

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SECTOR IN VICTORIA

Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 10 March 2026

MEMBERS

Anasina Gray-Barberio – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

Sarah Mansfield

WITNESS

Deanne Carson, Chief Executive Officer, Body Safety Australia.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon and welcome back. We will now resume the committee's public hearings for the Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, can you please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Deanne CARSON: Sure. Deanne Carson, CEO of Body Safety Australia.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We are now going to go around and introduce ourselves. My name is Anasina Gray-Barberio, MP for Northern Metro and Chair.

Michael GALEA: Good afternoon. Michael Galea, Deputy Chair, Member for South-Eastern Metro.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region. Hello.

Georgie CROZIER: Good afternoon. Georgie Crozier, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Thank you. And we have Ms Ermacora online as well. I would now like to invite you, Ms Carson, to make an opening statement if you wish, and I ask you to please keep it to a maximum of 8 to 10 minutes so we have got more time for discussion. Thank you very much.

Deanne CARSON: Thank you very much. Body Safety Australia provides childhood sexual abuse prevention education to children from three to 18 years old, their parents and caregivers, educators and teachers in metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria. We deliver programs to approximately 20,000 children a year, 3500 parents and caregivers and over 2600 educators and teachers. We take a child rights approach to our work, one where we centre the needs of children first, not only to be safe but to be carefree in their play, in their learning and their friendships. I would like to acknowledge all of the victim-survivors of childhood sexual abuse and specifically those children of Point Cook, Tarneit, Melton and all of the other children who should have been safe last year at their early childhood centres.

In protecting the privacy and anonymity of these children and all children who are victim-survivors, we inadvertently erase their voices. The Victorian Child Safe Standards require us to ensure that children are empowered about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously. When we do this in co-design with children we also ask them this question: 'What do you need in order to feel safe?' This is what they have told us: 'I feel safe when I am loved. I feel safe when adults take me seriously. I feel safe when I'm allowed to make mistakes. Stop saying "be careful" all of the time and just let me play. You listened to me, and that made me feel safe.'

In my professional opinion the case that prompted this inquiry was both predictable and avoidable, as those intent on accessing children to sexually abuse them identified the early childhood education and care sector as one easily exploited. A recent study by the University of New South Wales reported that one in six men in this country admitted having sexual feelings towards children and 9 per cent of men surveyed admitted to offending against a child. In other words, the number of men in Australia who admit to sexually offending against a child could form a line starting here that would stretch through Wangaratta and Wodonga into New South Wales as far as Newcastle.

When institutions responded to the recommendations of the Betrayal of Trust inquiry and the royal commission and put greater barriers in place to prevent offending, the number of offenders did not decrease. They simply looked for an easier path to offending, and there are many factors that make this sector vulnerable, including systems that see early childhood education and care as a productivity solution first and a place for children's education and care second. We have as a society, I believe, devalued the work of the professionals who educate and care for children, seeing them as babysitters and not providing them with the training, autonomy and environments to do their roles to the best of their capacity.

While not a universal experience, poor ratios, poor work conditions, long hours and low rates of pay have inevitably led to understaffing and a highly casualised workforce. Coupled with low qualification requirements in order to gain employment, it is no surprise that offenders would seek employment in the sector in order to gain access to children. In our written submission we called for a greater focus on prevention while understanding the importance of tightening capacity to intercept and address offending when it does occur. But our area of expertise is prevention education. We do support the national approach to professional development but also see the online training as a minimum standard and not the bar that Victoria should aspire to or that the workforce deserves.

When the enormity of alleged offending was publicised last year, the team at Body Safety Australia did not wait for a government or a peak body led response but worked swiftly to host a webinar to support early childhood educators and teachers. Within a week 2500 educators had registered and we had pulled together a panel of experts to support them. Our organisation did this without support and without funding, because the sector needed it. We surveyed those registered and over 700 educators responded, and I would like to share that data with you: 97 per cent of them said that they wanted further training to increase their confidence and knowledge in child safeguarding; 75 per cent wanted the government to invest in tailored service-level approaches that engage the whole team, not just the permanent staff; 79 per cent wanted whole-of-community education for children, families and staff; 50 per cent wanted communities of practice for service leaders; and 67 per cent of those 700 stressed the need for training for agency and casual workers, and we consistently see that they are left out of training opportunities.

Online training developed for the purpose of being accessible for all educators throughout the country is better than nothing, but it will not meet the needs of diverse communities. It cannot speak to the nuanced need of the vulnerabilities in rural areas, faith communities, migrant and refugee communities, services with high numbers of children with disability or experiences of trauma and First Nations children. While it is cost-effective, it cannot address the human element that is often a barrier to educators applying their learnings. We deliver training that helps educators overcome the barriers to the reportable conduct scheme, and we know that it is not knowledge that is the greatest barrier. When we did our pilot only 5 per cent of educators said that they would, pre the training, feel completely confident speaking up if they believed that a colleague was harming a child. The barriers that they named included the fear of getting it wrong, the fear of repercussions for themselves, the fear of repercussions for the accused staff member if they were in fact innocent, lack of confidence, lack of time and lack of resources to navigate complex reporting systems. By the end of training 73 per cent felt very confident and the rest were somewhat confident.

Trainers must also take a compassionate, trauma-informed approach. The *Australian Child Maltreatment Study* shows us that one in three women in Australia are survivors themselves of childhood sexual abuse. If we apply that statistic to a predominantly female workforce, we can assume that there is almost always one and there are sometimes many survivors in the room when we deliver training. Comprehensive primary prevention education also provides parents of enrolled children with the knowledge and skills to empower and protect their own children, identify and disrupt grooming when it occurs and better advocate for child safety measures. Primary prevention needs to engage children, not because children should ever be expected to protect themselves from an adult who chooses to harm them but because children need to know their rights, to be safe and to have the skills to identify safe adults and the language to disclose harm, including being able to accurately name their genitals. Finally, primary prevention looks to the future. Children learn not only their right to be safe now but to respect the bodily autonomy of others. Thank you for having me here today.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Carson. We really appreciate your opening statement. I too would like to acknowledge the victim-survivors, especially those that you have mentioned. These are young children who do not have the vernacular to express themselves when they are being harmed. My first question to you – you presented a really interesting submission. You said child sexual abuse and exploitation is a form of gender-

based violence, except it is not often seen this way in the mainstream, when we are talking about young children, that this is gender-based violence. You provide a Body Safety Superstars program as part of the delivery of this primary prevention program to children and to childcare providers. In your submission you spoke about how you delivered this program, and in term 3 of last year your staff documented 20 signs of concerning atypical behaviour in children resulting in six calls to the Orange Door and 12 reports to child protection. That is some scary stuff, if I may say so myself, and this is from your workforce, who can pick up on these behaviours and these symptoms. So when you talk about a child rights approach, what does that even look like for children who are zero to three, for example? In terms of an early childhood setting, what should a child rights approach look like?

Deanne CARSON: Yes, good question. When we deliver the program, we deliver to children from three years old, so if they are in 3- or 4-year-old kindergarten, but we work with the educators who work with children from infants all the way through. A child rights approach for infants, children who are preverbal or perhaps children who are non-verbal can be about studying their body language. It can be as simple as understanding where the cot room is and understanding how children respond when people walk past the cot room – if they startle – and setting up an environment that actually centres the child’s right to rest over easy access of supervision.

The CHAIR: Okay. You mentioned the Commission for Children and Young People would often provide communities of practice that centred around child safety. You have concerns that this is not going to continue, moving forward, because part of their remit has changed and moved over to VECRA.

Deanne CARSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Can you tell us more about what is going to happen there and what you have been told?

Deanne CARSON: Well, I do not know. I am not aware of what is going to happen. I spoke at the last community of practice that was hosted by CCYP. I know that they are extraordinary spaces for child safe leaders to come together to share their practice, to share the challenges that they face and to gain a more nuanced understanding from experts that they may not normally have access to, particularly the child safe leaders who might be in rural and regional areas who do not have access to perhaps training to come out to their spaces as well. It allows for really nuanced conversations. It allows for people to come together and understand how to take a strengths-based approach when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and migrant refugee families.

I will give you an example that I often see when we are delivering training, where we see educators say that perhaps this house is ‘chaotic’ when actually that child is living in a home that is multigenerational that has many, many caring and protective adults. It allows the educators to come together and share that knowledge and understanding and take it back to their teams, and I think that is a critical part of child safety, particularly when you have what might be large employers in a lot of these spaces, but small workforces. Helping the service directors have that support is really critical.

The CHAIR: Your submission also argued that child sexual abuse prevention needs to begin much earlier than current policy debates. In your view, what do you reckon are the biggest gaps in Victoria’s current approach to primary prevention in early childhood settings?

Deanne CARSON: Body safety education is in the EYLF. It is a requirement. The training that we provide is not funded. We are not funded by any government department. Services can access us through school readiness funding, but that only allows them to access the program. If we are then picking up and doing reporting, we might be on the phone to SOCIT or child protection or Orange Door for maybe up to 6 hours, and we might have to give evidence and there is no funding for that. That is a massive barrier for accessing comprehensive body safety education.

The CHAIR: Also, again coming back to your submission, you were quite disappointed that the government’s rapid review failed to name primary prevention initiatives as a recommendation. Were you at all consulted during the review process?

Deanne CARSON: No, we were not consulted. And when we asked to be involved, we were told that it was not our time.

The CHAIR: So you did proactively reach out to the government.

Deanne CARSON: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: What does that mean ‘it wasn’t your time’?

Deanne CARSON: That prevention was not the focus. I can check the exact wording of the email, but I believe it said prevention was not the focus at that stage.

The CHAIR: And what are your thoughts on that? What is your feedback on that? Because we are trying to look at everything here. We do not want a repeat of these issues, hence why we are having this inquiry. If you have any thoughts, you happy to share –

Deanne CARSON: Absolutely. I will add to that that over the course of the last year we have emailed numerous ministers and asked for meetings and wanted to share our knowledge and have not been successful in gaining meetings with ministers.

The CHAIR: ‘Unsuccessful’ as in they have not responded to you?

Deanne CARSON: Some have not responded, and others have referred us to ministers who have not responded.

The CHAIR: Which ministers did you reach out to, Ms Carson?

Deanne CARSON: The minister that we were referred to was Minister Blandthorn, and Minister Blandthorn’s office has not responded. I was very disappointed because we have been doing this work in Victoria for 11 years now, and we do visit every single space in Victoria. I have worked in schools as small as eight children. We work in every space in Victoria. We work in for-profit centres, we work in not-for-profit centres and we work in council centres. We see the vulnerabilities and we have increasingly, over the last three years, seen an increase in reporting of men who have gained employment in early childhood education who have had accusations of child sex offending made against them. We have tried to gain traction in that space with both state and federal governments, with peak bodies and with regulators, and we have been unsuccessful.

The CHAIR: Thank you. My time is up, Ms Carson. Deputy Chair.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thanks very much, Ms Carson. I would like to start with the workshops that you talked about. The statistics that you gave were very interesting, especially that at the outset only 5 per cent of people felt comfortable – or felt confident, I should probably say – to make a report. Apart from that aspect, were there any other observations that you took from those workshops of any gaps in awareness or training or what a grooming behaviour is or is not or anything else in that that you think that we should be aware of?

Deanne CARSON: Absolutely. I will break it down. We actually provide three different trainings in child safety in early childhood education. The first one is the Body Safety Superstars, and that helps educators understand what is child sexual abuse, the prevalence, the particular risk factors for different communities, what is grooming and how you can intercept it. A lot of people are starting now to understand what is grooming but do not know what are the opportunities for intercepting grooming. It provides them with the 10 learning objectives that they can teach children in order to empower them as well. That is the Superstars. We then offer professional development around the Child Safe Standards, particularly around cultural safety. We look particularly at the standards that ask for cultural safety for First Nations children, children from migrant and refugee backgrounds, disability, LGBTIQ+ and children with a disability. Did I say disability?

Michael GALEA: I think you did, yes.

Deanne CARSON: The nuanced and strength-based approach that each of those communities would require in order to have equitable child safety. Then the last one is around reportable conduct. We have been doing this for 11 years. Initially a lot of educators were really afraid to say ‘penis’. Am I the first person who has said that in this room? I hope so. They are now very confident. The vast majority of early childhood educators in Victoria are very confident talking to parents and children about naming genitals, which is amazing. They are concerned about parent pushback, they are concerned about intercepting grooming and

mostly they are overwhelmed. Educators are overworked and overwhelmed. I said at the start that this is a gendered issue, but this is an issue that is predominantly being enacted by men where we are nearly exclusively asking women to pick up the pieces and make children safer.

Michael GALEA: You spoke about in your submission – one of the many challenging parts to read – the persistent perpetrators and, through the previous federal royal commission, how they now find other ways, I think, as you said, seen as vulnerable areas, vulnerabilities that they can exploit. How do we break that cycle? How do we stop that? Is there a way?

Deanne CARSON: We work with very young children to help them understand that they do not have a right to harm other people's bodies. We destigmatise asking for help for people who are having thoughts about harming others. I do not have the statistic on me, but a lot of the offending very young children experience is actually perpetrated by adolescent boys rather than adults and we know that the vast majority of those boys do not go on to become adult perpetrators. We know that if we do more work with those boys before they offend with that early intervention work where we have identified boys in upper primary school who have harmful beliefs and behaviours but have not yet offended, I think that is how we enact change.

Michael GALEA: And that, would I be right to say, then aligns with: by removing stigma, we get more access to more of these vulnerable people who might become offenders and can make those interventions?

Deanne CARSON: And by taking a strength-based approach as well, because when we talk about those boys, we know that a lot of them may come from homes where there is family violence, and so we can actually intervene with compassion instead of with blame and judgement.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. In terms of the work that we are looking at for this inquiry, obviously you would be aware of the new mandatory training. Would you be supportive of those changes that have been made under the national law to the training requirement?

Deanne CARSON: The new training?

Michael GALEA: Yes.

Deanne CARSON: Yes – and. Because it is national, I am really supportive. I think that Victoria has done more earlier than a lot of other states, and I see it as a pretty low bar and we can do better.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And you have launched into my next question. Is there another interstate or perhaps broader scale of international comparison that you would wish to draw our attention to for somewhere that is effectively implementing these changes?

Deanne CARSON: I am doing quite a lot of work in South Australia at the moment and I have seen some of their training being embedded within the Department for Education, and I see a great confidence in the educators in South Australia in doing that aspect. But that is curriculum, that is not the aspect that actually talks to abuse.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Have you had any meetings or engagements with the Department of Education in Victoria with your advocacy?

Deanne CARSON: Some, yes.

Michael GALEA: If I may ask, has that been productive? Has it been fruitful?

Deanne CARSON: I mean, it has been positive, I guess. I do not know what – if you are asking if it is fruitful in that I am sharing what we are experiencing, yes. But I have to say that my team is really stretched and really under-resourced, and as far as hearing about how we are going to be supported to do the work that we have been doing goes, it has not been.

Michael GALEA: That is good for us to hear. I am out of time, but I just acknowledge that at least one of the suburbs you have mentioned in your submission is in my electorate. So thank you for the work that you are doing in my community.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Crozier.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, Ms Carson, for being before us. Can I get some clarification? In your opening statement – I think I misheard, but I did not want to interrupt you – you said a statistic: one in six males either have been impacted or are abusers. Can you clarify that for me?

Deanne CARSON: Yes. The University of New South Wales recently published data. They surveyed adult men in Australia, and one in six said – I would need to get the exact wording back up for you – that they had had thoughts of abusing children and one in nine admitted to sexually harming a child. And there was another statistic, and I can share it with you, that also spoke to the number of men who said that they would have acted if they thought that they could get away with it.

Georgie CROZIER: Well, I find those statistics just completely extraordinary in the extreme, to be honest, and I find them hard to believe. I would like to see the details of that study, because I find that incredible. So be it as it is, I am glad I clarified that, because – I see my committee members also nodding with me – I find them extraordinary. I say that because I sat on the Betrayal of Trust inquiry – I chaired that committee – and spent many, many, many hours talking to people around the grooming behaviours of individuals who preyed on vulnerable children. I have been going back through this as we have been going through this committee, and there are lots of findings we made. But we made specific recommendations, and when I listen to you it feels like the government has done nothing to take on board anything we did in that inquiry – anything at all.

I note that you were formed in 2015, and as Mr Galea referenced, in your submission you said:

A couple of years ago I started calling it ‘the unintended consequences of the Royal Commission’. Institutions were implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission. As a result, predators found it harder to gain access to children. So, they started looking for the weak links ...

And you go on. I just want to tease that out a bit more, because Mr Galea asked about it and talked about the vulnerabilities. I have got a question for you: has the government failed, the Department of Education specifically, given we have had inquiry after inquiry and recommendation after recommendation? If you are saying this and are claiming that one in six males, according to that University of New South Wales study, are having these thoughts about children, as a society we are really going down the drain if that is the case.

Deanne CARSON: Of course the royal commission did not fail, and of course the Betrayal of Trust inquiry did not fail. I think that extraordinary work was done and –

Georgie CROZIER: Are governments failing, though?

Deanne CARSON: I think that with each iteration we uncover new uncomfortable truths. When we started doing this work in the 90s, we talked a lot about stranger danger, but we know, statistically, stranger danger is not where children are going to face the greatest risk. Then we were talking about institutional harm, and we were still able to talk about that because it happened over there. Then we were talking about the risk to children in their own families. We are only now starting to talk about the risk to children from adolescent children as well. In all of this, we have quoted so many statistics about victim-survivors in the same way that we do with family violence – how many women experience family violence – but we do not quantify the perpetrators. I think that now we are coming to an uncomfortable truth where we are looking at that, not for shock but to say ‘How can we prevent that from happening?’

Georgie CROZIER: But you go on and you say that dating apps and kids’ social media and gaming accounts are the weak links in these areas, so do governments need to be doing more around that? What we are looking at is –

Deanne CARSON: Absolutely. We are siloing our responses. We are sitting here talking about early childhood education and care, but we are not talking about out-of-hours school care, and we are not talking about the vulnerabilities of out-of-hours school care. We are not talking about the vulnerabilities of NDIS disability support workers. When we silo, we are not –

Georgie CROZIER: Well, we have got terms of reference according to this inquiry.

Deanne CARSON: I understand that.

Georgie CROZIER: What I am asking is: given all that we have done, given all the findings, given all the recommendations and given what the government has put in place, both federally and in the states, in trying to deal with these issues – and a lot of work has been done, but I read your submission and I feel like nothing has been done. So I am asking you: has government failed?

Deanne CARSON: I cannot give you a yes or no, because yes, children are still being harmed, but no, because we are sitting here talking about it, and my team –

Georgie CROZIER: But isn't that because the processes were not in place to be able to track these people or do the proper checks? The Ombudsman here in Victoria recommended a tightening of the working with children check, yet the government ignored it.

Deanne CARSON: Yes. We did not support the early childhood education and care sector. We provide training to permanent staff and we do not to casuals and we certainly do not to agency staff. Are you asking if we should actually finish implementing all the recommendations?

Georgie CROZIER: That is my time. But what I am asking is – there is a lot more work to be done, but I would suggest that a lot of work has already been done.

Deanne CARSON: I do not want to discount the work that has been done. Last July my team were out there working in 40, 60 early childhood settings a week supporting those educators and supporting those children and hearing those disclosures and hearing children as young as three ask for help, and I get really frustrated when I cannot gain traction and share that information – when I email the regulator and say, 'What would you like me to do with these disclosures?' and they do not respond. To be clear, that is the federal regulator, not state.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Thank you, Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you so much for your submission and for appearing today. At the start, in your opening statement, you made the reflection that early learning centres are really being used as an efficiency measure in society as opposed to being seen as a place for nurturing and supporting the learning and education of children. Can you expand on that and perhaps what the problems are that have then stemmed from that?

Deanne CARSON: Early childhood education and care has been incredibly important to women's participation in the workforce, and I think it is the reason why I was able to work and perhaps other people in this room. But when we see it as a service that perhaps is for profit and we prioritise shareholders over the needs of the children and we do not take a child rights approach, we inevitably are in conflict. If our KPIs are about how much money we make and how much money we save rather than how happy and safe the children are, then we have the wrong approach.

Sarah MANSFIELD: That is something that I think we have heard in different ways throughout this inquiry. You also spoke about, or you provided some statistics about, the desires of the workforce to have some more support generally with a whole range of aspects of their work. Why do you think the current system is not delivering what that workforce needs?

Deanne CARSON: I want to qualify that by saying I see really inequitable access to those things in Victoria, and I assume perhaps it is even more so in other states, just because of the geography of spaces. When we work in some areas and with some services, they are really well resourced: they have excellent training, they have excellent support, they have a high number of staff who have been there for a long time, who have really strong relationships, and those staff are empowered to make autonomous decisions. However, we can go three suburbs over and work with staff who are exhibiting all of the signs of burnout and vicarious trauma because they are supporting so many children who have their own experiences of trauma with very, very little support. I worked last week with – and I heard you speaking to the union earlier – two council areas, one in metro Melbourne and one in regional Victoria, and even though they were both council-run services, the one in regional Victoria had higher staff vacancies and had a higher number of children who needed support but could not get support. I asked them what they wanted me to tell you, and they said that it can be a three-year wait to see a paediatrician to get an assessment for a child in regional Victoria. So the support available for children who are diagnosed is just not available there.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You mentioned before that you provide training. I just want to follow up with a question I had. Do you provide training to casual staff as well?

Deanne CARSON: Only when their employer invites them, which they often do not. If they do, they are welcome to come. They will not get paid, but they might get pizza.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay.

Deanne CARSON: And that is casual, not agency.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Right. And so agency staff – not at all? Okay. You also mentioned that a lot of staff potentially have a fear of speaking up about things that they might see, and that fear can be multifactorial. It might be fear about, as you said, getting it wrong or fear of repercussions for themselves or the person they make the complaint about, particularly if they are getting it wrong.

Deanne CARSON: Yes.

Sarah MANSFIELD: We have heard a few things about the broader culture of speaking up and a lot of different things that work against, at times, people feeling confident to speak up. What do you think needs to change to create a culture where there is that openness and disclosure and confidence about speaking up about child safety issues?

Deanne CARSON: All staff who speak up need to have the opportunity to discuss what their barriers are and share them with others. What I see works really well in training is when you do have that confident staff member and you give them the space to talk about what makes them confident, that gives courage to the other staff members as well. So those communities of practice where you can draw on people who already are really confident can really bolster the confidence of others. Helping understand the system, so helping understand what will happen when an investigation is done and what kind of information they will have and what information they will not have. And the other thing that a lot of staff have said to me is a script for how to talk with parents, because all of a sudden you might have a staff member there one day and gone the next and parents asking, ‘Well, where is that person?’ and them not knowing what they can and cannot say. So even just a simple script of how to manage those small interactions can be really important for them.

Sarah MANSFIELD: We heard earlier that sometimes there can be additional challenges with speaking up within a person’s own organisation. A lot of it can be that there might be a perceived conflict of interest there, or the threats to employment might be more direct. Do you think having independent pathways where people can raise concerns or make complaints are important?

Deanne CARSON: Absolutely. I have spoken to so many educators where there has been harm occurring in their workplace, both here and interstate, with some other cases, and they have said that they did raise it with their employer and their employer shut them down. So an independent pathway is critical.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. I am going to do a little bit of tidying up. I have been listening, and there are some questions that are still outstanding from the discussions we have had today. The rapid review – you offered to provide government the wisdom of your experience and research. If you are comfortable, can you take it on notice and provide that to the committee?

Deanne CARSON: Sure.

Melina BATH: I was interested: you mentioned the federal regulator was not interested – just help me understand. You have done a number of assessments over time. You go into care settings, into the sector, and do workshops. Just unpack that a little bit for me.

Deanne CARSON: Sure. This is not something that happens frequently, but on occasion we have been in services where one of our team have observed behaviour that would be reportable conduct if we fell under the

reportable conduct scheme, which we do not. So we then look for the pathway to report, rather than relying on that centre to –

Melina BATH: To be your own whistleblower.

Deanne CARSON: Correct.

Melina BATH: Therefore there is an impediment because you are not seen as a category 1 identifier, so you would prefer that you would be classed as a category 1. What qualifications do you have, Ms Carson?

Deanne CARSON: Our team come from a range of different backgrounds. They come from either early childhood education or primary or secondary teaching –

Melina BATH: But they have got a qualification, generally?

Deanne CARSON: Some are still studying as well.

Melina BATH: Okay. So just on that interaction, I would be interested to see if there is any information you could provide here on notice.

Deanne CARSON: Sure.

Melina BATH: When you do go into the various services, who invites you? Is it the agent who invites you as a person of knowledge or wisdom? Do they come in and say, ‘Can you give us a workshop?’ or is it government?

Deanne CARSON: Our programs are available on the School Readiness Funding menu. We have provided an evidence base for our programs that has been assessed by the Department of Education, which has placed it on the School Readiness Funding menu. So early childhood education settings can access School Readiness Funding in order to secure the program.

Melina BATH: Okay, so that is how you provide –

Deanne CARSON: Yes.

Melina BATH: Do you go and do a region or a suburb? Quickly – how do you do that?

Deanne CARSON: It is always a point of tension because there is a lot of travel involved for our team. When we work in regional and rural Victoria, we try to work in regions. However, we also respond to centres who perhaps are requiring extra support. So it may not have been an incident that happened in the centre, but it happened to a child who attends the centre, and so they may ask us to come sooner.

Melina BATH: Sure. It can be council run, it can be not-for-profit, it can be –

Deanne CARSON: For profit.

Melina BATH: For profit. Yes. It is you sharing the knowledge. So it can be agency requests – that is what I am saying. Thank you. I have written down ‘potential perpetrators’, and in my experience over the last 10 years, some of them are not men. I just make that as a comment. I have probably worked more in special developmental schools where kids are non-verbal et cetera and really do not have that ability to communicate with parents or safe-space people. You are implementing some training and you are wanting to teach the leader, the head service provider, who is going to interview potential new staff. What are some of the targeted questions that you would train that person to ask to identify potential perpetrators? How do you eke them out? How do you red flag them? Or if you tell me, are we giving the game away a bit?

Deanne CARSON: No, not at all. We do not do a lot of training in that aspect, but we do ask them to obviously review and ask child-safe questions, particularly behavioural ones: ‘Can you tell me about a time where you were concerned for the safety of a child and what you did, and how you responded and how you acted?’ The other major thing that we recommend, not just for the behavioural questioning in interviews, is reference checking, because what we are finding now is that there are fewer and fewer reference checks being completed, and most of those are being completed digitally – that is just a confirmation of employment.

Melina BATH: ‘Do you know Bob Smith?’ or whatever.

Deanne CARSON: Yes. ‘Did Bob Smith work there, and for how long and in what role?’ – rather than taking the time to actually talk to somebody on the phone, which again is really complex because it is much, much harder now than it was three or four years ago to get a centre director on the phone, to have a conversation with them and to conduct a reference check.

Melina BATH: That is right – to actually connect as well. That was my next question – what about referees.

So a recommendation for us could be to require centres to actually have those deeper conversations with referees.

Deanne CARSON: Deeper conversations, or perhaps because centre directors are so inundated with paperwork and workload, maybe there is a central space for reference checking, not just working with children checks.

Melina BATH: You talked in your submission about CCTVs and I think – let me get this – a false sense of security. In the past, again, when speaking with parents of children who were in special developmental schools, as that has kind of been my experience, they really feel that that is really important. So I want you to unpack why it is not helpful and just provide that context.

Deanne CARSON: Firstly, I understand that the conviction rates for child sex offenders are astonishingly rare and low, and CCTV may help overcome that. But I also know that people who are intent on harming children know how to circumvent safety measures like CCTV. I am sure that many people have spoken to this, but I am concerned about where that data is hosted, who is viewing the data, what they are using those images for. I am concerned that it could be a reason to reduce the number of educators, not increase ratio, because we have CCTV there. It can give parents a false sense of security. But more than anything else, from a child’s rights perspective, children have the right to play and to eat and to sleep and go to the toilet without a camera trained on them. There has got to be a better way.

Melina BATH: Thanks. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. Jacinta Ermacora from Western Victoria. I am here in Warrnambool today. I am sorry I missed the introduction. I have just got a couple of questions from the start of your time, so they might not seem logical now, but it struck me to ask you: would you say that a recommendation of this inquiry ought to be to address the undervaluing of the childcare profession?

Deanne CARSON: Yes, 100 per cent. If we treated early childhood education and care professionals like professionals and we raised all of the conditions that they work under and made it a profession that people wanted to get into, that it was difficult to become an early childhood education and care professional, we would reduce the vulnerabilities of the sector. But also beyond that, most of the educators that I am speaking to now, even though all of you are doing so much work to support them, they feel like the media has absolutely crushed their spirit, honestly.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. I am happy to be corrected, but I think you are the first person to raise that, and to be crushed by the media at the wage rate they are on, just as an example. Another question that sort of pops into my mind too is I really appreciated you flipping the data about men, and we know that under all the categories – intimate partner, sexual assault and child abuse – the majority of perpetrators are males. I do not think anybody questions that anymore. You said that one in three women were survivors and I think I have operated on that too. If you have got a classroom of kids, then you can assume, as you said, that there are survivors in your room. Why is this not talked about? You know, it constitutes 25 per cent of police work. It is an enormous part of criminal behaviour in our society, and yet it is just not named and not discussed. I might have gone beyond your remit, sorry.

Deanne CARSON: Because we would have to face the fact that perhaps they are our brothers and our fathers and our partners, and that is heartbreaking.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, and uncomfortable. Just moving to something a bit more constructive, there were questions about incidences and reporting of incidences and you described a healthy chaotic family. It sort of occurred to me that our educators and carers could be supported to understand the difference and to understand positive crazy dynamics as opposed to negative crazy dynamics in families that they are working with.

Deanne CARSON: I think that we all have biases, and we can only see things through the lens perhaps that we were raised with, unless we are otherwise educated. And so, you know, as a white woman who grew up in a nuclear family, like that is my norm, and it is only through learning and being taught by very generous people that I understand multigenerational families have such great strengths that perhaps my nuclear family did not have. This is why I keep coming back to communities of practice and also the fact that the early childhood education and care sector is so diverse and does have, apart from gender, so many educators from so many different backgrounds and experiences, and if we draw on that and share that knowledge, we can then have a better understanding of the strengths of the families that the children live in.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I just want to leave the last moment to you, because I am the last questioner. Is there anything that you feel is unsaid or that you have left off that you, on reflection, would like to add?

Deanne CARSON: I think the only thing that I would like to add, and I touched on it earlier, is I know the remit of the work that you are doing, but if we do not desilo this work, we are going to be having this same conversation in disability. We have already had it in aged care. When we only look to the early childhood education profession as the one source of knowledge about the solution, we miss all of the other vast experience. So in whatever way you can, please desilo the work that you are doing.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you very much. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Ermacora. That brings our session to a close. Ms Carson, I just wanted to say thank you very much for your contribution to the hearing today. You will receive a copy of the transcript for a review in about a week's time, before it is published on the website, and I do note that there were some questions on notice for you.

We are now going to take a quick break and come back at 5 past 3. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.