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Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic as a Child Safe Organisation

Children and young people have the right to be safe and feel safe wherever they are, at home and in organisations at all times. Recently, many organisations have had to change how they engage with children and young people, including adapting service delivery to online platforms, experiencing downturns or surges in demand, creation of new support initiatives and resuming usual services as restrictions ease.

It remains critical for organisations to have strategies in place to reduce the risk of harm to children and young people. The Commissioner's [Child Safe Organisations](#) resources provide guidance on practices that are achievable, relevant and reliable in reducing the likelihood of children and young people experiencing harm when in the care of organisations.

Creating and maintaining a safe and friendly organisation is an ongoing process of learning, monitoring and reviewing. Different types of organisations will have varying levels of risk and levels of engagement with children and young people. Risk management strategies focused on identifying, preventing and mitigating risks to children and young people should be reviewed and enhanced during times of change.

Evolving safety risks at this time

A key way organisations can ensure safety in the face of operational changes is by undertaking a thorough risk assessment. Safety risks for children and young people in organisations are impacted by situational, vulnerability and organisational factors. Examples in the pandemic context include:

Situational risks: increased use of online platforms; reduced capacity to supervise staff due to staff self-isolating and/or adapted service delivery modes; less face-to-face parental or carer involvement due to crowd and social distancing restrictions; increased opportunities for abuse between children and young people in an organisation's online platforms (e.g. cyberbullying).

Vulnerability risks: many children and young people are now more vulnerable than before as there may be less opportunities for the adults in their lives to observe and respond to changes in behaviour or to proactively check in with children, such as those in closed

residential settings or remote communities. They may also be impacted by increased family pressures or conflict or be experiencing mental health issues themselves.

Organisational risks: in the rush to respond to immediate pandemic implications, organisations may have lost staff and volunteers with expertise in child safety and/or expedited recruitment and screening processes to keep up with demand.

Top tips for managing safety risks at this time

- Use opportunities like staff meetings and external newsletters to reaffirm that child safety is a continuing priority for the organisation.
- Give children, young people and their parents/carers the opportunity to identify if their needs have changed during the pandemic.
- Actively promote how children, young people and their families can give feedback or make complaints about service delivery changes.
- Check and update the organisation's code of conduct to include risks arising from changed ways of working, such as clear guidelines for staff and volunteers about acceptable online and phone contact with children and young people.
- Ensure staff and volunteers understand changes and reinforce professional boundaries, such as only contacting children and young people during regular service hours.
- Provide child safe refresher training to staff and volunteers as the organisation resumes engagement with children and young people after shutdowns.
- Provide child-friendly information to parents, carers, children and young people about how the organisation is addressing child safety risks during the pandemic.
- Support staff and volunteers to be responsive to how children and young people might be differently impacted by the pandemic depending on their circumstances.
- Reinforce the organisation's child safe commitment in all recruitment processes and ensure regular screening measures are undertaken.
- Continue regular supervision meetings with staff and volunteers who are working directly with children and young people.
- Establish appropriate supervision practices for one-on-one contact by staff and volunteers with children and young people over phone or video link.
- Plan how to integrate any pandemic related service improvements as well as feedback from children, young people and their families in ongoing service delivery.

Seek further information – Child Safe Organisations resources are available at ccyp.wa.gov.au