through the grooming processes that perpetrators of sexual abuse particularly undertake. They make it hard for that person to then turn around and say that they have been sexually abused. There is fear of not being believed and the expectation of a particular response from authorities and being fearful of that response. There can be shame or other cultural or religious factors or values of families and communities that may prevent disclosure occurring. People may fear that they will be blamed, and even talking around issues about sexuality, including disclosing issues like sexual abuse, means talking about sex, and that therefore is often quite shameful in particular family environments and in particular cultural environments. There may be concerns about the impact of disclosure on significant others, including the perpetrator. Sometimes there are very mixed feelings about the perpetrator or in fact other family members, and that is just as true for organisations as well. If it is a trusted person who is the perpetrator, for example a leader within a youth organisation, 'What are going to be the impacts for him' — and it is usually a him, or her — 'if I were to disclose that abuse?'.

There is also a lack of recognition sometimes of the experience as abuse, and it is often not until adulthood that people will actually recognise, 'What happened to me was not my fault; I didn't ask for it, and it is abuse'. That recognition will often not be there at the time it is occurring, and of course gender stereotyping around appropriate sex role behaviours for men and women and for boys and girls can contribute to those expectations.

I am sure that you are already familiar with the historical context in terms of child maltreatment in organisations. Key reports were obviously the *Bringing Them Home* report relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the *Lost Innocents* report focusing on child migrants, the *Forgotten Australians* report looking at children in institutional foster care from the 1920s to the 1970s and the *Protecting Vulnerable Children* report by Senate Community Affairs References Committee inquiry in 2005. That is a little bit of background, and now I want to focus specifically on what the research about organisations has to say.

As I said in my preamble, there is often little research available documenting child maltreatment in organisations, so we tend to need to look at what the particular risk factors are at the individual level as well as at the organisational level. The research that is around, particularly research that uses information from people's disclosures about their experience of sexual abuse — and often it is qualitative research that we are using here — identifies that environments that tend to have high risks for children are ones that are home-like, recognising that of course families are often the most common place for — particularly sexual — abuse to occur, and so organisations that are more likely to mirror the characteristics in a home environment, where there is trust and expectations of each other, is where abuse is more likely to occur. It is also more common where staff are allowed to be alone with children, where there are hierarchical or patriarchal management processes and structures in place, and where there are poor disclosure policies.

A recent study by a couple of researchers from Queensland — Smallbone and Wortley — has looked at some self-report data from child abuse sex offenders, and it is interesting to look at the other side — not just from the victim side but what offenders say about their behaviours. What they found was that some of the locations where abuse particularly occurred were places like babysitting venues, where there were organised, structured activities, sometimes in the offender's place of employment, and also in organisations like churches.

To summarise that, the international data are really suggesting that children are likely to be at heightened risk of maltreatment in organisational settings where employees are really acting in the place of parents and have the same kind of expectations and obligations that parents do. It automatically brings to mind situations like children and young people in out-of-home care, whether that be placed in the broader kinship networks but particularly in foster and residential care settings — day-care facilities, schools and child-care settings. They are the ones where you have people acting in the place of parents.

The issues regarding the duty of care of organisations can be summarised in three key areas, and will I expand upon those in a moment. It is about screening for known perpetrators — so it is making sure that organisations are not employing someone who is already known to be a risk to children. Then there is managing the situational risks that arise within the work of that organisation. Thirdly and most importantly, there is creating positive cultures. I will talk about those three in more detail in a moment. Before I do that though, I want to quickly cover off on some of the specific groups of children that are at higher risk or may be at higher risk of abuse in organisations.

The two groups I point out are children with a disability, whether that is physical, intellectual or psychological, and children who are in out-of-home care. That is consistent with what we know about the broader research around risk factors relating to child sexual abuse. So the vulnerability to sexual abuse does vary with age, and particularly middle childhood and around the time of puberty is when sexual abuse risk tends to increase, and of course that is when children are probably more likely to be coming into contact with some types of organisations than others. Girls tend to be at greater risk than boys, but we should not underestimate in any way the fact that boys are still a significant proportion of victims of child sexual abuse as well as other types of child maltreatment. As I mentioned before, we know that maltreatment tends to go together, so other forms of harm to children such as physical or emotional abuse, neglect and particularly family violence are likely to, in and of themselves, be risk factors for sexual abuse occurring.

In terms of the characteristics of a child in terms of their level of cognitive functioning and their psychological wellbeing and capacity to be resilient and assertive is also likely to be a factor. A child that is less able to be assertive — and that may be because of intellectual disability but it may be because of other personality characteristics — is likely to be more at risk than other children. Social and structural disadvantage can also play a factor, although of course we know that abuse occurs in all family types and in all socioeconomic circumstances. Family dysfunction and parenting characteristics can also place children at greater risk, and that is not just at risk of abuse within their own family but in other settings as well, be they schools or other youth-focused organisations.

Then in terms of characteristics of offenders, we know they tend to be male, but that women can also offend sexually; we know that problems such as substance abuse and other characteristics such as mental health issues are associated with offending; prior history of abuse is an important factor, although we have to remember that there is not an automatic one-to-one relationship — most victims do not go on to become abusers, but turning it the other way around, there is a higher prevalence of histories of abuse in people who are perpetrators of child abuse.

Other personality characteristics tend to emerge. The research often talks about perpetrators as being "charming" and people who can easily ingratiate themselves with others, and they are often the characteristics that we admire in many organisations. They often tend to be the leaders because people are attracted to that kind of personality, but they often display very deviant attitudes, and often this only emerges when you look at research on perpetrators and they describe how they were able to access children and young people. And as we know from the broader research, offenders usually engage in grooming behaviour, and there is a whole range of ways in which people try to desensitise a child in order to be able to perpetrate sexual abuse. That can involve a whole range of things from giving gifts, from being the important person in their life, to making them feel special when they may be feeling vulnerable and not feeling special — and there is a whole range of behaviours that perpetrators engage in there.

In terms of strategies for organisations and how organisations prevent child abuse and what do problematic organisations look like, there is less good research, as I said before, to actually say what works. But what we know from the principles and from the things I have outlined in terms of the risks factors, is that there are some really concrete things that organisations are putting in place. I am aware of organisations such as Child Wise that have documented a number of these processes and principles.

For example, Child Wise identified 12 steps that are required to build child-safe organisations: first of all, having a good understanding of what child abuse is (and that is why I have taken the time to give the background that I have today); developing and maintaining an open and aware culture where there is an embarrassment to talk about issues relating to sex, relating to children's development, relating to emotional concerns et cetera; identifying and managing the risks and dangers to children in programs and activities that organisations are running; developing a child protection policy; creating clear boundaries — so identifying what responsibilities are for workers in organisations and what they are not allowed to do; adopting best practice in recruitment and selection — and that relates to issues such as working-with-children checks, police checks and also abiding by mandatory reporting policies; screening of staff and volunteers; support and supervision of staff and volunteers; ensuring there is a clear complaints procedure for reporting concerns; knowing legal responsibilities — as I said before, in terms of mandatory reporting; empowering children and encouraging participation in the organisation's programs; and providing education and training to all participants.

You can see that it is very holistic, and it is not about addressing one particular characteristic, but taking what I would call a whole-of-organisation approach. I would summarise, as I indicated at the beginning, that creating a child-safe organisation has three key elements. First of all, there is screening for known perpetrators, which is about making sure that an organisation is preventing infiltration by someone who has the clear intention of harming children. It is about managing situational risks, and I would like to go on and talk briefly about what we can learn from other research in the field of situational crime prevention. It is not just about looking at someone who has a clear intention but saying what can be done to manage the context in which that abuse may be able to occur. And then, finally, creating positive cultures, which talks about clarifying expectations of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour; encouraging disclosure and being able to have appropriate strategies for responding to those disclosures; and involving police and child protection authorities, rather than trying to manage things in house within an organisation.

I think the most significant advance within this field of creating safe environments has been to understand what in the criminological field has been understood and learnt from situational crime prevention. Really that is based on the premise that under the right circumstances almost anybody could offend — we are talking generally about offences here. Therefore what we have to do is assume that that could occur and put in place things within an organisation to prevent that from occurring. The analogy is often made with how we have often addressed car theft. We have not completely eradicated it, but car theft has reduced significantly. One of the ways that has occurred is not about locking up people who might look like they are a potential car thief but rather changing the environment to be able to reduce the risk that someone who has a propensity to offend in that way does not

have that opportunity: some very clear things, like having better locking systems on cars, having alarms, having the big visible locks and having handbags and keys not stowed visibly.

All of those things are things that you can do to manage the situational risk of that kind of crime occurring, and the same kind of principles can be applied within organisations. Really that is what the institute outlined in the 2006 issues paper on child maltreatment in organisations: to apply those principles and say, 'What would that look like within the context of trying to reduce child abuse and neglect within organisations?'. That means understanding what are some of the limits of pre-employment and screening or suitability assessments focusing on creating those safe environments, rather than just trying to look at safe individuals, and focusing therefore on opportunity reduction — making crime more risky, making crime more effortful, reducing the rewards, reducing the excuses and preventing and not tolerating what could be potential grooming behaviour.

In order for that to occur, I believe that the research supports a whole-of-organisation approach, where organisations, be they schools, churches or other youth-focused organisations, can best respond not just to sexual abuse of young people but to other forms of harm as well by doing things like promoting respectful relationships, so having conversations and talking explicitly about what respectful relationships among young people and between young people and their carers or those who might be in authority or in responsible positions within an organisation might mean.

What we know is that abuse within organisations may be perpetrated by adults. We also know that abuse within organisations can be perpetrated by peers — by other young people. In fact the research around child sexual abuse does tend to indicate that that is a significant area of concern, so I think a child-safe approach to organisations will be effective in addressing both of those issues.

Taking a whole-of-organisation approach means that individual disclosures are responded to appropriately and that there is effective leadership across the organisation on issues. That means: having things like an agreed definition of what sexual assault or child maltreatment might be; having statements about the consequences of offending; having clear and published policies and procedures that are victim centred. Policies, though, are not enough if they sit on a shelf; they obviously have to be implemented, so that involves regular training, reviewing the policies, monitoring them, often having sponsors or champions, if you like, who talk about what that policy means, regularly bring it up in team meetings and flesh it out and mentor new staff who might be coming into an organisation, and of course evaluating. And one of the most important aspects of evaluation is that organisations record when situations of concern arise. My hope would be that after having put in place policies such as this there is a reduction in those concerns.

Then there are obviously explicit programs that try to prevent sexual abuse and other forms of harm to children. We know of programs like protective behaviours programs, which encourage awareness for children, particularly in a school setting, about what is appropriate touching, understanding about their bodies et cetera, but of course that is inadequate unless all of these other things are in place. Teaching children that their body is their own and that they have a right to nobody else touching them is potentially even more damaging if there is actually no-one they can trust to go to to be able to raise a concern when it occurs. So a well-implemented protective behaviours program is embedded within that sort of whole-of-organisation approach where there is a culture around acceptance and talking about these kinds of issues.

It also involves education on the long-term impacts of child abuse and in particular sexual assault — that organisations understand the consequences, the harm that it does to individuals and to their families and communities. Some good examples, I think, of how organisations can embed these kinds of frameworks is to look, for example, at the national safe schools framework, which talks about how things like bullying, harassment and violence can be addressed through whole-of-school approaches.

I am happy to go into a little bit more detail on that if you like, but otherwise I can probably skip to talking about facilitating disclosure. I think that is one of the critical things for organisations. If we are going to be serious about preventing child abuse, we need to be seen to be active in responding to concerns when they are first raised, because it may be that someone has a concern before anything has become too serious. Sexual abuse sometimes is a very serious and one-off single event — i.e., a rape. Often it is a whole process, and it is a graduation of experiences that build up. If a child or a young person is able to come and talk to someone who is trusted and say, 'Hey, I feel a little bit uncomfortable about something that someone has said or the way they

looked at me', it may be that we are able to intervene, give some support to that young person and stop that abuse before it occurs or intervene in the middle of that cycle before it worsens.

Some of the ways in which that can happen is looking at how young people do make disclosures. Often disclosures are not made to an authority figure; often they are made to other young people. It might be to a friend or to some other trusted peer. A whole-of-organisation approach means making sure that everybody, including other children and young people in the organisation, understands child abuse and prevention strategies so that they can better hear and respond when their friend or someone else within the organisation comes and raises concerns. What the research on victims' disclosures shows is that often they are not believed by the first person that they tell. Often it is not until they have told three or four or five times that they eventually are believed and some concrete action is taken. It is very important to be able to get more people within a protective network around a victim so that they are able to disclose, disclose early and get the help that they need.

Of course that has the beneficial impact of other people seeing that a person was able to be protected. That friend that made the disclosure is then able to see, 'When my friend talked to me about this and we both went to the teacher' — for example — 'the teacher did something about it and got my friend out of this unsafe situation'. That then instils a culture within that school community or that youth organisation that it is okay to talk about this, you get help when you need it and you are appropriately supported.

The CHAIR — Dr Higgins, can I interrupt you there to say that I want to give the committee members an opportunity to ask you questions. I know you said to interrupt you as were going, but just so you are aware — —

Dr HIGGINS — We are running out of time.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Dr HIGGINS — Perhaps I will skip to talking about a couple of key points that emerged in a study I did of a case study of child sexual abuse within a church community. The analysis of that case revealed that there were a number of characteristics of that environment that facilitated the abuse occurring and prevented appropriate responses. I am talking here about one case; I am not generalising to church communities. I am trying to understand what some of the principles are that we can understand about organisations from this case.

What was evident was that there was minimisation and denial of the initial allegation. There was a misunderstanding of the difference between consensual peer sex and child sexual abuse. Even words like 'relationship' I think are emblematic of that. Child sexual abuse is not a relationship between an adult and a child: it is abuse. The language that we use around that is therefore important.

There was a failure to encourage the victim to report the situation to the police, so that suggests there was an absence of an appropriate policy around what we do if there is an allegation. There was an inappropriate response to legal actions once the police were involved, so again there was an absence of a policy that said this is how we respond, this is how we work with police et cetera. What was also evident was patriarchal sex role beliefs, religious doctrines and practices, and they related to a range of different contexts such as women, family, sin and forgiveness, the role of civil authorities — the police and the law courts are obviously what I am talking about there — and also the reverence that people have for religious authorities and religious leaders.

There was a failure to provide appropriate and separate support for the victim and the alleged perpetrator and accountability processes. Overall, there was poor leadership, which led to a polarisation of the church community. They are just some examples of how we can learn from when things go wrong within communities.

Ms HALFPENNY — How long ago did that happen — not your case study but the case of the person?

Dr HIGGINS — The case study was published in 2001, and it was in the couple of years prior that this occurred.

Ms HALFPENNY — That the actual thing happened?

Dr HIGGINS — Yes, so it is recent-ish.

I am also happy to either answer questions or just talk more generally around some of the things to think about in terms of mandatory reporting and also working-with-children checks if the committee would like.

The CHAIR — If you would like to give a very brief comment about that, we might then go to questions. Would you like to comment on the mandatory reporting and working-with-children checks?

Dr HIGGINS — Sure. Mandatory reporting obviously has some significant strengths in terms of it being a symbolic acknowledgement of the seriousness of child abuse. It talks about the moral responsibility, if you like, of community members to report, and it tries to overcome the reluctance that individuals, whether they be professionals or community members, have in reporting their suspicions. It does therefore have that increased awareness, but it also has some downsides.

We know once mandatory reporting of child abuse is implemented that jurisdictions see a marked increase in the number of reports coming through. That is a good thing in some ways, but it also has the downsides that unless it is matched with increased resourcing. There is a much higher workload for child protection departments in responding to those reports. The department may be able to screen out a referral that does not really warrant following up because it does not meet the threshold for statutory intervention, but there is still a family in need of some assistance because of those concerns. So it has some downsides if there is not adequate resourcing available.

What we have also seen in some jurisdictions in Australia is an increase in the threshold for responding to concerns about child abuse and neglect after mandatory reporting has been implemented — so, rather than responding to cases where there is risk of harm, only responding to cases where there is significant risk of harm because there is just not resourcing to deal with those sort of in-between cases. And of course there is the expectation from someone who is a mandatory reporter that there will be some concrete action, so there can be a sense of disillusionment if there is no feedback process or if they do not actually see the investigation happening or in fact even if the investigation happens but there is no outcome in terms of the child being removed or some other supports given to the family or the situation where the abuse is occurring.

Similarly with working-with-children checks, they are a really important step, and I would describe them as the first chapter in the book, not the final chapter. They help with screening people but only those people who have already been identified as being problematic, and of course everybody who is an offender has to offend for the first time, so they never pick up a first-time offender; they only pick up those who the system has already, if you like, identified. I think that is the serious limitation of working-with-children checks, and I think the balance to that is what I talked about earlier: the kind of holistic, whole-of-organisation approaches where working-with-children checks are seen as just being the first but by no means the most important step.

The CHAIR — Thank you. We might hand it over to committee members, and I will ask Mr McGuire to ask the first question of you. Thank you very much for your presentation.

Mr McGUIRE — Thank you, Dr Higgins, for your in-depth analysis and guidance. I would like you to elaborate a little bit more on improving the organisational cultures. Can you just respond on how a culture of transparency and communication can be fostered to reduce the risk of child abuse and also if there is evidence that organisational culture in religious and non-government organisations has improved in ways that help to reduce situational risks?

Dr HIGGINS — I will answer the second question first by saying no, I am not aware of research that actually talks about any improvement. To go to your first question, I think some of the issues I have talked about in terms of the sort of culture of an organisation, starting with the leadership — so, in an organisation such as a school, we are talking about the principal, we are talking about senior teachers, we are talking about guidance officers or psychologists or social workers who might be in the school environment all being able to promote what we would call a child-focused or child-friendly environment. That means being able to have the appropriate embedded curriculum, so that might involve a tailored protective behaviours program, but that is by no means sufficient.

I actually think that healthy sexuality and healthy relationships education should be seen as a normal part of everyday classroom curricula rather than just seen as a stand-alone thing that we sort of inject once in a child's life at year 9 or year 7 or whenever it might be. Teachers need to be trained and encouraged and fostered to be able to have conversations with children and young people about some of these sensitive and tricky issues. We

all know that these are the things families often struggle to have conversations about, but it is the silence that surrounds them that means it is hard for victims to speak up and easy for perpetrators to be able to engage in their grooming behaviours without being detected.

The third aspect, I suppose, is the issue of policies. It is not good enough, I do not think, for organisations to claim to be aware of and responding to issues of child abuse and neglect unless there are actually written policies that clearly talk about what the expectations are and what they intend to do in response to concerns that are raised, clearly articulating how those issues should be raised and the kind of supports that will be provided and the processes they will undertake. Obviously they will be quite different for different organisational contexts, but there are some overarching principles. I referred before to organisations like Child Wise that have articulated well some of those principles that can then get tailored and adapted to the particular context of an organisation, whether it be a religious organisation, school or other non-government organisation.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you, Dr Higgins. In the case study you mentioned you had written about in 2001 you identified that there are various areas, such as minimisation of denial, failure to encourage victims to report, inappropriate response to legal action, sex role beliefs and the effect on disclosure by male victims, doctrines and practices, support for victims and perpetrators, conflicts of interest and policies and procedures that promote leadership. In the 10 years since that was written, can you tell us whether in fact there have been any improvements in any of those areas, in your opinion?

Dr HIGGINS — I would have to say — I can only speak from my opinion here — that there is not solid research relating to that. I think it would have to be dealt with on a denomination-by-denomination basis. What we know is that a number of religious denominations have in fact put in place a range of policies to try to address some of these things, and to the degree to which there are those policies and processes in place, that is a good thing; however, I do not think we could assume that they are systematic or that they are actually embedded right throughout the organisational structure. If you went to a parishioner on the street, would they actually know that this policy is in place? Are local priests, ministers and vicars within their sermons or homilies reflecting these kinds of issues and openly discussing that? I think those are the real questions.

Mrs COOTE — So is the Australian Institute of Family Studies not doing any follow-up research on that document you did?

Dr HIGGINS — No. The research we did was a literature review of published research; this was not a new empirical study, and we have not been funded or asked to do any further follow-up work on that. Equally I am not aware of any new research specifically relating to that area. It is one of those things where it is actually difficult research to do and does not often get done, and where it does get done it is often of the nature of the research I did, which was a qualitative case study approach. It is hard to actually then generalise from that. However, I know there are some denominations that have engaged in inquiries and written reports around that; I know in the Anglican Church there was one by Zoë Morrison. It is those kinds of reports done by specific organisations that I think will answer your question best.

Mrs COOTE — Could I assume that the Australian Institute of Family Studies is not interested in this?

Dr HIGGINS — The Australian Institute of Family Studies is very interested in this. However, we recognise that we have limited funding and have to prioritise our research. Abuse in organisations is one aspect; abuse in families is another. We certainly try to make research available, but conducting new empirical research is an expensive task and needs to be considered within our other research priorities.

Ms HALFPENNY — In terms of procedures and policies being introduced into organisations, I am assuming if government could do it in non-government organisations where there is a funding commitment or arrangement and say, 'You have to have this policy to do that', what other mechanisms do you think it could use to ensure that there are policies and procedures in religious organisations? Also, to follow on in terms of making children resilient and all of that, are there any good ideas or programs outside schools about making children more aware?

Dr HIGGINS — Yes. I am aware, for example, that at the moment under the commonwealth's Family Support Program there is a particular round of grants for organisations wanting to implement child-aware approaches, and that is an initiative under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children. I think that is an example of the kind of initiative that you are talking about, where there are, in this instance, not

obligations but rather opportunities for additional funds for organisations wanting to put their hand up and implement these kinds of child-aware, child-friendly, child-focused organisational approaches. I think you have identified one of those important mechanisms, and that is using the existing funding mechanisms to promote awareness and implementation of child-safe organisational policies. I suppose I just want to add to that, that having a policy in place, sitting on a shelf, is not much good though, in and of itself.

Mr WAKELING — Dr Higgins, thank you for your presentation. I would like to talk about risk indicators, if I may.

Dr HIGGINS — Yes.

Mr WAKELING — I am interested to know whether there are any other indicators that suggest a higher risk in child abuse occurring within an organisation. I am interested specifically to look at when the understanding of organisational risk factors for child abuse emerged and also when religious organisations would have become aware that risk factors were high in religious settings.

Dr HIGGINS — That is a big question, and I am not quite sure how to tackle answering it.

Mr WAKELING — Happy for you to obviously come back to us as well.

Dr HIGGINS — Yes. To clarify: are you asking when should organisations have realised that their characteristics may place children at higher risk within them? Is that what you are asking?

Mr WAKELING — Yes.

The CHAIR — Would you like to take that question on notice?

Dr HIGGINS — I do not think that it is really a question that I can answer very readily. I suppose what I can point to is that the review of the literature we did in 2006 points to our understanding of where the literature was at that time, so that gives a sense of that, bearing in mind that the literature we reviewed was published on a range of dates. However, most of it was fairly recent, so a lot of it was in the late 1990s and 2000s. That is consistent with the broader literature on child abuse and neglect. There has been a burgeoning of research, starting in the 1980s, focusing on child sexual abuse but it was really focused very much within the family environment, so a lot of it was on incest, and it grew out of the significant advances in the feminist approach to understanding rape and the risks to women and then a commensurate focus on child sexual abuse. Really it has been since then that researchers have tended to broaden out.

But one of the reasons we published this issues paper was because we felt there was not one place you could go to where someone was drawing together all of these threads. I am not going to say that we were the first, but I think it is a fairly significant conceptual bringing together of those different threads that had not been done in quite that same way before.

Mr WAKELING — If you could prepare some information for us to revisit on that, that would be appreciated.

Dr HIGGINS — Sure.

Mr O'BRIEN — Thank you for your work and your presentation. Since the 2006 article — and I know there may be difficulty with resources — what evaluation has there been, particularly in relation to the child-safe accreditation program and other issues that you identified in your article? How successful have they been? I also have a very specific question I would like to follow up on in relation to mandatory reporting, where you said there were downsides and you referred to a spike in reporting once a regime came in.

Dr HIGGINS — Yes.

Mr O'BRIEN — Of course we are talking about mandatory reporting across all non-government organisations. In relation to that are there any other downsides you can identify for us, particularly the argument that by making it mandatory you might discourage reporting? We would like to evaluate that. You should know that the Catholic Church recently in its submission to us has now accepted a form of mandatory reporting as a result of the Cummins inquiry earlier this year, so roll that up in the evaluation on mandatory reporting.

Dr HIGGINS — The evaluation I can answer fairly quickly. The institute has not done any because we do not run programs; we are purely about either conducting research or disseminating research done by others. I am not aware of any formal evaluations done by others, but organisations such as Child Wise may be able to assist you — it does lots of training and promotion of its resources — in terms of whether there have been any organisations that have evaluated changes as a result of having implemented those child-safe whole-of-organisation policies.

In terms of mandatory reporting, yes, you are right that I am cautioning that there are some limits. I am not saying that we should not have mandatory reporting by any means, I am just noting that there are some consequences and one of those consequences is a significant rise in the resource intensity for child-protection departments. If that is not appropriately matched, there can be dissatisfaction within the general community and people who should be reporting around the actions that are taken or not taken. The other limitation of mandatory reporting, if it is a stand-alone strategy, is that it is seen as being sufficient in and of itself.

Mr O'BRIEN — I do not want to interrupt, but if I could just direct you to my question: I appreciate those submissions and thank you for that, what I am interested in is are there any perverse outcomes or disbenefits from imposing a mandatory reporting obligation in relation to the bringing forward of evidence? Maybe that was an old argument that is a moot point in the light of the church's position, but I would like to know if there are any that you have identified. I am not saying there are; I want your opinion on that.

Dr HIGGINS — There is not good research to be able to answer that question, but I am aware of criticisms of mandatory reporting, but I do not have the capacity to answer that question.

The CHAIR — Dr Higgins, thank you very much. I know we started a little bit late, but you have done very well to keep us on time, so we do appreciate that. On behalf of the committee, I thank you again for appearing before us this afternoon. Your evidence has been most helpful.

Dr HIGGINS — My pleasure.

Committee adjourned.