

Closing The Net – Episode 8, The Good Fight

Closing disclaimer:

Due to themes of child sexual abuse and exploitation, the content of this podcast may be distressing to some people. It is not suitable for children and listener discretion is advised. For advice and support please visit accce.gov.au.

Michael Outram:

You'd be hard pushed to come up with a worse way of inflicting harm on people or a community, wouldn't you? We deal with narcotics, they cause immense harm, and that's a priority. Firearms, all of these other things, I struggle to find something that at human level you can comprehend as being more harmful than this.

Alison Geale:

The offender does, in some cases, a very good job of making the child believe that not only is it their secret, but you won't be believed, you're going to be in trouble. This is what's going to happen if you tell anybody. Our family is going to be ripped apart. Sadly, that can happen. What they're saying can ring true. Families can be split apart.

Elliot Rubens:

These are incredibly troubling, worrying things. These people aren't allowed to do this to you, and there are supports that can help. How would you feel about calling child protection together or calling the police together to making a report about this?

Mark de Crespigny:

What's very, very important is firstly ensuring that the victims, and these crimes are about victims, that justice, in some way is meted out, that the harm done to those victims is actually dealt with and dealt with before the courts.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

I'm Rodger Corser, and this is Closing The Net, a podcast series that explores the world of those policing the borderless crime of online child sexual exploitation. Throughout the series, we've heard numerous stories from those on the front line of policing this horrendous crime type, women and men who work tirelessly to bring child sex offenders to justice and who dedicate their lives to keeping children safe from harm. It is, for all intents and purposes, the good fight, but it's a fight they won't win on their own since they rely heavily on the awareness and support of parents, carers, teachers, members of the community, and people like you and I to identify suspicious online behaviour and report it.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Coming up, we'll find out what you should do if a child discloses online abuse to you, where to go to report the abuse, the reasons why some kids don't come forward and the organisations working to support them. Some of what you'll hear may be confronting, but these are stories that need to be told.

Michael Salter:

The difficult piece is, of course, we have some parents that we can't trust. We have some parents who are offenders as well. So yes, we need to build resiliency into parents and into the community, but we also need to provide kids with options outside of the family structure. We can't assume that their family is going to catch them if they fall. Their family might be the one pushing them.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Reports of online child, sexual abuse have grown exponentially in recent years. In just the 12 months leading up to July, 2020, the number of reports received by the Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation, the ACCCE as it's known, was more than 21,000. In the previous year, that figure was around 14,500. It's a daily challenge for the team of the ACCCE to prioritise those reports through their Child Protection Triage Unit, and then engage with law enforcement partners either here in Australia or internationally to instigate search warrants, warrants that could ultimately lead to the seizure of child exploitation material and the arrest of one or more offenders. Detective superintendent Paula Hudson leads AFP Child Protection Operations and also works in the ACCCE.

Paula Hudson:

The Child Protection Triage Unit is that one door in for receiving referrals of online child exploitation. The majority of those referrals, which would have been this year has been 21,000, they come from The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the U.S. We do receive referrals from members of the public through the reporting abuse buttons on the ACCCE and AFP websites, and we were saved reports through other Commonwealth agencies. Could be Border Force, AUSTRAC, through financial. That Child Protection Triage Unit is the clearing house and the triage of all those reports that are received. There's hundreds every week that are triaged. Sometimes referrals coming in within the hour, it's out, and people are going through the door on a warrant for the very extreme matters. So that's the dynamic pace of that unit and essentially works. It is a hospital triage. That's what we call it. The triage. We're triaging cases.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

A critical partner for the ACCCE when it comes to acting on reports of online child abuse material is the eSafety Commissioner. Its head of investigations is Toby Dagg.

Toby Dagg:

When we first started operating in 1999 under the old Australian Broadcasting Association, because Australia's been in this fight from a regulatory perspective for more than 20 years, that year the team back then took 200 complaints. Last year, we took 14,500 and we could run teams running 24 hours a day and never touch the sides of the scale of the hosting problem that we're facing in the clear web. I'm not talking about the dark web. I'm talking right in front of us.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Within the Office of the eSafety commissioner, Toby's Cyber Report Team is kept busy on a daily basis, responding to the sheer volume of reports coming through and, where possible, taking down offensive online material involving children. While they don't hunt and prosecute offenders, the team works closely with law enforcement partners and the actions that are able to take can vary depending on the type of content and where it's located.

Toby Dagg:

A typical day for the cyber report team involves reviewing reports that have been submitted by Australian residents and law enforcement about illegal and harmful content. About 65 to 75% of those typically concern child abuse material, and so the team's first order of business is to prioritise those, make sure, first of all, that they're not hosted in Australia. If they are hosted in Australia, that leads to us considering some of our very strong regulatory powers to have that material removed. But beyond that, the team is looking for matters that we need to pass a law enforcement. So that includes matters where we think the child could be identified or an offender could be identified, where we've established that the child is potentially at risk of a contact offense, and looking for patterns of hosting as well, and patterns of presentation on content services.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

For the ACCCE, the AFP, or even local police to effectively triage and investigate online child sexual abuse, a critical step for members of the public making a report is to have some form of evidence. Fiona's 12-year-old daughter was being groomed over Instagram by a 30 year old offender posing as an 18 year old. Fiona, whose real name has been withheld, knew she needed to report the activity. So she contacted the AFP immediately who guided her through what to do next.

Fiona:

I jumped onto the AFP website and submitted a complaint via the AFP portal. It was quite late in the evening. The next day I was contacted straight away and the AFP asked me to send through screenshots of messages and any other information that I had. Luckily for me, I found his Facebook profile. I found his Instagram profile. All sorts of stuff. I just forwarded all of that straight away, along with the screenshots.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Peter's 12-year-old son was also targeted by an offender using Instagram. Peter, also not his real name and whose voice were disguised at his request, had a background in technology and knew that capturing any kind of evidence would be crucial for making an effective report.

Peter:

I'd learnt what to do, which was good. I didn't block the person straight away. I asked my son to go through all the communication that he had, had. He actually knew how to do screen recordings. The way these kids get through the device is incredible. I'm an IT guy but I can't use this stuff like they can. He did a screen recording of all the communication and everything that he'd had with this person. We downloaded all the data in my son's account, which you can do. So on all those social media accounts, you can download all the data and I then went and removed all information that identified him one by one. So changed his name, removed photos. I just changed the profile completely so it was a different name, anything like that, and then deactivated it.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Once he and his son had collected as much evidence as they could, Peter jumped online and filed a report to the ACCCE. He was contacted by investigators straight away.

Peter:

Yeah, they were just fantastic. We had the evidence and that was a bit different. If you don't have the evidence, if there's nothing to follow up, you're just launching a complaint. "Look, this happened to my

kid and this was the username," and they're not going to get much help from the social media companies. We didn't block the person straight away so we had a lot of good evidence and the AFP were fantastic. How they managed to interview my son, get further evidence from him when he was quite frightened, run through everything, the way they looked after him. I was really proud to be an Aussie and have these guys there fighting for our kids. The stuff they'd have to see and go through every day, I couldn't read it once and that was my son, but I can't read other either. Yeah, they just have to deal with this stuff all day. They're just fantastic.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Simone McKeough leads the AFP's online child safety team who run the ThinkUKnow program. ThinkUKnow is an evidence-based education program led by the AFP, delivered nationally in partnership with police and industry partners to prevent online child sexual exploitation. ThinkUKnow provides information on how to get help and make a report if things do go wrong online. When assessing a report, Simone says any kind of evidence that parents and carers can pull together will help make a difference.

Simone McKeough:

The type of evidence we need to assess the report includes things like screenshots of any chat interactions, usernames, profiles, any website URLs and things like that. So any evidence that the behavior or the activity has occurred online. There's no information too small or too insignificant for us. Sometimes parents and carers might be thinking, "Maybe not that big of a deal," or, "I'm not sure whether I should report this," we would always suggest reporting just in case, and that way the reports can come through to our offices for assessment and they can take action if needed.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

So we know about the importance of gathering evidence before making a report. But in most cases before things even get to that point, the child who's the victim of the abuse needs to come forward and disclose what's been happening. For many reasons, that's not an easy thing to do. Bravehearts is a charity dedicated to making Australia the safest place in the world to raise a child. They've been providing support services for child sexual assault survivors since 1997, Bravehearts CEO, Alison Geale, says there are some common barriers to kids speaking out about abuse.

Alison Geale:

Mostly fear that they're not going to be believed. The offender does, in some cases, a very good job of making the child believe that not only is it their secret, but you won't be believed. You're going to be in trouble. This is what's going to happen if you tell anybody. Our family's going to be ripped apart. Sadly, what they're saying can ring true. Families can be split apart. There's also shame, feeling shameful for any blame. The offender may have convinced them that it's their fault or that it's normal. These kinds of things can be normalised. What we're finding, too, is that they can be normalised over a short period of time, not just a long period of time. Given the right dialogue and the right convincing dialogue can lead a child to believe that they feel hopeless. They don't have anyone to tell they're going to be blamed, not going to be believed and my family may fall apart. They may, depending on their age, have some elements of shame around what happens to their body naturally when they're exposed to any kind of sexual activity. Their body may be betraying them, and that can reinforce the levels of shame for children.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Bravehearts's Ditto Keep Safe Adventure show is just one of many child protection programs being delivered across the country. It helps young kids find their voice and the right language to use when something doesn't feel right.

Alison Geale:

There is something quite magical about an educated child and an educated adult, couple of things happen, they understand how to say, "No, these are my private parts." That kind of language, that's what our job is, getting the child to feel like they can identify a trusted adult that they can tell and that nothing is so bad that they can't share that with someone. We talk about feelings and yes feelings and no feelings, and to trust your instincts and have the courage to tell someone about it. It's about the child feeling that they have a voice and they can speak out. So that's our job to get that to happen as a result of seeing the show long-term and creating a relatability with a child so that they understand that they can speak up.

Alison Geale:

It's actually just lifting the lid on it in the first place, because this crime happens in shame, in secrecy, in silence and grows in the darkness. So creating a place where little ones can look up and say, "That person understands those feelings that I've got," without actually going into detail is why I call the show a gift because it's pulled together. I know that because you see the look on teachers' faces. They never trained to have those conversations. They look at it and go, "This show is great," and we get disclosures after the show too.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

For any child to summon the courage to disclose sexual abuse to their parents or trusted adult, they need to know they'll be believed from the outset and not have their claims dismissed as just part of their childhood imagination. For more than 30 years, Act For Kids has been providing support services to thousands of kids who have experienced child abuse and neglect. Experience has shown Act For Kids CEO, Katrina Lines, that when it comes to sexual abuse, a child is very unlikely to make this stuff up.

Katrina Lines:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, and particularly if it's something that would be scary or it's something that is out of the realm of experience of a child, they're not going to make it up unless they've experienced something. So it's very unusual for children to lie about, particularly about being sexually abused. They often don't use the words we use anyway, so they wouldn't say, "Oh, I've been sexually abused." They use different words and I think you'd just need to be aware of the things kids are saying, because sometimes ... well, they're definitely not going to use the words we use or the concepts we use, and so you have to be in the mindset that they're telling you something because they're worried about something and that they're not lying about it. You need to take that as the first position.

Katrina Lines:

We've done research and so have other organisations that show that over 60% of adults won't actually do anything if a child discloses that they've been harmed. So we teach little kids to tell, tell, tell, and tell again, until someone listens and helps, which is a sad thing to have to teach little kids, but we want to empower them to be able to ask for help and get help if they need it.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Dr Michael Salter is an Associate Professor of Criminology at the University of New South Wales who provides advice to child protection bodies across the globe on how to support kids who have been sexually exploited. Michael says it's important for kids to have a supportive environment at home so if something happens, they can push through any fears they might have and disclose to their parents.

Michael Salter:

So one of the reasons why kids don't tell parents is because they're afraid of getting in trouble. So often what we see is the way that parents set boundaries for their kids for unacceptable behaviour is, "If you do X, Y, Z, then I will be really angry at you." So offenders use this, they use it to manipulate kids, they use that to silence kids. "If you tell anyone they're going to be so angry at you, they're going to blame you," for example, so creates opportunities for offenders. We need parents to have relationships with kids where if the kid tells them something that the child might be embarrassed about, the child might've broken a rule and offenders will often get kids to break rules so that the child is on the side of the offender, then the kid is actually confident that the parent's going to support them rather than get them in trouble.

Michael Salter:

The difficult piece is, of course, we have parents that we can't trust. We have some parents who are offenders as well. So yes, we need to build resiliency into parents and into the community, but we also need to provide kids with options outside of the family structure. We can't assume that their family is going to catch them if they fall. Their family might be the one pushing them.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Elliot Rubens is a counselor with Kids Helpline and deals with distressed children every day. Elliot knows how much courage is involved for a child in just picking up the phone in the first place.

Elliot Rubens:

It definitely is incredibly brave of them and strong. So often the calls that are regarding child abuse and child sexual abuse don't start that way. There's definitely a feeling out process first is talk about other things going on, whether that's loneliness or mental health concerns that are kind of coming up diagnosed or undiagnosed. It's only after there is that rapport building and that trust that's kind of being established there where they go, "Okay. I think this is someone that I might be able to tell more to," that there is more of a disclosure of, "Oh, I guess there is something else going on that I'd like to talk about."

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

That strong connection between caller and counselor can also be a big help during the reporting process.

Elliot Rubens:

If a 16-year-old was disclosing something, that would be different from a 10-year-old disclosing something. Wherever possible, we try and encourage clients to do these things themselves, to give them that sense of power and advocacy so we can support them. "With the things that you disclose today, these are incredibly troubling, worrying things. These people aren't allowed to do this to you, and there are supports that can help. How would you feel about calling child protection together or calling the

police together to making a report about this? You've got lots of different people you can go to." With that kind of culture of safety that we can create around the child, hopefully that can then give them the sense of protection and confidence around themselves to then be able to make that really brave, scary choice to then reach out and speak to the AFP, ACCCE or police or child protection.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Fear and shame are considerable factors that can stop a child from coming forward to report their abuse, and sometimes it can take years before they feel strong enough to contact authorities. Earlier, I mentioned in the 12 months leading up to July, 2020, the ACCCE received more than 21,000 reports of online child sexual exploitation. 21,000. It's hard to imagine the depth of what goes unreported. And then there are the other victims, the partners and family members of people who share child sexual abuse material. Fear and shame are some of what they need to deal with too as they comprehend making a massive upheaval in their lives in order to make a report. PartnerSPEAK is a Victorian based online support group that helps support and provide advocacy for people in this situation. Natalie Walker is the CEO.

Natalie Walker:

So many people say I've never been to a police station. I've never had a speeding fine. I've never been in a court. These are really huge steps and foreign places. For most people, reporting is the hardest thing that they will ever do. People have fears about have their children been harmed. If they report will there be child protection implications for them? So there are a number of ways that we can help people to report. If it's in Victoria, we can physically go with people to a station if they want to do it face to face. We've supported people to go to their local SOCIT, Sexual Offences and Child Investigation Teams, and also the JACET, Joint Anti-Child Exploitation Teams. We have helped people make a report on Crime Stoppers. We've done three-way conversations on Crime Stoppers. One of the tricky things about reporting is also if there's ambiguity about what she's seen, whether that's child sexual abuse material. So that's something that PartnerSPEAK can offer in terms of talking through that as well.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

As Australian law enforcement embraces a victim centric approach when it comes to child sexual abuse, collaborating with organisations like PartnerSPEAK gives them a powerful resource to reach those not so obvious victims of this horrendous crime type. It also provides those secondary victims with the emotional support they desperately need as they start to go through the reporting process.

Natalie Walker:

My goal for PartnerSPEAK is that within 24 to 48 hours of any warrant that is served in relation to child sexual abuse material, that the non-offending partner and close affected family members receive information about PartnerSpeak. Historically at PartnerSPEAK, we were supporting people where the crime was 10 years ago, and because they had nothing to do with their trauma for 10 years, when I met them it was like the trauma was last week. The power of having support available within half an hour is changing people's lives. So one of the really important ways that people find out about us is that when law enforcement are issuing a warrant, they can ask the non-offending partner if she consents to a referral being made to PartnerSPEAK, and then we can contact her straight away. There's been some really powerful stories where law enforcement officer actually called the peer line for her and put her on the phone while the warrant was being conducted. We recently supported a mother whose adult son was being charged and it was an arrest by appointment. So that meant when she arrived at the police

station, there was a peer support worker with lived experience who knew what she was going through, who'd been through the police and the statements and the questions and the courts and child protection was with her. I think they were together for five hours and the peer support worker sat with her while she made her statements, while her son made his statements. The difference in having that connection and having someone who has been through what you're going through is transformative.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

One of the direct results of greater community awareness around how to report online child sexual abuse, coupled with the dedication of law enforcement to pursue child sex offenders, is the increased caseload for Commonwealth prosecutors when offenders are brought before the courts. Mark de Crespigny is a Deputy Director with a Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions.

Natalie Walker:

It works out to be about 15% of the matters which our office deals with are Commonwealth child sex offenses. There's been a sort of quite a notable increase. Two financial years ago. So 18/19, we were having about 20 cases a month commenced. In the last financial year, 19/20, we were averaging around about 29 cases a month. In the first few months of this year, we've been averaging more closer to 40 cases commencing every month. So there's been a noticeable increase.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Something else which has been increasing is the size of the penalties for those involved in child sex offenses.

Mark de Crespigny:

The penalties for Commonwealth child sex offenses are actually very severe and they were recently increased so that the lowest penalty is 10 years for somebody in decently communicating with a child only if the age of 16, to the highest penalty being life in prison for an aggravated offense of somebody having a sexual interaction with a child overseas. So the penalties do include the most severe penalties available. From our point of view, what's very, very important is firstly ensuring that the victims, and these crimes are about victims, that justice, in some ways, is meted out, that the harm done to those victims is actually dealt with and dealt with before the courts. So that's a very, very important part of it. The second part is to make certain that the community says very loudly that this sort of behaviour is absolutely and totally wrong, because what is dangerous about these networks is there's almost a normalisation of the behavior. What's really important is that the community says that harming children is not an activity which it's prepared to put up with, and that it will take the most severe action against people who are involved in that.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Those investigating this particular crime type have also been given more power to go after offenders. Matt Rippon leads Intelligence Operations at the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, an organisation with the power to compel people to answer questions and provide information on child exploitation networks, as part of what's known as coercive hearings.

Matt Rippon:

We have the very unique power, no other agency has it at a Commonwealth level in the country, where we can buy summons demand that a person appear in front of an examiner and answer questions in

relation to, in this case, child exploitation networks in order to illuminate those networks and have a better understanding and insight as to how they operate and to generate leads for law enforcement. If people that are involved in that coercive hearing process do not cooperate, they do not answer questions, they can face penalties of imprisonment and face charges of contempt. The very powerful tool to have that we are provided that we know overseas international partners are very envious of, our challenge is to make sure that we use that capability to its maximum effect to apply pressure to these networks at the direction of the ACCCE and our partners.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Australia is fortunate to have law enforcement and prosecutors working side by side to make the online space safer for our children to explore, learn, and grow. Mark de Crespigny believes we should all take heart from the tireless work being done to bring child sex offenders to justice.

Mark de Crespigny:

I think one of the amazing things working in this area is just simply the absolute dedication of the investigators from police forces throughout Australia in chasing these matters down, and from my point of view, the dedication of our prosecutors and also the prosecutors with the state prosecuting authorities in bringing these matters to justice. It is something which I think people take as very much an important thing to do for the community's sake.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Justice will go part of the way towards healing the mental and emotional wounds of child sex abuse survivors. But while some will find the courage to speak up, others will forever struggle with disclosing their abuse. For all survivors, however, Dr Michael Salter believes seeking out support services is a vital step in the healing process.

Michael Salter:

So it's really important that survivors understand that healing and recovery is possible. Not everyone is impacted in the same way. As long as we provide people with special support, and that can be mental healthcare, can be supporting them about some of the other interruption. Sexual abuse can interrupt education, so kids might not be performing as well as they should be at school, can make concentration really difficult. If that's not picked up early, that can have flow on effects. When you become an adult, then you have fewer economic opportunities. There are multiple sort of impacts across the lifespan. So the earlier we can support a victim, the better, and the more comprehensive the support, the better.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Prevention, as they say, is the best cure and for parents and carers protecting our kids online and supporting them if they receive unwanted interactions online doesn't have to be hard. Try to keep an eye on what your children are doing and who they're chatting with online. Create an environment where they feel they can come and talk to you about anything and they won't get in trouble. If they're having issues online, do what you can to collect evidence before you make a report. There's no silver bullet when it comes to combating online child sexual exploitation, but for Detective Superintendent Paula Hudson, there is some hope.

Paula Hudson:

By saying we've received 21,000 reports it's more than ever, there is hope there. That means people are reporting it so that's actually a good thing. People are knowing how to report, knowing how to collect evidence and make the report. So in some ways we need to be, I guess, buoyed by that. Our member of the public reporting is going up. We would rather receive 10 reports that are resolved to nothing and it wasn't, rather than you sitting back and go, "Oh, no. I won't do it." We'd rather you report. It's one of those crime types that you shine the light on it and the more reporting is taking place, that actually can be a positive as well when you look at the rates and the stats. So we take the positive out of that.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In episode nine of Closing The Net, we look beyond the borders of Australia and talk to those working with the ACCCE on an international level to share intelligence, disrupt global child abuse networks, and ultimately bring offenders to justice.

Paul Hopkins:

We come from such a privileged background in Australia, and for Australians to go overseas and to use their position and their money and their privilege to abuse children overseas is about as bad as it gets.

Steve Baird:

In Australia, sometimes we feel far removed from these issues. It's important that we start to have more of a national conversation around terrible forms of slavery, like the online sexual exploitation of children, that we understand that Australia is part of both the problem and the solution.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

If the content in this podcast has caused any distress, or if you know a child is being contacted or groomed online, visit accce.gov.edu to find out how to report and where you can seek support. If you see child abuse material online, it's important to report it to the Office of the eSafety Commissioner who can help get it removed. If you think a child is in immediate danger, please call triple 000 or your local police. You can provide anonymous information to crimestoppers.com.au or by phoning 1800 333 000.

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