

Children and young people first turn to Mum, a friend and then Dad if they feel unsafe, ACU survey

Children and young people faced with a situation that is risky or harmful would first turn to Mum, a trusted friend, or their Dad to tell them they felt unsafe, according to new Australian Catholic University research.

Professor Daryl Higgins and Douglas Russell from ACU's Institute of Child Protection Studies surveyed 1851 children and young people aged between 10 and 18, for the [Children and young people's safety: 2018-2020 report](#).

Professor Higgins, director of the Institute of Child Protection Studies, said almost half of the young people surveyed reported barriers to seeking help if they felt unsafe.

"Unfortunately, confidence in adults was low," Professor Higgins said.

"Many young people felt that adults didn't care or were too busy to help or wouldn't know what to do if they were approached. Around one in ten felt unsure whether adults would know what to do even if they were approached for help."

Less than two-thirds of young people had confidence that adults had the skills to help if they felt unsafe while only one-third said they would know what to do if felt unsafe about an adult because their organisation had discussed these issues with them previously.

Most said they would tell someone if they felt unsafe – most likely Mum, a friend, then Dad. They were slightly more likely to tell someone if they were to feel unsafe with an adult than with a peer.

The research led to the development of the [Children and Young People's Safety Project](#) to support organisations to improve their child-safe culture. Sports, arts, recreation, education, faith-based organisations, and youth development providers have so far taken part.

Children and young people watch two scenarios on potentially unsafe (or grooming-like) situations, then answer questions about how confident they would be that adults would keep them safe, any barriers to seeking help, who they would go to, and what type of help they may want if they felt unsafe in their organisation.

“Organisations are taking steps to improve children’s safety and are implementing many changes to become safer for children and young people,” Professor Higgins said.

“It is a troubling fact that children and young people are at risk in places where they should expect to be safe – their school, sports club, church and other youth-serving organisations.”

Professor Higgins said organisations, families, and communities can take several steps to improve conditions of safety for children and young people.

Suggestions for young people include:

- Identifying adults they can trust in case mum and dad aren’t around
- Talking to their friends and trusted adults about what they want to feel even safer

Suggestions for organisations, families, and communities include:

- Fostering better relationships between adults and young people that enable conversations about safety
- Championing the rights of young people
- Discussing children’s safety regularly with staff, volunteers, young people, and families.

Douglas Russell, lead researcher and project manager, said the survey showed not all young people want the same type of support when feeling unsafe.

“Given many young people prefer to speak to parents or friends, organisations should consider how to better engage parents in prevention and safeguarding strategies,” he said.

**Media Contact: Elisabeth Tarica, Australian Catholic University on 0418 756 941
or elisabeth.tarica@acu.edu.au**