

# Truth, recognition and healing

Report on victim-survivors' experiences of child sexual  
abuse in Victorian government schools and certain  
non-government schools before 2000

MAY 2026



Forum for Truth and Recognition

# Report

Angela Connors  
Chair

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## Forum for Truth and Recognition

### Truth, recognition and healing: Report on victim-survivors' experiences of child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools and certain non-government schools before 2000

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The Honourable Jacinta Allan  
Premier of Victoria  
1 Treasury Place  
Melbourne VIC 3002

29 May 2026

Dear Premier,

In accordance with the terms of reference contained in the establishing instrument dated 9 June 2025, it is my honour to present the report of the Forum for Truth and Recognition.

This report serves as an official public record of victim-survivors' experiences of child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools and certain other non-government schools by relevant employees before 2000.

This public record puts victim-survivors at the centre. It recognises their truth as well as their strength and resilience in the face of trauma. I hope this report builds a stronger understanding of the significant impacts of child sexual abuse in schools to better prevent and respond to it now and into the future.

Yours sincerely,

**Angela Connors**  
Chair  
Forum for Truth and Recognition



# Acknowledgements

## Acknowledgement of First Peoples

The Forum for Truth and Recognition acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and custodians of the lands, seas and waters known as Victoria. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.

First Peoples have been instrumental in creating a shared understanding of the importance of truth-telling, including as reflected in the work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. We acknowledge First Peoples' approaches to healing. These seek to address the impacts of trauma by embracing social, emotional, physical, cultural and spiritual dimensions of health and wellbeing.

## Acknowledgement of victim-survivors of child sexual abuse

The Forum acknowledges the advocacy of victim-survivors, which contributed to our establishment. We respect those who continue to call for opportunities for people who have been sexually abused in schools to share their experiences and to be heard.

We were deeply affected by the extraordinary strength, bravery, determination and insight of everyone who shared their experiences. We were humbled by their trust in us. We also acknowledge victim-survivors who chose not to speak to us and hope they nonetheless feel that this report reflects the importance of their own experiences. Finally, we reflect on victim-survivors who are no longer with us and who may never have had the chance to put their experiences on the public record and receive the acknowledgement they deserved.

## Content warning and support services

This report contains discussion and descriptions of child sexual abuse that may be distressing to read, particularly for people whose experiences are directly or indirectly referenced. We encourage readers to exercise discretion and care for themselves when engaging with this report and to seek support if needed. For example, you may wish to have someone to support you while you read.

We advise First Peoples readers that information in this report may have been provided by or may refer to First Peoples individuals who have died.

If you or someone you know needs support, the following no-cost services are available:

- 1800 RESPECT, call 1800 737 732  
24-hour sexual assault and domestic violence support
- Sexual Assault Crisis Line Victoria, call 1800 806 292  
24-hour support for people who have experienced sexual assault
- 13 YARN, call 13 92 76  
24-hour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support
- Lifeline, call 13 11 14  
24-hour crisis support
- Beyond Blue, call 1300 224 636  
24-hour mental health support.

If you are in a situation that is harmful or life-threatening, contact emergency services immediately on triple zero (000).

## A note on language

The language used to describe and discuss child sexual abuse is important.

At the individual level, victim-survivors understandably have strong preferences around the words used to describe them and their experiences. Words that feel meaningful and resonate with some people may feel disempowering or inaccurate to others. The words and expressions victim-survivors prefer can also change over time as they move into different stages of life and healing.

Some victim-survivors expressed their discomfort or disagreement with certain language, which we have not always been able to accommodate. We respect victim-survivors' rights to use the words that work for them.

Language is also important at the societal level. It can influence how the community understands and reacts to information about child sexual abuse. In the past, language sometimes acted to diminish or downplay child sexual abuse by wrongly referring to it as 'a relationship' or 'an affair'. Thoughtless words can also reinforce misconceptions about the prevalence, dynamics and impacts of child sexual abuse. It is important that the words we use to discuss this issue are sensitive to their power.

We have taken guidance from *The child sexual abuse language guide: terms and definitions preferred by victims and survivors of child sexual abuse*, developed by the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse. We explain our approach to certain words and phrases below. For more information on definitions we have used, refer to the Glossary.

### Victim-survivor

'Victim-survivor' refers to people who have experienced child sexual abuse. We acknowledge that people have different perspectives on this term. Some people identify with one, both or neither of the words 'victim' and 'survivor', and this can change over time. In certain contexts, we have used 'participant' to describe victim-survivors who engaged with the Forum.

## **‘Historical’ child sexual abuse**

Our establishing instrument uses the term ‘historical child sexual abuse’, which is defined as abuse that happened before 1 January 2000. We heard – and share – reservations about the term ‘historical’. These reservations are discussed more in the Message from the Chair.

In brief, we are concerned the word ‘historical’ reinforces the idea that child sexual abuse in schools is a problem of the past. While there have been meaningful changes to improve child safety in schools, child sexual abuse can and does still happen. We also worry that this language fails to recognise the sometimes lasting and lifelong impacts of child sexual abuse.

For these reasons, we have minimised use of the word ‘historical’.

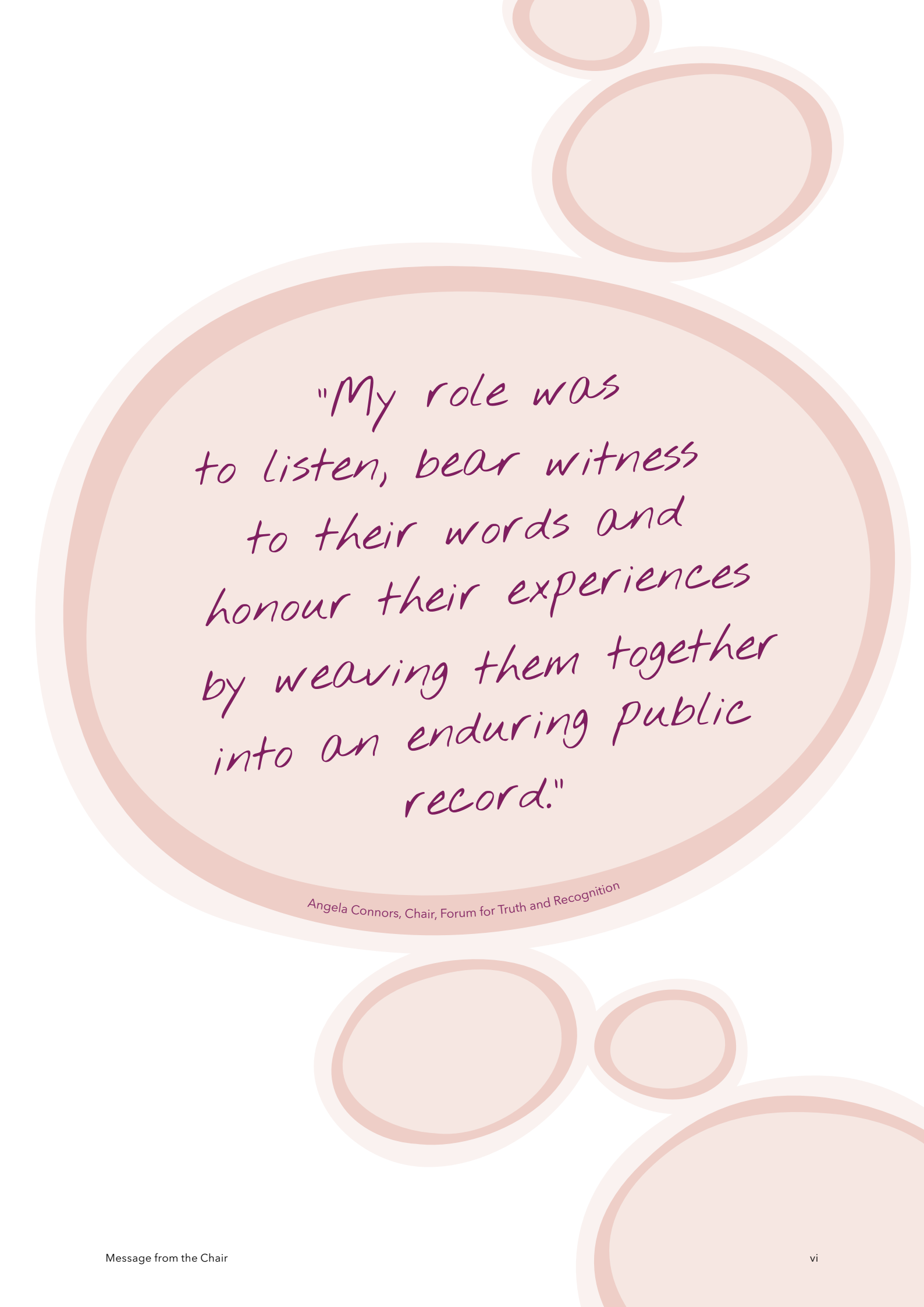
## **Reflecting personal truths**

This report reflects victim-survivors’ recollections and experiences, as shared with us.

Our role was not to investigate or ‘test’ what people told us; it was to listen to victim-survivors and believe them. In doing so, we have been careful not to prejudice current or future criminal or civil proceedings, including the legal rights of victim-survivors. One way we have done this is by not naming perpetrators. While some experiences referenced in this report may have been proven to a legal standard in a court, most have not.

We have adopted a consistent approach of avoiding the word ‘alleged’ in relation to any perpetrator to reflect that our role was to believe victim-survivors and record their experiences. This does not mean the experiences set out in this report have been legally proven. By not naming any perpetrators, the Forum does not intend to devalue or ignore any experiences or information shared with us.

We have also chosen not to name schools because some victim-survivors did not reveal the specific school they attended and many schools from that era have since closed, merged or changed names.



*"My role was  
to listen, bear witness  
to their words and  
honour their experiences  
by weaving them together  
into an enduring public  
record."*

*Angela Connors, Chair, Forum for Truth and Recognition*

## Message from the Chair

Over the life of the Forum, I have had the privilege of learning from victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in schools. They trusted me to hear some of the most painful and personal moments of their lives. My role was to listen, bear witness to their words and honour their experiences by weaving them together into an enduring public record. Every experience of child sexual abuse represents a collective failure that deserves to be heard and acknowledged.



Inviting people to share their experiences of child sexual abuse at school was always going to be a challenge. Many victim-survivors were sexually abused decades ago and confronted significant barriers to reporting. Those who did report as children were often dismissed or ignored. Those who spoke up later as adults were sometimes met with responses that minimised the impact of the sexual abuse or fuelled feelings of self-blame and shame. Even today, it is still very difficult for victim-survivors to come forward with the confidence their disclosures will be met with compassion and care.

After launching and raising public awareness about the Forum, enquiries began to come in. Victim-survivors came forward to share their experiences, sometimes disclosing what happened to them for the first time. I was aware of the courage and resilience required to do so, given the lifelong trauma that many victim-survivors carry.

I had the privilege of meeting with every eligible victim-survivor who requested a personalised session. I invited them to speak at their own pace about whatever they felt comfortable sharing and what they thought was meaningful and important to highlight for the public record. This meant that victim-survivors were invited to share what they wished without an expectation to provide a neat, chronological account of events. My role was not to investigate or 'test' what people told us; it was to listen to victim-survivors and believe them. Hearing their recollections reminded me of how vulnerable children can be if they do not have safe adults in their lives, including at their schools.

I was at school during the 1970s and 1980s. This was a period when many victim-survivors who contributed to the Forum experienced child sexual abuse. I loved school. And my schooling was not scarred by sexual abuse. I had the types of experiences all children should have at school – a sense of achieving, belonging, making friends and learning new things. Hearing that many children had vastly different experiences from my own has been confronting and incredibly sad. At the same time, it confirms to me the remarkable resilience and spirit of victim-survivors.

The experiences shared with me were many and varied. Some victim-survivors tried to downplay or underplay the seriousness of abuse they experienced because they were thinking about others who were 'worse off'. There is no hierarchy of sexual abuse – it is all bad. People have coped with the abuse in different ways. Some have compartmentalised it in a way that enables them to keep living their life, while others are confronted with their memories daily. I am also conscious some victim-survivors' lives have been tragically cut short due to the effects of child sexual abuse.

Many of the victim-survivors who came forward were denied the opportunity to achieve their full potential at school. In some cases, this had lasting effects on their lives – their career choices, financial security and self-confidence. Some told us the impacts of their trauma also affected their family and friends.

The victim-survivors who spoke to me want children's experiences at school today to be different from their own. Many victim-survivors who came forward did so for altruistic reasons; at the end of the day, it was not about them. It was about making sure people knew such abuse went on in schools so the government and schools would do better in future.

Victim-survivors want their painful truths to be heard and acknowledged. This is not because their experiences reflect a relic of the past, but because of what we can learn from them today. This sits uncomfortably with the concept of 'historical' child sexual abuse – a term that forms part of our terms of reference. I struggled with this language because it echoes what victim-survivors were often told – to 'move on' or 'get over it'. It reinforces the incorrect belief that child sexual abuse in schools is a problem of the past. However, despite significant efforts, child sexual abuse in schools has not been eradicated.

Other inquiries and commissions have paved the way for the Forum. It is important to have processes such as this for victim-survivors to talk about what happened and to create a public record. The public record should drive change and the continued focus and development of responses that create safe environments for children at school.

This report centres the voices and experiences of victim-survivors. Based on what victim-survivors told me, I have shared my observations on how the government and the community can better prevent and strengthen the response to child sexual abuse at schools, now and into the future.

I thank all victim-survivors who came forward to contribute to the Forum. I am privileged to have been entrusted with your memories and reflections. I hope that voicing and sharing your experiences, and knowing you have been heard, will support your journey towards healing. It is also my sincere hope that this public record helps make schools safer places for children.

## Acknowledgements

I extend my thanks to lived experience experts, including those who contributed their expertise to our advisory group, for their important contributions, advice and assistance. I also thank the Critical Friends of the Forum for guiding and challenging my thinking.

The Forum would not have been possible without our dedicated staff and legal advisers, who worked tirelessly to create this important public record. A full list of acknowledgements is in Appendix I.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Angela Connors', with a stylized, cursive script.

**Angela Connors**

Chair, Forum for Truth and Recognition



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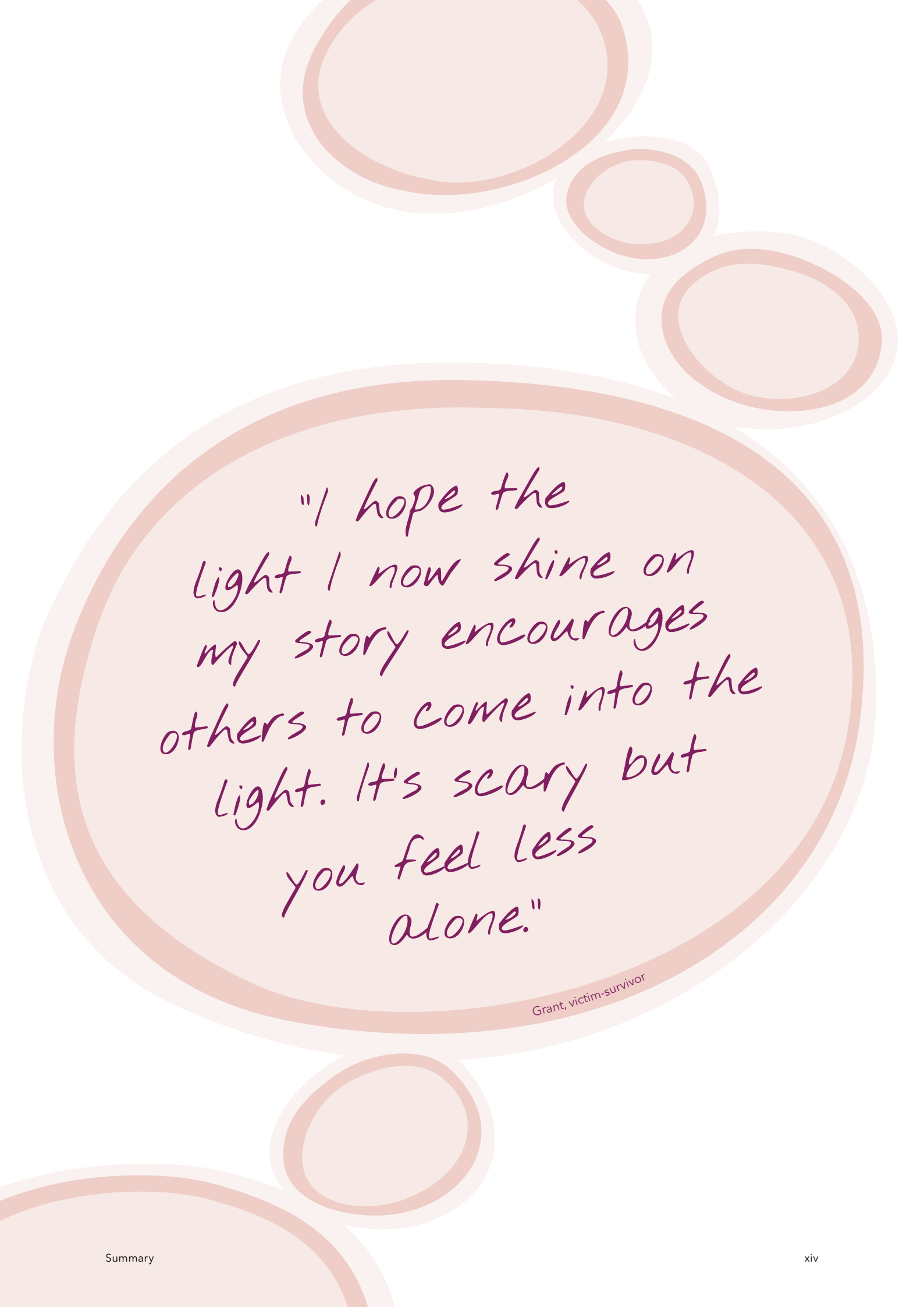
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"I hope the  
light I now shine on  
my story encourages  
others to come into the  
light. It's scary but  
you feel less  
alone."

Grant, victim-survivor

# Summary

## Content warning

Please be aware that this report includes descriptions of child sexual abuse, attempted suicide and self-harm. It may be distressing or unsettling for some readers.

We encourage readers to exercise discretion and care for themselves when engaging with this report and to seek support if needed. For example, you may wish to have someone to support you while you read. A list of support services can be found at the front of the report.

## What was the Forum?

The Forum for Truth and Recognition was a statewide truth-telling process for people who experienced child sexual abuse in Victorian government or certain non-government schools before 2000. The Forum ran from August 2025 to May 2026 and was chaired by Ms Angela Connors.

The Victorian Government asked the Forum to create a safe and trauma-informed process for victim-survivors to share their experiences and be heard. Our role was to translate these accounts into an enduring public record for the community and government to bear witness to the harm experienced in Victorian schools.

Our objectives were also to:

- support the individual and collective healing of affected victim-survivors
- contribute to a shared understanding among all Victorians of the significant and far-reaching impacts of historical child sexual abuse in Victorian schools
- allow the Victorian Government to learn from the experiences and information shared to better prevent and respond to child sexual abuse in government schools now and into the future.

The Victorian Government established the Forum in response to a recommendation by the Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools. That inquiry delivered its report to the Victorian Government in 2024.

## How did we create the public record?

The Forum was open to anyone who experienced child sexual abuse perpetrated by a teacher or other school employee or contractor:

- in a Victorian government school context before 1 January 2000, or
- in a non-government school before 1 January 2000, where the perpetrator had previously worked in a government school and allegedly committed child sexual abuse while working there.

We undertook extensive community engagement to make sure victim-survivors were aware of the opportunity to take part in the Forum. This included community outreach, webinars and advertising in print and social media. We also reached out to more than 100 organisations across Victoria to raise awareness of our work.

In keeping with our objectives, our approach was designed to support healing and recovery. Our work was guided by advice and input from a range of experts, including people with lived experience of child sexual abuse.

We invited victim-survivors to book a personalised session with the Chair. Personalised sessions were held across Victoria, in person, on the phone and online, based on the victim-survivor's choice. Sessions were unstructured and guided by what victim-survivors chose to share. This approach recognised that not all victim-survivors feel comfortable discussing all of their experiences.

Victim-survivors were welcome to bring support people (such as family, friends or counsellors) to their personalised session. They were offered access to wellbeing support before and after meeting with the Chair; counselling was also available.

Victim-survivors could also make a submission to the Forum in any form. This could be a written submission, a video or audio recording, or a creative submission (such as an artwork, poem or song). Some victim-survivors participated in multiple ways.

To ensure victim-survivors felt safe, respected and supported, we prioritised their preferences and needs in carrying out our work. For example, victim-survivors were consulted on how the Forum could use their information. It could be treated in one of three ways:

- Public – people could use their real name and consent to their information (including things that may identify them) being included in the report.
- Anonymous – people could contribute anonymously, which allowed us to reflect their experiences without their name or any identifying material. We used pseudonyms for people who chose to remain anonymous.
- Confidential – people could provide some or all of their information confidentially, meaning it informed the Forum's work but did not appear directly in the report.

We heard from 38 people whose experiences fell within the scope of the Forum. Of these, 32 participants attended personalised sessions with the Chair and 18 provided written or creative submissions.

## **What did we hear?**

It was up to each victim-survivor to decide what they shared with us. This was important to ensure they felt safe taking part in the Forum and did not experience further trauma. While there were many similarities in the experiences we heard, there were some important differences. For example, not all victim-survivors went into detail about the acts of abuse they experienced, while almost all spoke of the significant impacts of the abuse on their lives.

We heard about child sexual abuse perpetrated at schools across Victoria from as early as the 1960s to as recently as the 1990s. Most victim-survivors who spoke to us were sexually abused in primary school. A small proportion experienced child sexual abuse in both primary school and secondary school. We chose not to name schools in the report because some victim-survivors did not reveal the specific school they attended and many schools from that era have since closed, merged or changed names.

We heard about child sexual abuse perpetrated against children by principals, teachers, cleaners, maintenance staff and other school employees. Most perpetrators we heard about were men.

Our role was not to investigate or ‘test’ what people told us; it was to listen to victim-survivors and believe them. In doing so, we have been careful not to prejudice current or future criminal or civil proceedings, including the legal rights of victim-survivors. One way we have done this is by not naming perpetrators. While some experiences referenced in this report may have been proven to a legal standard in court, most have not.

We have adopted a consistent approach of avoiding the word ‘alleged’, but this does not mean the experiences set out in this report have all been legally proven. By not naming any perpetrators, the Forum does not intend to devalue or ignore any experiences or information shared with us.

## **Looking back**

Many victim-survivors reflected on different community norms and attitudes that existed when they were children. These made it easier for child sexual abuse to happen and more difficult to talk about.

Some victim-survivors commented that people in the past were reluctant to discuss sex or sexual abuse. This meant that, as children, some victim-survivors did not realise they were being sexually abused and did not have the language to describe what had happened to them. One victim-survivor told us:

As a child, I had no idea what [the perpetrator] was doing because I wasn't sexually aware, but I knew this stuff felt wrong ... We couldn't verbalise what he was doing to us, as we didn't know what it was and we weren't emotionally mature enough to talk about it properly.<sup>1</sup>

Others said they could not speak about their experiences because it was too shameful or embarrassing.

Several victim-survivors spoke about the respect they were taught to hold for teachers. This had the effect of silencing children who experienced sexual abuse at school.

Did I know [the child sexual abuse] was wrong? Of course I did. But I was a tiny, 4-foot-11-inch child, terrified and taught to respect and obey authority ... I never spoke up.<sup>2</sup>

Some victim-survivors told us that intimate 'relationships' between teachers and older students at secondary schools were often not remarked upon or recognised as child sexual abuse.

### **Childhood before the abuse**

Some victim-survivors described their childhoods in the lead-up to the sexual abuse. We heard about happy, imaginative, carefree, bright and studious children.

However, for many, childhood was marked by challenges such as family violence, bullying, learning difficulties, parental illness or disability, family responsibilities (such as caring for younger children) and migration. Some victim-survivors had also experienced child sexual abuse before they were abused at school.

Child sexual abuse is never the victim-survivor's fault. Some victim-survivors felt that their adverse childhood experiences were the reason perpetrators targeted them:

I was also abused [outside of school]. So I came 'pre-groomed', you could say. Without realising it, the whole way I've carried myself – my whole life – has been giving off a signal.<sup>3</sup>

Others said that their social isolation or naivety about sex made them especially vulnerable to being abused.

### **The abuse**

Almost all victim-survivors described being groomed. Grooming is the process a perpetrator uses to manipulate and control a child, their family and community in order to perpetrate child sexual abuse. The intent of grooming is to gain access to the child, obtain their trust and maintain their silence about the abuse.

We heard about many different grooming behaviours. Some perpetrators used kindness, extra attention, gifts, money and privileges to make children feel special.

Others chose children to attend special excursions, camps or offsite sporting activities. Several perpetrators gave children lifts in their cars or invited them to their homes.

It was one of the things he did for all the kids that he was abusing. Give them stuff, make them stuff. He made this wooden guitar and painted it and all that. And I had it and I really liked it. I thought it was cool.<sup>4</sup>

Victim-survivors also described perpetrators seeking to normalise sexual conversations with children – such as talking about masturbation – as a grooming tactic.

Many victim-survivors described perpetrators who were seen as charismatic, friendly and popular. We heard that perpetrators relied on these characteristics to groom and gain the trust of parents, carers, siblings, colleagues and the wider community. This allowed them to spend unsupervised time with children without attracting suspicion.

Conversely, we also heard about perpetrators who were authoritarian, intimidating, violent and terrifying. Victim-survivors told us these perpetrators used threats and fear to make sure children did what they were told and remained silent about the abuse. Some victim-survivors felt that other school staff may have been fearful of questioning, challenging or reporting such perpetrators. One said:

And I still remember when he was driving us back and he was saying, 'This is our secret. Make sure no one hears our secret, otherwise the devil will come.' And he would say, 'The devil will come in your dreams and he'll do something terrible'.<sup>5</sup>

Victim-survivors also described perpetrators using shame, mockery, humiliation, blame and manipulation to ensure they did not tell anyone about the abuse they were experiencing.

Some victim-survivors found it too painful to speak about the acts of abuse they experienced. However, some others chose to describe the detail of what happened to them.

We heard distressing accounts of abuse, including about perpetrators who:

- sat children on their lap and touched their genitals
- asked children to take their clothes off to be photographed
- exposed their genitals to children or asked them to touch the perpetrator's genitals
- touched children – whether directly or through clothing – on the breasts, genitals, buttocks or other parts of their bodies, including 'tickling' them to test boundaries or masturbating them
- sexually penetrated children or forced them to engage in oral sex.

These abuses were perpetrated in many locations, including classrooms, the school sick bay, teachers' offices and the school maintenance shed. Some acts of abuse occurred while children were on school excursions or camps. Others took place in private locations such as the perpetrator's home or car, or the victim-survivor's home.

We heard that many perpetrators were careful and sought to hide what they were doing by abusing children in unsupervised locations. However, we also heard about perpetrators who were more brazen and abused children in front of other students or adults. Victim-survivors described their shock and confusion that this could happen without consequence:

[The perpetrator] would often come and sit with me to check my work. Whenever he did this, he would place his hands in the back of my trousers or shorts and fondle my backside. This was happening while other students were busy at their desks. I remember sitting there thinking that I couldn't believe this was happening to me.<sup>6</sup>

Victim-survivors described a range of immediate responses to the acts of abuse. Some said they would 'freeze' while being abused. Many were highly distressed or angry in the immediate aftermath. Others described being confused because they could not understand what the perpetrator was doing to them or why it was happening.

Some victim-survivors said they experienced abuse that perpetrators described as a 'relationship', in which the victim-survivor was made to feel complicit. We heard that this involved acts of abuse occurring over a long period – in some cases for more than a year. One victim-survivor said the perpetrator who abused her was concerned to ensure she did not fall pregnant and was careful to use contraception.

Several victim-survivors spoke of knowing they were not the only child being abused by the perpetrator. They said this made them feel distressed. All acts of child sexual abuse are abhorrent. However, some victim-survivors downplayed the abuse they experienced, particularly when compared with what they knew others were experiencing:

So that's basically my experience as far as it goes. I know it's not as bad as what a lot of other people have gone through, but it wasn't exactly right either.<sup>7</sup>

## Disclosure and response

We heard that it can take some victim-survivors many years and sometimes decades to disclose that they experienced child sexual abuse.

Many victim-survivors told us that, as children, they felt too confused, ashamed, discouraged or frightened to tell anyone what was happening to them. Some told us that they did not understand they were being sexually abused because they had not been taught to recognise abuse. Others were afraid of being punished or expelled for causing trouble:

Now, for a little girl who's grown up a good girl and who's got a strict dad, all I can think of then is, 'If I tell, I'm going to get expelled. I'm going to get a beating'. And also – tell them what? I didn't know what was happening. I was like, 'What is he doing? I don't like it'.<sup>8</sup>

Many said they thought they would not be believed if they spoke up or that nothing would be done. In some cases, this was because victim-survivors felt the school already knew about the perpetrator's behaviour and had failed to act.

We heard that some victim-survivors did disclose the abuse while they were children. Some told their parents or siblings but were not believed. One victim-survivor told us he was told to stay away from the perpetrator as a way of avoiding further harm. This was impossible because the perpetrator was the victim-survivor's teacher.

Other victim-survivors told a member of school staff – including principals, other teachers and, in one case, a school chaplain – about the abuse. We heard that schools' responses were often another form of betrayal, ranging from disbelieving, denying or downplaying the abuse to punishing children for speaking about it. We heard that children were told they were over-reacting or that their allegations could 'ruin the perpetrator's career'. Some children were humiliated, bullied or threatened by perpetrators after reporting the abuse to the school.

And then I went back and told my teacher. And he said, 'Oh, no, you're just over-reacting'. I went home and told my parents. My parents said, 'No'. And then I went to the principal – nothing. No one would believe me. It was all, 'Do you understand what you're saying? This could ruin this person's career'. It's like, 'No, I'm 10, 11 years old. I don't understand. This is what happened to me'.<sup>9</sup>

Many victim-survivors told us about perpetrators remaining employed at the school, where they continued sexually abusing children. They described the sense of betrayal they felt at these responses.

[The perpetrator] had prior convictions and [the school] even knew that. I think that's the hard part. They even knew that and still let him continue to work. Their duty of care should have been to their student, not to the sleazebag paedophile with prior convictions.<sup>10</sup>

We heard that some victim-survivors reported the sexual abuse as adults – either for the first time, or for the second time after having experienced poor responses as children. Some victim-survivors only came to terms with the fact that they were sexually abused later in life – in some cases, many years after the abuse.

Some victim-survivors felt that people around them dismissed or diminished their experiences, saying not to worry about what happened and to 'get over it'.

Others described reporting the child sexual abuse to police as adults. One victim-survivor said she felt shamed by the police officer she spoke to. We also heard that victim-survivors felt silenced and unsupported during criminal legal processes that began after they reported the abuse:

It felt like the perpetrator was more supported in the context of the legal system than what we were as the survivors ... if my partner hadn't been there, I wouldn't be here today. That was horrific.<sup>11</sup>

Some victim-survivors spoke positively about reporting to police as an adult.

### **Impacts of the abuse**

We heard about the devastating physical and emotional impacts of child sexual abuse often affecting every part of victim-survivors' lives.

Many victim-survivors spoke about how the child sexual abuse affected them as children:

I just changed. And Mum just kept saying, 'What's wrong with you? What's the matter with you?' I didn't know how to explain it. But I used to tear up my sister's dolls and break her bikes, and it was things that I just never would have done before that.<sup>12</sup>

We heard that, as children, victim-survivors experienced:

- feelings of confusion, shame, anger, fear and guilt
- distress, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideation
- behavioural changes, such as acting out at home, being disruptive at school or struggling with the transition to secondary school
- negative effects on friendships and adolescent development
- heightened vigilance about the safety of other children
- physical effects such as stomach ulcers.

One victim-survivor said the abuse she experienced made her think that sex was love and led to her seeking out casual sex as a teenager.

Victim-survivors told us that as adults they experienced:

- feelings of shame, anger, fear, distress, loneliness and betrayal
- significant mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, panic attacks, eating disorders, self-harm, attempted suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder (in some cases involving hospitalisation)

- problems with alcohol and other drugs
- negative effects on their confidence, self-esteem and sense of self
- difficulties with trust, intimacy, sexuality and forming and maintaining relationships, including with friends
- heightened vigilance around children and a reluctance to become parents themselves
- physical impacts including sleep disturbances and chronic illnesses
- major disruptions to education, employment, careers and earning capacity
- homelessness.

We heard that many of these impacts are lifelong:

There is no time frame that a victim places on crimes committed against them, whether it is reported two minutes or [more than two decades] later. It never fades. It is always a trauma. It is a current event every single moment of life. My life.<sup>13</sup>

Some victim-survivors described experiencing ‘triggers’ in their day-to-day lives. Triggers are objects, experiences or events that cause a person to recall a past traumatic memory. They often generate a strong emotional, psychological or physiological response. For some, triggers were people who looked or sounded like the perpetrator. For others, the trigger was work-related – for example, being called to the principal’s office while working in a school or feeling unsupported or disbelieved by a manager.

## Healing and recovery

Child sexual abuse can have significant and lasting impacts on a victim-survivor’s life. We heard that ‘pain doesn’t disappear’ and that it can help to manage expectations around healing. However, victim-survivors also shared a wide range of strategies they use to help manage the impacts of the abuse they experienced. This is an important reminder that with care, connection and support many victim-survivors can find joy, purpose and meaning in their lives. As one victim-survivor told us:

The shame and blame isn’t on me ... I don’t want to be anonymous. Why should I? I’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. This happened to me. This was a crime. I’m a victim of a crime – an insidious crime. I’m here and I’m alive and ... I’m doing OK.<sup>14</sup>

We heard about the healing power of:

- connections with partners, children, family members, friends and other victim-survivors
- counselling, mindfulness and other therapeutic practices
- physical exercise, being in nature and spending time with animals
- helping others – especially children – through work and volunteering
- reframing experiences of child sexual abuse to move away from victimhood and shame towards empowerment.

Importantly, victim-survivors told us that healing is very personal. We heard that victim-survivors needed to feel ready to heal for supports to be effective. One victim-survivor told us:

Two and a half years ago I had written 'I am ashamed of my shame'. Yesterday I was able to delete that line because now when I think of all my suffering and losses, I feel compassion for myself. Shame will not be my tomb. I am a survivor, not a victim anymore. I stand in my strength.<sup>15</sup>

## What created the conditions for abuse?

Child sexual abuse is never the fault of the victim-survivor. Rather, it occurs where power dynamics, hierarchical structures, organisational cultures and community attitudes combine in complex ways to silence, disbelieve and devalue children.

It was not the Forum's role to identify the specific factors that led to each victim-survivor's experience of child sexual abuse. However, it was important to outline some of the main risk factors for child sexual abuse in schools to help understand how and why abuse may have occurred before 2000.

### Community attitudes, knowledge and understanding

Community attitudes, values, knowledge, assumptions and norms influence how schools and the people who work in them treat children. These influences can be especially powerful in shaping responses to child sexual abuse.

We heard that, in the 1960s and 1970s, children were expected to be 'seen but not heard'. They were taught to respect and listen to adults. Adults were trusted and believed over children. We heard that these attitudes had the effect of silencing children who experienced sexual abuse.

Schools were viewed as highly trustworthy and credible institutions. Many families deferred to the authority of schools; principals and teachers were considered pillars of the community. We heard that this may also have discouraged victim-survivors from disclosing sexual abuse.

In the 1960s and 1970s, social norms about sex and sexuality prevented many parents from talking to their children about healthy sexual development and bodily autonomy. The topic of child sexual abuse was taboo. Many victim-survivors were therefore not equipped to recognise their experiences as child sexual abuse or did not feel comfortable telling anyone about the abuse.

Community misconceptions and problematic beliefs about child sexual abuse meant it often went unaddressed in schools. These common misconceptions included:

- Child sexual abuse is rare.
- Children's disclosures of child sexual abuse are inherently unreliable and should not be trusted.
- Some children 'seduce' adults and are 'willing participants' in the abuse.

### **How perpetrators evade detection**

Schools provide perpetrators with ready access to children. We heard that perpetrators often exploited unsupervised school environments to sexually abuse children.

Perpetrators of institutional child sexual abuse are often described as popular, charming and charismatic. They may occupy positions of leadership, power, trust and authority. These characteristics can make it difficult for children, parents, carers and school staff to question their behaviour.

While all children are vulnerable to sexual abuse, perpetrators may strategically target children with particular vulnerabilities because they are perceived as easier to manipulate and less likely to disclose the abuse. This includes children experiencing family conflict, violence or breakdown; children with a history of abuse; children with disability; and children who lack an understanding of sex and sexuality.

Perpetrators are often highly strategic in the techniques they use to groom children, families, institutions and the community so they can sexually abuse children without detection. Grooming enables a perpetrator to establish an emotional connection with a child, build trust and create a 'special relationship' with them in order to sexually abuse that child.

Grooming is often subtle, gradual and difficult to discern. It may involve behaviours that otherwise appear to be 'normal' or caring. It is often central to how perpetrators manipulate and coerce children and enforce their silence.

Until relatively recently, grooming was not well understood as a concept nor was it treated as a crime. There was also far less guidance on the expected professional conduct of teachers and what constituted inappropriate conduct towards students. This may have helped to obscure grooming and allowed perpetrators to positively frame inappropriate behaviours as special attentiveness or teacherly devotion to students.

## **Governance, organisational culture and leadership in schools**

Cultures of silence, power and control over children within schools create the conditions for child sexual abuse to go undetected and unreported. While each school has its own culture, schools are inherently hierarchical institutions where there is a clear power imbalance between adults and children. We heard that teachers exerted significant power, authority and control over students. Victim-survivors said that at times this included physically punishing children for being disobedient.

Research demonstrates that the risk of child sexual abuse is increased where the culture of a school is to:

- disbelieve or doubt children
- discourage reporting of concerns about staff behaviour
- fail to follow child safety policies and procedures
- fail to treat child safety as a shared responsibility
- prioritise the school's reputation and interests over child safety.

Schools whose staff recognise signs of child sexual abuse and fail to act may facilitate a 'bystander' culture, where inaction becomes an acceptable response to concerns about child safety. Such failures to act may expose children to the risk of ongoing sexual abuse. Unconscious biases can deter staff from believing children and prevent them from acting in response to concerns about child sexual abuse. For example, a staff member who learns of allegations about a colleague may be slow to revise their positive opinion of the colleague or may overlook evidence that contradicts their opinion.

Leadership also shapes organisational culture by demonstrating what is acceptable. A leader's style, behaviour and approach influence how people within an organisation treat one another. If school principals tolerate or model disrespectful or inappropriate behaviours towards children, they send a message to staff that children's safety is not important.

When leaders handle disclosures poorly, it can send the message to staff and students that there is no point speaking up about safety. We heard many accounts of principals and school leaders who did not act to protect children who disclosed child sexual abuse.

The risk of child sexual abuse is also increased where a school lacks effective governance on child safety. This includes:

- effective and consistently enforced policies and procedures on preventing, identifying and responding to child sexual abuse
- regular training on child safety so staff know how to report concerns and have confidence that concerns will be followed up without negative consequences for the reporting staff member
- effective staff supervision and accountability
- adequate record-keeping and information-sharing practices to ensure opportunities to act in response to child sexual abuse are not missed.

### **Responses to child sexual abuse**

Effective responses to allegations of institutional child sexual abuse build trust and confidence in an organisation's policies and processes. They encourage children, staff and families to report child safety concerns, including sexual abuse. Conversely, inadequate institutional responses to child sexual abuse erode trust, discourage reporting and place children at risk of harm.

We heard that staff at some schools were aware of child sexual abuse occurring but did not directly address it. One victim-survivor told us that his school suspected children were being sexually abused in the school's maintenance shed. He explained that the school prohibited children from going to the shed and punished them for non-compliance:

A lot of the children who were being sexually molested by these two men ended up getting detention for going back to the shed. The children were being punished and yelled at by the teachers. I look back on that and say, 'Yeah, they could have handled that better' ... No one wanted to tell the truth. No one wanted to talk openly.<sup>16</sup>

We also heard that some victim-survivors were physically punished at school for speaking up about the sexual abuse they had experienced. A victim-survivor told us he received the strap on the back of his legs after he disclosed that he was being abused.

### **How child safety in schools has changed since 2000**

We were not asked to examine the extent to which child safety practices in schools have changed since the experiences of victim-survivors described in this report. However, we felt it was important to reflect, at a high level, some of the key changes since 2000 designed to prevent and address child sexual abuse in Victorian schools.

## **Community attitudes and awareness**

Community attitudes and awareness about child sexual abuse and children generally have shifted since 2000. For example:

- Children's rights are more clearly defined, with a strong emphasis on a child's voice and empowerment.
- The broader community has a better understanding of child sexual abuse. This is in large part because victim-survivors have spoken up through the media and public inquiries about their experiences of abuse and its impacts.

These broader changes have been accompanied by targeted initiatives within schools aimed at informing and educating students, families and school staff.

## **Organisational responses in education**

Since 2016, Victorian schools have been required to uphold the Child Safe Standards, which place obligations on schools and the Department of Education to keep children safe.

Some of the specific changes designed to improve child safety in government schools (and, in some instances, non-government schools) include:

- the introduction of age-appropriate education about child sexual abuse, including the Victorian Government's Respectful Relationships initiative
- expectations of more rigorous screening and recruitment practices to ensure employees and volunteers are safe and suitable to work with children
- greater policy guidance and increased training and professional development on the prevention of and appropriate responses to child sexual abuse
- requirements for schools to satisfy and maintain minimum standards (which include upholding the Child Safe Standards) to be registered with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority
- safety being a design consideration in the physical environment of schools.

The Department of Education has dedicated teams to support schools to follow and understand its policies and procedures regarding staff misconduct as it relates to child sexual abuse and associated investigations. It also has a dedicated team to provide support and assistance to former students who have been sexually abused at a Victorian government school by an employee or another adult working at the school.

## Legal and regulatory responses

The Victorian Government has created two regulatory schemes to improve children's safety in organisational settings. These are the Child Safe Standards and the Reportable Conduct Scheme. The Reportable Conduct Scheme provides independent oversight of how complaints about staff and volunteers in certain organisations, including schools, are managed.

There have also been changes to the way child sexual abuse is policed and managed through the legal system. For example:

- Victoria Police now has specialist sexual offences and child abuse investigation teams as well as new processes designed to be more sensitive to the dynamics of child sexual abuse, the needs of victim-survivors and the impact of trauma.
- Criminal laws have been changed to more accurately reflect the nature and severity of child sexual abuse, including by changing terminology, creating new criminal offences and imposing longer maximum sentences.
- The civil law system has been changed to be fairer for victim-survivors wanting to sue organisations or government departments.

There are now more independent screening measures to oversee adults working in schools, including the Working with Children Check scheme. The independent Victorian Institute of Teaching has responsibility to assess and monitor a person's suitability to teach. It also maintains a code of conduct and has a range of resources to support teachers to uphold their professional obligations.

## A focus for the future

One of the Forum's objectives was to allow the Victorian Government to learn from the experiences and information shared with the Forum to better prevent and respond to child sexual abuse in government schools now and into the future.

Many victim-survivors were driven to take part in the Forum because they wanted to contribute to momentum around changes designed to improve children's safety at school:

I seek compassionate listening, a willingness to see my truth and a curiosity that may enable learnings that inform improvements in the Victorian public education system, to protect children and adolescents into the future.<sup>17</sup>

Some also wanted to improve responses to victim-survivors. Many shared their ideas for improvements to child safety.

Victim-survivors called for:

- improved community understanding of child sexual abuse and ongoing opportunities for victim-survivors to speak about their experiences
- support for parents and carers to have age-appropriate conversations with their children about sexual development and child sexual abuse, including the risks posed by people known to the child
- children's rights and safety to be central to the decisions and actions of institutions and the people within them
- strengthened safeguards for children in schools, including structures to enable schools, teachers and families to work together to protect children against the risks of child sexual abuse, and for children to support each other
- systems to enable school staff to freely express concerns about their colleagues
- better support services for victim-survivors.

Based on what she heard from victim-survivors, the Chair has drawn together five key messages on how to continue to promote safety in schools:

1. Acknowledging past wrongs is an important step towards safer schools in the future.
2. A child-safe culture in a school makes sexual abuse less likely to occur, harder to hide and more likely to be reported.
3. Led by the principal, school leaders set the tone for a school's approach to child safety. They should signal through their words and actions that upholding child safety is everyone's responsibility.
4. Schools and education departments must continue to prioritise child safety. Child safety is not achieved and then maintained – it requires constant attention and vigilance.
5. We must continue to keep our eyes and ears open and ask children what they feel and what they need. We need to start from a position of belief and act on children's concerns with compassion and care.

## Recommendations

The Forum's establishing instrument gave us the power to make recommendations on the form of any restrictions to be placed on public access to the report and any records of our inquiry. We made two recommendations on this basis.

The first is that there should be no restrictions on public access to the report and it should be published in its entirety as soon as possible after it is delivered to the Victorian Government. Printed copies of the report should be available for public access through the State Library and a digital version of the report, together with related videos, should be made publicly available online for at least 50 years.

### **Recommendation 1**

The Forum recommends that the Victorian Government:

- arrange for the report to be tabled in the Victorian Parliament in an unredacted form as soon as possible and no later than 31 August 2026
- ensure printed copies of the report are delivered to the State Library of Victoria and all Victorian public libraries, to be available for public access
- make a digital version of the report, together with related videos (the Easy Read guide and animated summary), publicly available online for at least 50 years.

The second recommendation relates to ensuring confidential, anonymous and sensitive information in our records is appropriately protected. This involves amending the *Inquiries Act 2014* (Vic) to ensure information identified as confidential, anonymous or sensitive is kept confidential for a minimum of 99 years and exempted from applications under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Vic).

### **Recommendation 2**

The Forum recommends that the Victorian Government amend the *Inquiries Act 2014* (Vic) to ensure personal information identified by a relevant royal commission, board of inquiry or formal review as confidential, anonymous or sensitive is:

- kept confidential for a minimum of 99 years following the end of the royal commission, board of inquiry or formal review
- exempted from the application of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Vic) for a minimum of 99 years following the end of the royal commission, board of inquiry or formal review.

These changes should apply retrospectively to the Forum.

## Fragments of Self, by 'Abby'

(i) In Photos.

Processed in the red light  
of the dark room,  
the cave  
that has held us captive  
for years,  
photos pegged to the string,  
lifeless,  
drying.

Those little faces and naked bodies.

Me: cowering.

You: 'Are you afraid there are naked photos of you?'

(ii) In Water.

Trapping weak swimmers between your legs.

Before I could swim,  
a tiny thing,  
in your arms at the deep end,  
crying,  
'I want to go to the shallow end'  
You, angry, refusing to let me go.

Placing your hand on my chest  
After I swam the length,  
'Can you feel your heart beating?'

Laughing cruelly at [redacted] and me naked by the pool  
because you wouldn't let us change in the room.  
Scoffing at me panicking, forgetting my underwear in the rush.

Sitting upon my shoulders in the pool,  
your penis pressed into the back of my neck,  
the way you framed it,  
like it was a science experiment,  
how a little girl could hold the weight of a grown man  
in water.

(iii) In the Office.

'Are you ticklish?'

Your fingers gouging into my chest.

Long fingers, blunt nails,  
used to strumming a guitar  
for children.

I distrust any man  
with the same shaped hands.

(vi) On Your Knee.

Class reading time.

Me on your lap.

Special.

Always.

(v) At Camp.

I can see us in the lineup

[redacted] and me in our forbidden, rebellious bathers

clutching our towels around us

while other girls are forced to take a public bath

naked

in front of the teachers

and girls

and you.

Why are you, a man, here?  
Why are we forced to be naked?  
Why is this public?

I overhear another male teacher talking of taking photos from a distance.

'You two will go and take off your bathers  
or you will bathe in front of the boys tomorrow.'

Returning, defeated, I wait until you are  
seemingly absent.  
I hunch under my developing body  
in front of everyone  
and then you enter  
proudly, laughing,  
with a bucket of cold water  
to pour over my head.

You've been waiting all my schooling  
for this one triumphant moment  
of seeing my naked developing body.

'Don't tell your parents'

Later

Me: cowering.

You: (laughing) 'Are you afraid there are naked photos of you?'

(vi) Now.

I keen in the fragments of self from the waves  
and those parts entangled in the razor wire  
of your fingers,  
your groin,  
your eyes,  
your photos.

Do you have them still?

# Introduction

The Forum for Truth and Recognition was a statewide truth-telling process for people who experienced child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools or certain non-government schools before 2000. This report creates an independent public record of victim-survivors' experiences to ensure they are not forgotten. It is our sincere hope that this public record will build a shared understanding in the Victorian community and beyond of the devastating impacts of child sexual abuse in schools and support victim-survivors to heal.

## Why was the Forum established?

In 2023 the Victorian Government established a Board of Inquiry to investigate child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools during the 1960s and 1970s (Beaumaris Board of Inquiry).

One of the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry's recommendations to the Victorian Government was to establish a statewide truth-telling and accountability process to create a more comprehensive public record of historical child sexual abuse in government schools and relevant non-government schools.<sup>19</sup>

On 6 August 2025 the Premier, the Hon Jacinta Allan MP, announced that the Victorian Government would establish the independent Forum for Truth and Recognition. The Premier appointed Ms Angela Connors as its Chair. Premier Allan noted: 'We are making sure the voices and experiences of all victim-survivors of abuse in government schools are heard forever – helping people heal by telling the truth.'<sup>20</sup>

Alongside this, the Premier announced that the Department of Education would conduct a systemic review of Victoria's past responses to child sexual abuse in government schools in response to the matters raised in the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry's report.<sup>21</sup> The government has informed us that it will release the findings of the systemic review at the same time as this report.

## What was the Forum's task?

The Victorian Government asked the Forum to create a safe and trauma-informed process for people who were sexually abused in a Victorian government school and certain non-government schools before 2000 to share their experiences and be heard. Our role was then to translate these accounts into an enduring public record for the community and government to bear witness to, and learn from, the harm experienced in Victorian schools.

Our report builds on the extensive work of inquiries into institutional child sexual abuse over the past 15 years.<sup>22</sup> These inquiries have examined failures in responses to child sexual abuse in institutions, recommended various reforms and demanded action from governments. They have also generated important research, triggered new investment and driven shifts in policy and practice.

Over the past decade, the Victorian Government has set about implementing dozens of recommendations to prevent child sexual abuse in institutional settings (refer to Part 3). Some of these reforms continued to progress alongside the Forum's work.<sup>23</sup> Child safety is a policy area that demands constant attention to respond to new and changing risks and to the latest research and evidence on what works to protect children from sexual abuse.

From the outset, our hope was that this public record would make a unique contribution to the important and ongoing conversation about child safety in schools. Victim-survivor voices have featured in past inquiries and reviews but alongside other stakeholders, research, policy and reform discussions. This report focuses on the voices of victim-survivors to expose abhorrent abuses and the conditions that enabled those abuses. We hope this public record also contributes to a greater community and government understanding of the vigilance required to prevent child sexual abuse in schools.

Most importantly, this public record reveals the extraordinary strength and resolve of victim-survivors to make schools safer for children. We trust that their experiences and insights, as detailed in this report, will inform the Victorian Government's responses to child sexual abuse in schools now and into the future.

## **Who could participate in the Forum?**

The Forum was open to anyone who experienced child sexual abuse perpetrated by a teacher or other school employee or contractor in a Victorian government school context before 1 January 2000.

Anyone who experienced child sexual abuse in a non-government school before this date was also able to participate if the perpetrator had previously worked in a government school and allegedly committed child sexual abuse while working there.

Eligibility and the Forum's terms of reference are explained in Part 5.

## **How did we approach our task?**

It was essential for us to tell the Victorian community about our work so that victim-survivors were aware of the opportunity to take part in the Forum. We had to harness and generate support and interest for people to come forward. Our community engagement was extensive and included community outreach, webinars and advertising in print and social media.

To ensure victim-survivors always felt safe, respected and supported, we prioritised their preferences and needs in carrying out our work. In keeping with our objectives, our approach was designed to support healing and recovery.

We invited victim-survivors to book a personalised session with the Chair and/or make a submission to the Forum in any form. Personalised sessions were held across Victoria, in person, on the phone and online, based on the victim-survivor's choice. Sessions were unstructured and guided by what victim-survivors chose to share. This approach recognised that not all victim-survivors feel comfortable discussing all of their experiences.

Victim-survivors were welcome to bring support people (such as family, friends or counsellors) to their personalised session. They were offered access to wellbeing support before and after meeting with the Chair or making a submission; counselling was also available. More information on our approach, including our decision not to hold public hearings, is in Part 5.

Our work was guided by advice and input from a range of experts, including people with lived experience of child sexual abuse. This is also described in Part 5.

## **How is this report structured?**

This report is structured as follows:

- Part 1 contains victim-survivors' accounts, capturing their voices, experiences and truths. This includes their lives before they experienced child sexual abuse and the immediate and longer-term impacts of the abuse. Part 1 also highlights victim-survivors' approaches to healing. It concludes with our recommendations to honour the voices of those who shared their experiences with us.
- Part 2 draws on research to describe the conditions that increase the risk of child sexual abuse in school contexts.
- Part 3 gives a high-level overview of improvements in child safety in Victorian schools since 2000.
- Part 4 includes victim-survivors' reflections and ideas on how to improve safety in schools and better support victim-survivors. It also includes the Chair's closing reflections on how to maintain momentum in preventing and improving responses to child sexual abuse in schools, based on what she heard from victim-survivors.
- Part 5 has detailed information about the Forum, including our scope and approach to the work.

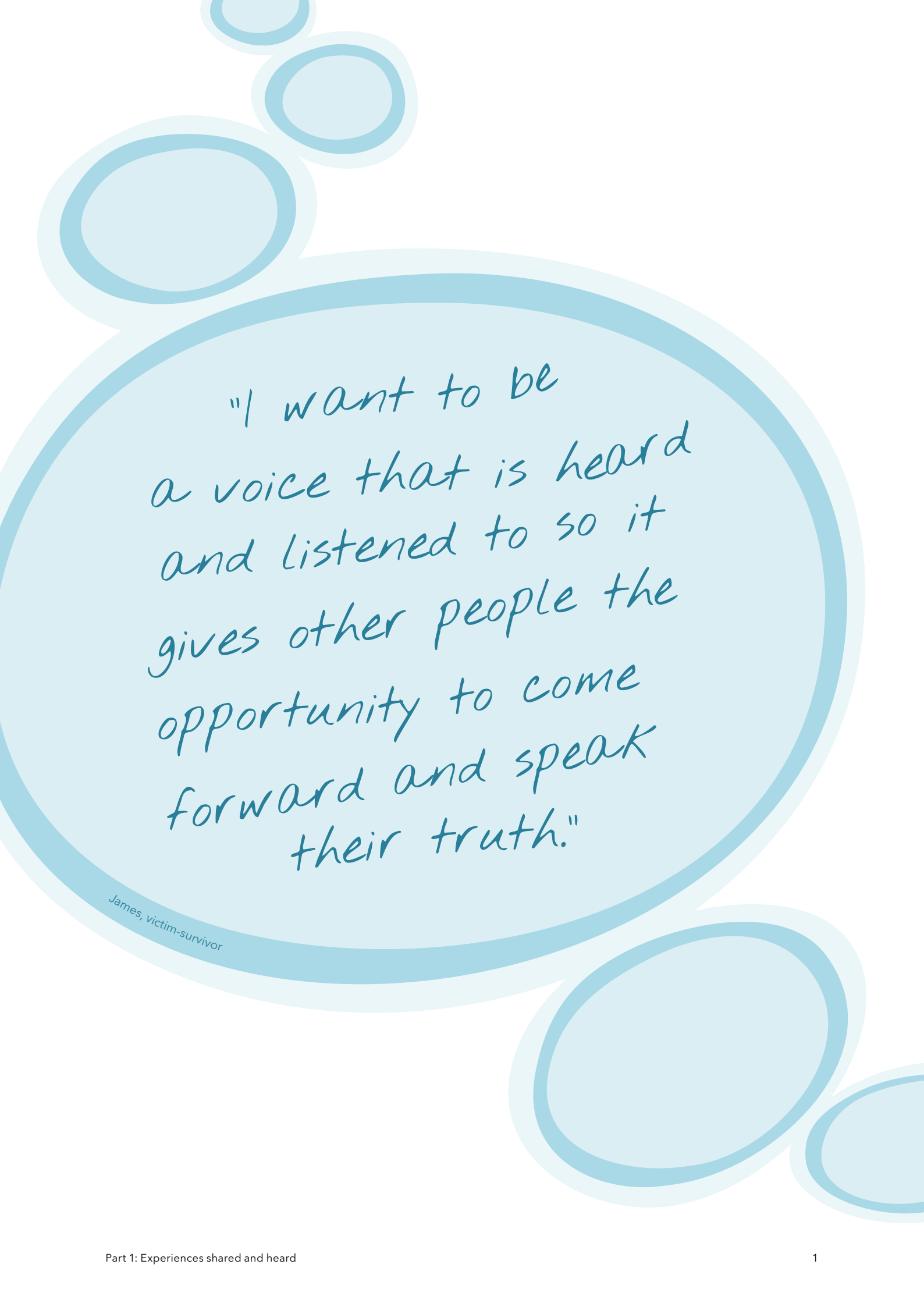
There are also a Glossary and appendices, including the Forum's establishing instrument and an Easy Read guide.

A short animation describing the Forum's work and a video of the Easy Read guide were published on our website ([www.truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](http://www.truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au)).

## Summary and Introduction Endnotes

1. Personalised session with Grant Holland.
2. Submission from 'Grace', p 1.
3. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
4. Personalised session with 'Brendon'.
5. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.
6. Submission from Alex Raven, p 1.
7. Personalised session with 'Jacob'.
8. Personalised session with 'Joan'.
9. Personalised session with 'Martin'.
10. Personalised session with 'Violet'.
11. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
12. Personalised session with Erena.
13. Submission from 'Betty', p 1.
14. Personalised session with Daz Gibbs.
15. Submission 2 from 'Boudicea', p 5.
16. Personalised session with 'Brendon'.
17. Submission 1 from 'Boudicea', p 1.
18. Submission from 'Abby'.
19. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Part D, p 364, Recommendation 3.
20. Premier of Victoria, *Ensuring truth and accountability for victim-survivors* [media release], Victorian Government, 6 August 2025, accessed 15 February 2026. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/ensuring-truth-and-accountability-victim-survivors>
21. Premier of Victoria, *Ensuring truth and accountability for victim-survivors* [media release], Victorian Government, 6 August 2025, accessed 15 February 2026. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/ensuring-truth-and-accountability-victim-survivors>
22. These include the *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024; *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017; Family and Development Committee, *Betrayal of trust: Victorian Parliamentary inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other non-government organisations*, Parliament of Victoria, 2013.
23. Premier of Victoria, *Parliament will not rise until Child Safety Bill passes* [media release], Victorian Government, 21 August 2025, accessed 15 February 2026. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/parliament-will-not-rise-until-child-safety-bill-passes>





"I want to be  
a voice that is heard  
and listened to so it  
gives other people the  
opportunity to come  
forward and speak  
their truth."

James, victim-survivor

# Experiences shared and heard

## **Content warning**

Please be aware that the content in this part includes descriptions of child sexual abuse, attempted suicide and self-harm. It may be distressing or unsettling for some readers.

We encourage readers to exercise discretion and care for themselves when engaging with this part of the report and to seek support if needed. For example, you may wish to have someone to support you while you read. A list of support services can be found at the front of the report.

## **1.1 Introduction**

This part of the report represents the heart of the public record of child sexual abuse that occurred in Victorian government and certain non-government school settings before 2000, as heard by the Forum.

It is here that we capture the voices and experiences of victim-survivors as they describe the acts of sexual abuse that profoundly changed their lives. Their words reveal that the betrayal and harm they experienced were not confined to the acts of the perpetrator but extended to the adults who looked away and to the schools, government departments and police that we heard often failed to act.

These experiences also show the varied paths victim-survivors have taken in order to live with the long-term consequences of the abuse. Healing from childhood trauma is not a simple or linear process.

For some, the act of sharing their experiences of child sexual abuse has helped lift a cloud of shame and given them strength from solidarity with other victim-survivors. As Grant told us:

I hope the light I now shine on my story encourages others to come into the light. It's scary but you feel less alone.<sup>1</sup>

Our hope is that this public record serves as an enduring reminder of the insidious nature of child sexual abuse and its often devastating and far-reaching impacts.

## How this part is structured

Part 1 reflects the experiences of victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in Victorian schools prior to 2000, as shared with the Forum. Demographic information about participants and other relevant data are in Appendix B.

Section 1.2 describes the experiences of victim-survivors under broad themes, capturing memories of their early lives before experiencing child sexual abuse through to present-day impacts.

Section 1.3 sets out our recommendations on public access to the report and on the treatment of our records once the Forum has concluded.

### A note to the reader

Victim-survivors who expressed a preference for their experience to be public are referred to using their real names. People who asked to remain anonymous are referred to by a pseudonym (an alternative name used to protect identity), which is indicated with quotation marks – for example, 'Murray'.

As we explained in 'A note on language' and reiterate in Part 5, our role was not to investigate or 'test' what people told us; it was to listen to victim-survivors and to believe them. We have adopted a consistent approach of not using the word 'alleged' in relation to perpetrators. This does not mean the experiences set out in this report have been legally proven. By not naming perpetrators, the Forum does not intend to devalue or ignore any experiences or information shared with us.

We have chosen not to name schools because some victim-survivors did not reveal the specific school they attended and many schools from that era have since closed, merged or changed names.

## 1.2 What we heard

Between November 2025 and March 2026, victim-survivors shared their experiences with the Forum in a variety of ways: through conversations with the Chair, written submissions, poetry and artwork.

We did not constrain victim-survivors in how they described their experiences to us. Personalised sessions were open and fluid conversations, where the role of the Chair was to listen and acknowledge what the victim-survivor wanted to share. We did not ask set questions of people who provided submissions or took part in personalised sessions, giving them the freedom to tell us whatever was important to them. Through this approach, we received a wide variety of rich information. Some victim-survivors provided only brief submissions, while others contributed in multiple ways. Each contribution is important.

All participants were asked to complete a consent form to outline their preferences on how their information should be treated. This report contains the information people wished to share publicly, noting some people chose to do so anonymously under a pseudonym or their first name only.

This report does not contain information that victim-survivors asked to be kept confidential. In some instances, we received contributions through the post or by email without the person's contact information. In these cases we were unable to confirm their preferences. We have therefore erred on the side of not publishing this information. However, each contribution was read and considered by the Chair and informed her reflections in Part 4.

The sheer volume of information we received meant we could not include everything a participant wrote or said to us. However, we wanted every victim-survivor who wished for their experiences to be placed on the public record to be able to see themselves in this report.

To do this, we have created personal narratives for victim-survivors wherever possible. These narratives draw on a person's submission, what they said during a personalised session, or a combination of these. In some cases we have reordered what people said in their personalised session because sometimes victim-survivors would return to an earlier point later in their discussion with the Chair. We have also lightly edited written submissions to align with our report style and removed potentially identifying information where a victim-survivor asked to remain anonymous. This has all been done with care and sensitivity to preserve the words of victim-survivors. We have also quoted victim-survivors' contributions elsewhere throughout the report.

We were unable to prepare personal narratives for a small number of victim-survivors for various reasons. Where this was the case, this was explained to the person before the report was finalised. However, we have still used their contributions in other ways in the report.

The information in this section is broadly organised under six overarching themes. Often a person's narrative spoke to one or more of these themes. In instances where we felt it important to keep different elements of a person's experiences together, we included them under the theme that we thought was emphasised the most. In other cases, we have created multiple parts of a person's narrative relevant to the particular theme.

The six overarching themes are:

- **Looking back** – includes victim-survivor reflections that speak to the context of the child sexual abuse they experienced, including the prevalent attitudes and norms of the time.
- **Childhood before the abuse** – captures reflections victim-survivors shared about their childhood and family lives before they were sexually abused at school.
- **The abuse** – includes victim-survivors' descriptions of the acts of grooming and sexual abuse perpetrated against them.
- **Disclosure and response** – describes whether victim-survivors told anyone about the abuse and, if they did, what happened in response to that disclosure.
- **Impacts of the abuse** – describes how the abuse affected victim-survivors throughout childhood and into adulthood, including impacts on schooling, work, personal relationships and their overall health and wellbeing.
- **Healing and recovery** – includes victim-survivors' reflections on what has helped them live with the sexual abuse they experienced and what has supported their healing.

Throughout the report we have centred victim-survivors' contributions as shared with us. One such contribution came from 'Betty'.

'Betty' described the child sexual abuse perpetrated against her at school as an abuse of power and a breach of the trust society places in teachers and schools. She urged the community to bear witness to this abuse and its devastating impacts.

### **'Betty'**

I was sexually abused as a child. By a teacher. In a Melbourne high school. That is not an 'experience'. That is a crime, a life-changing event that destroyed me. And now you will give me the grace and dignity to read about how that happened and what impact it has had on me.

The facts. Early 1990s. A Melbourne government secondary school. The perpetrator – a man, [in his late 20s], a physical education 'teacher'. I say 'teacher' in quotation marks because whatever he was on paper, he does not deserve to be known by his profession. He used that to prey on children – me, he groomed and sexually abused while in a position of authority. Over and over. He was employed in an environment where children are supposed to be safe, protected and trusting of the adults who mentor them. Our parents, guardians and caretakers are supposed to have peace in the knowledge that they are leaving their children in the care of these adults for the best part of Monday to Friday.

Then there is the all-too-often falsity that once we turn 15 or 16, we know what's right and wrong. We have only been *guided* to recognise right from wrong. Children cannot defend themselves from wrong if they are cornered by an adult. They lack insight in developmental years. Put a child of 16 up against a scheming, self-gratifying predator [in his late 20s], and in an instant that child's maturity – or immaturity – is exposed by his scripted routine to groom and rape children.

I was groomed and sexually assaulted over a period of two years [in the early 1990s]. I kept this to myself for over 30 years. The perpetrator groomed me over many months and took advantage of his position as a teacher to gain a false sense of trust, and then physically and sexually assaulted me – a child of 16 to 17 years of age. This was a crime then, it is now, and it will continue to be in the future.

There is no time frame that a victim places on crimes committed against them, whether it is reported two minutes or [more than two decades] later. It never fades. It is always a trauma. It is a current event every single moment of life. My life.

I reflect upon the breach of trust that members of the community such as teachers are expected to adhere to and uphold. I was a student, and he was a teacher. I was a child. He was an adult. I trusted him and he made

his choice to prey on me, based on the expectation he could get away with it, as society should trust people in positions of authority who have a duty of care.

He consciously made choices to see me and cross the boundary from teacher and student to a sexual relationship. In his position of power, he made it possible for himself to obtain self-gratification, while under the collective societal assumption that 'teachers are role models and protect our children while they are at school and in their care'.

The abuse of power in his position has haunted me, and not only until I was forced to start talking about it through therapy, did I fully understand that this was one sided; I did not enjoy one moment of it. I did not consent to it but rather I did what I was told. I was stuck. Captured.

What was done to me has destroyed me. I have come forward; I can now talk about it because what beats my heart is the sorrow for my young self. If this happens to other children, I can honestly say that the magnitude of its effects is lifelong.

Yes, we can get help, yes, we can seek justice, yes, we can try and see the good in the world and not catastrophise the evils. But you see, if this is done to a child, in their formative years, there is something that gets etched into their core that can never be healed. The grief of being robbed of innocence, the sorrow of wondering how I would have been if this wasn't done to me. And no one can ever fix that. All we can do is fix [things] so this is less of an occurrence in society.<sup>2</sup>

## Looking back

Victim-survivors who shared their experiences of child sexual abuse with the Forum were born between the 1940s and the 1980s, with most born in the 1960s. Some described different community norms and attitudes that existed when they were children.

'Joshua' reflected on the community's tolerance of homophobia and other prejudiced views at the time:

Those years that we're looking [at] and talking about, probably the level of acceptable behaviour in society regards a lot of things like racism, homophobia – all of those things, I think it was probably a lot more tolerated than what it is now. And if you were from one of those communities, you were often and openly vilified because of it.<sup>3</sup>

Many victim-survivors described social norms and misconceptions about child sexual abuse that made it easier for perpetrators to sexually abuse children and silenced many victim-survivors.<sup>4</sup>

We heard about a reluctance to discuss sex or child sexual abuse, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. 'Oscar' commented on how little information children had to understand sexual development and sexual abuse in 'the pre-internet age'.<sup>5</sup>

'Joan' said:

I didn't know what sex was or anything leading up to sex – that conversation never happened with my mum.<sup>6</sup>

This lack of information meant some children did not understand they were being sexually abused and did not have the language to describe what had happened to them. As Grant explained:

As a child, I had no idea what [the perpetrator] was doing because I wasn't sexually aware, but I knew this stuff felt wrong ... We couldn't verbalise what he was doing to us, as we didn't know what it was and we weren't emotionally mature enough to talk about it properly.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Ann Maree told us she didn't understand that what she was experiencing was wrong:

I wasn't conscious that he wasn't allowed to do that. It was like, 'No, this is in broad daylight and this is acceptable and you're going to wear it'.<sup>8</sup>

'Sigrid' and 'Ruth' both spoke about a period where intimate 'relationships' between teachers and older students were not remarked upon or recognised as child sexual abuse.

'Sigrid' told us she was 16 when a teacher at her school started sexually abusing her. She reflected on the changing social norms that perpetrators exploited in the 1970s to abuse older students.

### **'Sigrid'**

... one of the characteristics of that period as I see it [was] a loosening of boundaries in general adult society that was exploited by perpetrators, quite convinced that they could cloak their abuse in enough pretence of a not entirely unusual 'intimate relationship'. Society was indeed navigating its way out of the sexual liberation movement of the 60s and into the era of the women's movement but without sufficient guard rails to ensure safety and the prevention of exploitation and abuse.

In the 70s when things were loosening up, the mores about the way people behaved with each other were in total flux. Here we were having really close relationships with our teachers. That's probably, I believe, part of why it enabled [sexual abuse] to continue. When I sit and think about the fact that we're all drinking and there's photos of us drinking at our graduation, for instance – I remember somebody else saying to me once, 'My God. You would never see that happen now, like not in a pink fit'. All perfectly normal back then ...

My observations of another female student and male teacher spending much time together during breaks were confirmed by my perpetrator as them 'going out'.<sup>9</sup>

'Ruth' was the youngest in a large family that often moved house. She described a culture in the 1980s – both within her school and the regional town where she lived – that normalised inappropriate and sexually abusive behaviours by teachers towards students.

### **'Ruth'**

I guess I was a high achiever, but I was also into sport. I swam competitively. I had some trauma from my childhood, but I was an athlete ...

[The perpetrator] was the first year out of uni. I now feel for him and his colleagues because he stepped into a school [where] it was OK for teachers to have sexual relations with students.

I left home ... I think it was during Year 12. I moved out just the day before my accounting exam, because I needed to study, but I had three jobs at the time. I was tired. I needed to study and my dad wouldn't pick me up, or my dad wouldn't do something or other. And then we had a fight and he said, 'Well, there's the door, take it'. And I went, 'OK, I'm never coming back'. So, I ended up living with two of the teachers as well as a third person, so it was a share adult house. I moved in there and ended up dating and going out with one of the teachers.

My ex-boyfriend at the time – his drama teacher was a female. I had already felt uncomfortable with the fact that she was too friendly with all the [students the] same age as me ... But it was very much about drinking with the teachers and smoking with them and hanging out with them. So, it was just very normalised.

My dad had gone to the school and said, 'I don't think it's appropriate that my daughter – who's still at your school – is living with teachers and going out with one'. And they said to him, 'Well, she's old enough. It's not up to you anymore'. And when I heard he did that, I'm like, 'Oh, too bad, it's not up to you. I'm not coming home anyway. I have nowhere else to go'. I needed to finish high school and I did. And when I finished Year 12, I had such great marks.

Even now to this day, I still think I'm much better [off] than being like 13 or 14 or 15 or 16 when this happened. But I was still a student and what it did shaped me ...

I remember [the perpetrator] proposed to me when I was in a car. I hadn't got to uni yet. And it was in the middle of nowhere. So I remember driving, being in the car going, 'How do I say no to this guy? Because I don't want to get married' ... But the thing is that I said yes because I was captured. And then I remember getting all of these engagement presents and thinking, 'I don't want any of them'. And then having to split up with him, give them all back.

And then I moved and when I was at uni, my sister gave him my address. She said, 'But he's so lovely' ... And he would stand at the front of my house and go, 'Let me in'. And again, he was young. I mean, this is first year out, second year out [of university]. And now that we're adults, we know how young 'young teachers' are ...

Only now I've joined one of the [school] Facebook groups. If they threw up a picture of me, I would be mortified. So, I can't comment. I can't say anything in case they say, 'I remember you!' I don't want to be remembered. And that's wrong. That's wrong.<sup>10</sup>

## Childhood before the abuse

Many victim-survivors reflected on their childhoods before they were sexually abused, describing a variety of backgrounds and upbringings. Some described being happy and settled children, with close, caring and stable families. Others had difficulties and sometimes felt unsafe at home. Many wondered whether their circumstances and prior experiences contributed in some way to the abuse they experienced, revealing added vulnerabilities the perpetrator could exploit.

'Warren', who went to school in the 1960s, told us he had devoted parents who were very community-minded.

### **'Warren'**

We were a very, very happy and loving and caring family.

I enjoyed school. I remember preschool. That was across the road. I remember my preschool teacher – she was a lovely lady – and then I left preschool and went to state school ... In those days, we had wood-fired furnaces in the classroom.

I just went through each year with friends. I used to ride a bike to school, and I'd put my bike at the end of the school property under a shed with all the other bikes. They were all lined up. My sister went to the same school, and my brother went to the same school. We all had a rich childhood. And I was a keen student, I suppose.<sup>11</sup>

Alex, who went to school in the 1970s, also described being a happy child:

I was generally a very happy person at school and at home. Before the abuse I enjoyed interacting with my brothers as I was part of a large family.<sup>12</sup>

Erena was the eldest daughter in a large family. Her parents migrated to Australia in the 1950s and worked long hours, meaning she and her older brother often looked after their younger siblings. Despite these responsibilities, she described herself as a creative child:

I used to pretend I was all these different actresses and I used broomsticks. I'd go into the bushes, and I was into magic and everything. I was very carefree.<sup>13</sup>

Other victim-survivors described being isolated or naive as children. Some believe this may have left them more vulnerable to sexual abuse. For example, 'Sigrid' described herself as 'a very introverted, studious student' and a 'bright bunny in the class' who 'didn't have a lot of friends'.<sup>14</sup> She reflected on her vulnerability at the time of the abuse:

My naivety was astonishing but as I try to remind myself, despite entering the period of older adolescence where sexual interest and desire arises, I was a child, and until then a relatively sheltered, unworldly one compared to my friends, regardless of my intelligence, idealistic, progressive feminist views and opinions.<sup>15</sup>

'Sigrid' said she later realised she was a 'sitting duck for what transpired' due to limited family support and isolation from her peers. She described her childhood as 'devoid of connection and parental love and affection'.<sup>16</sup>

In Year 11 my mother ... was hospitalised and in rehabilitation for months before returning home quite disabled. I was the only daughter in a household with my very traditional post WW2 migrant father ... with no extended family in Australia. Hence, I was responsible for taking care of the family in most ways while trying to complete my final years of high school. I did not engage in many normal teenage/peer activities ... My relationship with peers was fraught ... and I was very lonely despite appearances which I kept up.<sup>17</sup>

Many victim-survivors described experiencing disruption or difficulty in the lead-up to the child sexual abuse. 'Paige' described having had 'a hard childhood' due to her stepmother treating her and her siblings 'badly'.<sup>18</sup>

Several victim-survivors had already experienced sexual abuse in other settings.<sup>19</sup> For example, Daz said:

Unfortunately for me, my abuse started at the age of three. And it had nothing to do with schools except for when I walked into the school, my perpetrator saw my vulnerability.<sup>20</sup>

Janelle similarly told us that she believed her prior experiences of abuse made her a target for the perpetrator.

### **Janelle**

At school, especially in primary school, I spent a lot of time on my own.

I used to cry a lot. They thought it was because my parents had separated. ... I had one teacher that was really lovely. When I was in Grade 1 and when I used to cry, she'd take me in the staff room and let me have a biscuit. No other teacher demonstrated such compassion the rest of the time, but that really meant a lot to me.

I was also abused [outside of school]. So I came 'pre-groomed', you could say. Without realising it, the whole way I've carried myself – my whole life – has been giving off a signal.<sup>21</sup>

George said he felt that his learning difficulties led to him being 'targeted' by the perpetrator.<sup>22</sup>

## George

I didn't have any closeness with my siblings. My parents weren't abusive, but they were very regimented – 'This is why you live and this is what we do'. They were very straight.

My education was poor, my reading was poor, so I was always put in a particular category. In Year 7, they noticed that I needed some assistance in reading and writing, so they put me in special classes. That went on for a couple of years ...

[The perpetrator] basically said I wasn't going very well in school ... And he sort of said he could help me and if I didn't let him help me, I was going to be disgraced – I'm not going to proceed to the next class. He said, 'Oh, I can help you, so you're not going to flunk your class'. So he just said the right things.

I was vulnerable ... I wanted to please my parents and not flunk.<sup>23</sup>

'Joan' told us that she came from a strict migrant background, which made her compliant and fearful of getting into trouble.

## 'Joan'

I'm trying to pinpoint why it happened. I was brought up in a strict household with immigrant parents – educated immigrant parents, I might add. My dad was really strict. I think back then everyone got a spanking. I just got a little bit more of a spanking – myself and my siblings.

I was never allowed to have sleepovers. I didn't go out on school excursions, that type of thing ...

I was just a little girl, happy as Larry, playing. I had my sisters, my brother – they were my community – and then school. I was a pretty good girl at school. I never got into trouble.

I don't want it [child sexual abuse] to happen to anyone else. And there are little girls out there who might have their family background as mine was – strict, you know. And maybe that's why [the perpetrator] chose me.

Especially with kids from migrant families who, again, may be vulnerable ... you've got to be good and all. And then they might also be getting physically abused if they're not.<sup>24</sup>

‘Simon’, another child of migrants, described his disciplined upbringing:

I was screwed up ... the way I was raised. I wasn’t allowed to cry ... stiff upper lip, you know?

It was hard to go to a school excursion. It was hard to convince [my mum] that sex education was a good idea. Everything was hard for this lady who hadn’t had any education.<sup>25</sup>

He also described experiencing violence at home:

[The neighbours] got a broken window at the front of the house and they’re calling my dad – ‘Who broke this?’ My mum was there. Everyone was there ... he goes, ‘Did you break this window?’ And I said, ‘No’. And my dad’s decision was to bash me, just in case I did.<sup>26</sup>

## The abuse

Almost every victim-survivor described behaviour by a perpetrator that amounted to grooming. Grooming is the process a perpetrator uses to manipulate and control a child, their family and community in order to perpetrate child sexual abuse. The intent of grooming is to gain access to a child, obtain their trust and maintain their silence about the abuse. Sometimes this can involve a perpetrator using kindness and gifts to disarm a child. It can also involve threats or causing fear to coerce a child’s compliance.<sup>27</sup>

Andy M commented on how the perpetrator at his school engaged in predatory grooming:

‘OK, these are the kids I’ve got. Therefore, I’m going to target them.’ There was a grooming process, and it was contrived. It was very orchestrated.<sup>28</sup>

He added that perpetrators ‘count on silence’ to perpetuate child sexual abuse.<sup>29</sup>

Grant explained how the perpetrator would engage in boundary-pushing behaviours with students as part of the process of identifying his targets and grooming them:

I can see now [he] began ‘testing the waters’ in terms of my vulnerability for abuse and his vulnerability to being exposed in an incremental way. When he took us for cricket, he would adjust my protective gear in my pants. I thought that was weird because I had always done it myself and his hands were in my pants for a long time. I had no knowledge of sexually inappropriate actions. Of course, I now know he did that to many boys to plan for his targets and test their silence.<sup>30</sup>

Phil described how the perpetrator groomed him and other boys through a combination of strategies, including offering to teach them to drive and having sexualised conversations with them.

## Phil

[A boy I knew] went on a camp with this teacher up to the high country and came back and was raving about it. This fella had Ford cars. As a 12- or 13-year-old boy, I was very impressionable ...

Now when I look back, it was the perfect scenario for the boys to go, 'Oh, this place is fantastic'. And then [the boy I knew] went on this trip with this fella ... So I'm going, 'Geez, I want to do that'.

And I remember my mum saying, 'Two weeks is a long time you're going to be away'. I'd never been away from my family. I said, 'I'll be right, I'm going with [the perpetrator] and there's this other fella. I'll be all right'.

I think there were so many things that I loved about this fellow and then he let us drive his truck. We're in the middle of nowhere in the desert in the back of South Australia. He said, 'Who's driving next? Come sit here next to me and I'll show you how'.

We had nowhere to shower or anything. So then he said to us ... 'Boys, we're gonna have a shower here. We're gonna be in the river, so you all gotta strip off'. So we're all sort of covering ourselves, soaping up and the water's freezing.

At the time, I'm more worried about my mates looking at my [genitals] and whatever else. Then [the perpetrator] was staring at us. Then he stripped off. So he was fully naked ... and he was standing there, washing himself, looking at us. At the time, I obviously thought nothing of it, but now I just think, 'Geez, this is just crazy'.

The whole scenario of going, 'Now I'm standing with three of my mates and we're nude in the river' ... everything shrinks to start with and then you're exposed.

Then there were a lot of conversations about 13- and 14-year-old boys and masturbation from this fellow – asking us questions about masturbation, how often we did it, how long would it take to ejaculate and all this sort of stuff. And then he would be telling us stories about what he would be doing.

I spoke to [the boy I knew who went on the camp]. I said, 'Did you do any of this?' He said, 'Nah, nah, nah, [the perpetrator's] a great bloke. He doesn't do anything like that'.

I never told [my mum] afterwards, even before she died. I thought I couldn't tell her because it would have killed her.<sup>31</sup>

We heard that sometimes grooming behaviours formed part of a perpetrator's reputation among students. 'Paige' said:

We heard stories of peeping holes in showers at his house. He'd take kids there. He'd take kids overseas also. He organised the ballet for us [primary school] kids to go and see which was wonderful to watch. He drove the bus.<sup>32</sup>

She also recalled the perpetrator taking her and one of her friends on a trip before the abuse occurred:

I have photographs somewhere of us both doing a dive into a pool. We stayed at his friend's farm. She was nice. We made blackberry jam there. We rode her horse around and into a dam. I think he may have pictures of that. I don't remember where we slept or anything more than that.<sup>33</sup>

Alex similarly recalled the way the perpetrator would groom him and other boys:

When we were going to school – and I think this might have been some form of grooming – he would invite certain boys to go [to concerts] because he loved his [music] and he'd invite us. He'd come up in his car. I remember he'd parked ... and we'd jump in. I remember ... he'd drive us to the city [to concerts].<sup>34</sup>

'Brendon' recounted how the perpetrator let him use tools from the school maintenance shed and described the perpetrator making him a gift:

It was one of the things he did for all the kids that he was abusing. Give them stuff, make them stuff. He made this wooden guitar and painted it and all that. And I had it and I really liked it. I thought it was cool.<sup>35</sup>

We heard that grooming could be carried out through gifts and attention but also through overt threats and psychological abuse.

James recounted receiving a gift from the perpetrator as part of the grooming process:

He gave me a book called *Noddy does naughty things* ... and it's about doing naughty things and getting presents for doing these naughty things.<sup>36</sup>

He also told us the perpetrator threatened to kill his family if he spoke about the abuse.<sup>37</sup>

'Oscar' said that the perpetrator who sexually abused him in primary school was friendly and trustworthy at first. He told us that the perpetrator then made threats to enforce his silence about the abuse.

## **'Oscar'**

He was a PE teacher. He was like a sports coordinator.

When I first met him, he was nice. He was a great person. Someone threw my bag onto the portable, and he was great – he would go up and grab it.

I didn't realise at the time he was living [close to] my house. And he'd sometimes say things like, 'Hey, I know that you like riding bikes' and lots of stuff. And I thought, 'Oh, how does he know that? Oh, it must be God telling him'. And he got our trust.

Every Friday he would come into our class – whether in Grade 1 or Grade 2 – and he would take someone out for a tour of either his PE area or his church. And when they would come back, they would always be so quiet. I remember a girl that he took came back and she was really shaking and soiled her pants and everything else. I didn't think anything of it at the time. I was only five or six.

First time I went on a camp, nothing happened to me, but I remember waking up and I could hear a scream ... and he was jumping up and down on this girl. I didn't know what was happening at the time. Obviously, he was raping her. And then on another camp, he would choose one of the children and say, 'Hey, you can come in and sleep in my room'. And the next day they were just white in the face. They wanted to go home. They were homesick.

I had no idea what was happening until one day I woke up in his bed and I didn't know how I got there. I remember – I think three to four hours later – a huge pain in my backside, blood and everything else. I was too afraid to say anything. I thought, 'Why did this happen?' ...

When I came back ... I couldn't talk. And the stories that they always gave the parents and the stories that I actually wanted them to believe – I was tired, I wanted to go home, I'm homesick. I wasn't tired. I just wanted to get the hell out of there. And I still remember when he was driving us back and he was saying, 'This is our secret. Make sure no one hears our secret, otherwise the devil will come'. And he would say, 'The devil will come in your dreams and he'll do something terrible'. ...

I didn't want to go on another camp ever again. My mum and dad were pushing, 'Go on this camp, go, go, go'. I deliberately went onto the toilet block, pretending to get a ball down and I jumped. I fell down and injured my leg and hip quite badly.

What he did to me, he did to so many others. I still remember Grade 2 – we had 10 guys, 10 girls. By the end of the year only three girls, me and only five boys remained. They all just vanished. We were told stories – ‘Oh, they changed schools. They’ve gone here. They’ve moved somewhere else’. But now I know, because I remember they were all the ones that went on tours to his church. But there were people that must have known.<sup>38</sup>

‘Joan’ told us that the principal who perpetrated sexual abuse against her in primary school threatened to expel her if she told anyone about the abuse.

### **‘Joan’ (continued)**

Grade 6 came along ... And that’s when my principal came in and he said, ‘Can I borrow [‘Joan’] to help me out in the office for a little bit?’ I went to his office and, you know, the first time was probably just ... to do different jobs. I can’t quite even remember. It was just happening really often.

And then one time we went into his office. To the right of his desk there was a walk-in cupboard space. But then in that space there was also a cupboard with doors. And he made me clear up his cupboards. But once those doors were open, it was sort of stuck – no access to his office, nowhere to go. And it was dark.

And I remember he came in and we got in between those two doors. And that’s when he started to grope and he started to kiss me and tried to pop his disgusting tongue down my throat. And he said, ‘Don’t tell anyone. If you tell anyone, I’ll get you expelled’.

Now, for a little girl who’s grown up a good girl and who’s got a strict dad, all I can think of then is, ‘If I tell, I’m going to get expelled. I’m going to get a beating’. And also – tell them what? I didn’t know what was happening. I was like, ‘What is he doing? I don’t like it’. ...

I can’t remember the timelines. I can’t remember how long [the abuse] went on for. I remember another time he made me sit on his lap and his hand went up to grope me again.

And I remember I used to cry and cry every night. And my mum was leaving to go [overseas] with my big sister. And I remember crying so much. And she was like, ‘What’s going on? Why are you crying?’ And I couldn’t tell her. I didn’t want her to leave, but I couldn’t tell her what was going on.

What would [my dad] have done? First of all, I would have been to blame if I got expelled. My dad would have been ashamed. I don't know if he would have questioned why. I guess I just kept my mouth shut.

And this is where I think my little 11-year-old brain kicked in and went, 'You don't like this. You've got to stop it'. So the next time he came to my room and said, 'Can I have ['Joan'] to help me in the office?', I went, 'Can my friend come with me?' And that's how it stopped because I used to take her with me everywhere.

Mine's a little story, but it happened. I don't want it to happen to anyone else.<sup>39</sup>

Some victim-survivors said they were afraid of the perpetrator who abused them. Janelle referred to an 'authoritarian' sports coach who sexually abused her in primary school. She said she had a difficult home life, so despite being frightened of him, she felt the perpetrator was 'much nicer' to her compared with how she was treated at home.<sup>40</sup>

### **Janelle (continued)**

[The perpetrator] was my softball and netball coach from about Grade 3 to Grade 6. If the boys were in trouble and they were going to get the strap, they went to him. We were all scared of him the whole time we were at school.

I don't remember him really being angry with the girls, only the boys. But we were still scared anyway. He was very authoritarian. He had a roaring voice when he did get mad and he'd go all red. I wouldn't be surprised if the teachers were scared of him as well.

This was back in the 80s. There was a hallway with old school photos. There were some really old photos of him with dark hair, and he was a lot more overweight then, so we knew he'd been around for a long time. There were rumours that he'd taught at another school ... and that he'd been moved on for touching girls.

One of the other girls was his favourite to abuse, and I think she had tried to get help. And nothing had come of it. Every year there were a few girls that he would abuse. And it was always the girls who developed early, who went through puberty early. And I suppose we were vulnerable as well.

He'd call a girl over who he was going to abuse, and sometimes the other girls would look at me [when I was called] and say, 'Poor you', because they all knew what was about to happen. And no one thought of saying no to him because we were scared of him. And I knew it wasn't going to work anyway.

He pulled me on his lap. He'd start off tickling. And he'd tickle you under the ribs, high up – I suppose testing boundaries. And then slowly the tickling would be at the side of the breast. And I was really ticklish, so I was giggling and squirming.

[The perpetrator] had long nails, which I always remember. So you could feel when he was touching you. He'd do circles around your breast and slowly go into the nipple. I just remember it made me uncomfortable, but it was ticklish. And I suppose at the time I felt shame that I wasn't reacting badly to it, that I was giggling, which would maybe imply you like it – which I certainly didn't.

He never abused me when we were one-on-one. There were always people around – he enjoyed that or something. It would be on the netball court when I was off, or at softball while waiting to go on, or in front of my mother. There were occasions when I was one-on-one with him and he never touched me.

There was one incident where, for some reason my classroom teacher was standing at the side of the netball court this day ... sort of looking out the corner of his eye and when I started giggling, he said, 'What's going on? What's funny?' I think he wanted me to say, but ... I just knew – don't say anything ...

After I had left [primary] school, I went to school with my mum once to wait for my brother and sister and he came out to say hello to me and see how high school was. He put his arm around me and started trying to tickle me and reach my breast in front of my mother. He was openly talking to my mum doing this. I said to him, 'Don't touch me'. I had a bit of an attitude, thank goodness. And my mum said, 'Don't be so rude'. And I said, 'I don't care. I don't want him to touch me ever again'. And that was the last time he did touch me.

I do know from younger pupils that he still went on and continued molesting other girls.

He's dead now. But I did google him a few years ago and I saw that a woman from the 60s had come forward [and said] that he'd abused her while he was still alive. He did get a light jail sentence for that. So, if you think he was going from the 60s to the late 80s, and there were a few girls every year, there must be a hell of a lot of us.<sup>41</sup>

Alex attended primary school in the 1970s. He described sexual abuse that sometimes occurred in the classroom while other students were around. He recounted that, at other times, the perpetrator would create excuses to be alone with him to perpetrate sexual abuse.

### Alex

It was my job to take money collected from students to the [perpetrator's] office.

I would tell him that I was there to pass on the donations which were in the money collection bag. There was a big cupboard in the room which he would ask me to open. I would open the door to the cupboard and place the bag onto a shelf with other bags collected from various classrooms. As soon as I would put the bag in the cupboard [the perpetrator] would come up behind me and place both of his arms around my waist. He would place his cheek against my face and neck and move his face up and down telling me how beautiful I was. He would rub his groin against my backside. A couple of times he placed his hands down the front of my pants and fondled my genitals. I remember that I would try to get out of his clutches and let him know that I had to return to class.

[The perpetrator] became my teacher the following year ... [He] would often come and sit with me to check my work. Whenever he did this, he would place his hands in the back of my trousers or shorts and fondle my backside. This was happening while other students were busy at their desks. I remember sitting there thinking that I couldn't believe this was happening to me. This occurred on many occasions.

A couple of times I was asked to go to [a specialist classroom]. This was when there were no other students around. He would once again come up behind me, put his arms around me, kiss my cheek and tell me that I was beautiful and put his hands down the front of my pants.

I revisited the school with two of my brothers [a few years later]. We had moved ... with our parents but visited the school on a trip ... [The perpetrator] was there. He approached me separately and told me that they had a new [specialist classroom] ... [The perpetrator] took me up to the room alone. I can't remember where my brothers were. Once again when we reached the room, he took advantage of me, came up behind me and put his hands around me. He kissed my cheek and fondled me down the front of my pants. I remember running away from him and ran out of the school and found my brothers ... I never returned to the school.<sup>42</sup>

We heard that some victim-survivors experienced a combination of sexual abuse and physical violence. 'Jacob' attended primary school in the 1970s in country Victoria.

### **'Jacob'**

I had a female teacher ... And her special way of dealing with me was to beat the living crap out of me and make me put girls' clothes on in front of the class. She tried to get me to strip down in my socks and jocks and put on a dress and high-heeled shoes and all that kind of stuff. And that went on for quite some time ...

The following year I had a psycho teacher who just used to beat the shit out of me. But that's fine. That's what he did ... By this stage I was a bit of a basket case as a kid, a bit of a misfit. I didn't really have any friends, which is the story of my life ...

He just made me sit at his desk and he would just play with me ... it started off just touching my arms and my back and stuff and I would just freeze 'cause I was not comfortable at all with this guy touching me. But over time he kind of slowly worked his way down to, you know, the legs and thighs and inner thighs and that kind of stuff.

I think he was expecting that I would respond to him favourably and I didn't. And so he kind of got violent with me in the end. I remember one time he got me out in the school grounds, and he was shaking me around violently asking me why I don't respond nicely to him doing what he was doing. He lifted me off the ground. It was pretty insane. Shortly after that I got taken out of his class. I guess someone must have thought it had gone too far.

So that's basically my experience as far as it goes. I know it's not as bad as what a lot of other people have gone through, but it wasn't exactly right either.<sup>43</sup>

'Joan', victim-survivor

*"And he said,  
'Don't tell anyone.  
If you tell anyone,  
I'll get you expelled'."*

Ann Maree told us she was sexually abused by a teacher while she was in primary school in the late 1970s.

### **Ann Maree**

[The perpetrator] chose to blame me for something I didn't do ... In that room – in that shed – at lunchtime when he chose to blame me ... he had a one-metre ruler and he would exercise his will without even offering me a chance to even speak about any of [it] ... A wooden one-metre ruler is the width of my hand and he hit it twice. And from that moment I always tried to push it away and forget that this man has done this, but he never forgot because from that moment he was grooming me for the next six months ...

He [befriended] my father and he started coming to our house, drinking beer, smoking pipes with my father in his time off, bringing his wife and their little daughters ...

There was a lot of savage energy that he brought, and he brought it to school and then he brought it to my home and my parents. And that was something we could never escape ...

After [the perpetrator] left, [an adult] said to me, 'Did something happen? Has anything happened to you?' ... I remember staring into the distance while [the adult] was asking me ... and saying to myself, 'It is so squashed, you will never say this. That's it'. ...

I was very frightened every time I saw him at our house, and that was very often ...

[The perpetrator] has impacted me all this time. It's nothing about saying, 'Oh, I want to help others', as much as I want to save my own life ...<sup>44</sup>

We heard that perpetrators were often highly manipulative in the strategies they used to sexually abuse children at school. 'Grace' described a primary school teacher taking advantage of her roles as first aid monitor and bell monitor.

### **'Grace'**

I remember very clearly being molested by a teacher in [the early 1960s] when I was aged from 10 to 12.

I was a very innocent little girl. I was the bell monitor and would have to ring a handheld bell at the edge of the playground, to let the children on the playing fields know that the main bell had rung to come back into class.

[The perpetrator frequently] used ... to stand beside me, our backs to the school, with his arms crossed over his chest and fondle my breasts.

I was also first aid monitor, and he would often come into the first aid room and fondle me.

Did I know this was wrong? Of course I did. But I was a tiny, 4-foot-11-inch child, terrified and taught to respect and obey authority ... I never spoke up.

[The following year], I attended a family gathering in a private home, only to find that he was there as a guest because he was their next-door neighbour. I was terrified and horrified.

I hope that I was the only person he abused, but I believe statistics will prove me wrong ... Surely, surely, surely somebody knew and surely I wasn't the only one. I think that's what I'm most annoyed about – somebody must have known.

I wonder why it was me. I think a lot of it is because I was very compliant, very obedient. Don't rock the boat, you just do what you're told. And I went back and read my school reports and they were all good – all complimentary about that.

And I think the other thing was you never disappointed your parents. My parents love me and they were good, but I would never have been brave enough to tell them and I think that must be just part of my nature. So, therefore, I'm thinking probably certain kids are more vulnerable than others to be abused. I think too compliant is probably a way of seeing it.

I have a [family member] who's disabled, so my family priority was her, naturally. She was the centre of everything. So, I think they had enough to worry about. And I guess he knew that. Maybe he thought he was giving me attention that I might have needed? Maybe, I don't know.

And do the other kids know? I don't know. Nobody ever said anything. And I haven't told my parents ever. I wonder, did that make me ... have a lesser value on my opinions and things? I wonder about that in hindsight.

It happened again with a friend of my father's. Why was I so vulnerable? I did tell my parents about him, but only when my sister became about 14 and I thought, 'He did it to me – he could do it to her'. And that's when I told my mother. I never told my father. I don't know whether they ever spoke to him. I doubt it.

When I went to secondary school, I really struggled. Really, really struggled. Couldn't get out quick enough. And yet I loved school. I wanted to be a teacher.

Eventually you get a voice, and you know how to say no. But with my kids [I tell them], 'No one is ever to touch you if you don't want them to'.<sup>45</sup>

'Warren' described his teacher repeatedly sexually abusing him in a primary school classroom in the 1960s while he cleaned a blackboard. He said he never told anyone about the sexual abuse he experienced.

### **'Warren' (continued)**

I suppose I became the teacher's pet. I mean, that's a sick saying, but it's just – I can say it to you now – I was always a giving person, probably because my parents were longstanding community people and were up until their last days ... I've always been a giving person to [the community] and I was the same at school.

We had a mixed classroom of girls and guys. I remember it. I was standing on a chair and I was cleaning the blackboard or something like that, and this creep would come up and touch me. But I didn't know any different, so it just went on and on and on. It would be after school – after the class had left – and he would put quite a solid chair up on the blackboard area, and then I get up there ... with a blackboard duster. I'd take all the stuff off the blackboard and he'd put his hands all over me. Pretending [to be] holding me so I wouldn't fall over, but at the end of the day, you know, fondling me.

There is more than just him touching me on a stool. It was after school in wintertime. Again – teacher's pet – I'd stay back to help him in the classroom ... I would stand in front of the heater in the classroom. My hand would go into his pocket. My hand would touch his penis. And my hand would masturbate his penis. [I can't] get this out of my head, the stench – the stench of sperm and everything else related to it. It's horrid and it's just – it's there in my head and I can never get away from it, as much as I don't want to ever think about it again.

There was another person in my class who knew about what was going on because he went to the police about the whole thing. I suppose you could call him a whistleblower in this day and age, but he was the person who probably saved my life.

Then the day [came] that it all came out because we had a policeman come to the house – to my parents' house. It was obviously arranged the day before because I didn't go to school that day ... And I clearly remember sitting there having breakfast one day and I clearly remember saying to my mother, 'Am I going to go to jail?' Because I thought I'd done the wrong thing.<sup>46</sup>

Erena told us she was abused by a non-teaching staff member of a local high school when she was 11.

### **Erena**

I was in Grade 5. My friends and I would meet at the high school in the summer – it was a thoroughfare which everybody went to. I can't remember if it was a Saturday or Sunday or even after school ... the [perpetrator] came out – I'd seen him before wandering around – and he called us over. He said, 'Oh, do you want to come into the canteen and have an icy pole?' It was a warm day and he offered to let us have anything we want, and it was like, 'Hey, I'm an 11-year-old kid, I'm gonna go'. We didn't have much in our house so that was really comforting.

Then he said, 'Do you want to have a look around the school?' He had a very strong accent ... He took us around, showed us the office and the science [room] – all the things you see in a high school that you don't when you're in primary school. You're in awe of all these things. I was in the office on the typewriters and stuff, just doing all these funny things.

Later when we were in the sick bay, he puts his hand down on the outside of [my] pants and starts touching me ... And I had this feeling – I wanted to push his hand away but not put it away. It was like I was between a rock and a hard place. I was scared. I didn't know what to expect from it. He then gradually kept moving his hand and like fingering me and put his hand down my pants and it felt nice. But I was scared ... He undid his zipper on his pants and started pulling his penis out. That's when I freaked. I just started crying, 'Let me go, let me go!' And I just got up and I ran out.

That man scared the living daylights out of me.

I never told my parents. Never told anyone except my brother. And I didn't even tell him all the details. Not until later in life.<sup>47</sup>

Many victim-survivors described perpetrators exploiting unsupervised physical environments to sexually abuse children. 'Claire' explained that a teacher sexually abused her in a private room in the school building when she was 13.

### **'Claire'**

We went to Sovereign Hill for an outing. He was teaching history, amongst other things. A number of us agreed to go off in a bus to Sovereign Hill and we were dressed up for the day. I don't have the photo. I suspect I've destroyed it, but there was a photo of him in a suit and me in a full-length dress and a little bonnet or something. And my recollection of that day – the photo is of me with my arm through his elbow wandering around.

There was some other occasion where – I don't exactly know why – but I hung around late [at school]. The secretary was still there in the downstairs office. But he had this particular room that was a bit separate from the rest of the building, and I suspect that it might have been a nurse's room or something. Firstly, because it had a little bathroom attached to it, but also because it had its own separate entranceway. And we stayed there and it ended up with him getting me to masturbate him and he ejaculated in my hand. But the recollection is at the end he was sort of holding my hand over his penis. That was at 13.<sup>48</sup>

*"And I still  
remember when he was  
driving us back and he  
was saying, 'This is our secret.  
Make sure no one hears our  
secret, otherwise the  
devil will come'."*

*'Oscar', victim-survivor*

David described being sexually abused by his high school teacher in the early 1960s.

## David

David was born in the 1940s and grew up in Melbourne. As a child, he lived with his parents and sisters in Melbourne's northern suburbs – attending the local public schools.

He shared this recollection about one of his teachers from the early 1960s when he was in high school:

On this particular day I had misplaced my locker key and went to ask [the perpetrator], 'Could I have my locker unlocked?' At the time there was a small fee of three pence to unlock the locker.

[The perpetrator] came with me to my locker and before I could speak any more, he placed his hand into one of my trouser pockets and at the same time said, 'That will be three pence or three pence worth', as he fondled my genitals through my trouser pocket. I was shocked at what had occurred and [the perpetrator] then marched away.

I reported what happened to my parents, however as far as I can recollect nothing was done as [the perpetrator] was seen as a very respected teacher.

David explained that the perpetrator went on to sexually abuse other students – girls and boys – before moving to a school in another state:

There is a newspaper report on [him] molesting students at this school by a student who basically has really been disturbed by his experience. Adding further insult to my experience of [the perpetrator] is that he was honoured with a formal Australian Government award for services to a sporting organisation etc.

In his later years, before he retired from the education department ... I believe he was a respected member of a services club and held in high acclaim. When the reports of molestation at his last school [were made] he quickly retired ...

David ended up sharing his experience with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. In his submission to us, he reflected:

What upsets me most about [the perpetrator] was he was able to move from school to school around Australia molesting boys and girls ... I have never forgotten what occurred to me ...<sup>49</sup>

We heard that perpetrators who sexually abused older children often led them to believe they were in a 'relationship'. 'Sigrid' told us she was sexually abused for two years by a high school teacher in the 1970s. She was 16 when it started, and the sexual abuse continued until after she completed high school and had turned 18.

### **'Sigrid' (continued)**

My perpetrator had joined the staff in my Year 9 and, what now seems something quite incredulous, had a partner whom he lived with and who was a former student of his. ...

This man was clearly a predatory, serial offender, one who groomed the community and his colleagues as well as myself, but at least to some degree, he was enabled by the adults around me, and the attitudes of the era, which I feel are very much underestimated, and although they persist today in a different form, were drivers of child sexual abuse.

He also succeeded in continuing this behaviour due to my fearful silence.

I did not ask my parents' permission to go out to dinner with him when he asked – by passing a folded private note to me in class – that would have been totally inconceivable for me, and he knew it would be. A ruse to create a feeling of legitimacy, all the while keeping it a secret ...

Before I knew it, after what felt like 'special attention' in being taken out to dinner, I found myself forced into oral sex ... being told I was a beautiful, desirable young woman ...

I'm not planning to relay my entire experience in this submission – it is just too painful even now ... and even after decades of psychotherapy trying to process and address it ... Suffice to say it involved threats, degradation, violence couched as sexual experimentation and led me to not want to live at one point, such that I skimmed some of my mother's [heavy sleeping medication] so the pain was dulled and my sleepiness at school reduced the possibility of me 'spilling the beans'. I was increasingly confused; distressed and felt I had no way out of the predicament I was in.<sup>50</sup>

'Betty' told us she was sexually abused by a physical education teacher in the 1990s when she was aged 16 and 17. She described the lengths to which the perpetrator went to groom and manipulate her.

### **'Betty' (continued)**

What he did was seek me out. He flattered me with compliments such as, 'You're a smart student, if you help me at a school [sport] regional competition, you won't fall behind if you miss a class. Would you like to help me out for the day?' And, 'Wow, you are a ballet dancer, you must be very dedicated and committed'. This went on for months. Seeking me out, alone, at school, finding me, asking me how I was. He did get me alone at those school events. A disguise so I would trust and not suspect any ulterior motive.

At a school awards evening, he discovered that I was going to celebrate with friends and turned up at the same location. Then he drove me home under the ruse of it being safer and cheaper than a taxi and that he lived near me. A child hears this and agrees. Safety is better than danger, right? And on that drive home, after more than 12 months of this grooming period the line crossed further into the abyss of violation. He touched my thigh ... kissed me on the mouth and said, 'I could do that again'. I went inside, where my parents were sleeping, thinking I was safe.

Over the next few weeks, school progressed. I was mid-exams. He extracted my home phone number from school records and called my family home. In that phone call, he first asked if I knew who it was. I just asked who it was. He said, 'It's me'. I recognised his voice. He said something like, 'It's your PE teacher. I just wanted to see how you were going, you're on school holidays soon and maybe you want to come over and see all my triathlon gear or something like that'. I asked something like, 'What do you mean? Like go out somewhere?' He said, 'If you can get here, I can bring you home'. He told me not to tell anyone and make sure I was by myself. He gave me his address during the call.

And then I went there. And then he raped me. He did it several times. The same routine. Telling me, 'If you were older I would be in a relationship with you'. Telling me, 'It's our secret'. The way in which he took control over me was physical and psychological. Putting pressure on me to maintain this crime but pitching it as a love story. What adult man makes the decision to place a child in this position? To muddle my mind with false security, false guidance, deceit and blackmail?

He used condoms. Once the condom broke and he said to me I needed to get the morning after pill, as soon as possible since, 'We don't want any pretty little versions of you running around just yet'. Re-read that sentence. A man, a so-called teacher said this to me, a child. 'Just yet'?! It leaves me winded with lack of breath, with horror, disgust, to reflect on the nonchalance and manipulation being placed on me. Was that to imply that I was his possession?

I travelled alone in a cab, to the women's hospital, in the early hours [of] the morning, where in [the 1990s] a morning after pill was dispensed only after consultation in the emergency departments. I was extremely ill for eight hours following. My parents worried and helplessly looked on, wondering what gastro bug I may have picked up. I felt shame for instigating their worry.<sup>51</sup>

'Sarah' told us she was sexually abused by an outdoor education teacher at her school in the 1980s when she was in Year 12. She described the cruelty and psychological strategies the perpetrator used against her.

### **'Sarah'**

I have managed to push everything aside for 40 years. I never really recognised it for what it was because whenever I thought about it, I just looked back at my 17-year-old self and thought, 'You were 17, above the age of consent, you silly girl' ...

I was the youngest of six kids and so therefore I was the last one at home ... All of my friends had left school. We had 13 kids in our [class] ... I was already mad into outdoor ed. I used to ride my bike around everywhere and hiked on the weekends and that sort of stuff, so I think that provided really easy access for someone ...

So ... this thing happened over a period of time, and I'm not sure exactly what months throughout my Year 12 year ... the stuff that I experienced, I'm not gonna go into that detail ...

[The perpetrator] had already offended at a previous state school ... I've got this referee report from my principal saying what a great student I was 'cause I gave a really good appearance of that. [It notes] I also provided a lot of assistance to our outdoor ed coordinator and I thought, 'Man, did you even speak to the previous school at all? And if you did, here's a bright red flag that you did not pay any attention to'.

I can't remember a lot of the physical detail, but I remember the cruelty and ... the meanness ... taking pleasure, I guess, in really testing people. I remember being on a hike and him putting a whole lot of rocks in my backpack and me saying, 'What's this for?' [He said,] 'I'll tell you when we get there'. Then hiking 20 kilometres or whatever. And then him just tipping out the backpack and me saying, 'Well, what was it for?' He said, 'I was just testing you'. And that's the bit that I can remember ...

For the last quarter of my Year 12, I just remember being on autopilot and being numb and not really feeling anything.<sup>52</sup>

'Boudicea' said she was a student with great ambitions. She described being sexually abused at 16 by a female teacher in high school in the 1970s.<sup>53</sup> She explained the various stages of the abuse she experienced: grooming, trauma bonding, sexual abuse, rejection and enduring ongoing silence.<sup>54</sup> She described the way the perpetrator was able to manipulate her into believing they were in a 'relationship'.<sup>55</sup>

### **'Boudicea'**

'Boudicea' experienced 'months of grooming', with the perpetrator showing her extra attention and tapping into her interests, including her love of poetry.<sup>56</sup> She was drawn into what could be described as a secret world, where the perpetrator would give her cigarettes and alcohol, invite her to her home and gradually isolate her from her family and social supports. She recalled being lured to the perpetrator's home under false pretences:

These visits were purported to be extracurricular English tutoring but also became sexual encounters. The physical sexual intimacy at the alleged perpetrator's private home on an ensuing Saturday, cemented and assured her of all that was achievable in the manipulation of my innocence, trust, complete adoration and loyalty; bound now with shared secrets about her private life and affection for me.

She went on to describe the sexual abuse she experienced and the manipulations that accompanied it:

While [I was] only 16 and 17 the alleged perpetrator and my reading of poetry to each other, sharing of cigarettes between sessions of erotic kissing, fondling, murmurs of affection, exposure of breasts through underwear, partially clothed tribadism [genital rubbing] on her loungeroom floor and king-sized water bed, all occurred with gentle guidance in physical intimacy in her private home and car.

I was led to understand we had a mature, loving, mutual relationship. As all sexual activity occurred in private there was to my way of thinking no impropriety. We were never completely naked together ... We were never seen together in public affectionately touching. At school she controlled distancing, initiating communication and carefully chosen moments of non-sexual contact for whispered invitations, bumping in crowded corridors, titillating 'unintentional' touches when returning assignments in class, coded facial expressions and greetings, passing of notes and one poem communicating ... her suicidal ideations, leading me to an empty classroom and entreating my reassurance when she despaired because we were in conflict, and so on.

'Boudicea' told us she did not report the sexual abuse because she was groomed and manipulated:

My failure to report or protest this and her sexual and emotional abuses to school authorities is an example of how trauma-bonded I was, remaining in silent resentment, incomprehension and a belief that this is typical of all adult relationships. She controlled everything between us.

'Boudicea' said the sexual abuse ultimately ended when she finished school and moved out of her family home:

[I] invited her to be in a publicly open relationship with me; [she] dismissed me as a 'ridiculous, foolish, deluded teenager' and mocked me with my naive expectations – why would she ever want to have a relationship with a schoolgirl? She was an adult and wanted a mature adult relationship, not one with a girl ...

After berating me as an ingrate and time waster, the alleged perpetrator banned me from any further contact with her now that my school life was over. I was completely brainwashed and trapped in the deadly worm's lifetime silence of shame.

'Boudicea' reflected that it was only as an adult that she came to understand her experiences as child sexual abuse:

[In my 60s] I was telling a counsellor that, although the alleged perpetrator was [in her mid-20s] and I only 16, our relationship was consensual sharing of physical intimacy; that I was the only student she had ever loved; that she was sentimentally drawn to re-enact a parallel relational experience that she had as an adolescent with her female English teacher; and I believed she had learned from our experience not to repeat it. I was shocked to learn over the last few agonising years of specialist trauma counselling that all her well-practised, manipulative and intelligently calculated behaviours were typical of a sexual predator.<sup>57</sup>

While confronting to read, these experiences depict the varied ways that victim-survivors described perpetrators grooming and sexually abusing them at school – sometimes covertly and, at other times, out in the relative open.

They reflect significant breaches of trust by perpetrators, betraying not only the children affected but also their families who rightly expected their children would be safe at school. Unfortunately, many victim-survivors described feeling further betrayed by adults who knew (or ought to have known) about the sexual abuse but failed to respond appropriately.

## Disclosure and response

We heard that it can take some victim-survivors many years to disclose the sexual abuse they experienced as children. As Grant explained:

Many people often question and do not understand why it takes so long to disclose abuse. Each case is different, but issues include shame, embarrassment, not wanting to cause more trauma or chaos in a family or group, misplaced guilt, and trying to forget trauma to get on with your life etc.<sup>58</sup>

While some children may unambiguously disclose the abuse, others may show changes in behaviour or rely on adults to identify emotional or physical reactions.<sup>59</sup>

We also heard that children can face a range of barriers to disclosure, including being fearful or ashamed, not trusting that their disclosures will be taken seriously or not recognising that what is happening to them is sexual abuse. 'Simon' reflected on the difficulty of sharing his experiences when he was young: 'As a child, you just accept it and this is the way it is'.<sup>60</sup>

Children can sometimes be groomed into maintaining silence.<sup>61</sup> Andy M told us:

I never thought at that stage to have spoken to my friends or to my family about what happened ...

51 years ... I couldn't tell it to anyone. No one knew.<sup>62</sup>

AJ described moving to a new primary school after being physically and sexually abused at his previous school. He told us he also experienced abuse at subsequent schools he attended. AJ reflected on the lack of curiosity by school staff and the barriers to his disclosure:

[There were] lots of counsellors. You know, no one ever asked me any questions of what happened. Not one. I don't probably think that I would have told anyway because of what the perpetrator would have said to me.<sup>63</sup>

We heard that as children, victim-survivors felt discouraged from disclosing child sexual abuse for a range of reasons. George said he did not report the abuse he experienced because he was aware of rumours about the perpetrator that were not acted on:

The rumours continued through the whole school and the bit that I don't really understand is that ... if I heard [rumours], you would have thought teachers heard – not that I ever went to a teacher – but I did hear the [school] knew obviously of [the perpetrator's] antics. And nothing was done.<sup>64</sup>

'Joan' said she was sexually abused by a principal. She was told she would get in trouble or be expelled if she disclosed the abuse and said this made her too afraid to tell anyone.<sup>65</sup>

Janelle told us that one reason she did not report what happened at school was because her past experiences of abuse outside school had led her to believe it was simply a part of how men behaved. She shared that she had also been told about other students' attempts to report the perpetrator without success.

### **Janelle (continued)**

I never went to any teachers because I'd been told other girls had and they had been told you need proof – like a photo. This was the 80s. There were no mobile phones. There weren't disposable cameras. No one was getting a photo. And so again, we all just kept our mouths shut after that. And we just knew the next lot of girls were going to get it as well.

Some of the teachers had daughters that were a few years younger than us. And I suppose we thought, 'I wonder what's going to happen there? Will something finally be done when it's their daughters?'

Some of us didn't talk about it, but we just knew – either because he took an interest in that girl or because they developed early. Like the girl who said, 'Poor you' to me when I was called over to [the perpetrator]. When she said that, I knew that she knew what was going on, so she must have been touched herself.

He groomed the teachers as well ... No one questioned anything. No one. No teachers, not the principal, no parents.

I did tell [some adults close to me] and there was nothing that came of that. In fact, [some] said I made it up.

In hindsight, I know nothing would have come of it, even if I had reported back then.

I think I mentioned something about him on [social media]. And one girl just expressed sympathy. But the school has [offered], as far as I'm aware, zero acknowledgement. I don't think of [school] in a nice way at all. I certainly would never go to a reunion.<sup>66</sup>

Some victim-survivors told us they raised the alarm either to family or the school itself. For example, James told us that as a child he had spoken to police about his abuse and had on one occasion gone to a safety house after being abused by the perpetrator.<sup>67</sup>

Tim told us he was sexually abused by a teacher when he was in Year 10 and Year 11. He told us he was also sexually abused in primary school, but his contribution to the Forum focused on his experiences in high school. He described nothing changing after reporting the abuse he was experiencing in high school.

### Tim

It was pretty interesting that I was sort of targeted by this fellow quite early on in my time at [high] school. I guess my question is how much did he know about me before I've arrived at the school? ...

That's probably my biggest sort of question I ultimately have got unanswered is: 'Why was I ... subject to the attention of a perpetrator at a new school?' That's always gonna be a question that I'll ultimately never get an answer for. But I think there must be something in the makeup of an individual that makes you appear externally vulnerable ...

[The perpetrator's] activities went unvetted for many years at the school ...

However, what was interesting was at the time I now have a clear memory of going to [a member of senior leadership] at the school complaining about the perpetrator. As a result of that nothing changed, which is curious.

[That member of senior leadership] is no longer alive, but I think it's fair to say that his role there was probably one of protecting the perpetrator ... My secondary school ... had all the virtues of an unvetted environment where you had a [member of senior leadership] that was an enabler and you had other teachers – certainly, some of them were whistleblowers and brought the perpetration to the attention of the [member of senior leadership]. Yet it went on for a number of years.<sup>68</sup>

'Sarah' told us she remembered staying at the home of the perpetrator, where he sexually abused her. She now looks back and wonders how anyone thought that was appropriate:

I just think, 'What? Didn't anyone think that that was not a great idea?' Like, even if he was really innocent, he would have been placing himself at risk of any accusations by doing that.<sup>69</sup>

'Joshua' told us he was sexually abused by his female principal from the end of Grade 4 and throughout Grade 5. He reflected on how adults seemed not to notice or have any concerns about the perpetrator's behaviour. He said no one took action.

### **'Joshua'**

We had a female principal at the primary school. I would often get called out of class via the PA [public announcement] system. From the best of my memory, that probably happened between, I don't know, 10 to 12 times.

There'd be no one else in the room. The door would be closed.

I would be asked to give her shoulder massages. From memory they were pretty quick and other times it felt like I was in there for half an hour.

There was nothing really said about it because you're so young. The people around you – like my parents – knew that this was occurring. Obviously, all the teachers did as well because it was over the PA system where I'd get called to go and do this.

No one ever said anything. So as a kid growing up, you don't think that there's anything wrong or untoward about what was occurring ... It probably wasn't until I've got children of my own – you reflect on different parts of your life. You're like, 'Oh'.

There were never any reports or anything made because nobody thought that it was out of the ordinary.

That's just not right. As a parent I certainly wouldn't be comfortable if one of my children [were] subjected to that.<sup>70</sup>

'Ethan' remembers telling a chaplain what happened to him. He said the chaplain failed to act. 'Ethan' explained how even now as an adult he wishes he had done things differently.

### **'Ethan'**

I loved school. I was a very conscientious student and everything.

People were scared of [the perpetrator]. I was terrified of him the day it happened.

I came to school and I forgot my shorts – so hopeless ... The other kids were getting changed and I was in there too getting changed. He came in and he says, 'Oh, where's your shorts?' and I said I forgot them. And he said, 'Right, because of that you'll have to do PE in your underwear' ... He says, 'Hurry up, I'm waiting. We got a class on'.

It was actually a gymnastics class. We had our own green mat that we were using, and we were doing all these different movements. Of course, everyone had their shorts on apart from me. Girls were laughing as they were coming in. They saw me.

I was terrified and I think at one stage I went into the cubicle where the toilet is to hide.

After it happened, I left maybe three or four weeks, and I actually went to the chaplain. You'd think someone, as a chaplain, would have more compassion. I went to him to tell him what happened and he said, 'Oh, there's nothing we can do about that'. He taught sex education as well at the school. So it wasn't great, to be honest ... I think [the chaplain] should have said, 'Oh, look, I'll note it and I'll have a chat to the principal about it' ... at the very least.

To this day, I really regret not running to the principal's office or even to another classroom or another teacher that I could find.

That happened to me when I was 13 and then five years on, I'm not surprised that I did have a breakdown, to be honest. Not surprised.

I think it was just the pressure of Year 12, and I had all the things that had happened to me and I just had a breakdown. So yeah ... not fun having massive panic attacks.

I actually went to a school reunion and [the perpetrator] was there. He was so nice to me ... The sad thing is I don't think he realised he was doing anything wrong, you know? He just thought it was a punishment thing. That's the sad thing about it.

You only get one life. If I had the insight that I have now back when I was that age ... I'd do things differently. I just wish I had the insight then, but I didn't because you're only a kid.<sup>71</sup>

Victim-survivors told us that often their disclosures were ignored, minimised or met with punishment. Aden remembers disclosing sexual abuse at school as a child and the unsatisfactory response he received:

I remember [a member of senior leadership at the school] told me, 'You need to go home, you need to tell your mum and you need to go to the police station'. He didn't call the police at the school. And then that was all put under the carpet.<sup>72</sup>

Aden felt betrayed by the actions of bystander teachers who he said knew about the sexual abuse occurring at the school:

Well, I think what happened in the context of my experience was – they knew. Teachers knew. They knew and they all put it under the carpet. All of them. It is so disgusting.<sup>73</sup>

Alex said he had no evidence that other teachers or administration staff knew about the child sexual abuse occurring at his school. However, he said it was so openly discussed among students that he found it difficult to believe it had not somehow come to the attention of staff:

I just couldn't believe that children would know what was going on and adults wouldn't know what was going on, and I find that hard to reconcile.<sup>74</sup>

'Paige' was sexually abused in the mid-1980s at 12 years of age by her primary school principal. She recalled how adults did very little, despite discussions among students and their parents about the perpetrator's behaviour.

### **'Paige'**

The principal of [the primary school] called and spoke to one of my parents. I can only assume it was my stepmother. He had asked to see me. I don't remember my stepmum saying if he said why.

My stepmum sent my youngest brother who was 7 with me to look after me. I know she said, 'Don't leave her alone with him'.

We get there and go straight into his office. He sends my brother on an errand. While he is gone [the perpetrator] asked me if he could take pictures of me without my top on. I felt stunned but said, 'I don't have much down there'. He did say, 'That's OK'. My brother then came back puffing – he ran all the way – I think he had what the principal asked for. It was small. We left. I don't remember what the conversation on that went like.

We chatted on the way home. We told my stepmum and nothing happened that I know of.

But I had conversations with my brothers and sister and friends how all [the] parents knew what was happening with the principal. We children all spoke about it in school and knew that too.

I was always unsure of two other teachers that we kids spoke about, and I always felt that they were like him or knew of him, because they never did anything. But some kids would say they weren't like the principal ...

One time we were in his office as primary school kids. My friend showed us a picture of a girl with long hair – her arms were by her side. It was a negative in [a] white frame. She had a bruised eye. She had on a bikini top. That's all we saw of her. My friend found it like she knew where it was – she'd seen it before. We asked where she found it. She said behind the cupboard. I don't know what we did after that ...

I just did the math and realised my brother was only 7. The fact that an adult sent him to protect me as a 12-year-old because she felt the need to always makes me upset ...

I move my brain on pretty fast. I can talk about it, but I get cross at how adults knew though. [My stepmum] knew. They all knew and nobody did anything ...

I felt that, for me, I wanted to record this moment in my world that I do think about now and then when I'm triggered by things, and the fact that [the perpetrator] was moved around a lot was frustrating too.<sup>75</sup>

'Sigrid' explained that her school principal noticed the perpetrator's unusual level of interest in her. She recalled that, rather than addressing the concerns about the teacher, the school tried to send a message to him indirectly. She also reflected on a moment when, under different circumstances, she may have felt comfortable disclosing the sexual abuse to a trusted teacher.

### **'Sigrid' (continued)**

I recall a time when the principal called [the perpetrator] into his office to relay a gentle warning that he should be careful as my home situation meant I was vulnerable and the time he was spending with me 'supporting' me during this crisis could create the wrong perception or engender a dependence for closeness on my part. If that principal had known what was happening at the time he would truly have been shocked to his core.

I also remember the annoyance my perpetrator expressed after one teachers' professional development day. An invited speaker did a presentation about appropriate student-teacher relationships (someone's radar must have been up to some degree), and my perpetrator cunningly used that with me to emphasise that I was 'a mature young woman' and who was this presenter to belittle 'our relationship' and claim teachers who developed close relationships with students were themselves immature!

He also used it to stress that I must make sure the secret was tightly held for fear of him losing his job and me being seen in such a way that may have consequences for me too – seeding the notion that I could be viewed as delinquent, in moral danger and placed in a 'home'. Nevertheless, a year later when I arrived at [study camp] ... the morning after everyone else did (after spending the night before at a hotel), no word was said. None. I remember having nightmares that other students in my tent commented on and I was petrified I had said something talking in my sleep ...

Another teacher, while supervising a class of an absent teacher, detected something in my behaviour (sleepiness during class after self-medicating to numb my pain and mask my distress which included suicidal ideation) that he quietly, gently asked me if I was pregnant. I responded with, 'No, I'm not pregnant – not with a baby at any rate'. I think I laughed with a touch of hysteria – partly with relief that he hadn't assumed the correct causation but suspected I may have been sexually active with a fellow student, and that this meant I was safe from 'being found out'. The denial of pregnancy seemed to allay his concern in the moment and he didn't ask any further questions.

Had he continued perhaps later in private, and given the respect I had for him ([he] had previously taught me and was a very psychologically minded educator), he is the only person I imagine I may have risked disclosing to, both about the abuse and my state of mind – indeed some part of me wanted to but such was the fear and trepidation that I studiously avoided him in the school grounds thereafter.<sup>76</sup>

We heard that sometimes when victim-survivors spoke up about the abuse they were scolded for making disclosures that could 'ruin the perpetrator's career'. Some also described facing repercussions from the perpetrator.

'Martin' attended a regional primary school in the 1980s and recalled telling his teacher, parents and principal about the sexual abuse he experienced. He said no one believed him.

### **'Martin'**

When the abuse occurred, it was in a classroom environment where there were three composite classes – Grades 5 to 6. What would happen was the teachers would specialise in a particular area. So, if you were doing history, you would go to this classroom and you would work with that teacher.

But there was a room off to the side, which [the perpetrator] kept his bean bags and stuff in. And, you know, if you are special, you're invited into that room. And then you were provided special privileges and mostly it was OK.

And then he would wrestle with you, or whatever it was. And then I remember he put his hands down my pants and then I sort of got up, got upset. Then he [said], 'Calm down. It's not what you thought it was. Here's a dollar. Go across to the milk bar ... So go and calm down, get some lollies from the milk bar'.

And then I went back and told my teacher. And he said, 'Oh, no, you're just over-reacting'. I went home and told my parents. My parents said, 'No'. And then I went to the principal – nothing. No one would believe me. It was all, 'Do you understand what you're saying? This could ruin this person's career'. It's like, 'No, I'm 10, 11 years old. I don't understand. This is what happened to me'.

Obviously, he found out that I made the complaint and then life was absolute hell, as you could imagine. Sitting in the classroom, just everything from humiliation to bullying. It was horrendous.<sup>77</sup>

'Violet' told us she was sexually abused at a high school in the north-western suburbs of Melbourne in the late 1970s. She described how she was met with disbelief when her report of abuse made its way to the principal, which led to the perpetrator stalking and threatening her at school.

## **'Violet'**

My abuse goes back to the ... cleaner at the school. We met in the fan room, which was around the back of the school near the portables, and the abuse took place there.

There was a social worker who belonged to the same church group and youth group, and I spoke to her about it 19 days later. She went to the principal and told the principal, who then called [the perpetrator] up and said there was someone who was making allegations against him ... Police got involved. It went to committal. The school council paid for his legal defence.

He wasn't suspended, so he stalked me every day. He said, 'You know what's going to happen. You won't know when it's coming, but you'll be dead. Family will be dead, friends'. I had a good friendship group, but they deserted me because every time they had a conversation with me, they were called to the principal's office to find out what I was talking about.

I had teachers who didn't believe me. I remember [a] teacher who was also a person who was involved in the church, so I sort of knew her vaguely outside. And I remember her saying to me, 'Why are you doing this? Why are you doing this to this man who has a wife and three kids?' And I said to her, 'I will cut off my arm, my right arm, if you just believe me'. So yeah, no one believed me.

[The perpetrator] had prior convictions and [the school] even knew that. I think that's the hard part. They even knew that and still let him continue to work. Their duty of care should have been to their student, not to the sleazebag paedophile with prior convictions.

I think the shame is the thing that stays. You hide the secret. You worry that you're gonna run into someone that remembers you ... and you wondered whether they were talking about you, whether they were saying it, and what people think of you.

I even had this woman, probably four years later, come up to me in the supermarket and say, 'Oh, you're the one that fucked the cleaner'. I was like, 'What?' ... I didn't know what to say. It was just so out of the blue.

I think the injustice of what people did at a school level, and of not being believed – like, I'm very truthful now, but if I'm not believed about something – it's in your DNA. You just don't shake it. And I think I'm always wanting to do the right thing because I still feel like I did the wrong thing.<sup>78</sup>

Alex, who described himself as 'generally a very happy person at school and at home', told us he 'never really realised these sorts of things could possibly happen'.<sup>79</sup>

### **Alex (continued)**

I remember telling [people] at the time. I was basically told to keep away from [the perpetrator] at school, which was very difficult at the time because he was my teacher ... I thought I would have been more supported after [disclosing the abuse]. I think that [contributed] to my lack of self-worth.

I started not to trust adults from when the abuse occurred and from [after I disclosed the abuse]. I became angrier. I started to lash out at people and suffered outbursts for no apparent reason at the time. This included slamming doors, talking back to my father and just generally being more unruly, which wasn't normally in my nature ...

I had heard from a fellow student ... that [the perpetrator] was caught a couple of years after I had left the school and was dismissed. I have never officially heard whether this was true or not.<sup>80</sup>

Some victim-survivors told us they were punished as children for revealing they had been sexually abused. 'Oscar' recalled the various ways he tried to raise the alarm about the teacher who was sexually abusing him when he was a very young child.

### **'Oscar' (continued)**

I used to say when I was five or six years old in the playground, 'Oh, this person [the perpetrator] pulls you', as in 'pulls your penis'. One of the teachers overheard me and I was told, 'Oh, you have to see the [principal]' ...

And I went to her room, and she had a ruler in her hand and said, 'How dare you say all these things about this person? Such a great person'. And I remember she gave me the strap all over my legs. I was red in the back of my legs ...

Grade 1, Grade 2, Grade 3 – the year went so long ... That year for me, it was like 10 years. And I remember, without even realising what I was doing, I got in trouble. I got the strap. We had a picture of something that we had to draw. I don't know how I drew it, but I drew the [perpetrator] holding a banana and inserting it in someone's backside ... I gave it to the teacher and the teachers just gave me the strap ...

And none of this ever got back to my parents during the parent-teacher nights or anything like that. They never said anything. The only time they even said something to my parents was, 'Oh, your son should perhaps go to a special school – he's got mental problems'. My parents said, 'How dare you say this?' and threw it back. And then my parents have said [to me], 'Don't tell or talk to people or anything like that'. It was the silence that hurt ...

I remember wanting to actually go into a police station. I think it might have been [the 1970s]. And I did go ... but then I got scared because the officers all looked mean and tough. I think I was eight or nine. I didn't know what to say ...

I want to encourage others to tell the truth, whether they're a teacher, whether they suspected something, whether they were afraid to say something, whether they didn't know. Remember, this is the 70s and 80s. But some teachers would have known. They would have known ...

It took me nearly 50 years to be at this point where I'm talking to anyone – 50 years. Because it's something that you want to put in the back of your mind. You don't want to ever think about it. And as I sit here today, I would know that there would be people sitting in jails right now because when they were young they lost their childhood and they decided to be rebellious.<sup>81</sup>

'Brendon' noted it was the children who were punished rather than the perpetrators at his primary school. He told us that in the 1990s he and other children were groomed and then sexually abused in a maintenance shed on school property by two perpetrators, one of whom was a maintenance worker who mowed lawns at the school.

### **'Brendon'**

I didn't have that many friends, so I was alone a lot of the time. But one of my friends did come up to me and said, 'Oh, this guy who works in the shed – the maintenance dude – he'll give you free stuff from the canteen. He'll let you use the tools'. So I thought, 'Well, that'll give me something to do'. So that's sort of how I got lured into that area ...

There were two guys in there ... [One perpetrator] would give you a hug and then put his hand down your pants and that sort of stuff – fondle and all that. I realised later on when I really thought about it that they couldn't do anything else. They probably would if they were able, but they weren't able because anyone could walk into the shed at any time. They kind of kept their physical abuse to something that they could probably quickly stop doing. But I watched – I saw it happen to other kids and it happened to me.

I remember it thoroughly because I remember the texture of his hands – because he was a maintenance man – you know, rough ...

They'd sit there, they'd smoke, they'd talk, they'd fondle and do whatever they wanted to do – masturbate you off, whatever. And then they'd swap. You know, so you're getting swapped around by these two fellas in the shed. And I just remember the whole experience. It was confusing. It was just weird, weird ...

And then I remember when it obviously had become an issue for the school. They obviously suspected something. So they had assemblies with the children. Each class would have an assembly in the multipurpose room and the teachers would say, 'You're not allowed to go to the shed. Don't go to the shed. If you go to the shed, you'll be in trouble. Don't go to the shed'. But I'd still go back there because I had nothing else to do. And the teachers would come in and say, 'If we find you in here again, you're going to get detention. We told you not to come here'. So the children were being punished in many ways ...

No one wanted to tell the truth. No one wanted to talk openly. Everyone was always trying to sugarcoat it, not telling you why they're doing things ...

Obviously the school let the parents know that something was going on. When I went home, my mum sat us down at the table – me and my brother and my sister – and she already had this whole thing written down on a piece of paper: 'What would you do if someone approached you? What would you do if someone touched you? What would you do?' And I'm sitting there going, 'Why are we doing this?' Like, 'What's going on, Mum?' And she's like, 'Oh, you know, I'm just curious' ...

It's like trying to sugarcoat barbed wire. It's still gonna tear you apart ... That was the short of it. I found it obviously humiliating and degrading, but the way that it was handled was even worse from the school and from the parents ...

There was no help for it either. I mean, the police came and I was only 10, 11? And I was short and they were huge. They scared the bejesus out of me. So when they asked me if I had been involved in the shed and all, I said, 'No'. They terrified me. I didn't want them there and I didn't want to be moved away from my mum and my brother and sister into an individual room with these two massive people wearing guns and stuff, so that they could sit down and talk to me about something I wasn't ready to talk about. So I said, 'No, I wasn't involved in it'.

Not to mention everyone at school who, if you got found out that you were a part of it, you got relentlessly bullied – when I was already being bullied at school. I was a very popular target for bullies ... If the school and the kids found out you were part of it – because a lot of the kids had to eventually go to court and things like that – they would come up to you and they'd say, 'Oh, you like having an old man's dick in your arse, don't you?' You know, like just this awful stuff. So I said, 'No, nothing happened to me'. So I dealt with that for a while because I wasn't going to tell anyone.

Probably not until I was about 15 or 16 is when I finally told Mum the truth that yes, I was part of it and yes, it did happen to me. Because it just wasn't handled well enough for me to want to talk ...

I don't know what happened after that. I don't know if he got found guilty and sent to prison or what. I don't know. It was in the paper at one point. I can't remember ... it all just got dropped after whatever happened, whether he got found guilty or not or whatever. Once there was an outcome, that was it. It just got dropped ...

After it was all done, what happened to the kids? Nothing. We were just expected to go back to doing things as normal and that was it. No one spoke to us. No one supported us. They just [went] back to normal. And the school – they never supported anybody. They just kept punishing everyone.<sup>82</sup>

Other victim-survivors spoke about reporting the abuse to police later, as adults. 'Sigrid' responded to a callout for information on child sexual abuse from Victoria Police in the 1980s – a few years after the abuse had ended. She wanted something on record as corroborating evidence in case another student came forward about the perpetrator:

The policewoman I spoke to unfortunately reinforced all my shame-based beliefs at the time – that I was old enough to know this was wrong, that police and the law would see me as 'consenting', that I should have told someone, it would never pass a test of evidence etc, etc ...

The only concession was to agree to take down the details so if there was a future investigation it was on record. And I, in my conflicted shame, fear and self-loathing at the time, accepted this ...<sup>83</sup>

Like 'Sigrid', Grant also told us he responded to a police callout in the 1980s. He said this was the catalyst for him to share his experience for the first time. He described what happened after giving his statement to police:

Weeks, then months went by, and I heard nothing. Eventually, I followed up and I was told by police that they couldn't find my statement and the detective had left the force.

This made me very distressed. I had after all these years tried to disclose and I wanted people to listen, but nothing had been done. My number one motivation for disclosing was that I wanted to make sure he wasn't doing this to other children.<sup>84</sup>

He told us he went to a different station in the late 1980s in response to another campaign by police, where he made another statement. He recalled that, again, nothing happened in response to this:

Nothing came of this either. No one followed me up, no one called me back and I gave up a bit more easily than the first time. I just pushed it down and tried to get on with life. I was back in the darkness.<sup>85</sup>

Grant told us that in the early 2000s he received a call from the police out of the blue. He said that he went to the police station and was asked to wear a covert recording device to attempt to get the perpetrator to admit that he had abused him. Grant described being unsupported and traumatised by this process, which was ultimately unsuccessful due to inadequate police preparation and the 'evasive and quite cunning' responses of the perpetrator.<sup>86</sup> He described being 'psychologically stuffed' after this incident, with the police offering no debrief or follow-up support.<sup>87</sup>

Grant said he is still angry at what he recalls as the failings of police:

I really want [Victoria Police] to apologise to me for the way they treated me so terribly on so many occasions. We could have stopped [the perpetrator] offending. How ironic that the organisation tasked with investigating and convicting perpetrators, and also tasked with protecting us, the Victoria Police, still remain in the shadows.<sup>88</sup>

Aden said he told a member of senior leadership at the school that he was being sexually abused but was told to go home and tell his mother and the police. He said that his parents ultimately did contact police at the time but that the police never followed up. He shared that, years later, when he came forward again, he had to make a new police statement. He described the significant challenges he experienced throughout the criminal case initiated against the perpetrator.

## Aden

I guess the reason I'm here is because I'm a survivor and I went through the court system and ... [I knew another] survivor of the same teacher. But I guess for me it's around the experience that we had going through the court system and the lack of support.

My perpetrator was a teacher ... and he got moved around from school to school to school to school to school. I think at the end of it he had over 100 survivors. If you think of that in the context of generations – it wasn't just a generation, it was generations of people.

We [Aden and the other survivor] reported quite early and nothing ever happened with that. Never got followed up. There's never any action taken. And it was many, many years later that it got brought up again. And then I had to actually make another police statement.

It felt like the perpetrator was more supported in the context of the legal system than what we were as the survivors. Police, lawyers, through the psychiatrist assessments – that experience, if my partner hadn't been there, I wouldn't be here today. That was horrific.

And the perpetrator – throughout the process, every time that he had a concern or issue in the context of his mental health and wellbeing – 'Oh, sorry, it's delayed. Sorry, it's delayed. Sorry, it's delayed.' Yeah ... so why aren't we being heard?

[The] experience has pretty much destroyed our family.

For me it is around the actual system. I think that needs to be challenged and that's what I would like to see the government do. I think even in the context of getting a payout [through the National Redress Scheme] – it was really beneficial. It's created a foundation for me and my partner. But in the context of that, I live in a house where I know where that comes from.

I feel as though even though if justice was served ... I will never get those years back.<sup>89</sup>

'Betty' described the impact of making a statement to police about the child sexual abuse perpetrated against her. She told us she reported to police relatively recently.

## **'Betty' (continued)**

I spent approximately five days, each day over six hours long, providing a statement. A statement that again, took me back to having to talk about all those details like his body type, his preferred sexual position, his language, what he did to penetrate me. Only now I was an adult woman, and the thought of what he did to me as a child, saddened me. I imagined my own daughter of 16, being put through this and it filled me with horror. It also explained my hyper-vigilance, over-worrying and being untrustworthy of everyone.

The police took me seriously and supported me, and the senior constable in charge of my case was an amazing individual who kept me afloat while in the midst of maintaining professionalism. The agony of providing so much information was crushing. I also realised that the years of trauma exposure therapy had given me access to parts of this that I had blocked out to survive ...

For me, remembering details brought me days of sleeplessness. If I saw someone who did the [same] sport as he was involved in, I fled the environment. If I saw someone with that kind of car, I walked the other way. I still do.

This individual was arrested and charged [that same year]. Three counts. Two of oral penetration of a minor and one of penetration of a minor. That was one violation of many he had put me through. Because it did not happen just that once. But it needed to be one violation so the legal system could proceed.

Experiencing that legal system was another emotional drain that depleted me of normality. I could not escape it, every day there was an inner dialogue about the what nows, what do I do, will it get to court?

And so many curve balls. Delay after delay in committal mention dates, then I was informed that the defendant was in ill health. And as such, the Office of Public Prosecutions [OPP] had to weigh up the likelihood of conviction. Unfortunately, the law has a set of criteria that needs to statistically show that this is in the interests of the government and society ...

[The] likelihood of conviction was low, since the defendant was in ill health and there was no guarantee that they would survive to see a trial from start to end. So, after medical submissions, the OPP decided that it was not to proceed based on this. I had spent many hours in meetings and on that day almost knew this was going to be the outcome, but I felt crushed. Defeated.

It was over in the legal system, but where was my justice? Why did it end like that? He got away with it. My only comfort was that he now had to live in terminally ill health, in the knowledge that those around him now know of the predator he is. That in possibly his most profound need for support, his family have abandoned him to die alone and in shame, the predator, paedophile and liar that he is ...

Now imagine, a child you know, being sexually assaulted, and the effect it would have on them, on you, on their future, on the school community. Perhaps it is your daughter, or a family member, or a member of a school sports club your child attends. Does the age of the offence, or the health of the accused, dominate your thoughts? Or is it justice for the victim?<sup>90</sup>

Some victim-survivors told us they felt adults and authorities responded differently because they were sexually abused as older children. As set out in 'Looking back', victim-survivors described a lack of professional boundaries between teachers and students that meant they would often socialise together outside school. We were told that this allowed child sexual abuse against older children to be normalised. For example, 'Sigrid' reflected on how her disclosure to police (described above) in the 1980s was met with victim-blaming attitudes:

But it speaks again to the belief that an older adolescent is not a child, is somehow to be considered complicit in the abuse they suffered and therefore not 'innocent', undeserving of validation or justice, caught in the proximity of a similar attitude that has prevailed for decades about adult sexual assault victims.<sup>91</sup>

A few victim-survivors recalled people who took action or showed care when they became aware that a child was experiencing sexual abuse. However, most victim-survivors described feeling that adults and organisations did not respond the way they wanted or needed them to, either when the victim-survivor was a child or as an adult.

Some victim-survivors told us that as very young children, they were expected to assume responsibility for their own safety – for example, by avoiding the perpetrator in circumstances where it was very difficult for them to do so. We heard that, rather than confronting and addressing the behaviour of perpetrators directly, schools sometimes tried to influence perpetrators indirectly by appealing to them to 'be careful' in their interactions.<sup>92</sup>

From many of these reflections, it appears that some parents were at a loss for what to do and either glossed over the disclosures, encouraged children to forget about the abuse or spoke to their children about it in confusingly oblique ways. Where parents did take steps to deal with authorities (such as the school or police), this often did not translate to meaningful change for the child.

Some victim-survivors reminded us that even as adults they struggle to feel heard and believed. They wondered whether, or believed that, things would have been different for them if the sexual abuse they experienced had been dealt with decisively and appropriately at the earliest stage. This may have limited the sexual abuse they or others were exposed to. In addition, it may have given them access to support that could have helped them process the traumatic events earlier and avoided years of silence and shame.

## Impacts of the abuse

Victim-survivors described some of the immediate feelings they had after being sexually abused as children. These included confusion, shame and fear.

Some victim-survivors told us that, at the time, they did not recognise the behaviour as child sexual abuse. For example, 'Oscar', who experienced sexual abuse in primary school, said:

I did not know I was a survivor until perhaps late in my teens. That's when I started to understand. I thought everything was normal up 'til that point.<sup>93</sup>

Some victim-survivors described a decline in their mental health as children. For example, Andy B said he began experiencing anxiety after being abused.<sup>94</sup> 'Sigrid' described herself as becoming 'increasingly confused' and 'distressed'.<sup>95</sup>

Several victim-survivors explained that their behaviour changed dramatically soon after being sexually abused. Erena described the significant changes in her behaviour after she was sexually abused in Grade 5. This included worrying about the safety of other children, misbehaving at home and seeking out sexual experiences as a teenager. Erena said the impacts of the abuse reverberated into adulthood.

### Erena (continued)

My life was affected in many ways.

In Grade 6 I started noticing things. There was a teacher in the primary school – he always had boys on his knees. I don't know whether I identified that with everything, but to me it didn't feel right in my stomach. And so for years, because I knew his car ... I would always look at that [type of car], even if it wasn't him. I noticed that car because I knew he was doing something to those boys.

I started acting out a lot, getting angry at Mum, wanting things that I shouldn't and not listening to her. And I'd become more of a troubled child.

I just changed. And Mum just kept saying, 'What's wrong with you? What's the matter with you?' I didn't know how to explain it. But I used to tear up my sister's dolls and break her bikes, and it was things that I just never would have done before that.

Eventually in my teenage years, I became very promiscuous because I was looking for love, looking for that feeling, looking for anything. And I was probably the town moll, you know. My brother was very protective over me. He wouldn't let his mates come near me. I'd hitchhike by myself up the [coast] and I'd just meet some surfy and go off and have sex. I thought having sex was having love and having a partner. My mother didn't teach me much. No one told me about contraception or anything.

Come the 80s, I met my husband. He wanted me to do a whole lot of things. I had to be off my face to do them. I couldn't do them truly for myself ... He used to film me. And I'd go and pick up guys. Sex was just a normal thing. Back in the 80s, it was all about money, sex, power, drugs.

I never really healed from my sexual abuse and trauma. There's always been something that's a catalyst to my addiction.<sup>96</sup>

'Joan' told us that after she experienced child sexual abuse in primary school she worried about the safety of other family members attending that school:

I then moved on to high school and my sisters had girls. One of my sisters with her girl was getting to the age where she was going to go to that school ... And I'm like ... I've got to get her away from [the perpetrator].<sup>97</sup>

AJ told us he was sexually abused in early primary school in the 1970s. He reacted by regularly running away from school, for which school staff physically punished him on multiple occasions. He told us he moved schools several times and said the abuse 'ruined' his family.<sup>98</sup>

## AJ

In [early primary school] ... at playtime, I went to go to the toilets and there was a predator hiding in the toilets ... There were other kids in there. They ran off. I was dragged into the cubicle and sexually abused.

From that, basically my life ... pretty much spiralled out of control. What used to happen then, is I'd be taken to school in the morning and my mum would drop me off. We didn't live far from the school and as soon as my mum had left, I'd run away. And then eventually, if they found me, they would take me back to the school to [a teacher's] office, which was up the

front of the school. And [the teacher] would then belt the crap out of me all the way to the junior school. That went on for quite a number of years ... I was five years of age.

The abuse from ... [a senior leader in the school] and the teachers was pretty horrific. That just built someone with some resilience. I could jump a three-foot fence without slowing down, which sounds funny, but it's kind of not ...

[As I got older] I used to walk or hitchhike home, whatever I could do to get away from the school. That went on for a while. Then they decided to move me to another school. Basically, the same thing happened. The teachers would just abuse me, and I was treated as though there was something wrong with me. I had lots of different changes from schools with that same scenario. Probably tried three or four different schools, if not five. Same scenario.

Eventually they decided they're gonna put me in a home. They're gonna lock me up and put me in Turana [a centre that used to house children in state care and youth offenders] ... Luckily my dad worked for the education department and he managed to get on to some people and say, 'Look, he's gonna get put in a home. What can we do for him?'

And I actually ended up with [an alternative school model] ... And you know, life changed a lot then. I used to go into the city a couple of times a week and they used to come to my house once a week in a bus – a little mobile home. And the teacher would come and I'd do all my homework. And then eventually I started an apprenticeship as a motor mechanic.

In my teenage years, I was an alcoholic. I started drinking probably pretty heavily at 14. I smoked a fair bit of marijuana. I was always a worker, always had two or three jobs.

As soon as I was old enough to be a fire marshal at the racetrack, that's what became our life [with the family]. From 15, I was allowed to be a fire marshal. Every weekend we would be at some kind of racetrack. And I think that helped a lot.

[The abuse] ruined the family ... I don't have anything to do with any of the family. They all think I was just a mongrel kid.<sup>99</sup>

Alex said that, after disclosing the abuse and simply being told to stay away from the perpetrator, he became angry, unsettled and mistrustful of adults.<sup>100</sup>

'Oscar' described his experience of child sexual abuse as causing the loss of his childhood.

### **'Oscar' (continued)**

When I was six or seven years old, I wanted to burn the school down ... I used to lie awake all night thinking of ways of getting back at [the perpetrator] ...

I remember another chilling moment was I think in Year 8 or Year 9 in high school. We had sex education. I remember I was left shocked. I thought, 'Oh, that's supposed to happen?' Because they were talking about what normally happens. I was thinking, 'Oh, is this another man and a man – and a baby happens?' That's how, you know, twisted I was ...

Young people could be sitting in jails right now because they had that experience and it put them on the wrong path to life. And people don't understand that. I could have easily gone down that road. I remember the only real brush I ever had with the law was at 18 or 19. I was drinking alcohol. That was my only way of sort of being happy because it poisoned my mind ...

I remember having all these nightmares – like it was horror in one way. I was with this girl, and we were in the same bed, and for one awful moment when I woke up ... I was wondering, 'Who is this person? Is it him?' I was really sweating. I was terrified ...

My father was walking the dog, got run over and killed. And I thought that was going to be the worst thing that ever happened in my life. You think, 'What's the worst thing that can happen?' Someone getting run over. But no, it was the fact that I lost my childhood. My first kiss was with this paedophile. My first sexual experience was with this paedophile. My brain was poisoned with all that ...

My biggest regret, I suppose, is I never could tell my parents. They went to their graves. My mum suspected something. I did tell her a little bit – you know, 'I used to get the strap for nothing' ...

I survived. I'm lucky. Whenever I have a bad day, I reflect that I'm here.<sup>101</sup>

Some victim-survivors said the experience of child sexual abuse affected their ability to connect and make friends with other children.<sup>102</sup> Aden described how the sexual abuse limited his adolescence:

I didn't have the teenage years that a normal teenager would have ... there's certain things that I didn't do because I was so fearful. Scared.<sup>103</sup>

'Simon' described struggling with the transition to high school, saying, 'I was that kid that the teachers complain about'.<sup>104</sup> He reflected on how the sexual abuse shaped him:

I've developed a dare for danger, and that's probably because of my experiences.<sup>105</sup>

Some victim-survivors shared that the experience of child sexual abuse caused physical effects in childhood. For example, 'Martin' told us he was 'the only 11-year-old that had ulcers'.<sup>106</sup>

Victim-survivors spoke extensively about the long-term impacts child sexual abuse has had on their lives into adulthood – affecting their mental and physical health, family, friendships, educational attainment, careers and outlook on life.

'Boudicea' shared the wide-ranging, lifelong impacts of the sexual abuse she experienced.

### **'Boudicea' (continued)**

The list below reveals the incredible psychological legacy of a same-sex abuser in a teaching role with adolescent children: an insidious gift that keeps on giving. The sexual and emotional abuse I experienced had overwhelming impacts over the two years in which I was her student. Those impacts broadened like a bow wave to continue lifelong negative effect on my:

- Creativity
- Eating and nutrition
- Education
- Emotions
- Faith
- Financial security
- Friendships
- Home life
- Integration in one coherent identity as an adult
- Life choices

- Mental health
- Physical health
- Physical safety
- Potential – Academic achievement
- Potential – Earnings
- Relationships
- Self-care
- Sense of selfhood
- Sense of wholeness as an emotional, physical, mental and spiritual being
- Sexuality
- Shame
- Sleep
- Spirituality
- Trust – in myself and ability to trust others including counsellors and police
- Use alcohol
- Wellbeing
- Work.<sup>107</sup>

Ann Maree said that her experiences ‘changed the trajectory’ of her life.<sup>108</sup>

George told us he was sexually abused in high school and had never shared this with anyone. He spoke about the overwhelming emotions and anxiety stemming from his experiences.

### **George (continued)**

Even at this age, I would have thought I might have dealt with it better. You know, you’re meant to not cry. You’re meant to be strong. You’re meant to just get up and bite the bullet and deal with what life dishes out ...

I’m almost 60. This has been locked up inside me for [around 50] years approximately. I haven’t been able to communicate and, look, I don’t know why. Sometimes I get extremely emotional and sometimes I can be OK. I don’t get that ... I’m just sick of hiding it. I’m sick of [being] ashamed of it ... That’s another thing – I feel like when I tell my story, I’m going to be looked upon differently ...

That's the part I just constantly ask myself. I was able to lock it up. Now, why the hell do I want to relive it? I don't understand that, but I feel like I've got no choice. And I want to get to the stage at least to discuss so much and not let the situation overcome me and become too emotional. Just to open up and trust people ...

I honestly thought I wouldn't be here. I got married; I had my first child. It wasn't even on my mind, wasn't on my radar. And I was living the life that I wanted to live, and then all of a sudden it's just caved in and I just can't handle it ...

I'm sick and tired of letting the situation get the better of me. I see things, I watch movies and it just gets to me. My anxiety, it increases. There's certain things I just cannot handle.

I'm just sick and tired of not sleeping. I'm sick and tired of not resting. I'm sick and tired of waking up, making sure the curtains aren't undrawn and making sure the doors are locked ...

I wish I never remembered his face to be honest. But I do. I wish I could remove certain memories. The way he held me and took advantage of me ...

I feel like being angry. I feel like they've won. I don't want them to win. I feel like these people, they walk away. Majority of them walk away ...

I think telling my story is a way of me confronting it and confronting him. That's why I'm saying it.<sup>109</sup>

'Warren' explained how his experiences of child sexual abuse still affect him today:

I'll be very honest – I do have some days where I get a little bit depressed over the whole thing. As much as I like to smile ... People will say to me, 'How are you?' Well, it's like, you really don't want to know how I am, because it's a can of worms. I do have days where I do get a bit drained by the whole experience.<sup>110</sup>

Many victim-survivors described feeling shame about the sexual abuse they experienced. Sometimes these feelings were cultivated by the perpetrator, who we heard would make the child feel complicit in the abuse, reframing it as something the child instigated or otherwise wanted. We heard these feelings of shame could be reinforced when family or school authorities responded poorly to disclosures.

As identified in her narrative above, 'Violet' told us that 'the shame is the thing that stays'.<sup>111</sup> She described undertaking teacher training as an adult and worrying about whether staff at schools where she did her placements were talking about what happened to her.<sup>112</sup>

Many victim-survivors shared how their experiences of sexual abuse at school affected their ability to learn and reach their full potential. 'Violet' said:

But you know, it affected my schooling. Like, there's so many gaps in my education. I've worked bloody hard and had a lot of support from different mentors, I guess through my education and through my psych.<sup>113</sup>

Grant also described how the sexual abuse he experienced affected his learning:

The abuse was traumatic and affected my life. In high school, I went a bit off the rails. I struggled academically, and I couldn't settle or study. I left school in Year 11 to become a motor mechanic, but I left that and returned to school. I also wanted to be a physical education teacher but dropped out of uni too. I dropped out of most things as I couldn't focus or settle.<sup>114</sup>

'Jacob' said he had assumed the child sexual abuse he experienced was his fault. He explained how this initially affected his self-confidence to pursue higher education.

### **'Jacob' (continued)**

I just don't really talk about it 'cause it's not what you did back then. You didn't really try to talk, which is why [perpetrators] could do it, I guess. My family didn't even know about any of it until probably about 10 years ago when I finally told my mum some of it.

I sort of became completely dysfunctional because of [the perpetrators]. I've figured that out over time ... I've managed to work a lot of that stuff out. But the reality is it's affected my entire life. I don't have a family. I don't have any friends.

I didn't even know about sexual stuff back then. It was only after the event ... I'd see [one perpetrator] around a bit and it took years for me to actually figure out why every time he was near me my skin would literally crawl ...

I spent time homeless and got into drugs and that kind of stuff. I met a lot of people who were in really dark places. I just would kind of help people – that's been something that I've always done.

I ended up going to uni in the end 'cause I realised that I wasn't stupid. It took a long time. I realised that I was smart enough to pass at school and it was just because of what had happened to me in the past. It was difficult to actually emotionally accept that you're potentially capable of being normal.

I went to uni and became a teacher, but the stress was too much for me. That was probably why, or part of the reason why, I never actually took a full-time teaching job. The anxiety of everything was just too much. So I just did short contracts, working with kids who came out of difficult and abusive

backgrounds and stuff, so they didn't have to go through the bullshit that I went through. I was a teacher for probably about 15 years working in alternative education. I got a lot of purpose out of doing that. I really did enjoy that.

All of my kids knew that I had this rule – you can say negative things about the world, you can say negative things about your circumstances, but you're never allowed to say anything negative about yourself. If somebody said that to me when I was 15, my life could have probably been a lot better because I just assumed that all of it was my fault and it took me years to undo that damage.<sup>115</sup>

'Charles' said he felt guilty about not reporting the sexual abuse he experienced when he was a child. He described the significant mental health challenges the abuse had caused him and spoke about its detrimental impact on his relationships with others.

### **'Charles'**

When I was aged 9 and 10 at primary school, [the perpetrator] was a teacher at that school. He was the librarian and a sports teacher. And he abused me about half a dozen times in the library.

He would do that by having me sit on his lap and fondle my genitals. The library was an interesting space because, as we know, libraries have little vestibules. And places where it's not normal foot traffic.

The guilt I feel – not shame, but guilt – is that I didn't speak up. Even though I was 9 or 10, I still look back on it and feel as though I should have spoken up and maybe that would have stopped his actions.

And I think that consciously whether I had developed enough at that age, to be able to know it was wrong – if I knew it was wrong, I think I would have spoken up, but I must have decided it wasn't wrong. So it wasn't something I needed to worry about ...

When I was looking to have children, I came out and told my spouse at the time. And we were able to work that through. And then later in life, [I was] diagnosed with depression and anxiety. These are the five disorders I have: treatment-resistant depression, major depressive disorder, PTSD, social anxiety and substance abuse disorder ... Psychological trauma is not something one recovers from – one learns to manage it.

I've been a remote father – more happy to be out of the country than in the country. Not being able to communicate with the children. I can see the linkages between the trauma and the impact. I live remotely through choice. And that's so I don't have to interact with people ... I have a 'contemplation chair' which just sits high on the hill.

My desire is ... to help as many other people as I can come forward. But I'll caution them prior to doing that if they wanted to go down the legal path, because it is horrendous.

My mother died last year. I started the legal engagement while she was still alive, but I didn't feel it necessary [to tell her]. There's no point in putting that sort of trauma on her because, you know, a parent would feel guilty that they didn't protect their child.

When I have talked to friends and my children about this, the way I contextualise it is that I'm not looking for sympathy. I'm not looking for guidance. I'm looking for understanding. All my children know ... And I was with one of them on Saturday and she said, 'Good luck, Dad, I'm with you'. She'll have vigilance. She will have understanding. And she will have advocacy because I started the ball rolling. And your report starts the ball rolling.<sup>116</sup>

Glen said he decided not to have children because he was worried that his experiences of child sexual abuse made him more likely to become a perpetrator – something he now understands to be 'completely misguided'.<sup>117</sup> He ended up 'inheriting three children' through his partner. He reflected on a moment that brought home what he missed because of his decision:

I had never held a baby ... until my granddaughter came along. Yeah, there's a sense of missing out.<sup>118</sup>

Glen said the effect of the abuse on his relationships was 'really difficult', particularly on his own children, saying, 'I think they suffered'.<sup>119</sup> He explained that the three children he came to raise all live elsewhere, and he wondered whether that was, in part, due to his parenting:

... maybe we've just given them the opportunity to live the lives that they want to live. And that's a cool thing, but there's always a little bit of – well, maybe ... my behaviours drove you away. And that's hard to cope with.<sup>120</sup>

Other victim-survivors described having a heightened sense of vigilance around children, even those they are very close to. For example, Phil explained how he was especially cautious around his children's friends:

We had one of my daughter's friends come away. There's no way I'm going to be in the car with her on my own.

I try not to touch anyone that's not my kids, even when they're my son's best buddies.<sup>121</sup>

AJ described how the sexual abuse he experienced made him especially protective of his own children:

When I had my kids and I'd go to the park, if someone looked at them sideways, I was ready to sort them out ...<sup>122</sup>

Like others, Grant said his experiences made him a 'paranoid and hypervigilant parent':

I coached my son's Auskick football team all through his junior years. I coached his cricket team all through his junior years. And because I knew nothing about soccer I was team manager right up to under 18s. I wasn't an elite sportsman or great coach ... I just didn't trust other people with my kids.<sup>123</sup>

We heard that child sexual abuse could sometimes leave victim-survivors confused about their sexuality. Aden described the added complexity of experiencing child sexual abuse as a gay person.

### **Aden (continued)**

My story doesn't ever leave me. It's always there – that sense of self and identity in the context of when I was younger and identifying as gay. That was a horrific experience for me because people were aware that I was actually a survivor and then therefore they were linking sexuality with paedophilia.

And to be actually able to process that as a person – and I'm an adult now – has taken many, many, many years of support – not only from mentors, therapists – support to actually process and be able to connect with that and understand that my sexuality is not because of what happened to me.

I've nearly finished my social work degree. Thank God. That frustrates me as well, because I feel like I should have finished that 20 years ago. I feel like because of the lack of self-belief I had in myself there's a lot of things that I didn't do. And, you know, I'm doing them. I'm starting to do them and complete them ...

Yes, I think that's been a part of my journey. It's important to actually connect with that part as well. And that's where I say it doesn't go away. It can't. I have to actually learn to connect with it and actually process and actually assume that part – like, 'You're OK, keep on moving, stop being a little chihuahua, control yourself'. But you know, it [takes] strategies.<sup>124</sup>

'Boudicea' said she experienced 'internalised homophobia'.<sup>125</sup> She described her mother asking her whether she was in love with the perpetrator and 'aggressively' saying, 'There are women who go after girls, you know!'<sup>126</sup> 'Boudicea' said:

Instantly I adopted an internalised homophobic extreme vigilance, which has destroyed my sense of self-worth and created a lifelong anxiety about discovery, rejection and becoming a social outcast because of my sexual orientation. I wonder whether social attitudes really have changed in Australian cross-cultural schools. They certainly haven't advanced in country towns.<sup>127</sup>

'Brendon' was sexually abused in primary school in the 1990s. He talked about how it affected his sexual development when he reached high school:

When I was 15, 16, I was very confused sexually. I didn't understand my identity. I didn't know what I was. A lot of people around that age will come to some sort of a conclusion: Am I straight? Am I gay? Am I bisexual?<sup>128</sup>

Many victim-survivors described long-term mental health challenges that they attributed to their experiences of abuse.

Grant said he suffered from poor mental health and suicidal thoughts, having twice attempted suicide.<sup>129</sup> He could not bring himself to tell his mother about the abuse but said he wished she had understood why he experienced difficulties in life:

I knew if this matter became publicly broadcast it would break her heart and she would be devastated ... She would have blamed herself.

I am happy she never knew about all these events, but, as is the case with all these things, the contradiction is that I feel guilty that she and my father died never knowing the real reasons for all my ups and downs.<sup>130</sup>

Alex spoke about the long-term impacts of child sexual abuse on his mental health and ability to maintain relationships with friends.

### **Alex (continued)**

When I left the school and started in high school, I became quite same-sex attracted. I might have always been that way inclined, but I think [the perpetrator's] abuse towards me may have contributed to me becoming more aware.

Since the abuse and more so in my later years of life I have suffered anxiety, depression, alcohol abuse and some difficulty maintaining friendships. I am lucky that I have a very supportive partner, I have a very good job and enjoy the area where I live. These moments in my life have taken me many years to get to. I think if the abuse hadn't happened, my life would have been a lot easier, with more successes and happiness happening much sooner.

I have had to work very hard to finally achieve some peace. I still suffer from some alcohol issues. This has contributed to some poor choices and a couple of health issues over the years. This is a work in progress. My anxiety continues to come and go, and I try to think positively and work on these issues day to day.<sup>131</sup>

'Martin' said he did not appreciate the extent of his mental health challenges until later in life. He spoke about the negative impact of the child sexual abuse on his intimate and family relationships.

### **'Martin' (continued)**

When you're so depressed ... you're so in it, you don't know that you are. Not until you come out the other side, you go, 'Oh my God, I can't believe I was there'.

When I was in hospital, my colleagues ... came across and said, 'We had no idea. You're so happy. You always come in and you want to say hello to people. You're so bubbly. We had no idea that you were in this space'. I was like, 'I've been in this space for months'.

It has a massive impact on relationships as well. It's been really hard to trust people, and, you know, even sexually, if I am touched without expecting it, I jump ... I've been a lot. I've been a lot over the years.

My mother worked in early childhood development ... Not being protected by somebody who understands the impact of that ... you have all of this knowledge, experience, theoretical understanding, but here's your opportunity to apply it to somebody you're supposed to care about and who was failed. We don't have a great relationship because I just can't get over it. Can't get over it.<sup>132</sup>

Some victim-survivors recounted having required psychiatric care. For example, Andy B described a particular low point in his life:

I got to my space at rock bottom. It resulted in a divorce and all sorts of stuff. And it wasn't pleasant, you know – suicide attempts and admission to facilities ...<sup>133</sup>

Andy B told us that he connected with other victim-survivors in adulthood who had also experienced sexual abuse at his primary school. He described the devastating impacts that many of them suffered:

High-level mental health stuff, schizophrenia, suicide. Some of those boys aren't with us anymore. They're all 60-year-old men or 60-plus now, and we're not young anymore, but there's been ruined lives.<sup>134</sup>

Daz told us he was sexually abused in primary school in the late 1970s. He shared that the abuse had wide-ranging impacts on his life. This included attempting suicide five years ago.

### Daz

It's affected every aspect of my life. My relationship with my daughter – I've got one daughter who I don't speak to, and it's because of abuse [I experienced]. I have no friends. I'm very lucky that I lost my ability to feel loneliness, because I literally don't feel it. And I know how much loneliness can affect people's mental health.

One of the big myths – it really upsets me, and this is why men don't talk – is if you have been abused, you become an abuser. People watch a 10-second newsreel about paedophile Pete who's in court that goes, 'I was abused as a kid' and then instead of educating yourself, that's what they think. I'll be the first to admit that was something that I struggled with.

I was very lucky – I had a great wife, but she was also the best mother in the world. I learnt so much from her. When she fell pregnant, one of my first questions was, 'You don't think I would ever do anything like that?' She said, 'You are the last person that I would need to worry about'.

It took me nearly 15 years to get into another relationship because of all the abuse stuff ... even being intimate was difficult for me ... I don't trust people. And you know what? That's not a bad thing. And I know it probably doesn't seem the right thing to say, but even your loved ones, you can't trust 100 per cent.

When I turned 50, I was sitting at the end of my bed on my birthday with no one around, crying like a baby because I felt like a failure because I was still alive. That's how I felt – that I couldn't even kill myself and do that right. And I fell into a massive depression.

I just got my house a year and a half ago, and that's the first time I've been able to breathe since as long as I can remember, because every other time I feel like I'm holding my breath. When I'm out in public, I feel like I'm holding my breath. Like now, I feel like I'm holding my breath – not because I feel uncomfortable, it's just I'm out of my comfort zone.<sup>135</sup>

**FIGURE 1.1: MAGPIE CALLING IN THE NIGHT, POEM BY 'BOUDICEA'**

'Boudicea' described a poem she wrote and shared with the Forum.

Poem written during lost hope of living and subsumed by the despair of lifetime losses, locked in my teenage self, overwhelmed with isolation in the silent suffering within and suicide and self-harm impulses.<sup>136</sup>

**MAGPIE CALLING IN THE NIGHT**

Alone.

Empty.

Gone:

lost in the dark of meaninglessness.

A sound. What is that?

Magpie calling in the night

I hear you,

calling where there is no light,

I see you.

No song in my heart.

No song anymore.

Magpie calling in the night

I hear you,

calling where there is no light

I feel you

calling

'I'm here too'.

Several victim-survivors described 'triggers' that affected them in their daily lives. In the context of child sexual abuse, triggers are reminders of past trauma that generate a strong emotional, psychological or physiological response in a person.

Some victim-survivors spoke of experiencing physiological reactions when talking about the abuse. For example, 'Sigrid' described getting a constricted throat when she tries to talk about her experiences:

| ... it's just so classically, you know, 'No, you will not tell anybody' – much to the frustration of the many therapists I've worked with.<sup>137</sup>

Erena described how she would be triggered when confronted with traits that were similar to those of the perpetrator. She said an image of the perpetrator was:

| ... in my mind and my life for years to come, and I could not listen to a ... man's accent [that was the same as the perpetrator's], could not look at a bald ... man.<sup>138</sup>

'Violet' described feeling triggered while working in a school:

| I get called to the principal's office for a meeting or something and still, I freak.<sup>139</sup>

Janelle explained how her experiences of child sexual abuse led to her feeling triggered by older men.

### **Janelle (continued)**

When I did get to Grade 6, the two Grade 6 teachers were men. I was – I still am – very scared of men. So it was horrible to have a man.

After [the perpetrator], obviously I didn't really trust male teachers, and when you get to high school you have quite a few.

[The abuse] was something that made you hate your body ... and so you try to wear heavy jumpers to hide it.

I do have a lot of triggers. Older males just trigger me. There's a man that lives near me and he looks just like [the perpetrator]. And one day he was outside his house and he smiled at me. I don't know if he was trying to be friendly. My nervous system was genuinely screaming that there was something off about him ... 'cause he reminded me too much of him, 'cause he even had the glasses ...

I've disassociated a lot. When I'm in active counselling, I find that I do that less. But if I'm home alone ... sometimes I think to myself, 'What did I do today?'

It's hard to leave the house. I haven't worked in a lot of years.

I've heard, 'Just get over it. You've had a family. You're a success. Don't worry about that. Just put that out of your mind', or, 'He only fiddled with you' – all these dismissive things. But the impact it has as your body is developing – you're developing all these things about relationships in your brain.<sup>140</sup>

'Joan' told us she was sexually abused by the principal of her primary school when she was in Grade 6. Like Janelle, she said the abuse caused her to experience triggers.

### **'Joan' (continued)**

My poor husband – it's really hard to kiss him. He's fantastic. We've been married [over 40] years. But sometimes ... if I'm in the ensuite and he walks in, sometimes I go, 'Get out, get out, get out' 'cause I need that escape ... sometimes the image just comes back.

I've got my eldest who's disabled. She lives in supported residential [care]. That's another little trigger for me ... because a lot of her carers are male and that bothers me.

I tried to talk about [the abuse] and pretty much was shut down – 'Get over it'. The social worker back in the 1990s [said], 'OK, so let's work on you getting better and getting over it'. But I want it out there. This happened ... I just want to be able to tell people.

I'm still connected to the Facebook group [for the school]. And they go, 'Oh, he's such a great principal'. And I'm like, 'No, he wasn't'. But even if I say he wasn't, no one's going to believe me.

I always used to visualise him being the same age as my dad and I feel like he probably was. I did look at his death record today. I did that last night at 3:00 in the morning where I couldn't sleep because I wanted to know. So, I just googled and found his death records. May he not rest in peace.<sup>141</sup>

Alex recalled encountering the perpetrator unexpectedly as a young adult and the effect it had on him:

I remember I jumped on the train [in the suburbs], went into the city and I got to Flinders Street. And the doors opened and there was [the perpetrator] – right there in front of me. And I remember I just sort of froze seeing him ... I don't know if he recognised me, but I ran off and I remember running down the ramp. And that just gave me all those feelings back again, and I never saw him ever again after that.<sup>142</sup>

'Martin' explained how, many decades later, the experience of being bullied and humiliated following his childhood disclosure of sexual abuse still triggered him in work situations where managers or other people in charge did not believe or support him:

It was the fact that my director didn't back me ... That was the trigger ... what I noticed was that there's a bit of a connection between that and spiralling into a depressive suicidal state. And so, there's a couple of other incidents along the way, along my career, where that has also happened.<sup>143</sup>

He reflected on the many years it took him to understand this dynamic:

It's taken me nearly 50 years to try and pinpoint that this is the connection [with] my depression ... And I never made the connection until this last incident this year, and then made the connection that, hey, I've got an issue with resilience and belief and trust.<sup>144</sup>

Aden explained that he was more sensitive in the workplace, where it required significant effort for him to self-regulate:

Even with my career, I have to really learn to, like, not shut up my voice, but not be reactive and not want to jump across the room.<sup>145</sup>

Andy M told us he sometimes struggled with figures of authority at work, which caused him to regularly move between jobs:

I have changed professions and jobs countless times in my life ... I clashed with managers, with people who are higher up and I don't think I felt intimidated, but I felt resentful if they were unfairly speaking to me.<sup>146</sup>

He explained how coming to terms with his past experiences helped him understand himself better:

It's kind of that realisation. It's like, 'Oh, that's why I was like that. That's why I have those issues. It paints that picture. It fills in those gaps.'<sup>147</sup>

'Simon' told us his experiences had made him distrustful of adults:

I've already got a distaste for adults ... like they're hiding stuff. They're not telling you everything.<sup>148</sup>

Glen explained that, through counselling and other avenues, he had a particular sensitivity to injustice more broadly, connected to his experiences of child sexual abuse:

Some stuff happened to me as a child. That was a crime. [It] should never have been allowed to happen ...

[An impact has been my] overeagerness to call out things that are wrong ... I don't stand back too much and sometimes I've got to learn to go, 'It's OK, you don't have to call everything out all the time'.<sup>149</sup>

Some victim-survivors told us they later worked in roles supporting children – for example, as teachers or social workers. We heard that the nature and environment of these roles was sometimes particularly challenging for people who have experienced child sexual abuse. For example, ‘Violet’ described how working with children in out-of-home care created specific challenges for her:

... because the system continually abuses them and ... if something doesn’t go right, it feels like it’s personal again. And I’ve got to do a lot of work in supervision around that – to be able to leave it where it is and not take it home ...<sup>150</sup>

‘Sigrid’ recalled the impact child sexual abuse had on her career as a teacher:

One of the significant impacts it had in early adulthood was that it ultimately led to me having to leave my first career as a secondary teacher ... I attributed the depression that instigated my resignation from the Education Department to an unsuitability on my part. Astonishingly, it is only much later in life have I realised there was an unconscious, constant environmental triggering that led to this waste of my first university degree and training. I was teaching and working [at] a school designed in exactly the same preferred Department design, same sitting layout, same classrooms, same staff rooms and same library storeroom floor where I was sexually abused after school hours and weekends.<sup>151</sup>

Aden described learning to understand his triggers and mitigate their impacts:

I have my own triggers, but I’ve spent many, many years working on those triggers. I identify them. I can talk to my inner child and my internal stuff and say, ‘Hang on a minute, you’re about to lose your shit’. And I just think people need to understand that better. It doesn’t disappear because you go through the courts and get a payout.<sup>152</sup>

We heard that some victim-survivors turned to self-medicating to help manage the effects of trauma.<sup>153</sup> ‘Jacob’, for example, said he ‘got into drugs and alcohol and things like that’.<sup>154</sup>

Some victim-survivors explained how their experiences of child sexual abuse affected their connections with others, including their ability to have physical contact. For example, Andy M said:

What happened definitely impacted my marriage and impacted other relationships and it’s impacted my intimacy.<sup>155</sup>

‘Jacob’ said that his experiences of child sexual abuse made it difficult to hug people.<sup>156</sup>

'Claire' told us:

I think it has impacted sex and intimacy and trust and all those things. It would have been a lot better if all those people had been safe ... It was a more difficult journey into adulthood because, as teens, we all don't know who we are, what we want, what to do. It means sometimes I was either insensitive or cavalier with other people. I think it damages your self-esteem, your sense of who you are as a person. It's like these people keep finding you, you know? How does that work? What does that say about me? So I think it is really confusing for survivors.<sup>157</sup>

Some victim-survivors described the far-reaching impacts of disclosing their experiences of child sexual abuse for the first time as adults after many decades. For 'Betty', these impacts included intense shame and significant mental health challenges, which in turn affected every aspect of her life.

### **'Betty' (continued)**

I spoke up after 30 years. I started to realise the double-edged sword of telling someone and holding the perpetrator accountable. The initial period after telling one person was then a blur of practical appointment-making, finding out what help I needed, what was going to happen to me, what did this mean to have started a process of facing the truth of my childhood sexual abuse?

It threw me into deep depression, anxiety, despair, hopelessness, isolation, exhaustion and thoughts of suicide. I started to tell myself that it would be better not to exist. That I had messed up my entire life by not getting help. By being made to feel that I had made a choice and it was my shame and my fault ...

It became part of my subconscious, and I did not even know it. It was with me everywhere. Like an electric shock. It glitched my thoughts and I didn't even know it. Split seconds of flashbacks while at work, on a date, deciding what to buy for dinner. It shortened my ability to exist in peace and quiet. My mind was in chaos, and I had lived like that for 30 years.

I sat with these notes of my trauma, my sexual assault, and it took me to horrific places where images, smells, sounds – all those things associated with the human who did this to me – all of those things came back and I suddenly started to observe why I could no longer watch certain TV shows, or why the sound of a specific car model generates fear in me – even to this day ...

I was [recently] assessed and diagnosed with PTSD. It was [a] diagnosis that in many ways explained to me what impact this trauma has had on me. It also reminded me that this was not my fault, that this was *done* to me. I had a long uphill climb. I stopped working. I have not worked since. Me. A university graduate, an academic, a go-getter ...

Work stopped; social life stopped. I did not go out anywhere. I had no energy. Yet I was restless and unsettled all the time. I could not sleep. I still can't. I could not focus on anything for more than 5 minutes without flashbacks re-entering my mind. That equates to not being able to read a book, watch a movie with my husband, go to my children's sport matches.

There was a distinction between life before disclosing this trauma and after ... And the life post-disclosure; that has its own set of new challenges and setbacks. I realised that I had no ability to feel good about myself. Relationships deteriorated, my availability for my friends ceased to exist. I lay in bed crying. I sat up at night scrolling through information. My physical health suffered, and my existing health conditions became exacerbated and complicated life even more.

I still cannot be kind to myself. I am my biggest critic, even when there is no need for it.<sup>158</sup>

Some victim-survivors told us they punished themselves for not disclosing or reporting the child sexual abuse when they were children, feeling that they may have been able to stop the perpetrator from going on to sexually abuse others.

'Sarah' described the anger and guilt she felt about not reporting the abuse when she was a child and the failures of adults to protect her.

'Betty', victim-survivor

*"It never fades.  
It is always a trauma.  
It is a current event  
every single moment  
of life. My life."*

### **‘Sarah’ (continued)**

What I’d experienced, I had to then hide it, and I didn’t think anyone would listen to me ... So I just pushed it to the back. And I actually somehow managed to pass my HSC by the skin of my teeth.

But then I spent the next few years really rudderless, and I felt that I couldn’t trust myself anymore. I probably trusted other people too much, which is bizarre. I can’t work out why that would have happened. I pushed it back so effectively.

I’m married to a lovely guy. I’ve been married for [almost 30] years. I didn’t tell him.

And then if you fast forward 40 years [since the abuse], I was [at] a family gathering ... My sister said to me, ‘Oh, I need to show you something’. She took me aside and showed me this [news] report and ... there [the perpetrator] was. After me and others that I think were probably concurrent with me, he then went on to keep offending. And his victims became younger and he was much more brutal.

When my sister showed me this report, I was surrounded by my family – my kids, my husband ... When I got home, I told my husband and he was pretty shocked and had to kind of process things himself.

I had this period where I had this self-loathing and feeling of guilt. You know, I kept thinking, ‘Oh my goodness, was I like a gateway victim?’ You know, ‘If I made it so easy, did I show him how easy it was?’

I know intellectually I don’t need to feel guilty about it. I know that he was the perpetrator and I was the victim. But emotionally – and particularly when you look at what [the perpetrator] went on to do – to know that I was probably pretty early on in his activities is pretty soul destroying ... I’m working through stuff around that. But I still have a hard time saying his name.

I’m so, so very angry at the people around me who really had every opportunity to protect me and others and failed to do so. Like, the negligence just blows my mind. And I know that it was a long time ago, but even in the mid-80s – I mean, come on.

Without realising it, it did affect me emotionally and the way I guided myself through a lot of my life. Somehow I managed to obtain enough optimism ... to know that I’d be OK. And I’m bloody lucky, I think. Bloody lucky that I was the age that I was, because I’m sure it’s much more damaging when you’re really little. And I thought even today I’m a bit of a fraud coming here, but for me, I just feel that it’s so important.<sup>159</sup>

Victim-survivors shared the varied ways their experiences of child sexual abuse had affected them. While some of these may be more widely understood in the community – for example, impacts on mental health – others may be less so. For example, victim-survivors revealed the sometimes subtle ways sexual abuse affected key decisions, milestones and achievements in their lives. This included decisions about parenting and having children or about their studies and careers. Many reported still experiencing flashbacks or ‘triggers’ from the sexual abuse and struggling to live as fully as they wished to.

Many victim-survivors acknowledged that their journey towards acceptance and healing was their own.

## Healing and recovery

Child sexual abuse can have significant and lasting impacts on a victim-survivor’s life. However, many victim-survivors described their journey of recovery from the impacts of childhood trauma. They shared things that helped them process and recover from the child sexual abuse they experienced, or at least better manage its impacts. This included professional counselling, connecting with family and friends, the affection of pets, creative pursuits and time in nature. Many found purpose in helping others and contributing to processes aimed at improving children’s safety into the future.

Victim-survivors explained that coming to terms with child sexual abuse is very personal and cannot be externally forced. For example, Andy B reflected that victim-survivors need to be in the right frame of mind at the right time for support to be effective, saying ‘all you can do is educate and plant the seed’.<sup>160</sup> He explained:

| You can throw out every support you like out there to people, but unless they’re ready to receive that support, it’s pointless.<sup>161</sup>

However, Andy B also said that the media portraying stories of people ‘coming out the other side’ of difficult life experiences ‘might just be the impetus to get someone moving along too’.<sup>162</sup>

Aden echoed the point that healing needs to be driven by the victim-survivor themselves:

| You can’t heal people. People actually have to heal themselves.<sup>163</sup>

Janelle explained the coping strategies she has learnt and the work she has done to live with the pain connected to her experiences of child sexual abuse.

### **Janelle (continued)**

I know because of therapy, I'm a lot stronger than I otherwise would be. But I know I still display the pain. And I think it's important for people to see that it lasts. It's a lifetime.

It's hard, but I'm here ... There's been a lot of work, a lot of tears. But it's worth it.

I've learnt a lot of techniques that I discovered that I've always been doing without realising – like mindfulness. I didn't realise that I'd always practised things like that, trying to focus on positive things.

Especially in primary school. I spent a lot of time on my own, so I suppose I had to go into my head more, focus on something else, like a beautiful flower in the garden at school or something like that. I have developed techniques to sort of cope.

I'm a big animal lover, so my animals help me a lot. The cat's a great source of comfort. And I've got this [toy] Humphrey. I've had it for a long time, really as long as I can remember. There's photos of me when I was like three holding Humphrey. When I hug it, it just soothes me. I have that next to my bed. I realise it's from when I was very little, when my parents were still together – it's the last time I felt safe. And so, the Humphrey sort of symbolises that.

I'm not ashamed and I don't mind telling the story about [the abuse] and my abuse [outside of school] as well, because ... it's not my secret, it's their secret and it only benefits them. Even before counselling, I've never had a qualm about talking about it because it's him who should be ashamed. It's his secret.<sup>164</sup>

'Boudicea' has used art, poetry and creativity to express herself, and some of these contributions are shared throughout the report. She told us how she has learnt to see her own strength and show herself more kindness and compassion (Figure 1.2).

**FIGURE 1.2: BOUDICEA THE SURVIVOR — SELF-PORTRAIT 'I STAND IN MY STRENGTH'**

'Boudicea' shared a self-portrait with the Forum, with the following description:

Two and a half years ago I had written 'I am ashamed of my shame'. Yesterday I was able to delete that line because now when I think of all my suffering and losses, I feel compassion for myself. Shame will not be my tomb. I am a survivor, not a victim anymore. I stand in my strength.<sup>165</sup>



Aden explained he went through a process of moving away from feeling like a 'victim' towards an empowered 'survivor':

I say to people, 'Yes, I'm a survivor, but I've transformed my story'. I don't want to live as a victim. I'm going to utilise my story. But I choose.<sup>166</sup>

'Simon' shared his recognition that his childhood experiences had affected him over the years, but chose to use different language to describe them:

I don't see the incidents as 'I was abused'. I see it as an incident that I got away from and because of that it's made me stronger.

I don't want to be seen as being abused because I think I got through it and survived. And I had a lot of other things worse than that happen to me that, again, I've got through and I've survived. And I'm not the only one. But now I've got to a stage where I've discovered myself and I've realised I've got a voice.<sup>167</sup>

Janelle described how counselling has helped her reinterpret her experiences with more self-compassion:

But sometimes I have taken it out on myself, you know – like self-hatred. And it's only been since my last [session with sexual assault counselling] that I've made the breakthrough that none of it was my fault and the self-hatred, the talk, has gone. I have learnt that it was up to the adults to protect us.<sup>168</sup>

Tim described his attitude to surviving traumatic experiences, recognising the resilience and personal growth that can come from those experiences:

You can be mindful of the impact in some ways, but at the end of the day you have an obligation to try and do what you can to survive these experiences. There's an element of resilience that comes out of an adverse experience, and I think in many ways that can't be underestimated ...

I think 'victim' and 'survivor' are two fundamentally different things. And I think it's a conscious mind shift to *surviving* something as opposed to victimhood.

I think you certainly can't change what's happened in the past. You can only really change the future.<sup>169</sup>

AJ explained the things that have helped him cope, including his beloved pets. He shared how hypnotherapy has helped in ways that were noticeable to the people around him.

### **AJ (continued)**

Trusting people is pretty heavy. I don't have many friends. My friend – he's furry and has four legs – he's a dog. I've got a dog and a cat. I've got one of each. My dog's my 'looker-after'. He looks after me. He keeps my mental health in control.

The lady I went and saw about five years ago that did a lot of hypnotherapy – she changed my life. Yeah, she changed my life. She dragged it all up and changed a lot of it, and it was marvellous. It was marvellous. Everyone noticed change. And that's when I started talking about it. Prior to that, if you had asked me about it, I would have said nothing. I wouldn't have told anyone.

That's what happened in my life, you know? It changes you forever.<sup>170</sup>

Some victim-survivors described the benefits of exercise and physical connection with their bodies as helping to manage trauma symptoms and support their healing. Glen found exercise and wellbeing had been 'really positive' for him.<sup>171</sup>

Ann Maree told us about using homeopathic flower essences to aid healing.<sup>172</sup> She said it is important to:

Repair ... the damage to the best of your integrity so that you can carry yourself with dignity and respect and say, 'It wasn't all my fault'.<sup>173</sup>

'Jacob' described the ways he takes care of himself:

I lift weights. I always eat pretty healthy. You know, I still like to get out the guitar and have a bit of a play.<sup>174</sup>

He also explained how he grounds himself in nature:

I wouldn't like to live in a big city. I can't handle too many people ... I'd rather be out in the bush so I can just go down the river and go fishing, go to drive and get away.<sup>175</sup>

Erena described the steps she took to carve a life for herself and come to terms with her experiences of child sexual abuse.

### **Erena (continued)**

I got a place of my own. I hadn't been on my own. I didn't know who I was. Here I was, this supposedly capable woman that had been all over the world, ran businesses. But living on my own, facing myself, I didn't know who I was.

I started my new life. And I went to rehab and a 12-step program ... I gradually rebuilt my life, went into community housing and I went and studied social and community support.

I've healed a lot. It's a journey. But I have recognised that it was the culprit for all my trauma.

I came here today with the thinking that I want some closure. I can speak my truth because I've been honest to myself. I can speak my voice and I have no inhibitions. I feel like I've healed so much, but I doubt myself sometimes ... I still have a lot more to do or heal.<sup>176</sup>

Child sexual abuse can damage victim-survivors' trust in people, making it harder to form close connections with others. However, some victim-survivors explained that when they connected and shared with other people – such as partners, family members, friends or other victim-survivors – they often felt stronger. For some, it helped lift the weight of silence and secrecy. For example, 'Sarah' expressed gratitude for her support network:

I just think I'm really lucky to have the right people around me, and I feel for people who don't really.<sup>177</sup>

Andy B credited close friends for encouraging him to get 'outside help'.<sup>178</sup> This led him to seek psychiatric and psychological support for PTSD, acute anxiety, panic disorder and depression, which he now describes as 'really well managed'.<sup>179</sup> He explained the broader network of support he receives:

I've got what I'd describe ... as formal supports and informal supports. My informal supports are people like my wife, my sister, other close friends ... But there's also the more formal ones – you know, my GP ... I've got a range of counsellors and psychologists that I tap into.<sup>180</sup>

Some victim-survivors credited family – particularly their children, for those who have them – as helping motivate their survival and recovery process. Andy B told us:

| That was where my rock bottom was, but it was only then that I had a desire to be alive for my children, be alive for myself.<sup>181</sup>

Several victim-survivors found purpose and drive in helping other people, particularly children.

‘Ethan’ said:

| I’ve just got this fire in my gut – this inner spirit – and I’ve got a really, really good sense of humour, and I’m very lucky to have that. Just a burning desire to talk about things and help other people.<sup>182</sup>

‘Jacob’ shared how helping others has empowered him in his own healing:

| I like helping people. It kind of gives life a bit of purpose, I guess. I hate seeing people hurting ... We [can] make the world a better place or a worse one, I suppose, and I’d rather make it a better one if I can.<sup>183</sup>

Daz spoke about struggling with his mental health. He told us that his passion to protect children is the reason he is still here.

### **Daz (continued)**

I had to find what worked for me, my reasons for being here. Couldn’t do it for family anymore. Couldn’t do it for myself ... This passion I have to protect children – that’s my reason. That’s the reason why I went through what I went through. That’s the reason why I’ve had all these experiences throughout my life. That’s the reason I’m here.

I’ve told my story that many times. I find it easier to tell someone at a bus stop, which I’ve done many times, for one reason – to educate. If we don’t start making conversations about abuse normal, the problem will continue to grow.

The shame and blame isn’t on me ... I don’t want to be anonymous. Why should I? I’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. This happened to me. This was a crime. I’m a victim of a crime – an insidious crime. I’m here and I’m alive and ... I’m doing OK.<sup>184</sup>

‘Martin’ described his motivation for speaking with the Forum as wanting ‘to be able to have a conversation’ about his experiences of child sexual abuse for the first time:<sup>185</sup>

| So that was really the main driver – that for 50 years I haven’t spoken about it.<sup>186</sup>

Andy M said he had begun to open up more to people in his life about what had happened to him:

There's a group of us who worked together ... at a recent gathering ... I went ahead and told them without going into all the details of the abuse – 'I just want to explain that to you. I feel it's good for me to [tell people] and I want you to understand me a little bit better perhaps'.<sup>187</sup>

Glen said he recognised that not every victim-survivor may want to come forward or take part in processes like the Forum, but he said the opportunity itself is important:

People needed the opportunity to tell their story. Whether they take it or not is another story. It's up to them.<sup>188</sup>

Alex described how participating in a private session as part of the Royal Commission several years ago helped him:

This gave me a chance to finally tell my story and to come out of that with an acknowledgement that this did happen. I finally felt believed and was able to move forward in some way, which really benefited my mental and physical health.<sup>189</sup>

He told us sharing his participation in the Royal Commission led to an acknowledgement from his father:

Dad apologised before he passed away ... because I told him that I'd been to the Royal Commission. And he said, 'I'm really sorry that we didn't do more'.<sup>190</sup>

'Charles' said he had three goals in contributing to the Forum:

(1) To help people who suffered around the same time I did – the victims of rape, (2) To help people who are considering going through what I've gone through over the last two years [legal proceedings] because that's a lived experience, and (3) That it never happens again to any other child.<sup>191</sup>

Andy B, victim-survivor

"Pain doesn't disappear ... It's like grief – it's massive on day one, but over time we're growing around it."

Andy B described the pragmatic way in which he came to learn to live alongside trauma.

### Andy B

Somebody broke your brain or part of your brain when you were 10. We need to work around it so that there's no expectation that they're going to get fixed and they're going to be normal. I have no expectation I'm going to be fixed or going to be normal. I carry the stuff around with me. I've got to learn to manage it. You know, it's classic pain management on an emotional level ...

Pain doesn't disappear. Trauma is a black hole and each day, each therapy session, each whatever, we've got this dark, dark hole in us and it's huge when it's first there. It's like grief – it's massive on day one, but over time we're growing around it. Doesn't mean it disappears, just that we grow around it as we move forward.<sup>192</sup>

'Warren' described feeling unburdened after his personalised session with the Forum, reflecting, 'I'm relieved because it gets it out of me'.<sup>193</sup>

Aden described how using his experiences to drive positive change is what motivates him:

I've chosen not to live in that victimhood. I'm a survivor. And in some ways, that's why I'm here today. It's because I actually want to use my voice. I want to use it in a way that I can develop or support developing programs that actually enhance outcomes and create early intervention because I think it's still not there.<sup>194</sup>

One of the Forum's objectives was to offer victim-survivors individual and collective healing. We hope the Forum has helped participants progress further along the road of healing and recovery. We also hope this report is a beacon to the broader victim-survivor community, who may also feel seen, validated and reminded that they are not alone. Experiencing child sexual abuse can be an isolating experience, and we recognise the strength that can come from connection and solidarity with others.

## 1.3 For the record

The experiences in this report are confronting to read.

We need to learn from the past to improve the future. This was an overwhelming motivator for victim-survivors who came forward – they wanted to make schools safer for children into the future. They wanted their experiences to be heard and understood by the community, schools and education departments, regulators and governments.

This section contains our recommendations to ensure the public record of victim-survivors' experiences is accessible and appropriately preserved.

### Access to the report

One of the Forum's important objectives was to contribute to a shared understanding among all Victorians of the significant and far-reaching impacts of past child sexual abuse in Victorian schools. This meant recording the experiences of victim-survivors and ensuring that an independent public record of their accounts would be accessible to the community. The Forum was mindful that ready access to the report for all victim-survivors of child sexual abuse – not only those who shared their experiences with us – could support their individual and collective healing.

Victim-survivors who shared their experiences with us could indicate their preference as to whether some or all of their information would be treated as 'public' (where identifying information could be included in the report), 'anonymous' (where their experiences could be included in the report without identifying them) or 'confidential' (where their information could be considered by the Forum but would not be included or quoted in the report).

In preparing the report, we were careful to ensure victim-survivors' choices about the treatment of their experiences have been respected to the extent possible. We have also been mindful to ensure the content of the report does not jeopardise any legal proceedings involving the victim-survivors.

The Forum's establishing instrument gave us the power to make recommendations on the form of any restrictions to be placed on public access to the report and any records of our work.<sup>195</sup> We believe there should be no restrictions on public access to the report, and we recommend that it be published in its entirety as soon as possible after it is delivered to the Victorian Government.

We recommend that printed copies of the report be available for viewing at the State Library of Victoria and in all Victorian public libraries. We recognise that access to the report in public libraries might require those libraries to consider how they can make access available in a sensitive and trauma-informed way.

The Forum further recommends that an online version of the report and its related videos (the Easy Read guide and animated summary) be made publicly available for download or viewing for at least 50 years.

### **Recommendation 1**

The Forum recommends that the Victorian Government:

- arrange for the report to be tabled in the Victorian Parliament in an unredacted form as soon as possible and no later than 31 August 2026
- ensure printed copies of the report are delivered to the State Library of Victoria and all Victorian public libraries, to be available for public access
- make a digital version of the report, together with related videos (the Easy Read guide and animated summary), publicly available online for at least 50 years.

## **Protecting sensitive personal information**

Consistent with the Forum's objectives, engaging with participants in a sensitive and trauma-informed way was an important feature of our approach. Many victim-survivors were understandably sensitive about how their deeply personal information would be used and protected, both during and after the Forum.

One way the Forum can protect the information it received is by making a restricted publication order. These orders are made under the *Inquiries Act 2014* (Vic) and can prohibit or restrict the publication of information received by the Forum.

The Forum issued two restricted publication orders under section 106(1) of the *Inquiries Act* that limit the public sharing of information that could identify victim-survivors and perpetrators. These were issued for one of the following reasons:

- To protect the identity of victim-survivors who spoke to the Forum and did not want to be publicly identified (or could not be for legal reasons).
- To restrict the identification of alleged perpetrators to avoid interfering with any current or future civil or criminal proceedings.

The restricted publication orders are published on the Forum's website. The Forum expects these orders will continue to have effect after the Forum ceases to exist, although these orders will only apply in accordance with their terms.

The Forum was a time-limited formal review established under the Inquiries Act. Throughout the Forum's operation, we sought to empower and respect victim-survivors' preferences about how their information was used. The focus of our approach was always the person, not the record. However, we could not provide victim-survivors with specific assurances about how their information would be managed after the Forum's operations ended. The inability to provide these assurances risked undermining the preferences of victim-survivors and may have a chilling effect on their willingness to take part in other government inquiries and reviews. It also created the risk that, with the passage of time, the focus would shift to managing a record, rather than respecting the person and their preferences.

After a review such as this concludes, records are required, by law, to be transferred to the Department of Premier and Cabinet and then on to the Public Record Office Victoria for archiving.<sup>196</sup> At that time, relevant ministers can deem the records 'closed' – for example, because they contain private or sensitive information. This means they are not open for public inspection. In practice, the most sensitive records are closed for periods of 75 to 99 years.<sup>197</sup>

However, in our decommissioning process, we became aware of some legislative gaps that may compromise the protection of these sensitive records. For example:

- The Forum's records (including closed records) are subject to the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Vic). This means that even closed records can be requested and released to the public. While the Forum would expect some of those records would be withheld from release based on relevant exemptions under that Act, these decisions would be made by the Victorian Government, not the Forum.
- While the Inquiries Act prevents the use of certain information provided to a formal review in civil or criminal proceedings, the scope of the relevant section (section 112) is unclear.<sup>198</sup> For example, it is unclear whether information could be used to inform a defence in a legal proceeding.

At the Commonwealth level, the *Royal Commissions Amendment (Enhancing Engagement) Act 2023* (Cth) was introduced to ensure personal or confidential information disclosed to royal commissions is protected after they conclude and is exempt from freedom of information legislation.<sup>199</sup>

Victorian inquiries have pointed to the potential risks to personal information described above. For example:

- The Yoorrook Justice Commission recommended records containing information that was shared on a confidential basis remain confidential for at least 99 years once transferred to the Victorian Government, consistent with the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty.<sup>200</sup>

- The Beaumaris Board of Inquiry recommended changes to the Inquiries Act to ensure information it identified as confidential, anonymous or sensitive remained confidential for 99 years after the records were transferred to the Victorian Government. It also recommended that this position be legislated for all future inquiries, particularly those with a truth-telling focus.

In June 2024 the Victorian Government indicated its intention to progress options to address these issues. However, at the time of writing this report, the Victorian Government has only acted on the recommendation of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. The recommendation from the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry has not been implemented, with the government saying it is ‘analysing options’ relating to the protection of records for other inquiries.<sup>201</sup>

The Chair of the Forum has written to the Premier, the Hon Jacinta Allan MP, requesting that the Victorian Government (as the future custodian of the Forum’s records) ensure as far as possible that the preferences of those who provided personal information to the Forum be respected.

The Forum reiterates the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry’s recommendation to amend the Inquiries Act to resolve the current ambiguity in legal protections. This will allow future inquiries and reviews to offer appropriate clarity and comfort to people that their personal information will be protected, enabling genuine choice and removing potential barriers to future participation.

In designing any legislative reform, the Victorian Government should recognise the need to balance the benefits of protections with maintaining appropriate accountability, transparency and scrutiny of reviews and inquiries themselves. It is also important to ensure such processes are sensitive to the fact that victim-survivors may seek access to such information or records themselves.

## Recommendation 2

The Forum recommends that the Victorian Government amend the *Inquiries Act 2014* (Vic) to ensure personal information identified by a relevant royal commission, board of inquiry or formal review as confidential, anonymous or sensitive is:

- kept confidential for a minimum of 99 years following the end of the royal commission, board of inquiry or formal review
- exempted from the application of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Vic) for a minimum of 99 years following the end of the royal commission, board of inquiry or formal review.

These changes should apply retrospectively to the Forum.

# Part 1 Endnotes

1. Submission from Grant Holland, p 17.
2. Submission from 'Betty', pp 1-3, 6. Emphasis in original.
3. Personalised session with 'Joshua'.
4. This is explored further in Part 2 of this report.
5. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.
6. Personalised session with 'Joan'.
7. Submission from Grant Holland, pp 4-5.
8. Personalised session with Ann Maree Sloan-Coleman.
9. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 4; personalised session with 'Sigrid'.
10. Personalised session with 'Ruth'.
11. Personalised session with 'Warren'.
12. Submission from Alex Raven, pp 1-2.
13. Personalised session with Erena.
14. Personalised session with 'Sigrid'.
15. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 3.
16. Personalised session with 'Sigrid'.
17. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 2.
18. Submission from 'Paige', p 2.
19. For example, submission from 'Sigrid', p 2; personalised session with 'Sigrid'; personalised session with Janelle Tasic; personalised session with Daz Gibbs.
20. Personalised session with Daz Gibbs.
21. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
22. Personalised session with George De Domenico.
23. Personalised session with George De Domenico.
24. Personalised session with 'Joan'.
25. Personalised session with 'Simon'.
26. Personalised session with 'Simon'.
27. For more information about grooming, refer to Part 2.
28. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
29. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
30. Personalised session with Grant Holland.
31. Personalised session with Phil.
32. Submission from 'Paige', p 1.
33. Submission from 'Paige', p 1.
34. Personalised session with Alex Raven.
35. Personalised session with 'Brendon'.
36. Personalised session with James Macbeth.
37. Personalised session with James Macbeth.

38. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.
39. Personalised session with 'Joan'.
40. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
41. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
42. Submission from Alex Raven, p 1.
43. Personalised session with 'Jacob'.
44. Personalised session with Ann Maree Sloan-Coleman.
45. Submission from 'Grace', p 1; personalised session with 'Grace'.
46. Personalised session with 'Warren'.
47. Personalised session with Erena.
48. Personalised session with 'Claire'.
49. Submission from David Zeunert, pp 1-2.
50. Submission from 'Sigrid', pp 2-3.
51. Submission from 'Betty', pp 1-2.
52. Personalised session with 'Sarah'.
53. Personalised session with 'Boudicea'.
54. Trauma bonding is a term used when a person has positive feelings for a perpetrator of abuse, making the person feel attached to and dependent on the perpetrator. Indicators of a child developing trauma bonds can include them lying to family and friends by saying the abuse did not occur, or believing they are at fault: The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Keeping children in mind and view practice guide 2: theoretical frameworks underpinning practice*, n.d., p 9.
55. Submission 1 from 'Boudicea', p 1.
56. Submission 1 from 'Boudicea', p 3.
57. Submission 1 from 'Boudicea', pp 3-6, 8-9.
58. Submission from Grant Holland, p 6.
59. For example, personalised session with Erena.
60. Personalised session with 'Simon'.
61. For example, personalised session with 'Oscar'; personalised session with 'Joan'.
62. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
63. Personalised session with AJ Toughill.
64. Personalised session with George De Domenico.
65. Personalised session with 'Joan'.
66. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
67. Personalised session with James Macbeth.
68. Personalised session with Tim Courtney.
69. Personalised session with 'Sarah'.
70. Personalised session with 'Joshua'.
71. Personalised session with 'Ethan'.
72. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
73. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
74. Personalised session with Alex Raven.

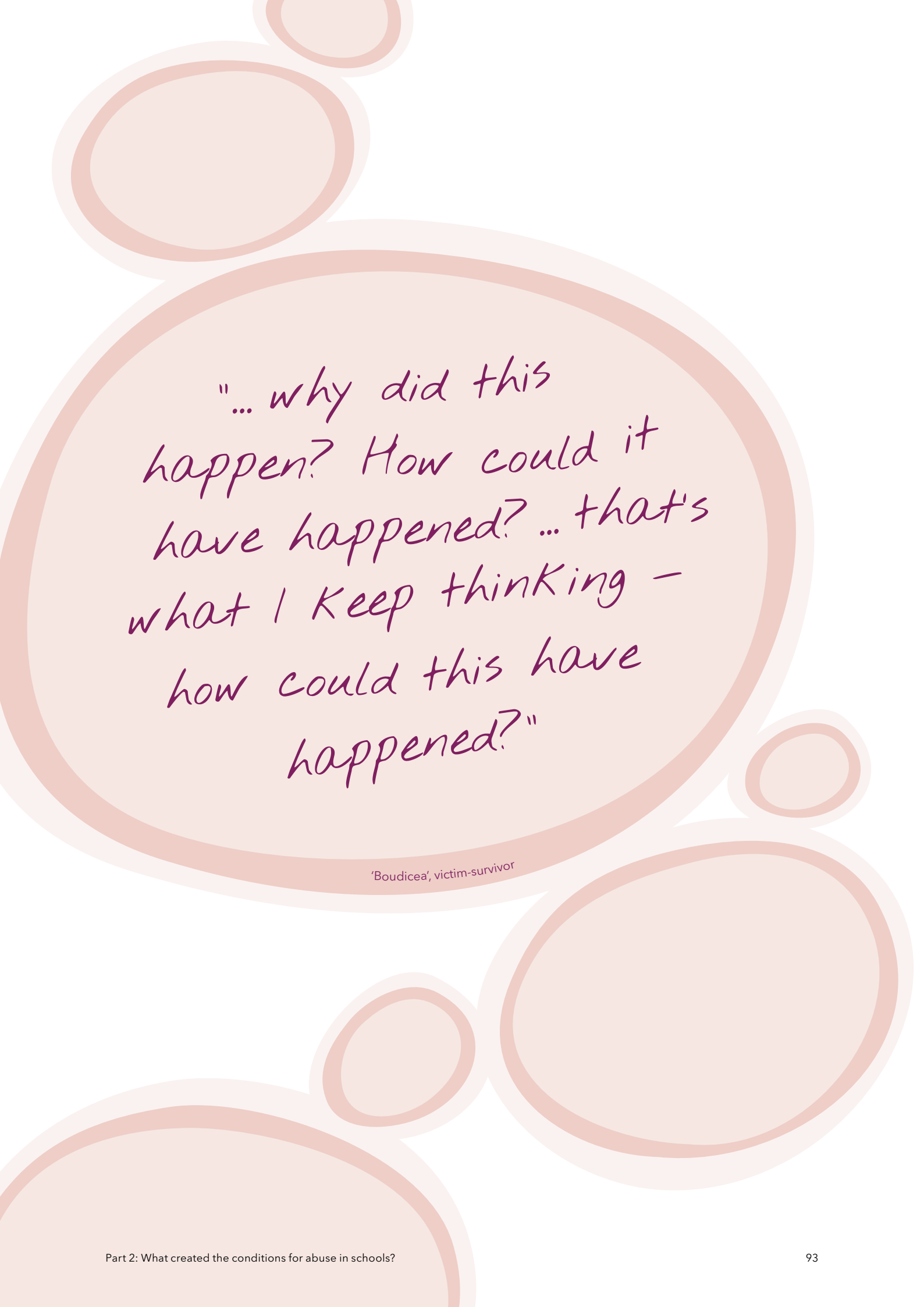
75. Submission from 'Paige', pp 1-2.
76. Submission from 'Sigrid', pp 4, 9-10.
77. Personalised session with 'Martin'.
78. Personalised session with 'Violet'.
79. Submission from Alex Raven, p 1.
80. Submission from Alex Raven, pp 1-2.
81. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.
82. Personalised session with 'Brendon'.
83. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 5.
84. Submission from Grant Holland, p 6.
85. Submission from Grant Holland, p 7.
86. Submission from Grant Holland, pp 7-9.
87. Submission from Grant Holland, p 9.
88. Submission from Grant Holland, p 17.
89. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
90. Submission from 'Betty', pp 4-6.
91. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 5.
92. For example, submission from 'Sigrid', p 4.
93. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.
94. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
95. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 3.
96. Personalised session with Erena.
97. Personalised session with 'Joan'.
98. Personalised session with AJ Toughill.
99. Personalised session with AJ Toughill.
100. Submission from Alex Raven, p 2.
101. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.
102. For example, personalised session with 'Jacob'.
103. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
104. Personalised session with 'Simon'.
105. Personalised session with 'Simon'.
106. Personalised session with 'Martin'.
107. Submission 1 from 'Boudicea', p 2.
108. Personalised session with Ann Maree Sloan-Coleman.
109. Personalised session with George De Domenico.
110. Personalised session with 'Warren'.
111. Personalised session with 'Violet'.
112. Personalised session with 'Violet'.
113. Personalised session with 'Violet'.
114. Submission from Grant Holland, p 5.

115. Personalised session with 'Jacob'.
116. Personalised session with 'Charles'.
117. Personalised session with Glen Fearnett.
118. Personalised session with Glen Fearnett.
119. Personalised session with Glen Fearnett.
120. Personalised session with Glen Fearnett.
121. Personalised session with Phil.
122. Personalised session with AJ Toughill.
123. Submission from Grant Holland, p 10.
124. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
125. Submission 1 from 'Boudicea', p 12.
126. Submission 1 from 'Boudicea', p 12.
127. Submission 1 from 'Boudicea', p 12.
128. Personalised session with 'Brendon'.
129. Submission from Grant Holland, p 9.
130. Submission from Grant Holland, p 6.
131. Submission from Alex Raven, p 2.
132. Personalised session with 'Martin'.
133. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
134. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
135. Personalised session with Daz Gibbs.
136. Submission 2 from 'Boudicea', p 3.
137. Personalised session with 'Sigrid'.
138. Personalised session with Erena.
139. Personalised session with 'Violet'.
140. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
141. Personalised session with 'Joan'.
142. Personalised session with Alex Raven.
143. Personalised session with 'Martin'.
144. Personalised session with 'Martin'.
145. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
146. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
147. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
148. Personalised session with 'Simon'.
149. Personalised session with Glen Fearnett.
150. Personalised session with 'Violet'.
151. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 3.
152. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
153. For example, personalised session with Erena; personalised session with 'Jacob'.
154. Personalised session with 'Jacob'.

155. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
156. Personalised session with 'Jacob'.
157. Personalised session with 'Claire'.
158. Submission from 'Betty', pp 3-4. Emphasis in original.
159. Personalised session with 'Sarah'.
160. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
161. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
162. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
163. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
164. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
165. Submission 2 from 'Boudicea', p 5.
166. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
167. Personalised session with 'Simon'.
168. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
169. Personalised session with Tim Courtney.
170. Personalised session with AJ Toughill.
171. Personalised session with Glen Fearnett.
172. Personalised session with Ann Maree Sloan-Coleman.
173. Personalised session with Ann Maree Sloan-Coleman.
174. Personalised session with 'Jacob'.
175. Personalised session with 'Jacob'.
176. Personalised session with Erena.
177. Personalised session with 'Sarah'.
178. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
179. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
180. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
181. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
182. Personalised session with 'Ethan'.
183. Personalised session with 'Jacob'.
184. Personalised session with Daz Gibbs; submission from Daz Gibbs, p 1.
185. Personalised session with 'Martin'.
186. Personalised session with 'Martin'.
187. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
188. Personalised session with Glen Fearnett.
189. Submission from Alex Raven, p 2.
190. Personalised session with Alex Raven.
191. Personalised session with 'Charles'.
192. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
193. Personalised session with 'Warren'.
194. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.



195. Premier of Victoria, *Appointment of the Forum for Truth and Recognition: victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools*, Establishing instrument, 9 June 2025.
196. The Premier may determine to transfer the records to another public office: *Inquiries Act 2014* (Vic), s 124.
197. Public Records Office Victoria, *Closure of public records under section 9 of the Public Records Act 1973*, 2013.
198. As considered by the Supreme Court of Victoria in *Re Mokbel (No 2)* [2024] VSC 39.
199. Refer to the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth), s 7(2E)(a)(vi).
200. Yoorrook Justice Commission, *Report into Victoria's child protection and criminal justice systems*, 2023, p 394.
201. Victorian Government, *Progress updates on the Board of Inquiry recommendations*, Victorian Government website, 2026, accessed 25 February 2026. <https://www.vic.gov.au/progress-updates-board-inquiry-recommendations>



"... why did this happen? How could it have happened? ... that's what I keep thinking - how could this have happened?"

'Boudicea', victim-survivor

# What created the conditions for abuse in schools?

## 2.1 Introduction

Child sexual abuse is never the fault of the victim-survivor.

It is difficult to understand how children can be sexually abused in institutions entrusted with the responsibility of educating and caring for them. Past explanations focused on the characteristics of individual perpetrators or the attributes of victim-survivors.<sup>1</sup> We now know that child sexual abuse in institutions is not the result of a single factor.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it occurs in eco-systems where power dynamics, hierarchical structures, organisational cultures and wider community attitudes combine in complex ways to silence, disbelieve and devalue children.

This part of the report contextualises the experiences of child sexual abuse described in Part 1. It describes some of the factors that may have contributed to, or created the conditions for, child sexual abuse in Victorian schools before 2000. It draws on the experiences we heard as well as research and previous inquiries – including the Royal Commission and the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry – to highlight factors that increase the risk of child sexual abuse in schools.

This part considers:

- community attitudes towards children, schools and child sexual abuse
- how perpetrators evade detection
- governance, organisational culture and leadership in schools
- responses to allegations of abuse in schools.

It was beyond our scope to assess the extent to which the risk factors discussed in this part contributed to the experiences of victim-survivors described in Part 1, or are still a concern for children in Victorian schools. Since 2000, Victoria has introduced extensive reforms to child safety, including in schools. We discuss these changes in Part 3. Nevertheless, victim-survivors shared with us their fears that some of these risk factors remain. We share these perspectives in Part 4.

## 2.2 Community attitudes to children, schools and child sexual abuse

Community attitudes, values, knowledge, understanding, assumptions and norms influence how schools and the people who work in them treat children. These influences can be especially powerful in shaping responses to child sexual abuse.

We heard that, in the 1960s and 1970s, children were expected to be ‘seen but not heard’ – meaning they did not have the right to express their views or question authority. One victim-survivor reflected:

... you know there is a broader cultural problem in terms of children being believed and it was certainly in my case growing up in the 60s and 70s – this overt sort of culture of children being seen but not [heard] ...<sup>3</sup>

Children were taught to respect and listen to adults. As one victim-survivor said:

Did I know [the child sexual abuse] was wrong? Of course I did. But I was a tiny, 4-foot-11-inch child, terrified and taught to respect and obey authority.<sup>4</sup>

Another victim-survivor said:

He was an adult. We were children. We were always told to listen to adults. We were always told to respect our elders and all that. And he was an elder. He was in his 60s or 70s.<sup>5</sup>

This had the effect of silencing children who had experienced sexual abuse.

A related view was that children lack credibility – that they are highly impressionable and prone to invent, exaggerate, misunderstand or incorrectly recall information.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, adults were trusted over children.<sup>7</sup> We heard that this deterred some children from disclosing experiences of sexual abuse in schools for fear of not being believed or being punished for speaking up against an authority figure.<sup>8</sup>

One victim-survivor reflected:

I think when I was in primary school, the teachers just treated kids like idiots.<sup>9</sup>

Several victim-survivors who disclosed their experiences to an adult while they were children told us they were not taken at their word. Instead, their concerns were ignored or dismissed:

... I went back and told my teacher. And he said, 'Oh, no, you're just over-reacting'. I went home and told my parents. My parents said, 'No'. And then I went to the principal – nothing. No one would believe me.<sup>10</sup>

One victim-survivor said staff at her school continued to disbelieve allegations against the perpetrator, even after criminal charges were laid:

And I remember [another teacher] saying to me, 'Why are you doing this? Why are you doing this to this man who has a wife and three kids?' And I said to her, 'I will cut off my arm, my right arm, if you just believe me'. So, yeah, no one believed me.<sup>11</sup>

Child sexual abuse is more likely to occur in schools where children do not feel safe disclosing concerns about their safety, or confident that they will be listened to, believed and taken seriously.<sup>12</sup> First Peoples children face unique challenges in speaking up – a child who experiences racism and feels culturally unsafe at school is unlikely to feel safe raising a concern about sexual abuse by a teacher or other staff member.<sup>13</sup>

In the past, schools were viewed as highly trustworthy and credible institutions.<sup>14</sup> Many families deferred to the authority of schools; principals and teachers were considered pillars of the community. As one victim-survivor observed:

| Teachers have this role and they have authority. We give them all authority.<sup>15</sup>

Another victim-survivor told us:

| I was always taught you respect your teachers and the priests and all that ...<sup>16</sup>

These attitudes may have made many parents less likely to question the actions and decisions of principals and teachers. The high regard in which many families held schools and their staff may have discouraged victim-survivors from disclosing sexual abuse.<sup>17</sup>

In Australia in the 1960s and 1970s, social norms about sex and sexuality inhibited many parents from talking to their children (particularly young children) about healthy sexual development and bodily autonomy.<sup>18</sup> This left many children unable to identify their experiences as sexual abuse:

As a child, I had no idea what [the perpetrator] was doing because I wasn't sexually aware, but I knew this stuff felt wrong ... We couldn't verbalise what he was doing to us, as we didn't know what it was and we weren't emotionally mature enough to talk about it properly.<sup>19</sup>

Another victim-survivor said:

That's when I started to understand – I thought everything was normal up 'til that point. Because this is the pre-internet age. You didn't have anything. You didn't have a book.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, societal attitudes relating to adult sexual relationships were changing. One victim-survivor described the 1970s as involving an 'unshackling of norms' and a 'loosening of boundaries', leading to 'more permissive' ideas, which she felt contributed to risks of sexual abuse against older children.<sup>21</sup> She commented:

Society was indeed navigating its way out of the sexual liberation movement of the 60s and into the era of the women's movement but without sufficient guard rails to ensure safety and the prevention of exploitation and abuse.<sup>22</sup>

Another victim-survivor observed that popular culture sexualised teenage girls:

... when I compare today to the 1970s, there is no comparison ... you listen to the songs of the time, and just a Beatles song – 'She was just 17, you know what I mean' – yeah, that's how it was and the sexualisation of the young ... was accepted on a certain level.<sup>23</sup>

We also heard that the taboo nature of child sexual abuse prevented many victim-survivors from disclosing their experiences to their parents or another trusted adult:

The topic of paedophilia was so swept under the carpet as to the point where this doesn't occur in polite society ... and so it was hidden.<sup>24</sup>

Another victim-survivor said:

[My father] could see something wasn't right and so could my mum. And I could never tell what that was, but I felt something wasn't right, but I couldn't speak about [it] because you couldn't speak about it.<sup>25</sup>

Widespread homophobia (including the criminalisation of homosexuality) compounded the shame felt by many victim-survivors who were sexually abused by a perpetrator of the same gender, creating another obstacle to disclosing abuse.<sup>26</sup>

One victim-survivor reflected on the community's tolerance of homophobia and other prejudiced views at the time:

Those years that we're looking [at] and talking about, probably the level of acceptable behaviour in society regards a lot of things like racism, homophobia – all of those things, I think it was probably a lot more tolerated than what it is now. And if you were from one of those communities, you were often and openly vilified because of it.<sup>27</sup>

When community members hold misconceptions about child sexual abuse, these can flow into the organisational culture of institutions such as schools. These problematic beliefs can contribute to environments where child sexual abuse is not identified or addressed, placing children at increased risk of harm.

Common misconceptions include:

- *Child sexual abuse is rare.* We now know that more than one in four Australians have experienced child sexual abuse.<sup>28</sup>
- *Children's disclosures of child sexual abuse are inherently unreliable and should not be trusted.*<sup>29</sup> Research indicates that children rarely lie about child sexual abuse.<sup>30</sup>
- *'Genuine' victims of sexual abuse physically resist the abuse and report it immediately.* In fact, perpetrators often groom and manipulate children to normalise sexual abuse, maintaining compliance through threats or fear or by making children believe the behaviour is 'consensual' or a 'special relationship'.<sup>31</sup>
- *People who have experienced child sexual abuse will become perpetrators themselves.* Research indicates that the vast majority of victim-survivors of child sexual abuse do not become perpetrators.<sup>32</sup>
- *Perpetrators of child sexual abuse are obviously 'creepy' and 'sinister'.* In fact, they are often seen as upstanding, trusted community figures.<sup>33</sup>

As one victim-survivor observed:

... no one's walking around with a big sign on their head saying, 'I'm a sex offender – I commit crimes against children'.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, another victim-survivor said:

... people need to realise that [a perpetrator is] not a monster. It's not someone who, I don't know, is walking with a limp. It's that nice guy who you like because he's groomed you to think he's nice. So you will look the other way.<sup>35</sup>

One victim-survivor commented on the common misconception that some children or young people 'seduce' adults and are 'willing participants' in the abuse. She referred to the belief that:

... an older adolescent is not a child, is somehow to be considered complicit in the abuse they suffered and therefore not 'innocent', undeserving of validation or justice, caught in the proximity of a similar attitude that has prevailed for decades about adult sexual assault victims.<sup>36</sup>

Almost all victim-survivors who spoke to us described experiencing perpetrator behaviours that amounted to grooming. However, at the time of their experiences there was little community understanding of the dynamics and patterns of grooming. This meant that parents and school staff were ill-equipped to recognise the early signs that a child was being sexually abused at school:

| I just don't think that at the time with the education that people had around me that they would have seen anything wrong happening.<sup>37</sup>

We discuss grooming further below.

## 2.3 How perpetrators evade detection

Perpetrators are frequently described as popular, charming and charismatic. Many seek to build reputations in the community as responsible, caring and upstanding people.<sup>38</sup>

One victim-survivor reflected on how confusing it was to encounter the perpetrator at a relative's home:

| They like him. He's their next-door neighbour. He's their friend. He must be a good guy because everybody likes him. But that really confuses you.<sup>39</sup>

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse in institutions may occupy positions of leadership, power and authority.<sup>40</sup> We heard that, in the past, such positions encouraged or required unquestioning trust and respect. Some victim-survivors told us perpetrators in such roles could also elicit fear:

| He was a charismatic, suave-looking and sophisticated bloke. He was an ex-elite level footballer, and boys were completely fearful of and obedient to him. Whatever he said, you did.<sup>41</sup>

Schools can provide perpetrators with ready, often unsupervised access to children.<sup>42</sup> While all children are vulnerable to sexual abuse, perpetrators may strategically target children with particular vulnerabilities because they are perceived as easier to manipulate and less likely to disclose the abuse.<sup>43</sup> This may include children experiencing family conflict, violence or breakdown; children with a history of abuse; children with disability; or children who lack an understanding of sex and sexuality.<sup>44</sup>

Perpetrators may also exploit a child's social isolation – for example, where the child is experiencing bullying or is new to the school and lacks friends or a network of supportive peers.<sup>45</sup> One victim-survivor told us:

That's probably my biggest sort of question I ultimately have got unanswered is: 'Why was I ... subject to the attention of a perpetrator at a new school?' That's always gonna be a question that I'll ultimately never get an answer for. But I think there must be something in the makeup of an individual that makes you appear externally vulnerable.<sup>46</sup>

Some victim-survivors explained how being the child of migrant parents isolated them from their peers and limited their ability to disclose the abuse.<sup>47</sup>

Perpetrators are often highly strategic in the techniques they use to groom children, families, institutions and the community so they can sexually abuse children without detection. Grooming involves behaviours that manipulate and control a child, as well as their family and other support networks or institutions, in order to perpetrate child sexual abuse. The intent of grooming is to:

- gain access to the child
- obtain the child's trust or compliance
- maintain the child's silence
- avoid discovery of the sexual abuse.<sup>48</sup>

Grooming enables a perpetrator to establish an emotional connection with a child, build trust and create a 'special relationship' with them.

Grooming is often subtle, gradual and difficult to discern. It may involve behaviours that otherwise appear to be 'normal' or caring. It is often central to how perpetrators manipulate and coerce children and enforce their silence.<sup>49</sup>

Until relatively recently, grooming was not well understood as a concept, nor was it treated as a crime.<sup>50</sup> There was also far less guidance on the expected professional conduct of teachers and what constituted inappropriate conduct towards students.<sup>51</sup> This may have helped to obscure grooming and enabled perpetrators to positively frame inappropriate behaviours as special attentiveness or teacherly devotion to students.<sup>52</sup>

Perpetrators often groom the families of the children they intend to sexually abuse. Building trust with the important adults in a child's life makes it easier for the perpetrator to gain access to the child, who may then feel unable to disclose the abuse to those adults.<sup>53</sup> One victim-survivor said the perpetrator:

... [befriended] my father and he started coming to our house, drinking beer, smoking pipes with my father in his time off, bringing his wife and their little daughters ...<sup>54</sup>

Another victim-survivor said:

This man was clearly a predatory, serial offender, one who groomed the community and his colleagues as well as myself, but at least to some degree, he was enabled by the adults around me, and the attitudes of the era ...<sup>55</sup>

Perpetrators also leverage the trust and power of institutions to avoid detection.<sup>56</sup> They rely on their relationships and good standing with colleagues – on their reputations as friendly, kind and caring people – to avoid suspicion. This is often described as grooming an institution.<sup>57</sup> One victim-survivor told us:

Often people who commit child sexual abuse – they groom the child, then they groom the institution, they groom the staff, and then everyone goes, ‘Oh, he wouldn’t have done that’.<sup>58</sup>

We heard that perpetrators also exploited the beliefs, attitudes and biases of individuals, schools and communities (discussed above) to discredit children and avoid accountability.

We heard that perpetrators took advantage of isolated or unsupervised locations on school premises – such as changing rooms, toilets and specialist classrooms – to sexually abuse children. The likelihood of detection in such environments is lower.

One victim-survivor shared:

... if you were doing history you would go to this classroom and you would work with that teacher. But there was a room off to the side, which he kept his bean bags and stuff in and if you are special, you’re invited into that room.<sup>59</sup>

Another victim-survivor told us that the perpetrator sexually abused him in specialist classrooms and a school office – all locations where he was alone with the perpetrator.<sup>60</sup> In the past, there was less emphasis on ensuring students were not alone in one-to-one situations with adults, and school buildings were not designed to maximise visibility.

We heard that perpetrators also sexually abused children at sporting events or on school excursions or camps. One victim-survivor described being taken offsite with other children to a football oval, seemingly to set up equipment for a sporting event:

There was never an event, and we never set anything up. We felt a bit special when he picked us as we felt lucky getting out of school. Some of the boys were taken to buildings and rooms at the football club and other times we just ran around the grandstands while he disappeared with boys into unknown locations.<sup>61</sup>

## 2.4 Governance, organisational culture and leadership in schools

Ineffective governance, poor leadership and cultures of silence and control create specific risk factors for child sexual abuse in schools.<sup>62</sup>

In the context of child safety, good governance requires a school to have effective policies and practices to prevent, identify and respond to child sexual abuse. This includes codes of conduct for staff behaviour, strategies to mitigate the risks of child sexual abuse and clear record-keeping policies and processes to track allegations.<sup>63</sup>

As the Royal Commission noted, the risk of child sexual abuse is increased where a school lacks:

- effective and consistently enforced policies and procedures on preventing, identifying and responding to child sexual abuse
- regular training on child safety so staff know how to report concerns and have confidence that concerns will be followed up without negative consequences for the reporting staff member
- effective staff supervision and accountability
- adequate record-keeping and information-sharing practices to ensure opportunities to act in response to child sexual abuse are not missed.<sup>64</sup>

The Beaumaris Board of Inquiry found that between 1960 and 1994:

- there were no Department of Education policies or procedures concerning child sexual abuse
- there was no other guidance or training for Victorian government school staff on how to prevent, identify, report, manage or respond to child sexual abuse
- the Department of Education had poor record-keeping and information-sharing practices concerning child sexual abuse.<sup>65</sup>

A summary of the findings and recommendations of the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry is in Appendix G.

An organisation's culture – the shared values and beliefs that shape staff behaviours, customs and practices – can have a direct impact on the safety of children within the organisation and how it responds to child sexual abuse. Cultures of silence, power and control over children within organisations create the conditions for child sexual abuse to go undetected and unreported.<sup>66</sup>

While each school has its own culture, schools are inherently hierarchical institutions where there is a clear power imbalance between adults and children. We heard that teachers exerted significant power, authority and control over students. One victim-survivor told us that the consequences for disobedience in school in the 1960s and 1970s often involved physical punishment:

I had another teacher. She used to continually hit us with a stick in class when she thought we were talking – and another teacher, I remember him belting me across the face one time in the yard. And things like that. And you grew up in a very intimidating environment as a student.<sup>67</sup>

Research shows that where institutions allow violence against children, staff can become desensitised. This makes it easier to minimise or tolerate other harms such as child sexual abuse.<sup>68</sup>

In Part 1, we outlined comments from several victim-survivors who described school cultures where they felt other staff knew or suspected that child sexual abuse was occurring but looked away.<sup>69</sup>

Schools whose staff recognise signs of child sexual abuse but fail to act may facilitate a ‘bystander’ culture, where inaction becomes an acceptable response to concerns about child safety.<sup>70</sup> Such failures to act may expose children to the risk of ongoing sexual abuse. As one victim-survivor told us:

... it’s important for people to understand what happened in the 70s and 80s. I still look back and I shake my head and think there’s so many warning signs that teachers could have or should have known ...<sup>71</sup>

Unconscious biases among staff can drive a bystander culture. These biases may deter staff from believing children and prevent them from acting in response to concerns about child sexual abuse. For example, a staff member who learns of allegations about a colleague may be slow to revise their positive opinion of the colleague or may overlook evidence that contradicts their opinion.<sup>72</sup> A staff member may also downplay a colleague’s concerning behaviours to avoid disrupting social cohesion with the colleague and other staff who may support that colleague.<sup>73</sup>

Unconscious biases can become more pronounced when the colleague is a widely respected or well-liked person who holds a senior position in the school. It can be difficult to accept the notion that the colleague who is seen as a ‘good bloke’ or a ‘nice person’ may also be sexually abusing children. As one victim-survivor said:

That’s when the rumour spread around the school and everyone’s going, ‘Oh no, no, no, he’s not like that’. And I thought, ‘Mmm, he was like that’.<sup>74</sup>

People may cope with such ‘cognitive dissonance’ by ignoring concerning behaviours or interpreting them as benign or insignificant.<sup>75</sup>

Staff may be especially reluctant to report concerns about a principal or senior colleague.<sup>76</sup> This may be exacerbated in small rural communities where staff are closely connected to one another, or alternative job opportunities are limited.<sup>77</sup>

Leadership also shapes organisational culture by demonstrating what is – and is not – acceptable. A leader's style, behaviours and approach influence how people within an organisation treat one another. If school principals tolerate or model disrespectful or inappropriate behaviours towards children, they send a message to staff that children's safety is not important. When they emphasise the value of upholding the reputation of the school, they are signalling that any threat to that reputation should be 'managed'.<sup>78</sup> When leaders handle disclosures poorly, it can send the message to staff and students that there is no point speaking up about safety.

The risk of child sexual abuse is increased where the culture of a school is to:

- disbelieve or doubt children
- discourage reporting of concerns about staff behaviour
- fail to follow child safety policies and procedures
- fail to treat child safety as a shared responsibility
- prioritise the school's reputation and interests over child safety.<sup>79</sup>

The culture of a school can be particularly corrosive where a principal or senior staff member is perpetrating child sexual abuse themselves.

The Beaumaris Board of Inquiry found that between 1960 and 1994, the Department of Education prioritised the education system, including the reputation of schools and teachers, over the safety of children.<sup>80</sup> One way the department did this was by transferring teachers between schools or to non-teaching positions as a way of 'managing' allegations of child sexual abuse.<sup>81</sup> One victim-survivor told us that in his experience:

The education department decided not to involve police, but instead to disperse some of these monsters to other primary schools.<sup>82</sup>

During this period, the education system focused on efficiency and maintaining public confidence, rather than safeguarding children. There was little understanding of, or attention to, children's rights, and there were few legislative or regulatory measures in place to keep children in schools safe.<sup>83</sup>

## 2.5 Responses to child sexual abuse

Effective responses to allegations of institutional child sexual abuse build trust and confidence in an organisation's policies and processes. They encourage children, staff and families to report child safety concerns, including sexual abuse. Conversely, inadequate institutional responses to child sexual abuse erode trust, discourage reporting and place children at risk of harm.

We heard that staff at some schools were aware of child sexual abuse occurring but did not directly address it. One victim-survivor told us that his school suspected children were being sexually abused in the school's maintenance shed.<sup>84</sup> He explained that in response, the school prohibited children from going to the shed and punished them for non-compliance:

A lot of the children who were being sexually molested by these two men ended up getting detention for going back to the shed. The children were being punished and yelled at by the teachers. I look back on that and say, 'Yeah, they could have handled that better' ... No one wanted to tell the truth. No one wanted to talk openly.<sup>85</sup>

We also heard that some victim-survivors were physically punished at school for speaking up about the sexual abuse they had experienced:

I went to [the principal's] room, and she had a ruler in her hand and said, 'How dare you say all these things about [the perpetrator]? Such a great person'. And I remember she gave me the strap all over my legs. I was red in the back of my legs.<sup>86</sup>

The Beaumaris Board of Inquiry described the Department of Education's responses to allegations of child sexual abuse between 1960 and 1994 as 'an appalling and systemic failure'.<sup>87</sup> This included covering up child sexual abuse to protect the reputations of schools and teachers and failing to act to protect children from perpetrators.

It also found that the department had never undertaken a review of allegations of historical child sexual abuse aside from the work of responding to that inquiry.<sup>88</sup>

Robust external oversight systems are essential to ensure children are safe in schools.<sup>89</sup> This includes systems to monitor departmental responses to child sexual abuse allegations and to regulate teachers' registrations so only appropriately authorised people can be employed to teach in schools.

The Beaumaris Board of Inquiry observed a lack of adequate regulation of teachers in Australian schools with respect to child sexual abuse, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>90</sup>

Over the past two decades, successive Victorian governments have created greater external oversight of teachers and schools in relation to child safety. These reforms are highlighted in Part 3.

In the past, inadequate justice system responses to child sexual abuse in schools discouraged many victim-survivors from reporting their experiences to police or seeking justice through the courts.<sup>91</sup>

For some victim-survivors, seeking a criminal justice outcome was important to protect other children – to ensure perpetrators could not go on to abuse others. However, previous inquiries have revealed that victim-survivors encountered many obstacles in the criminal justice system. These include:

- negative, judgemental or disbelieving responses from police
- ineffective or inadequate (non-specialist) police investigations into allegations of child sexual abuse
- the absence of appropriate criminal offences to reflect the reality of child sexual abuse and grooming, and to protect children in institutions
- daunting and retraumatising experiences as witnesses in criminal trials.<sup>92</sup>

One victim-survivor described her experience of disclosing child sexual abuse to police in the 1980s. She said the policewoman she spoke to told her the law would see her as ‘consenting’ to the abuse:

All because I had been 16. There was no concern on her part about the fact that this man was my teacher and had breached his duty of care and his position ... No concern that he was still teaching, that he lived with a former student, and he had told me that he had repeated his behaviour with another student after me.<sup>93</sup>

Victim-survivors may also be deterred from seeking compensation through civil litigation, which can be expensive, complex, lengthy and not guaranteed to result in the outcomes they seek.<sup>94</sup>

Part 3 outlines the significant changes designed to strengthen legal responses to victim-survivors of institutional child sexual abuse since 2000.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This part has highlighted some of the key factors that create the conditions for child sexual abuse in schools, drawing on research, past inquiries and the experiences of victim-survivors described in Part 1.

Since those experiences occurred, we have learnt much about the nature and extent of institutional child sexual abuse and what can be done to better protect children in settings such as schools. Many inquiries have recommended legislative and policy changes to prioritise children's safety in institutions and better prevent and respond to child sexual abuse.

In recent decades, successive reforms and shifts in community attitudes have combined to increase awareness of the risks of child sexual abuse in schools. The community now expects schools to meet higher standards for child safety and demands swift, sensitive and effective responses to abuse. We provide an overview of these new standards and the reforms that led to them in Part 3.

*"I think you  
certainly can't change  
what's happened in  
the past. You can only  
really change the  
future."*

*Tim, victim-survivor*

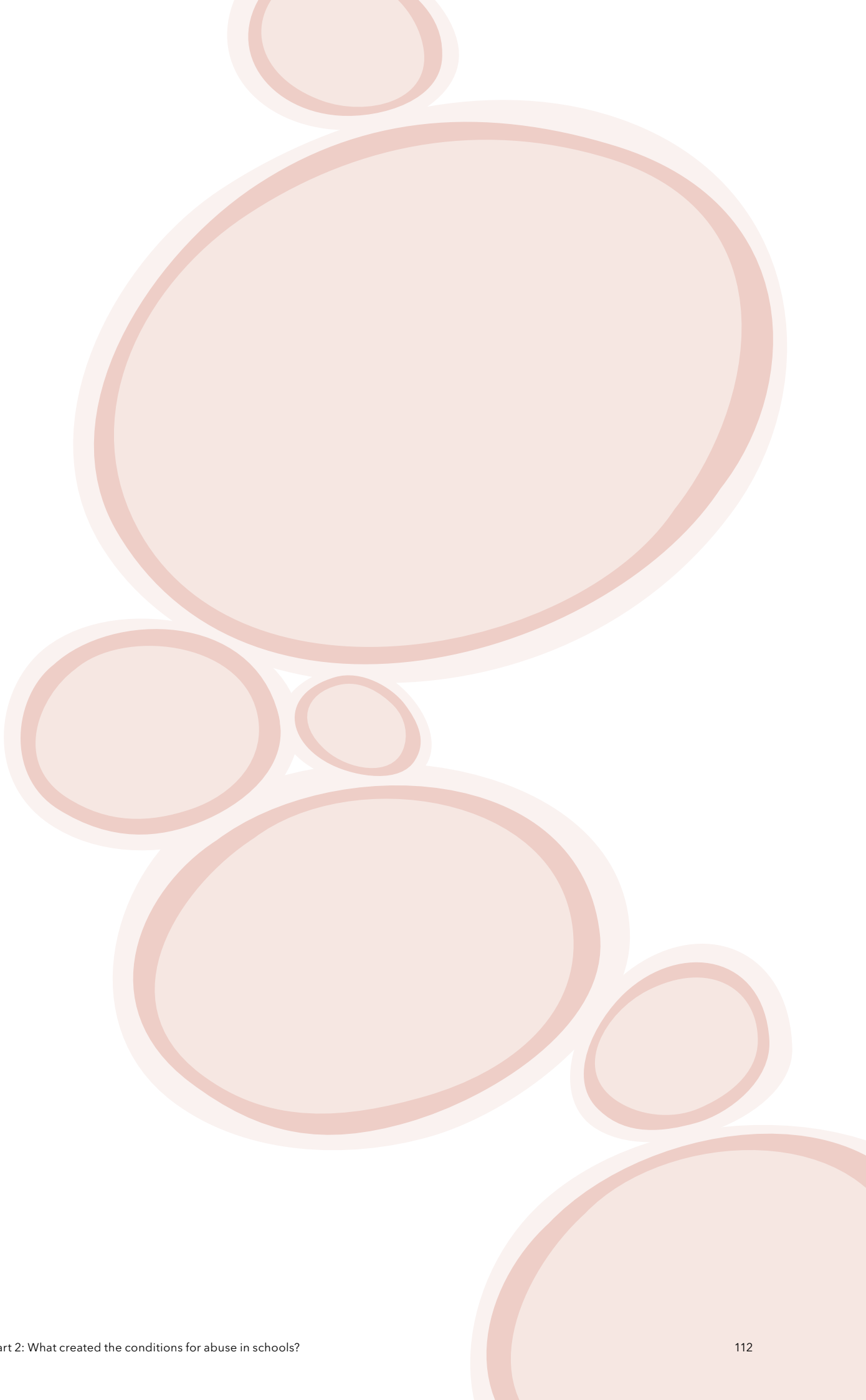
## Part 2 Endnotes

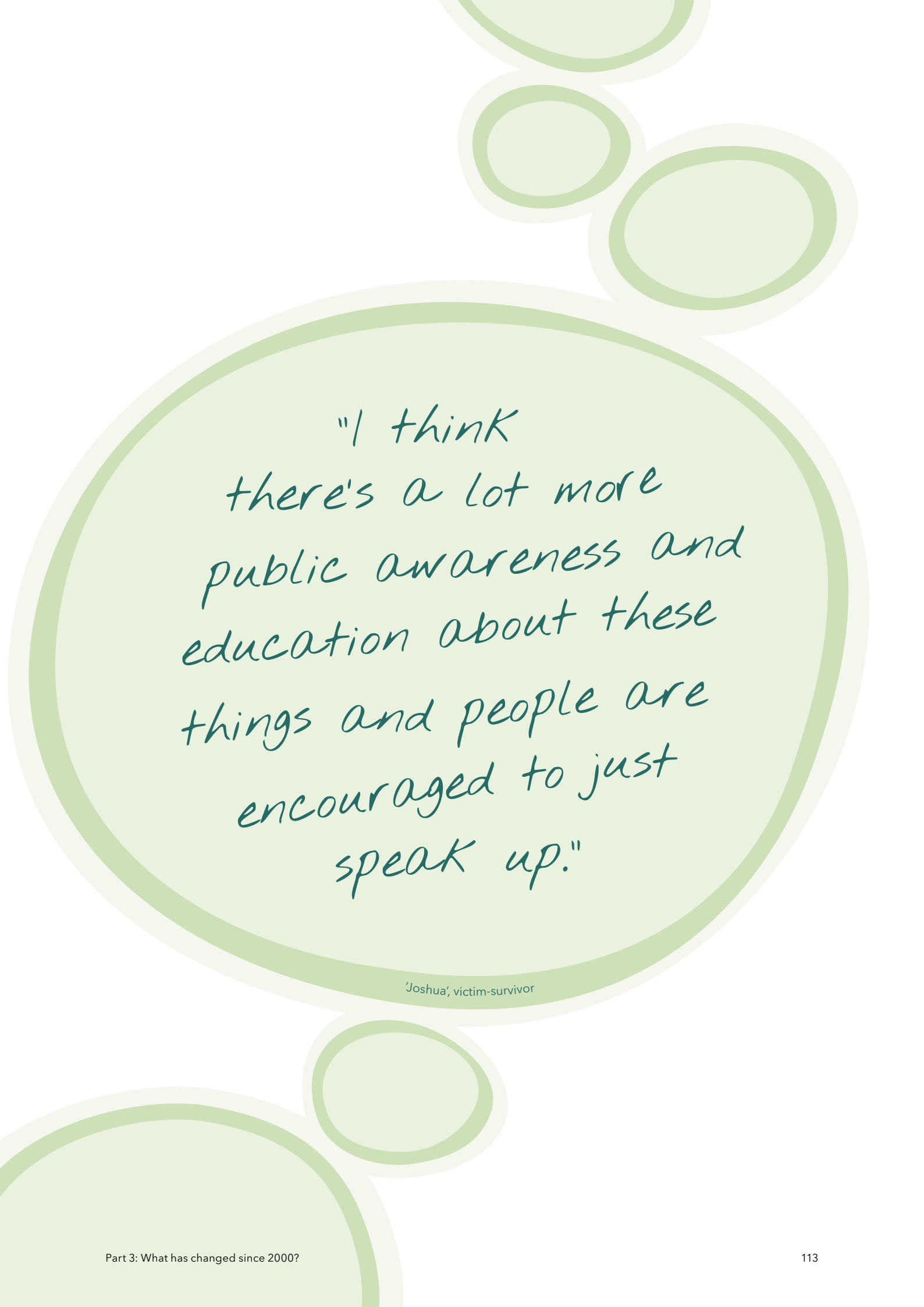
1. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 124.
2. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 124.
3. Personalised session with Tim Courtney.
4. Submission from 'Grace', p 1.
5. Personalised session with 'Brendon'.
6. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, pp 238-239; *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Part B, p 68.
7. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Part B, p 68.
8. For example, personalised session with 'Joan'; submission from 'Sigrid', p 3.
9. Personalised session with 'Brendon'.
10. Personalised session with 'Martin'.
11. Personalised session with 'Violet'.
12. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 161.
13. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, pp 160-161. Victoria's Child Safe Standards require organisations to establish culturally safe environments for Aboriginal children and young people (refer to Part 3).
14. T Blakemore et al., *Impacts of institutional child sexual abuse on victims/survivors: a rapid review of research findings*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p 73.
15. Personalised session with 'Boudicea'.
16. Personalised session with George De Domenico.
17. P O'Leary et al., *Grooming and child sexual abuse in institutional contexts*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p 17.
18. Transcript of Katie Wright, 24 October 2023, P-42 [9]-[28], *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools*.
19. Personalised session with Grant Holland.
20. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.
21. Submission from 'Sigrid', pp 4-5.
22. Submission from 'Sigrid', pp 4-5.
23. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
24. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
25. Personalised session with Ann Maree Sloan-Coleman.
26. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Part B, p 68.
27. Personalised session with 'Joshua'.

28. D Haslam et al., *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study – brief report*, Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology, 2023.
29. Until relatively recently, the law viewed children’s evidence as inherently unreliable. For example, in 1984, High Court Justice Dyson Heydon wrote: ‘Children sometimes behave in a way evil beyond their years. They may consent to sexual offences against themselves and then deny consent. They may completely invent sexual offences.’ J D Heydon, *Evidence: cases and materials*, 1984, second edition, p 84, quoted in M Harris and G Urbas, ‘Children’s unsworn evidence: historical developments and contemporary issues’, *University of New South Wales Law Journal*, 2017, 40(4):1392-1421, p 1392.
30. National Office for Child Safety, *Myths and misconceptions*, website, n.d., accessed 18 March 2026. <https://www.childsafety.gov.au/about-child-sexual-abuse/myths-and-misconceptions>
31. P O’Leary et al., *Grooming and child sexual abuse in institutional contexts*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, pp 10-11, 13-14. Note that we have placed quotation marks around the terms ‘consensual’ and ‘special relationship’ to highlight their incorrect use in the context of child sexual abuse, rather than to indicate that they are direct quotations from the source.
32. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 133.
33. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, pp 94, 131.
34. Personalised session with ‘Charles’.
35. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
36. Submission from ‘Sigrid’, p 5.
37. Personalised session with ‘Joshua’.
38. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, pp 43, 94, 98.
39. Personalised session with ‘Grace’.
40. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 98.
41. Personalised session with Grant Holland.
42. T Blakemore et al., *Impacts of institutional child sexual abuse on victims/survivors: a rapid review of research findings*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p 73.
43. P O’Leary et al., *Grooming and child sexual abuse in institutional contexts*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p 15.
44. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, pp 147, 186-187, 190.
45. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 194.
46. Personalised session with Tim Courtney.
47. For example, personalised session with ‘Joan’; personalised session with Erena; personalised session with ‘Simon’.
48. National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, *The child sexual abuse language guide: terms and definitions preferred by victims and survivors of child sexual abuse*, 2025, p 15.

49. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 41; National Office for Child Safety, *Grooming*, Australian Government website, n.d., accessed 18 March 2026. <https://www.childsafety.gov.au/about-child-sexual-abuse/grooming>
50. Grooming became a criminal offence in Victoria in 2014 (refer to Part 3).
51. Codes of conduct for Victorian teachers were first introduced in 2008. The Victorian Institute of Teaching publishes *The Victorian teaching profession's code of conduct* (refer to Part 3).
52. Grooming behaviours can look like 'normal' or 'legitimate' practices, distinguishable only by the motivation to perpetrate or conceal child abuse: P O'Leary et al., *Grooming and child sexual abuse in institutional contexts*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p 7.
53. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 43.
54. Personalised session with Ann Maree Sloan-Coleman.
55. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 3.
56. P O'Leary et al., *Grooming and child sexual abuse in institutional contexts*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p 11.
57. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 44.
58. Personalised session with 'Charles'.
59. Personalised session with 'Martin'.
60. Personalised session with Alex Raven.
61. Submission from Grant Holland, p 3.
62. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 16.
63. *Victorian Child Safe Standards*, Standard 2; Commission for Children and Young People, *A guide for creating a child safe organisation*, fifth edition, 2025, pp 45-51.
64. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, pp 172-173, 175-176; vol 4, p 137; vol 6, pp 189-195.
65. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, pp xiii-xv, Findings 1, 2, 4 and 5.
66. T Blakemore et al., *Impacts of institutional child sexual abuse on victims/survivors: a rapid review of research findings*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p 73.
67. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
68. *Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings*, 2023, vol 2, p 114.
69. For example, personalised session with 'Oscar'.
70. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 164.
71. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.
72. E Munro and S Fish, *Hear no evil, see no evil: understanding failure to identify and report child sexual abuse in institutional contexts*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2015, p 25.

73. D Palmer, *The role of organisational culture in child sexual abuse in institutional contexts*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2016, p 30.
74. Personalised session with Phil.
75. D Palmer, *The role of organisational culture in child sexual abuse in institutional contexts*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2016, p 30.
76. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 13, pp 64, 176.
77. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 13, pp 177, 179.
78. D Palmer, *The role of organisational culture in child sexual abuse in institutional contexts*, report prepared for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2016, pp 51-53.
79. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 159; vol 4, p 137.
80. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Part C, p 235.
81. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Part C, p 235.
82. Personalised session with Grant Holland.
83. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Part C, pp 172-173.
84. Personalised session with 'Brendon'.
85. Personalised session with 'Brendon'.
86. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.
87. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xvi.
88. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, pp xv-xvi, Finding 6.
89. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 7, p 18.
90. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Part B, p 69.
91. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Part B, pp 67-69.
92. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: criminal justice report*, 2017, parts II, III, VII, pp 75, 143, 257.
93. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 5.
94. It was not within the scope of the Forum's terms of reference to consider civil litigation arising from child sexual abuse in schools.





"I think  
there's a lot more  
public awareness and  
education about these  
things and people are  
encouraged to just  
speak up."

'Joshua', victim-survivor

# What has changed since 2000?

## 3.1 Introduction

This part describes some of the key events, policy and attitudinal changes that have shaped child safety and responses to child sexual abuse in the past 25 years or so. It includes a high-level timeline of key events and reforms relevant to child safety in schools, before moving to a brief discussion of shifts in community awareness, organisational responses and policy and regulatory changes.

While there have been many initiatives designed to improve child safety in Victorian schools, this is an issue that requires ongoing attention, refinement and reflection. Responses to adult victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in schools have been strengthened in recent decades but – according to some people who shared their experiences with us – still need attention. This is explored in Part 4.

A notable reform in Victoria has been the introduction of Child Safe Standards. These are principles-based requirements that apply to a range of child-facing organisations, including schools. They reflect the essential elements of a child-safe organisation, from policy and practice, training and professional development to leadership and governance. Taken together, the requirements are designed to embed children's safety into everyday thinking and practice. Victoria's 11 Child Safe Standards are listed in Box 3.1 and explained further below.

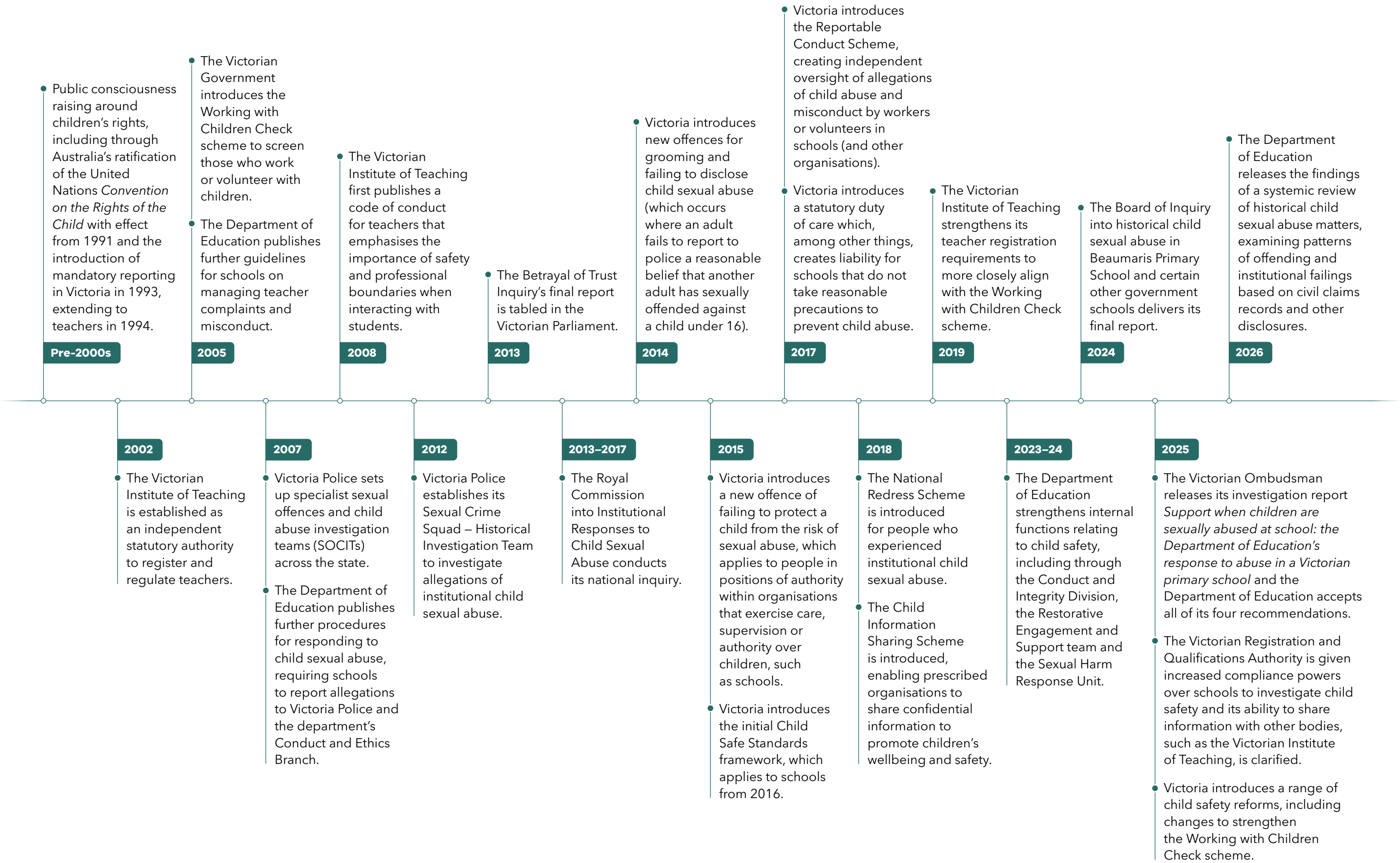
## 3.2 Timeline of key reforms since 2000

The timeline at Figure 3.1 gives a high-level overview of major events that we consider relevant to child safety in schools and responses to child sexual abuse, with a focus on changes since 2000. It should not be read as an exhaustive list. We also note that many of the reforms listed have been the subject of ongoing refinement and improvement over time.

**FIGURE 3.1: TIMELINE OF KEY REFORMS SINCE 2000**

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FIGURE 3.1: TIMELINE OF KEY REFORMS SINCE 2000



### 3.3 Community attitudes and awareness

Part 2 outlined how community norms and attitudes relating to child sexual abuse – and children generally – have a direct impact on safety in organisations. It described how outdated attitudes (for example, that children should be seen but not heard) contributed to children being silenced and their disclosures of sexual abuse minimised or not believed.

These days, there is greater awareness of the prevalence and impact of child sexual abuse. Children's rights are more clearly defined and openly discussed. Schools are not only encouraged but expected to openly engage with students on questions of safety and to listen to their views.

Early international child rights instruments tended to centre on meeting basic needs relating to nutrition, education and protection from neglect and harm, framing children as passive and helpless.<sup>1</sup> The 1989 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* moved away from a more paternalistic approach to child rights towards a greater focus on supporting children to participate in decisions that affect them.<sup>2</sup> Current best practice recognises that while children are inherently vulnerable, they should be supported to assert their rights in meaningful ways as they grow and develop.<sup>3</sup> This includes being empowered to express themselves and be heard.<sup>4</sup>

The Department of Education has created guidance for schools on how to empower students in line with its obligations under Child Safe Standard 3. This guidance includes that schools must inform students about their rights (including their rights to safety and participation), ensure staff and volunteers are 'attuned to signs of harm', have child-friendly ways for students to raise concerns and give access to age-appropriate child sexual abuse prevention programs.<sup>5</sup> The guidance includes practical ways schools can empower their students, including by having books with child empowerment themes, providing information about independent child and youth advocacy services and helplines, and designing a variety of ways for students to raise concerns (including suggestion boxes and regular surveys).<sup>6</sup> Schools can also access template documents, checklists and resources to help them.<sup>7</sup>

One victim-survivor reflected that children and young people can now draw on more support services than in the past:

It's good now too, because when I was growing up, I didn't really have [support]. They've got Kids Helpline, all the other support services ...<sup>8</sup>

Another victim-survivor reflected on the changes they see in schools today:

Yeah, it seems to be a lot more different ... [there are] smaller class sizes. I remember being in a class of 38 kids at one point. I think there's a lot more welfare services available to the kids, which is terrific. Like, I don't ever remember having a school counsellor or a school nurse or anything like that. And I know that my children's school has all of those things.<sup>9</sup>

Children who report sexual abuse now also have greater access to specialist sexual assault services that can provide counselling and support.<sup>10</sup>

Community norms and attitudes on child safety are partly shaped by how child sexual abuse is framed and the language used to discuss and describe it.<sup>11</sup>

Over time, victim-survivors have helped reshape broader narratives about child sexual abuse by speaking up through the media or public inquiries about their experiences of abuse and its impacts. These first-hand accounts have challenged common misconceptions and victim-blaming attitudes connected to child sexual abuse and sparked more nuanced community-wide discussions.<sup>12</sup> One victim-survivor told us:

I think there's a lot more public awareness and education about these things and people are encouraged to just speak up.<sup>13</sup>

While recognising child sexual abuse continues to occur, a victim-survivor told us that people with lived experience are starting to be heard:

It would perhaps be unrealistic for me to expect that this sort of abuse will never happen again. But if in some way, and I feel like this is the case, we are mitigating the opportunities and the incidents by having these conversations ... that's the faith that I take away that [victim-survivors are] being listened to.<sup>14</sup>

Another victim-survivor reflected on improved understanding of child sexual abuse in the community and even worried this had contributed to unnecessary concern:

When I compare ... attitudes to today, it's far different ... I think the level of awareness has almost swung too far. We're almost too aware of what can occur and it's making people anxious – more anxious than they perhaps need to be ... when I compare the two decades, so the 2020s with the 1970s, there's no comparison at all.<sup>15</sup>

Sensitive and accurate reporting of child sexual abuse helps inform and educate the community and empower victim-survivors. Current guidance for media organisations on how to accurately and sensitively report on child sexual abuse encourages journalists to move away from outdated framing and victim-blaming language. For example, instead of describing the sexual abuse of students by teachers as an 'affair' or a 'sex scandal', media organisations should instead use terms such as 'child sexual abuse' or 'sexual violence against children'.<sup>16</sup> The *Reporting on child sexual abuse: guidance for media* notes:

Reporting on child sexual abuse can be an opportunity to educate the community about the social prevalence of child sexual abuse and highlight stories of resilience from victims and survivors.

Reporting can situate child sexual abuse as a societal problem and not only an isolated event.<sup>17</sup>

Media organisations are increasingly providing content warnings and listing support services when reporting on child sexual abuse, recognising the distress such reports can cause for victim-survivors.

Progress towards equality in all its forms increases children's safety. Organisations that fail to respect diversity and uphold equality – for example, by addressing racism or discrimination based on sexual orientation – create greater risks of child sexual abuse.<sup>18</sup>

School communities are influenced by the broader norms and discussions about child sexual abuse that operate at the societal level. However, several targeted initiatives have sought to improve awareness and understanding of child safety in schools. These are designed to inform and educate school staff, parents and carers and, importantly, children themselves.

Since 2016, schools (and other child-facing organisations) have had to comply with legislated Child Safe Standards. Victoria's Child Safe Standards were updated and expanded in 2022 and are listed in Box 3.1.<sup>19</sup>

### **Box 3.1: Victoria's Child Safe Standards**

- Standard 1: Organisations establish a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued.
- Standard 2: Child safety and wellbeing is embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture.
- Standard 3: Children and young people are empowered about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.
- Standard 4: Families and communities are informed and involved in promoting child safety and wellbeing.
- Standard 5: Equity is upheld and diverse needs respected in policy and practice.
- Standard 6: People working with children and young people are suitable and supported to reflect child safety and wellbeing values in practice.
- Standard 7: Processes for complaints and concerns are child-focused.
- Standard 8: Staff and volunteers are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children and young people safe through ongoing education and training.
- Standard 9: Physical and online environments promote safety and wellbeing while minimising the opportunity for children and young people to be harmed.

- Standard 10: Implementation of the Child Safe Standards is regularly reviewed and improved.
- Standard 11: Policies and procedures document how the organisation is safe for children and young people.

The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority is responsible for monitoring schools' compliance with the Child Safe Standards and can take action for non-compliance.<sup>20</sup>

Children can now access age-appropriate education about respectful relationships, sexuality, consent and body autonomy, including through the Victorian Government's Respectful Relationships initiative.<sup>21</sup>

One victim-survivor recalled telling a fellow student about the sexual abuse she was experiencing in Year 12, which was being perpetrated by a teacher. She reflected on what would happen if someone made a similar disclosure today:

I would like to think if our 17-year-old selves were doing VCE now, for that other student – her red flags would fly.<sup>22</sup>

Parents and carers, as well as teaching staff, also benefit from education programs, which give them information and the confidence to discuss safety with children. One victim-survivor noted there are now advertisements on television giving parents information about child sexual abuse:

I know there's been ads, probably in the last two years about sexual abuse ... but I mean, there was nothing back in the day.<sup>23</sup>

One victim-survivor reflected on how they worked to empower their own children and normalise discussions about safety:

I made sure that ... we had this open forum and spoke to our kids – 'If there's anything wrong ...' Well, I never had any of that. Never had that education.<sup>24</sup>

Teachers and school staff have better access to training and professional development on child safety and receive greater policy and practice guidance. This is intended to guide them on what to do if they have concerns about the safety of a child or the behaviour of a colleague, including their reporting obligations and how to provide appropriate support for the affected student.<sup>25</sup> They can also access training to understand and respond to trauma, including its impact on brain development and physiology.<sup>26</sup>

## 3.4 Organisational responses in education

Schools and state education departments have come under considerable scrutiny in recent decades. While some review processes, such as the Betrayal of Trust Inquiry, focused on non-government schools, many findings and recommendations were nonetheless relevant to the Department of Education and involved changes across all schools.

Schools are expected to be attuned to children's safety. All government schools must comply with minimum standards to be registered with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority.<sup>27</sup> These standards cover a range of areas, including complying with the Child Safe Standards. Ongoing compliance is subject to cyclical reviews involving in-person visits every four to five years.<sup>28</sup> Out-of-cycle compliance checks can be undertaken if there are specific concerns about a school.<sup>29</sup>

School staff are now subject to independent screening measures designed to ensure employees, contractors and volunteers are safe to work with children. Teachers are required to be registered by the Victorian Institute of Teaching, which assesses their suitability to teach.<sup>30</sup> Non-teaching school staff, contractors and volunteers must hold a Working with Children Check.<sup>31</sup> Greater rigour is expected in recruitment processes more generally to get a better understanding of a person's work history and past behaviour before they work with children.<sup>32</sup>

One victim-survivor described returning to the school where he was sexually abused and being told about what had changed to make schools safer since he attended:

There is never a child left alone with an adult. There's always two now, and I assume that this happens in all schools ... it seemed like there's been a lot of changes from [the past] because ... there was no questioning why I'm being left with the [perpetrator] for half an hour and then get sent to class. No one questioned that. Today that wouldn't happen.<sup>33</sup>

Another victim-survivor shared his feeling that child safety concerns are now being reported more quickly:

The thing that I recognise now is the timeline between incident and reporting [has] been truncated. Whatever has enabled that is obviously positive ... I think that gives me some hope around some change.<sup>34</sup>

Another victim-survivor reflected on media reporting about a childcare worker allegedly abusing children that triggered an independent rapid review of child safety in early childhood education and care settings:

Now, it's appalling that it happened, but it seemed to me to come to light very quickly. What doesn't happen these days [is] ... where they were moved from one school to another school to another ...<sup>35</sup>

Schools can be supported to take urgent action to remove an employee from the workplace, including if there is a risk to student safety.<sup>36</sup> One victim-survivor shared his sense that schools now take more decisive action:

| I think today it seems it's one strike and you're out.<sup>37</sup>

There is an expectation that safety is embedded not just in policy and practice but also in the physical environment of schools. Some victim-survivors told us about how a lack of visibility enabled sexual abuse on school property, such as behind closed office doors (refer to Parts 1 and 2). These days, new school builds must factor children's safety into their design – for example, improving lines of sight between reception areas and first aid rooms and into classrooms.<sup>38</sup>

The Department of Education now has detailed policy, guidance and resources to support schools and regions to identify, report and respond to child sexual abuse consistently.<sup>39</sup> There are also publicised pathways for people to report child sexual abuse in government schools relating to current or former students.<sup>40</sup>

One victim-survivor shared his hope in relation to positive changes he observed in the Department of Education's approach:

| I feel hope that the Education Department is now so progressive and brave tackling such complex issues and genuinely trying to address the past ... whilst making the future safer for children. All power to them.<sup>41</sup>

The Department of Education has recently made structural reforms to better support schools and regions to follow and understand its policies and procedures, including the following:

- The Sexual Harm Response Unit, established in 2023, provides central management of the department's response to allegations of child sexual abuse by an adult who works (or recently worked) in a Victorian government school.<sup>42</sup>
- The Conduct and Integrity Division, established in 2024, receives all reports on school staff conduct matters, including suspected child abuse, and initiates investigations into allegations. It assesses and advises on managing risks to children's safety, working with third parties such as Victoria Police and the Victorian Institute of Teaching. The division is also responsible for managing the Reportable Conduct Scheme (described below) within the department.<sup>43</sup>
- The Restorative Engagement and Support team, established in 2024, provides information and support to former students who experienced child sexual abuse by an adult working in a Victorian government school. This team can help victim-survivors access counselling and other supports, school records and information on compensation options and facilitate personal acknowledgements and apologies from the department or the school.<sup>44</sup>

## 3.5 Legal and regulatory responses

How governments respond to child sexual abuse sends an important and authoritative message on how the community should view that behaviour. This includes the laws they introduce to criminalise certain behaviours and the safeguards they create for children in schools through regulation and oversight.

Following the Betrayal of Trust Inquiry in 2013, the Victorian Government created two regulatory schemes to improve children's safety in organisational settings.

The first was the Child Safe Standards, which were implemented in 2016. As noted above, Victoria's Child Safe Standards (refer to Box 3.1) place a range of obligations on schools and the Department of Education designed to keep children safe.

The second was the Reportable Conduct Scheme. This was established in 2017 to enable independent oversight over the management of complaints about staff and volunteers in certain organisations, including schools.<sup>45</sup> The Department of Education must report allegations of 'reportable conduct' (which includes sexual offences and sexual misconduct against or in the presence of a child) to an independent regulator (now the Social Services Regulator) and, where appropriate, to Victoria Police.<sup>46</sup> The department is responsible for investigating all reportable conduct allegations against employees, contractors and volunteers in government schools.<sup>47</sup>

The Social Services Regulator is responsible for overseeing how the relevant organisation investigates and responds to the reportable allegation. It has a range of powers, including to conduct an investigation itself where deemed necessary.<sup>48</sup> The regulator can also facilitate appropriate information sharing with and between other agencies (for example, to inform decisions about a Working with Children Check).<sup>49</sup> While the responsibility to notify the regulator of a reportable allegation lies with the head of an organisation, the regulator can receive notifications from anyone. This includes teachers or school staff, parents and carers, or a child.<sup>50</sup>

The Child Safe Standards and Reportable Conduct Scheme complement and inform each other. The Child Safe Standards are primarily geared towards preventing harm to children, while the Reportable Conduct Scheme ensures responses to complaints or concerns are managed appropriately.<sup>51</sup>

Police and courts have continued to make changes to the way they manage child sexual abuse matters, recognising that poor legal responses can allow perpetrators to evade accountability and further traumatise victim-survivors.<sup>52</sup>

For example, in 2007 Victoria Police implemented several changes to improve its response to sexual assault, including child sexual abuse. This included establishing sexual offences and child abuse investigation teams across Victoria, with specially trained officers responding to child sexual abuse cases.<sup>53</sup> Police processes reflect an expectation that officers will be more sensitive to the dynamics of sexual abuse, the needs of victim-survivors and the impact of trauma.<sup>54</sup> One victim-survivor, who sees the work of Victoria Police in her professional capacity, reflected:

The [specialist] sexual assault police are a lot better than their colleagues. We keep finding that clients get a very different reaction if they walk up to the counter and speak to [uniformed police], or if they ask for an interview with SOCIT [the Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team]. SOCIT are much more concerned, you know, 'What is it about this situation? Is there evidence of grooming? Is there evidence of threat?' They are more likely to realise it's quite likely that what the person's telling them is accurate from their point of view, whereas the people that haven't had the extra sexual assault training tend to take: 'Oh well, I don't know why you're saying that', or 'How should I know whether you're telling the truth?' or whatever attitude.<sup>55</sup>

Over the past 10 to 15 years, criminal laws have been changed to more accurately reflect the nature and severity of child sexual abuse. There are new offences, longer maximum sentences and changes in legal terminology to more accurately describe the abusive nature of a perpetrator's conduct.<sup>56</sup> For example, in 2006 the criminal offence previously described as 'maintains a sexual relationship with a child' was reworded to 'persistently sexually abuses a child'.<sup>57</sup>

One victim-survivor reflected on the challenge some people who experienced child sexual abuse decades ago could face in criminal processes, where the charges and sentences were based on the law at that time and sometimes meant perpetrators did not face a prison sentence:

I think there's probably a slightly better understanding of the fact that if it happened today ... the sentence would be manifestly longer than what it would have been.<sup>58</sup>

There are now offences that are particularly relevant to child sexual abuse in organisational settings. These include:

- a 'failure to disclose' offence for adults who fail to report to police if they reasonably believe a child under 16 has been sexually abused (with some exceptions)
- a 'failure to protect' offence for people in authority within organisations who know of a substantial risk of child sexual abuse but negligently fail to address that risk.<sup>59</sup>

In the past, laws made it difficult for victim-survivors to sue organisations (or government departments) in civil actions.<sup>60</sup> Following the Royal Commission, a range of changes have sought to make these processes fairer for victim-survivors of child abuse. These include amendments to the *Limitation of Actions Act 1958* (Vic) to remove time limits for initiating civil actions (noting that some people take a long time to come to terms with the abuse they experienced) and create the ability for courts to set aside previous settlements and judgments where it is just and reasonable to do so.<sup>61</sup> Guidance has also been updated on how government departments should respond to child sexual abuse civil claims to avoid unnecessarily adversarial or aggressive litigation strategies.<sup>62</sup>

Some changes have been designed to facilitate less defensive and evasive approaches when interacting with victim-survivors. For example, since 2002 organisations can offer apologies to victim-survivors in some limited circumstances without that necessarily being treated as an admission of liability for legal purposes.<sup>63</sup>

The National Redress Scheme was created by the Australian Government following the Royal Commission and opened in Victoria on 1 July 2018. The scheme offers monetary payment, a direct personal response from the responsible institution and counselling for people who experienced child sexual abuse in an institutional setting, including schools.<sup>64</sup> This opened an additional (or alternative) way for victim-survivors' experiences to be acknowledged and recognised without going through formal legal proceedings.

The Victorian Institute of Teaching was established in 2002. It is independent from the Victorian Government, including the Department of Education. It is responsible for assessing and monitoring a person's suitability to teach. It has powers to address misconduct or inappropriate behaviour with children, including suspending or cancelling a teacher's registration.<sup>65</sup> The institute maintains *The Victorian teaching profession's code of conduct* and has resources to support teachers to uphold their professional obligations.<sup>66</sup>

One victim-survivor recognised there are now clearer expectations on appropriate (and inappropriate) behaviour, including for people who work in schools:

There is a code of conduct out there in every field of endeavour ... now we've come a long, long way in that space, in [the past] 50 years or so ...<sup>67</sup>

Some victim-survivors only report child sexual abuse once they reach adulthood. Others may choose to report again if they feel an earlier disclosure (for example, when they were a child) was ignored or poorly managed.

It is important to recognise and respond to victim-survivors appropriately, no matter when or how they come forward. Organisations, particularly those with a role in responding to child sexual abuse, are increasingly recognising the importance of understanding trauma triggers and how systems and processes can avoid or minimise them. This can include limiting the need for people to repeat distressing information, using sensitive language and ensuring staff receive training on trauma.

There are now more support and advocacy services designed to support victim-survivors of child sexual abuse, including those listed at the start of this report.

## 3.6 Conclusion

Many of the changes described in this part were designed to address the problems reflected in victim-survivors' experiences (refer to Part 1) and the overall conditions that can give rise to child sexual abuse (highlighted in Part 2).

While changes to improve child safety have had some success in addressing many of the risks associated with child sexual abuse, victim-survivors told us there is still more to be done. As one victim-survivor said:

| I think we're starting to change, but we're not doing it fast enough and we really have to.<sup>68</sup>

Child sexual abuse still happens in schools, requiring ongoing vigilance. Misconceptions about child sexual abuse persist, and organisational responses can still fall short. In Part 4, the Chair of the Forum reflects on participants' ideas and views on how to better protect children into the future.

## Part 3 Endnotes

1. H Boxall et al., *Historical review of sexual offence and child sexual abuse legislation in Australia: 1988–2013*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2014, pp 6–7.
2. H Boxall et al., *Historical review of sexual offence and child sexual abuse legislation in Australia: 1988–2013*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2014, p 7. The principle of the ‘best interests of the child’ was codified into the *Children and Young Persons Act 1989* (Vic).
3. Commission for Children and Young People, *Empowerment and participation: a guide for organisations working with children and young people*, 2021, p 7.
4. Commission for Children and Young People, *Empowerment and participation: a guide for organisations working with children and young people*, 2021, p 6.
5. Department of Education, *Schools – child and student empowerment guidance: Guidance on Child Safe Standard 3: Children and young people are empowered about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously*, Victorian Government website, 2025, accessed 23 February 2026. <https://www.vic.gov.au/schools-child-student-empowerment-guidance>
6. Department of Education, *Schools – child and student empowerment guidance: Guidance on Child Safe Standard 3: Children and young people are empowered about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously*, Victorian Government website, 2025, accessed 23 February 2026. <https://www.vic.gov.au/schools-child-student-empowerment-guidance>
7. Department of Education, *Schools – child and student empowerment guidance: Guidance on Child Safe Standard 3: Children and young people are empowered about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously*, Victorian Government website, 2025, accessed 23 February 2026. <https://www.vic.gov.au/schools-child-student-empowerment-guidance>. There are also resources schools can use, including a fact sheet, scenarios and posters, to support students on how to raise and resolve problems they may be experiencing at school.
8. Personalised session with ‘Ethan’.
9. Personalised session with ‘Joshua’.
10. For example, Support After Sexual Harm (SASH) based at The Royal Children’s Hospital: The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne, *Support After Sexual Harm (SASH): About SASH*, n.d., accessed 25 February 2026. <https://www.rch.org.au/sash/>
11. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 31.
12. V Braithwaite et al., *Raising awareness of child sexual abuse: the wisdom of advocates*, La Trobe University, 2025, p 23.
13. Personalised session with ‘Joshua’.
14. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
15. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
16. National Office for Child Safety and News & Media Research Centre, *Reporting on child sexual abuse: guidance for media*, Commonwealth of Australia and University of Canberra, 2023, p 25.
17. National Office for Child Safety and News & Media Research Centre, *Reporting on child sexual abuse: guidance for media*, Commonwealth of Australia and University of Canberra, 2023, p 15.
18. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report*, 2017, vol 2, p 165.

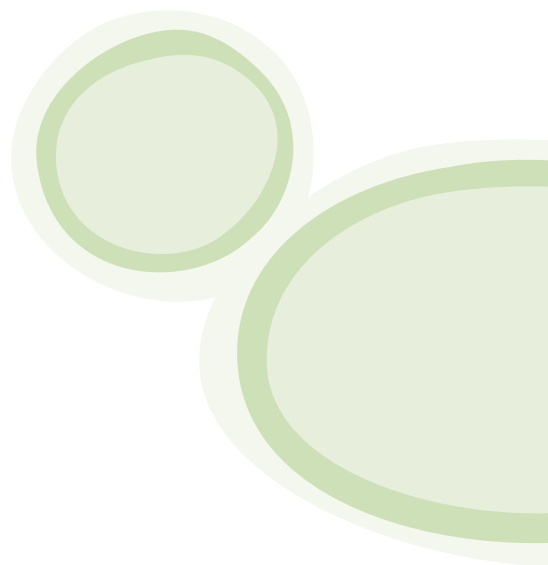
19. Initially Victoria had seven Child Safe Standards, which were replaced with 11 standards in 2022. The changes were designed to more closely align with the *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations* developed following the Royal Commission. As part of these reforms, Victoria introduced a new, dedicated standard focused on cultural safety for Aboriginal children and young people. For more information, refer to *New Child Safe Standards start in Victoria on 1 July 2022 to better protect children* [media release], Commission for Children and Young People, 1 July 2022, accessed 4 May 2026. <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/news/new-child-safe-standards-start-in-victoria-on-1-july-2022-to-better-protect-children/>
20. *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic), Pt 6, Div 2A.
21. In the younger years, this covers body autonomy, appropriate and inappropriate forms of touch, expressing permission or consent in communications with others, and help-seeking in relation to abuse and harassment by peers or adults. For teenagers, education is more sophisticated, covering issues of sexual consent, sexual harassment, sexual assault and abuse, respect within intimate relationships, strategies for help-seeking, peer support and positive bystander responses: H Cahill et al., *Resilience, rights and respectful relationships: teaching for social and emotional learning and respectful relationships*, Department of Education, 2024, pp 11, 84, 94.
22. Personalised session with 'Sarah'.
23. Personalised session with James Macbeth.
24. Personalised session with George De Domenico.
25. State Government of Victoria, *Schools – child safety knowledge, skills and awareness guidance*, Victorian Government website, 2025, accessed 18 February 2026. <https://www.vic.gov.au/schools-knowledge-skills-awareness-guidance>. School-based staff have access to a Policy and Advisory Library, which houses all operational policies, guidance and resources for Victorian government schools. These are also available online to the public. Refer to Department of Education, *Policy and advisory library*, Victorian Government website, n.d., accessed 18 March 2026. <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal>. Training resources are available from the *Department of Education's website*. <https://www.vic.gov.au/schools-knowledge-skills-awareness-guidance#resources>
26. Refer to, for example, the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, *Trauma sensitive practice in education*, n.d., accessed 11 March 2026. <https://www.academy.vic.gov.au/professional-learning/trauma-sensitive-practice-education>
27. These minimum standards require compliance with Ministerial Order No. 1359, which operationalises the Child Safe Standards for the school sector: The Hon James Merlino MP, *'Implementing the Child Safe Standards – Managing the risk of child abuse in schools and school boarding premises'* (Ministerial Order No. 1359, 31 January 2022). <https://www2.vrqa.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/Ministerial-Order-1359-Child-Safe-Standards-School-Boarding-Jan-2022.pdf>
28. Department of Education, *Minimum standards and school registration*, Victorian Government website, 2026, accessed 18 March 2026. <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/minimum-standards/policy>
29. Department of Education, *Minimum standards and school registration*, Victorian Government website, 2026, accessed 18 March 2026. <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/minimum-standards/policy>; The Hon James Merlino MP, *'Implementing the Child Safe Standards – Managing the risk of child abuse in schools and school boarding premises'* (Ministerial Order No. 1359, 31 January 2022). <https://www2.vrqa.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/Ministerial-Order-1359-Child-Safe-Standards-School-Boarding-Jan-2022.pdf>. The requirements the regulator checks include suitability screening processes (such as procedures for verifying Working with Children Checks), child safety induction and training, appropriate policies, risk registers and the delivery of sexual abuse prevention programs.

30. Victorian Institute of Teaching, *Who needs to register?*, Victorian Institute of Teaching website, 2024, accessed 12 May 2026. <https://www.vit.vic.edu.au/register/purpose>
31. Schools are required to regularly check the status of the Working with Children Checks of non-teaching staff, contractors and volunteers. They are notified of any suspensions or revocations of Working with Children Checks of staff members who listed the school as their employer: Information provided to the Forum by the Department of Education on 1 May 2026.
32. Refer to Child Safe Standard 6.
33. Personalised session with Daz Gibbs.
34. Personalised session with Tim Courtney.
35. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
36. Victorian Department of Education, *Managing conduct and unsatisfactory performance in the teaching service*, Victorian Government website, 2024, accessed 18 March 2026. <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/complaints-misconduct-and-unsatisfactory-performance/policy-and-guidelines>
37. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
38. Victorian School Building Authority, *Planning*, Victorian Government website, 2026, accessed 18 February 2026. <https://www.schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au/building-quality-standards-handbook/planning#362-child-safe-standards>
39. Department of Education, *Child abuse (including grooming) – identification and response*, Victorian Government website, 2026, accessed 4 May 2026. <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/protecting-children/guidance>. Refer also to the Department of Education, *Child Protection and Child Safe Standards (PROTECT)*, Victorian Government website, 2025, accessed 18 March 2026. <https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/child-protection-and-child-safe-standards-protect>. We note that refreshed PROTECT guidance for schools on identifying and responding to child abuse, including grooming, was published online on 24 March 2026: Information provided to the Forum by the Department of Education on 14 April 2026.
40. Department of Education, *Report child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools*, Victorian Government website, 2025, accessed 18 March 2026. <https://www.vic.gov.au/report-child-sexual-abuse-victorian-gov-schools>
41. Submission from Grant Holland, p 17.
42. The Sexual Harm Response Unit works with schools and other areas of the department to ensure appropriate wellbeing support is offered to affected students and families. It provides central, expert oversight on implementing any other actions to manage child safety and wellbeing risks, including notifying the school community of criminal charges or substantiated findings against adults working in schools: Information provided to the Forum by the Department of Education on 1 May 2026. Refer also to Department of Education, *Child abuse (including grooming) – identification and response*, Victorian Government website, 2026, accessed 4 May 2026. <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/protecting-children/guidance>
43. The Conduct and Integrity Division includes a team of specialist advisers to support school principals to respond to allegations and has in-house child safety investigation capability: Information provided to the Forum by the Department of Education on 1 May 2026.
44. Information provided to the Forum by the Department of Education on 1 May 2026. In 2025, the department launched its Restorative Engagement Program and Victim-Survivor Support Hub for former students who experienced child sexual abuse by an adult in a Victorian government school. For more information, refer to Department of Education, *Victim-survivor support for former students*, Victorian Government website, 2026, accessed 4 May 2026. <https://www.vic.gov.au/victim-survivor-support-former-students>. The department also launched policy and guidance on acknowledging and responding to reports of historical

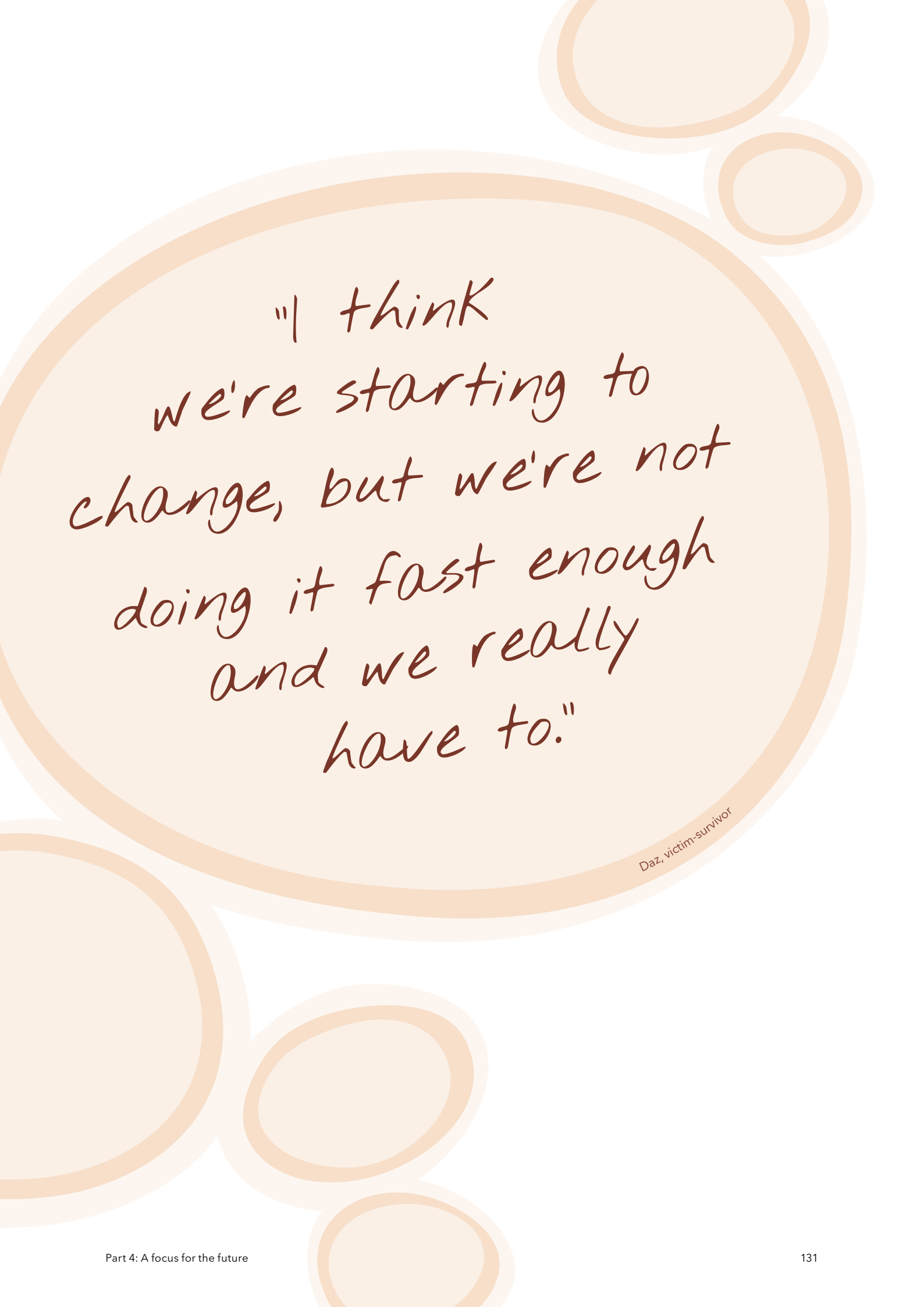
child sexual abuse in government schools. For more information, refer to Department of Education, *Historical child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools*, Victorian Government website, 2026, accessed 4 May 2026. <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/historical-child-sexual-abuse-victorian-government-schools/policy>

45. The Reportable Conduct Scheme was expanded in 2024, including broadening the definition of 'employee' to capture a wider range of people, such as contractors (including labour hire staff), volunteers (including parents) and agency casual relief staff.
46. Department of Education, *School operations: reportable and notifiable conduct*, Victorian Government website, 2025, accessed 24 February 2026. <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/reportable-notifiable-conduct/policy>
47. Department of Education, *School operations: reportable and notifiable conduct*, Victorian Government website, 2025, accessed 5 May 2026. <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/reportable-notifiable-conduct/policy>
48. *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic), Pts 5A, 5B.
49. *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic), Pt 6A.
50. *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic), ss 16L, 16M. The relevant head of organisation for government schools is the Secretary of the Department of Education.
51. For example, if the Social Services Regulator has concerns about how an organisation is complying with the Child Safe Standards, it may be inclined to apply greater scrutiny or intervention in response to any reportable allegations that arise. A disproportionate number of reportable allegations about staff in a particular organisation may also suggest the organisation is not complying with the Child Safe Standards. Commission for Children and Young People, *Our regulatory approach*, Commission for Children and Young People website, n.d., accessed 19 March 2026. <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/about-us/our-regulatory-approach/>. Note the resources related to the Child Safe Standards and Reportable Conduct Scheme are still housed on the Commission for Children and Young People website pending transfer to the Social Services Regulator.
52. Victorian Government, *Victorian Government annual report 2022: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, 2023, p 35.
53. Victoria Police, *Sexual offences and child abuse support teams and centres*, Victoria Police website, 2026, accessed 18 February 2026. <https://www.police.vic.gov.au/sexual-offence-child-abuse-teams-centres>
54. Victoria Police, *Safe from harm: strategy for family violence, sexual offences and child abuse 2024-2029*, 2024, pp 14, 17.
55. Personalised session with 'Claire'.
56. Refer to, for example, *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic), ss 49J, 49O, 327.
57. *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic), s 47A(1) (amended by *Crimes (Sexual Offences) Act 2006* (Vic), s 11).
58. Personalised session with Tim Courtney.
59. *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic), ss 327, 49O.
60. *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: Redress and civil litigation report*, 2015, p 5.
61. Victorian Government, *Victorian Government annual report 2022: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, 2023, p 31; *Limitation of Actions Amendment (Child Abuse) Act 2015* (Vic); *Children Legislation Amendment Act 2019* (Vic).

62. Department of Justice and Community Safety, Common guiding principles – child sexual abuse civil claims, 2024, accessed 24 February 2026. <https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/justice-system/laws-and-regulation/common-guiding-principles-child-sexual-abuse-civil-claims>; Department of Justice and Community Safety, Victorian model litigant guidelines, 2011, accessed 24 February 2026. <https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/justice-system/laws-and-regulation/victorian-model-litigant-guidelines>
63. Under the *Wrongs Act 1958* (Vic), the definition of ‘apology’ for the purposes of s 14J is ‘an expression of sorrow, regret or sympathy but does not include a clear acknowledgment of fault’: *Wrongs Act 1958* (Vic), s 14I (definition of ‘apology’), s 14J.
64. Victorian Government, National Redress Scheme, Victorian Government website, 2023, accessed 13 March 2026. <https://www.vic.gov.au/national-redress-scheme>
65. *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (Vic), Pt 2.6, Divs 8 and 9.
66. *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (Vic), s 2.6.3(1)(h); Victorian Institute of Teaching, About VIT, VIT website, 2026, accessed 13 March 2026. <https://www.vit.vic.edu.au/about>
67. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
68. Personalised session with Daz Gibbs.







"I think  
we're starting to  
change, but we're not  
doing it fast enough  
and we really  
have to."

Daz, victim-survivor

# A focus for the future

## 4.1 Introduction

Victim-survivors shared their experiences with the Forum and told their truth. Overwhelmingly, they were motivated by a desire to help other victim-survivors shed any shame they may be carrying and to remind them that they are not alone. They also wanted their experiences to be heard and acknowledged and to inform stronger protections for children at school.

I seek compassionate listening, a willingness to see my truth and a curiosity that may enable learnings that inform improvements in the Victorian public education system, to protect children and adolescents into the future.<sup>1</sup>

This part of the report reflects victim-survivors' suggestions on potential areas of reform. It contributes to one of our objectives – to allow the Victorian Government to learn from the experiences and information shared with the Forum to better prevent and respond to child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools now and into the future.

Many things have changed since 2000. Hearing people describe physical punishment (such as the strap) being used as a sanctioned, everyday form of discipline at school feels unimaginable today. In some instances, victim-survivors felt that the indifference displayed by school authorities to clear and unequivocal disclosures of abuse reflected outdated attitudes where children were to be seen and not heard, rather than believed.

Today there are stronger laws, new independent regulators, clearer policies and practices, and a better community-wide understanding of the prevalence and impact of child sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup> Some of the victim-survivors we heard from commented on these changes (refer to Part 3).

Despite these efforts, child sexual abuse still happens. National data confirms that child sexual abuse in all settings remains an urgent challenge for contemporary Australian society.<sup>3</sup> Data from Victoria's Reportable Conduct Scheme indicates that sexual misconduct remains the most common type of allegation in government schools, and roughly one in 10 reportable allegations over the life of the scheme have related to sexual offences.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that child sexual abuse in schools is not a historical problem. Rather, it is an ongoing risk to children that requires constant attention. One victim-survivor told us:

| I think the world is a very different place, but I'm not sure it is different enough.<sup>5</sup>

Section 4.2 captures victim-survivors' reflections and ideas on what still needs to change to keep Victorian children safe in schools and to better support victim-survivors.

In section 4.3, the Chair synthesises victim-survivors' experiences and reflections to outline five focus areas for child safety in schools.

## 4.2 Victim-survivors' reflections on what needs to change

Many victim-survivors were driven to take part in the Forum because they wanted to contribute to momentum around changes designed to improve children's safety at school and strengthen responses to child sexual abuse.

Janelle said:

| I didn't come forward for the Royal Commission. I never reported [the perpetrator]. So I have felt like this is my chance, and especially to help another kid.<sup>6</sup>

'Betty' urged others to reflect on the role they can play to protect children:

| Look about, look at children of the same age and ask yourself, 'How can I ensure that the public can be protected from this in the future? How can I advocate for all the children who have yet to tell someone, whether it is now or in 20 years?' A person in a position of power/duty of care does not have the right to coerce children into sexually compromising situations where the child has no insight or ability to talk.<sup>7</sup>

While systemic and policy issues fell outside the Forum's scope for inquiry or recommendation, victim-survivors were free to share whatever they wished. This included their views on policy and practice failures or on what needs to change. This section captures those reflections and ideas.

Some victim-survivors offered detailed written recommendations for policy and legislative changes on a range of issues related to child sexual abuse in schools. A number of these were beyond the scope of the Forum's terms of reference and have not been included here. With victim-survivors' consent, we have shared some of these recommendations with the Victorian Government.

Victim-survivors recognised that schools cannot entirely eliminate the risk of child sexual abuse. Some reflected on the unfortunate reality that there will always be some people who will look to exploit loopholes and lax safety measures to access and sexually abuse children.<sup>8</sup>

'Betty' reflected on the motivations of perpetrators:

Humans with intent to harm children do not discriminate. They do what they do for nothing other than self-fulfillment, power and control. They know full well that it is wrong, against and punishable by law, for a teacher to initiate a relationship with a student/child.<sup>9</sup>

Victim-survivors spoke of the many things everyday people can do to help prevent child sexual abuse in their personal and professional capacities. However, victim-survivors also emphasised the important role of government departments and agencies in making schools as safe as possible and ensuring they can respond to risks to children.

## Community awareness

In Part 3, we highlighted some of the shifts in community attitudes and awareness related to children's safety and rights. These included the views of some victim-survivors that child sexual abuse is more openly discussed and better understood now than in the past.

However, several victim-survivors identified that more work needs to be done to ensure the community understands the nature, extent and risks of child sexual abuse.

Daz called for more community education about child sexual abuse, including how parents should talk to their children about their bodies to normalise conversations about bodily autonomy. He told us that the continuing lack of community understanding prevents many from disclosing their experiences of child sexual abuse.

### Daz (continued from Part 1)

I truly believe that prevention is our way forward. We might not see the full benefits for 10 years or more, but the long-term impact would be far more powerful and sustainable than anything our current system delivers.

Protecting children should be everyone's number one priority. Sadly, it isn't. Adults often focus on issues that affect themselves – we see protests and rallies about adult concerns, yet almost none for the protection of children ...

I still hear blokes say, 'It won't happen to my kid'. I do these talks all the time. People are shocked at the figures. They think they're myths, but they're real ... People either want to put their fingers in their ears and go *blah blah blah* and not hear about it because it's uncomfortable. Well, they just don't want to believe it ...

It's those you trust the most that are the most likely, right? It could be Uncle Dave. But ... it could be your coach. It could be your teacher. It could be your ballet teacher. It could be your scout [leader]. It's anyone that has got free time with your child out of your vision ... People get into these positions so that they can abuse children ...

A lot of the feedback I get from parents is they don't know at what age they should talk to their child, in what language they should talk to their child. There's just not enough education around that ... It's got to be age-appropriate – you don't want to scare your kids. And it's actually a really easy thing to do ... We're not educating parents to educate their kids – not to call it 'willy', to call it a penis. The words that we use, as in the proper terminologies, I don't think they are dirty words ... We need to normalise it.

The myths, the stereotypes and the misinformation surrounding abuse are exactly why so many survivors stay silent about their lived experiences. Why would any man or woman openly talk about the abuse they went through when society still pushes harmful beliefs – like the idea that if you were abused, you will become an abuser? Not only is that belief wrong, it is statistically untrue. But myths like this keep people quiet.<sup>10</sup>

Andy M reflected on how his individual conversations with other people about his experiences of child sexual abuse have had a ripple effect in building awareness and understanding:

Most people are surprised by what I have to say. But I kind of feel that also each time I have that conversation with people who perhaps haven't considered it before, they're perhaps a little bit more aware of what happened to some people and what is continuing to happen to some people. And then next time they see something in the media, they may be encouraged to think, 'Well, this is great that this is coming out. This is an issue that affects the whole society'.<sup>11</sup>

Aden called for people – particularly those with a role in preventing or responding to child sexual abuse – to confront the reality of it:

And I feel that people actually need to be trained in the context of sitting with their own discomfort. And that goes from politicians down to courts and police.<sup>12</sup>

‘Claire’ mentioned the way language can work to conceal the reality of child sexual abuse:

Things like ‘fondling’ as an expression. It’s like, no, it’s not fondling – it’s child sexual assault.<sup>13</sup>

‘Sigrid’ drew attention to a societal view that children aged 16 and 17 cannot experience child sexual abuse perpetrated by a teacher because they are not ‘children’ and are somehow ‘complicit’ in the abuse:

When people hear the term ‘child sexual abuse’, I can see them defaulting to primary school age victims. They see in their mind’s eye a child, a young child, when they hear of [child sexual abuse], not a 16-year-old like myself. And that creates a significant problem when it comes to prevention and responses to survivors either seeking justice or healing ...<sup>14</sup>

She told us she fears society has ‘a collective blind spot’ to the sexual abuse of older children:

In a climate (thankfully) of increasing promotion of consent education and respectful relationships, the potential for norms that apply to peer-to-peer relationships (not children under the care, supervision and authority of adults) being blurred and utilised by adult perpetrators to extend the concept of consent to adult-child relationships, is a concern.<sup>15</sup>

‘Sigrid’ advocated for greater legal protections for older children, noting her understanding that the current grooming offence does not extend to situations involving children aged 16 or 17 who are under the care, supervision or authority of a perpetrator.<sup>16</sup> She also expressed her view that the ‘undeniable reality is that perpetrators pivot’, referring to new forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation (for example, perpetrators accessing child sexual abuse material online), but emphasised that ‘contact abuse’ from earlier eras should not be seen as out of date or irrelevant today.<sup>17</sup>

‘Sarah’ also said she feels it is important to make sure older children are protected against child sexual abuse, reflecting that 16- and 17-year-olds do not always ‘see themselves as kids’ and some ‘want to pretend that they’re adults’.<sup>18</sup>

'Claire' said that the adult safety network taught to younger children may also benefit older children:

For some years there's been training for little kids – you know, 'Who are the five people you talk to? If someone's mean, if someone's upsetting you, if you're angry, if something's not OK, who can you talk to?' And you have people other than just the parents, because they're protective of their parents or they don't want to tell someone that's going to get all upset with them. And I think it should be like this for teens as well – 'Know that there are people you can talk to'.<sup>19</sup>

We heard that, despite increased community understanding of child sexual abuse and its impacts, some victim-survivors feel unable to speak about their experiences with their families and friends. 'Oscar' reflected on his own silence about his experiences and on the importance of giving victim-survivors opportunities to speak:

I'm at that point now – do I keep this a secret to the grave or do I tell? And I'm at that point now where there are so many people right now walking around the place where this has happened to them and they're too afraid to say something. I don't know what the solution really is apart from what we're doing here right now.

What would change, I think, in my book is more people like you [the Chair of the Forum] – what you're doing right now – telling their stories, being listened to, understanding the fact that this is real. This has happened.<sup>20</sup>

Aden emphasised the importance of ensuring victim-survivors of child sexual abuse can speak and have their voices genuinely heard:

This is about being able to create a space where people can actually really tell their story. It's not fluffiness to get or make the government look like they're doing something, because ultimately I think in some ways they've missed the mark.<sup>21</sup>

## **Building confidence to speak up about child safety**

We heard from victim-survivors that parents and carers need confidence and skills to have conversations with their children about child sexual abuse.

Aden spoke about the need for parents and families to be comfortable talking about child sexual abuse:

I think it's actually about educating the family ... I think actually the first thing is to make sure the parents are actually sitting with it.<sup>22</sup>

'Charles' cautioned against underestimating children and their capacity to understand, highlighting the value of early conversations:

And even if from five years old, we can talk about sex and sexual mores, or we can talk about respect or we can talk about violence. I think that we underestimate our children.<sup>23</sup>

'Brendon' expressed a similar view that age-appropriate conversations are essential because children are capable of learning about their safety:

As a child, you may not have a full understanding, but you still understand ...  
I still believe – especially in Grade 5, 6, 7 – children have enough wherewithal. They're not dumb. They're not stupid.<sup>24</sup>

James told us:

I think there needs to be more of an outlet for children to feel safe and there needs to be more education in schools ... I know it's hard with younger students to obviously discuss [things of a] sexual nature or even just touching or anything of that nature, but there needs to be more education and just a better understanding that this is not right.<sup>25</sup>

We heard that education for children about sexual abuse should focus on the risks posed by people known to a child, rather than by strangers. Janelle told us:

And at school at that time, it was very big on 'stranger danger' ... thinking about strangers, what to do if a stranger follows you home from school ... all these kinds of things. But they never talked about people known to you, [which is] more common. That should be taught more.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Daz commented:

Children are taught to trust adults but often lack the nuance to understand that even 'trusted' adults can cross boundaries.<sup>27</sup>

'Warren' shared his belief that it is important for parents to be curious in their conversations with children:

Just to have broad conversations and honest conversations with, 'How was your day? What did you do today? What did you get up to?' And just try and find out if there's anything in there that shouldn't be there, that's slipping through the cracks.<sup>28</sup>

Many victim-survivors emphasised the importance of adults speaking up to protect children and acting on any concerns. Tim said:

There is a moral obligation on us all to do something when we observe any situation that is basically an affront to our value system.<sup>29</sup>

In Part 3, we described some of the initiatives designed to improve the knowledge and skills of school staff to act on concerns and protect children from harm. Several victim-survivors expressed the importance of ensuring these translate into practical and tangible improvements to children's safety.

Aden felt that there is still a gap between knowledge and action when it comes to responding to child sexual abuse in schools:

I understand the importance of early intervention and teaching schools and teachers, but it's also around them taking action. To actually not just go, 'Oh, is that happening?' But actually go, 'No, this needs to happen now. It needs to be investigated', and actually bring the family in and get them all the supports.<sup>30</sup>

He added that this extends to teachers being open with students about speaking up:

It's actually about them learning that when they're being taught that the teacher is actually saying to children, 'If I make you feel uncomfortable or if any teacher in this school makes you feel uncomfortable, this is the things you need to do'.<sup>31</sup>

Some victim-survivors called for systems to enable teachers or other school staff to share their concerns about the welfare of students. For example, 'Grace' commented:

I think teachers must be able to speak amongst themselves – must be able to go to their head and say, 'Keep an eye on so-and-so' or 'How do we talk to her? I think she's vulnerable'.<sup>32</sup>

'Oscar' shared that he told other children in the playground about the perpetrator's behaviour. He said teachers heard and failed to take steps to protect him. He pointed to the importance of listening closely to children and acting on concerns:

It's important that people understand that what happened was horrible in the 70s and 80s, but we all need to make sure we're doing the right steps now – Working with Children Checks and lots of stuff. But you know, whenever a child says something when they're only like six or seven – like, they say, 'This person pulls you' – stop and think – how could someone as young as me know something about that?<sup>33</sup>

AJ suggested that the screening process be stronger to assess teachers' suitability and safety to interact with children. He called for more wellbeing-focused staff to support children at school:

I think welfare officers are definitely a great thing and there should be more of them, not less.<sup>34</sup>

AJ highlighted the importance of hiring suitable people to serve as principals, reflecting they have ‘too much power’:

From what I read, I believe it’s damn too easy to be a principal of a school. If you’ve got a horrible, horrible principal at your school and you wanna get rid of him, you upmarket him, make him look good, and another school will come along and wanna get him off you. And that’s how people that shouldn’t be principals become principals.<sup>35</sup>

‘Grace’ said that teachers should be more vigilant about the risks to compliant children, who she believed may be particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse:

Certain kids are more vulnerable than others to be abused. Therefore, teachers should be looking at those good kids – not at the naughty kids all the time that draw the attention. Surely somebody knew and surely I wasn’t the only one ... we need to protect them.<sup>36</sup>

‘Claire’ described the importance of supervision and teachers being clear about the consequences of failing to act:

Well, I think you’ve got to have a female witness with the male staff teacher if they’re going off on camps or excursions or these kinds of things. And I also think that all staff need to be taught the signs of paedophile behaviour and what grooming looks like. And they have to start being told if you’re not reporting any concerning grooming behaviours, you’re potentially allowing this to happen. You know, we can’t go, ‘Oh, I like them. They would never do that’ ... I think it has to be made visible, even more visible. It has to be, ‘This is one of the risks that all these children in your care are potentially exposed to’.<sup>37</sup>

‘Claire’ also explained that teachers need to feel confident to have conversations with students, as this may create the space and safety for a disclosure:

They’ve got to understand that the students need opportunities because no one asked me directly, ‘Have you ever had a problem with him?’ Because there’s a possibility that, had they asked, I might have said at the time, ‘Yes, well, actually I have’.<sup>38</sup>

Janelle told us it would be valuable to have adult victim-survivors speak to teaching staff to help them understand the real-world implications of child sexual abuse:

Maybe some survivors need to speak to people training to be teachers, or teachers.<sup>39</sup>

While it is never the responsibility of children to prevent child sexual abuse, ‘Charles’ said it is important to ensure children feel confident to speak up if something is wrong. He called for structures that equip children to support their more vulnerable peers and said he wants to see schools, teachers and parents working together in a more coordinated way to protect children against the risk of child sexual abuse.

### **‘Charles’ (continued from Part 1)**

What paedophiles do is they prey on vulnerable children ... we [need to] understand vulnerabilities much better and look out for them a bit better. Do they need a bit of extra support? And it shouldn’t be seen as a negative by the child. It’s not as if one is failing maths or whatever. It’s more – I want the child to feel as though he or she is seen in a very, very positive light ...

And you know, if we can have 10-year-olds talking to each other and saying, ‘How’s it going?’ and stuff like that ... the children become the champions. So, it’s not only on the sporting field, but it’s also in the school environment.

And I would be looking at some sort of program. I’m not sure which year it would start – probably Grade 5, Grade 6 is about the time the child is cognisant of what’s happening. Did they feel comfortable to speak up? ... It must be seen by the child not as a necessity, or not as something that they have to do, [but] something they want to do.

You don’t want to make a child feel as though there’ll be negative consequences, so when you say something may happen, it’s not going to negatively impact them. They have to feel absolutely comfortable.

We have parent-teacher nights and things like that, but I don’t think we have a structure of parent-teacher engagement ... What I would like to see is something that ... says, ‘Look, we’re going to have a discussion about this ... what can we do as people who have the best interests of this child and you have your role and I have my role and we want the best for this child’.

If I think about the stakeholder map of a child – teacher, parent, doctor – there is a role for everyone there ... GPs are now given the go-ahead [to diagnose] ADHD. Why can’t they be given the go-ahead to be able to gently talk about, ‘Hey, how’s other things going in your life?’<sup>40</sup>

Ann Maree told us:

If a child’s allowed to comment on an adult’s behaviour, it becomes a shared responsibility. It becomes, ‘I’m going to hold you to account whatever you do to me’.<sup>41</sup>

‘Boudicea’ called for state education authorities to arrange and participate in collaborative ‘think tank’ processes to better understand how child sexual abuse relates to marginalised groups – including First Peoples and culturally diverse children, LGBTIQ+ children and children with disabilities. She expressed the view that these processes should involve victim-survivors with these identities and experiences.<sup>42</sup>

## Strengthening safeguards

Some victim-survivors told us that perpetrators were able to continue sexually abusing children in schools over many years, evading consequences and accountability for the harm they caused.<sup>43</sup> Some victim-survivors expressed a concern that a motivated perpetrator may continue to take advantage of weaknesses in the child safety system and offered their reflections and suggestions on how these gaps could be closed.

For example, Andy B and 'Sarah' called for better safeguards to prevent perpetrators' access to children, particularly when moving between jurisdictions. Andy B said:

I have heard anecdotally of perpetrators just simply moving from one state to another where they can continue on their merry way. And so I think some tightening up there could be something to think about.<sup>44</sup>

'Sarah' told us:

For me, it is just making sure that predators can't 'sector hop' and 'state hop', which is another thing [the perpetrator] did.<sup>45</sup>

'Ethan' described how a more rigorous reporting process would have been important when he disclosed as a child:

There should be a body that you can go to, like I went to the chaplain. And then that gets reported and then there's a process.<sup>46</sup>

Tim cautioned that compulsory reporting processes are only effective in protecting children in schools if staff (and others in the education system) comply with them; if there is a robust system to support confidential and independent reporting; and if an effective reporting culture is fostered.

### Tim (continued from Part 1)

I think the perpetrators establish this situation where it makes it quite difficult to [come forward] ... In the education environment, if the perpetrator is a teacher, who do you speak to? ... When you're wanting to complain about a staff member in education, you go to the principal where the information ends up.

And I know there is a compulsory sort of reporting. But that only works if there's effective sort of vertical integration of that and a willingness by all that participate in education to hold themselves to that requirement ... I guess the question I will ultimately have is how do parents become aware of the opportunity to go to someone independent or to go to an established complaints line? ...

You can set up a framework of compulsory reporting, but if there's a willingness to get around the system, people will find a way to do that. But equally, the thing that I often dwell on is what do the other teachers observe at the time?<sup>47</sup>

Some victim-survivors expressed concern about the Working with Children Check scheme. This scheme is a screening process for assessing (and reassessing) a person who wishes to work or volunteer with children. It looks at whether a person has a criminal history and any relevant professional conduct findings to help protect children from physical or sexual harm. Phil questioned its effectiveness:

I think that Working with Children Check is a joke ... I've got a card in my wallet [that] says that I'm an able and fine person that [can] coach your kids or whatever – basketball. I just think it's a bit vague where you go, 'OK, you've got it', ... I've paid the money to some department. What have they done to check on me? I've never been involved with children. Is that the full check? You know, no one ever comes and talks to you or asks you questions or anything. There's nothing.<sup>48</sup>

AJ shared his view that Working with Children Checks do not offer enough assurance that a person is safe to work with children:

I think personally the working with children's certificate is not worth the paper it's written on ... They hand them out like lollies.<sup>49</sup>

‘Grace’ suggested having an independent person check in with children in schools from time to time to ask them about their safety:

... back in primary school we used to have the health department come around and chat to the kids ... maybe somebody to come in, not even part of the school, come in and have a chat – ‘How are things going with you?’<sup>50</sup>

‘Warren’ called for greater supervision of children, either through the use of cameras or by pairing teachers so they are never alone with a student in a classroom.<sup>51</sup>

Andy M reflected on his role running rugby league coaching courses and told us:

And I notice now – and I’m encouraged by this – that one of the things that we teach when we’re running a coaching course ... is things like never being alone with one of the players, either at training or at a game or in the changing rooms or anything like that ... I’m sure that there’s similar measures in place at schools and things like that. And I’m thinking other community groups, if they were adopting similar processes, whereby it was recognised that an adult and a student shouldn’t be in a room somewhere on their own without someone else being there.<sup>52</sup>

James called for governments to take responsibility for child sexual abuse that happened in the past:

The government needs to be held accountable, whether it’s this government, the next government, or whoever it is. I don’t care who it is. If you say you’re going to do something, follow through with your actions. Actions speak louder than words is all I can say.<sup>53</sup>

## Support services for victim-survivors

Victim-survivors experience the impacts of child sexual abuse in different ways and need different types of support at various points in their lives.

Some victim-survivors said they want these types of supports and services to be more accessible and effective at addressing the root causes of trauma. For example, ‘Charles’ spoke about some of the benefits of newer, more experimental treatments:

What I’ve found over years of therapy is we’ve been treating the symptoms, not the cause. So you treat depression or you treat anxiety or you treat substance abuse. And that’s great, but you’re not treating the trauma from the child abuse which is causing that. And so what the psychedelic-assisted therapy allows me to do ... is to understand the cause and to have that treated.<sup>54</sup>

He also described some of the barriers he experienced accessing services and getting support when he needed it:

My general feel is that the support service network for mature-age people who suffered child sexual abuse is disaggregated. It is not seamless. I'll give you an example. I was calling one group – they happen to be in Queensland. I'm [interstate] and they said, 'Can you give us a postcode?' I gave the postcode and I said an [interstate] postcode and they said, 'Oh, we can't help you'. I was in a time of need ... I think more work needs to be done in organisations that are run 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. Most of the trauma for me will be outside hours, middle of the night or something. I think we have to have a real look at the support service network.<sup>55</sup>

Andy B said that while peer support is valuable, it is not for everyone. He explained that some people do not want to 'share that shame' with peers who are in the 'same experience group', but there are 'those that will want to'.<sup>56</sup>

James expressed his frustration that there is not enough support for victim-survivors:

It makes me so angry that the government is not doing anything. They said it was going to make it easy for us and help us and they've done nothing. And that's what makes me so angry ... you know, every day's a struggle for me. The trauma is a struggle for me.<sup>57</sup>

Grant reflected on a project designed to help victim-survivors going through legal processes connected to the child sexual abuse they experienced:

I have been fortunate to be involved in a project that is hoping to provide a guide and support service for people undergoing the retraumatising and complex process of child abuse litigation. No one is currently doing this. My legal team was great, but they are not trained therapists and cannot be expected to pick up really dangerous process points for survivors.<sup>58</sup>

Aden reflected that sometimes perpetrators who go through the criminal justice system are more likely than victim-survivors to have access to programs and interventions, including mental health services – such as in prison.<sup>59</sup>

'Boudicea' recommended that the Victorian Government consider conducting rolling inquiries into child sexual abuse within schools (such as every five years) to ensure 'new waves' of victim-survivors can share their experiences, have the benefit of healing and inform longitudinal learnings.<sup>60</sup>

FIGURE 4.1: AURORA — POEM BY 'BOUDICEA'<sup>61</sup>



## AURORA

At its seam

ocean's water

awaits the rivers' sweet

with behemoth jaws.

A good girl's soul falls.

Cries muted

in a maelstrom clamour

of others selfish possibilities.

Who can hear?

Who will see ... me ?

Who dares look  
down

an eternal  
whirlpool's  
core ?

Albatrossin dares !

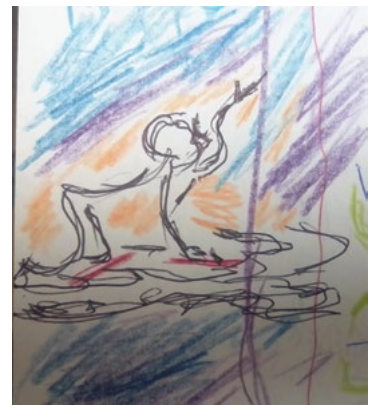
face  
cataclysmic updrafts

Diving..... Rising

Diving ..... Rising higher

Still diving more.

Spent.



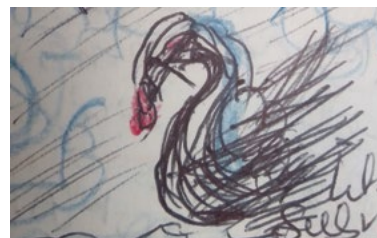
At river's edge  
where all seems ...

gone,

In swirling mist

appears

a Swan !



## 4.3 The Chair's reflections: maintaining momentum

I have had the benefit of hearing from victim-survivors who shared their experiences with the Forum. Based on their experiences and insight, I have drawn together five key areas I consider to be important to continue to promote safety in schools. These are:

1. Acknowledging the past
2. Child-safe cultures in schools
3. Leadership focused on child safety
4. Creating the conditions for adults to speak up and act
5. Activating the child's voice.

These elements consider the key problems and challenges victim-survivors shared through their experiences (detailed in Part 1) and their ideas for change captured in section 4.2, while acknowledging improvements since 2000 (highlighted in Part 3).

I drew upon a methodology called 'causal layered analysis' to help inform my reflections. This is a way of thinking through problems deeply by uncovering their root causes to shape a desired future. More information about causal layered analysis is in Appendix F.

### Acknowledging the past

An insidious aspect of child sexual abuse is that its occurrence is often denied and its impacts on a person downplayed. This can create a cloud of shame over victim-survivors and leave them to carry the burden of their traumatic experiences alone.

Many victim-survivors spoke about silence – the silence the perpetrator expected them to maintain; the silence around child sexual abuse in family and community conversations; being forced back into silence when their disclosure was met with disbelief or inaction. Silence harbours perpetrators and lets them get away with their abuses. It obscures the past failings of people responsible for protecting children.

The Forum has offered one way to acknowledge and record child sexual abuse that has occurred in schools. It recognises the value of listening, believing and acknowledging the experiences of victim-survivors. We cannot undo past abuse or unacceptable responses to it. However, we can offer victim-survivors the dignity of listening to what happened to them, acknowledging it was wrong and understanding its impacts. Doing so offers the possibility of contributing to a victim-survivor's healing and helps us learn and improve.

As Grant reflected:

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Truth and Recognition Forum which is chasing light and not hiding in the darkness ... I am very grateful that you took the time and care to listen to my story, and did so with such sensitivity and care.<sup>62</sup>

Failing to acknowledge the scale of the problem keeps the community ignorant of the risks and signs of child sexual abuse. It denies us the opportunity to learn from past mistakes. When schools acknowledge sexual abuse perpetrated against former students, they send an important message that such behaviour is not tolerated.

While this report does not reflect the full extent of child sexual abuse that has occurred in schools, what we heard gives an important insight into the conditions that can give rise to child sexual abuse and the devastating impacts when it occurs. It is an invitation to the Victorian community to bear witness, to learn and to act. As James said:

I want to be a voice that is heard and listened to so it gives other people the opportunity to come forward and speak their truth.<sup>63</sup>

**Acknowledging past wrongs is an important step towards safer schools in the future.**

## Child-safe cultures in schools

Past inquiries, research and victim-survivor advocates point to the role of organisational culture in preventing (or conversely increasing the risk of) child sexual abuse.<sup>64</sup> We must maintain an unrelenting focus on ensuring all Victorian government schools are cultivating the elements of a healthy culture that protects children.

Schools that have child-safe cultures are in a stronger position to prevent and effectively respond to child sexual abuse. The question of how to create, maintain and measure a child-safe culture within a school is not simple. Schools need to create the conditions where people feel compelled to speak up and act when they see or suspect that a child may be experiencing child sexual abuse.

Victoria's Child Safe Standards reflect the factors that promote an organisational culture that prioritises the safety and wellbeing of children.<sup>65</sup> These standards require organisations to reflect on issues of leadership, recruitment, training and policy guidance and to promote children's empowerment and celebrate their diversity.<sup>66</sup> Because they are principles-based, the Child Safe Standards aim to avoid a compliance mindset, instead requiring schools to actively reflect on how to embed them and make them meaningful within their environment.<sup>67</sup>

In Part 3, we outlined the steps the Department of Education has taken to support Victoria's schools to implement the Child Safe Standards and to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse since 2000. There are now a range of policies, procedures, guidance documents, training and other initiatives to improve child safety in schools. Taken together, these provide a good foundation to help make schools safer for students.

At the same time, the most prescriptive policies, informative training and directive reporting obligations will ultimately have to confront human behaviour in practice. This sits at the heart of change – creating a culture that encourages people to speak up and act, rather than look the other way, as reflected in the adage 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'.<sup>68</sup> A child-safe culture is proactive and continuously seeks to improve children's safety.

Some victim-survivors said schools have changed for the better since they were students. They see their own children and grandchildren having access to information and help that was not available in the past. Some also reflected that children nowadays are openly encouraged to tell someone if something is wrong. 'Joshua' said:

I think there's a lot more public awareness and education about these things and people are encouraged to just speak up.<sup>69</sup>

A healthy school culture is one that is vigilant to the possibility of child sexual abuse, that takes every possible step to prevent it and is decisive and protective of children when it does occur. It is a culture that is dynamic and continually refining and improving, rather than static and 'set and forget'. It works together with students, parents and carers and the broader school community to put safety first.

There are approximately 1,600 government schools across Victoria, all of which are likely to be able to demonstrate various levels of compliance relating to a policy or a procedure. Measuring culture can be more challenging.<sup>70</sup> While difficult to assess, culture can be teachable, observable and, with the right methodology, provable.

A potential additional measure to gauge the child-safe culture of a school could involve an independent person sitting within schools, observing the environment and speaking frankly with students, parents, carers and staff.<sup>71</sup> Such an approach may also be more accessible for some people, including children, who may not be aware of their ability to report safety concerns to other independent agencies, or feel too daunted to do so.<sup>72</sup> This type of external involvement would also allow child safety to be discussed and explored in a more general and preventative way, not just when there is an 'incident'.

We cannot afford to be complacent in how we encourage, demonstrate and live the desired child-safe culture. Changing and maintaining culture requires everybody to work together – schools, parents, carers, departments, governments and the broader community.

**A child-safe culture in a school makes sexual abuse less likely to occur, harder to hide and more likely to be reported.**

## **Leadership focused on child safety**

Organisational culture and leadership go hand in hand. While child safety must be viewed as a collective responsibility, the style and values of the leadership team within a school – particularly the principal – shape its culture and norms in uniquely powerful ways.<sup>73</sup>

Keeping children safe relies on the values, actions and behaviours of a school leadership team that continually reinforces safety – creating trust and confidence in students and staff to speak up. Recruitment of school leaders should focus on the values and behaviours that promote the conditions for a healthy and safe school culture to flourish.

Some victim-survivors were sexually abused by their school principal – someone they were taught to respect and obey.<sup>74</sup> They said that this made the thought of reporting the abuse they experienced particularly daunting. It may have also made it more difficult for a school staff member and families to raise concerns they may have held about the conduct of principals, as there were fewer external avenues for such reports in the past.<sup>75</sup>

Other victim-survivors said they were met with inaction, unsympathetic responses or punishment when they (or their families) told their schools about child sexual abuse perpetrated by a school staff member.<sup>76</sup> School leaders who fail to respond appropriately to disclosures send a message to staff, families and children that speaking up about child sexual abuse is unwelcome and futile. It tells victim-survivors that their safety and wellbeing do not matter. Tim told us:

I now have a clear memory of going to [a member of senior leadership] at the school complaining about the perpetrator. As a result of that nothing changed, which is curious.<sup>77</sup>

School leaders should always prioritise children's safety and wellbeing above all else. They should recognise that a school's reputation is best protected (rather than harmed) when a school is clear, decisive and protective of children in its responses to child sexual abuse.

School leaders need more than management experience and educational expertise. They need to have personal qualities that will ensure they embody child safety as part of their everyday practice. This requires a degree of emotional intelligence and humility – an open mind, a willingness to continue learning and an open door to staff, students and families who may have concerns.<sup>78</sup>

In particular, a school leader who places child safety on every agenda demonstrates their willingness to reflect and have uncomfortable conversations. They create an environment for staff to share concerns, learn from mistakes and continually build their confidence in how to identify and respond to child sexual abuse. In order to achieve cultural change or transformation in schools, the collective capacity and skills of teachers as well as students, parents and carers needs to be built.<sup>79</sup>

Safety is a precondition for effective learning. It is the foundation children need to thrive and reach their full potential.

**Led by the principal, school leaders set the tone for a school's approach to child safety. They should signal through their words and actions that upholding children's safety is everyone's responsibility.**

## **Creating the conditions for adults to speak up and act**

It is not a child's responsibility to protect themselves from abuse. It is the responsibility of adults to prevent, identify and respond to child sexual abuse.

Victim-survivors shared how the dynamics of grooming mean that some children can be manipulated into feeling complicit in the sexual abuse and unable to disclose due to fear or shame.<sup>80</sup> Children may not immediately recognise what is happening to them as sexual abuse.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, the adults around a child, including staff at their school, must be alert to the signs of abuse and equipped with the skills to respond.

Victim-survivors described the betrayal they felt not only by the conduct of the perpetrator but also by other people who failed to act when told of the abuse.<sup>82</sup> This includes school staff, parents and carers. The idea of otherwise good people not acting on knowledge or suspicions of abuse is hard to comprehend. Some of this may have stemmed from a poor understanding of child sexual abuse or uncertainty about what to do.

Other victim-survivors described perpetrators whose behaviours were brazen and widely whispered about in the school community. This should have triggered action from school staff, even without a definitive disclosure. For example, George said:

The rumours continued through the whole school and the bit that I don't really understand is that ... if I heard [rumours], you would have thought teachers heard – not that I ever went to a teacher – but I did hear the [school] knew obviously of [the perpetrator's] antics. And nothing was done.<sup>83</sup>

There are many familiar, everyday cognitive biases that contribute to inaction. These include a desire to believe the good in people over the bad, to avoid difficult conversations, to rearrange narratives to justify a course of action and to assume that someone else is responsible or taking care of the problem. People can often struggle to reconcile that everyday people – sometimes trusted and respected figures in the community – could be capable of perpetrating child sexual abuse. Believing a victim-survivor in such circumstances often forces a person to confront that they themselves have been deceived. This discomfort can continue to fuel their disbelief and scepticism.

It is important to reflect on how we can make sure staff in schools do not minimise, rationalise or look away from a colleague's concerning behaviour. School staff need to act on the earliest signs of grooming or inappropriate behaviour. If people wait to be 'certain' child sexual abuse has occurred, it is too late and the irrevocable harm is done.

To achieve this, we need to normalise everyday conversations about interactions with children in schools. Creating space for open discussion can help identify predatory behaviours and deliberate boundary breaches at the earliest stage.

All adults who play a role in a child's life should form an alliance of care around that child and lean into questions of safety with curiosity and commitment. Children spend a significant portion of their lives at school. Therefore, school staff represent one of the most important parts of a child's protective network.

**Schools and education departments must continue to prioritise child safety. Child safety is not achieved and then maintained – it requires constant attention and vigilance.**

## Activating the child's voice

Many victim-survivors described being sexually abused in an era when children were subordinate and expected to readily comply with the instructions of adults. They described a time when children were – at best – seen as deserving of protection but not as holders of rights or a voice worth listening to, including when it came to questions of safety. While a small number of victim-survivors told us they were believed, the responses to their disclosures were often not in line with today's expectations.

Children's rights are now well-established through the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and other instruments, but how consistently are they upheld and respected in practice?

Children have valuable insight into what safety looks and feels like for them, and this may be different from what adults assume is 'best'. The perspectives of students can be invaluable for schools. The act of asking and listening to children about safety demonstrates to children, parents, caregivers and school staff alike that students are to be heard and respected. This may also encourage children to disclose if they have a safety concern because it signals that what they have to say will be taken seriously. As 'Charles' reflected:

And you involve the child in some of the discussions. And we embolden the child. Then it not only helps them in school and to talk about sexual abuse or whatever violence or bullying ... [it] helps in the home as well.<sup>84</sup>

The Child Safe Standards require organisations, including schools, to empower children, take them seriously and support them to participate in decisions that affect them. It takes time to untangle decades of thinking that prioritised adult interests and organisations' reputations over the safety and best interests of children. While progress is being made, one in five Australians still hold some doubt about whether children who disclose sexual abuse should be believed.<sup>85</sup>

Listening to and acting appropriately on what children tell us is fundamental to child safety. This relies on adults earning the trust of children by showing genuine concern and interest in their wellbeing. We need to dismantle barriers to action on child sexual abuse and build school environments that encourage children to speak up. We need schools to be accountable to students and to honour their trust by acting decisively on their safety concerns.

**We must continue to keep our eyes and ears open and ask children about what they feel and what they need. We need to start from a position of belief and act on children's concerns with compassion and care.**

## A public record to inform the future

A future where children do not experience child sexual abuse at school – or anywhere – is the goal. This goes beyond protecting individual children from harm, towards creating a better society overall. Child sexual abuse is a problem that will continue to demand our attention, investment and focus. This requires us to have a vision that takes account of this stark reality. Doing so is not only a moral obligation but an imperative if we want safe, healthy and thriving children and communities.

There is no single solution to child sexual abuse. The many things we must do include all the adults around a child supporting them to have a strong voice and reach their full potential.

This report is more than a static record of the past – it is a call to action.  
As 'Sigrid' reflected:

I don't want my experience to be memorialised, nor do I want an apology that becomes another note in the history books.

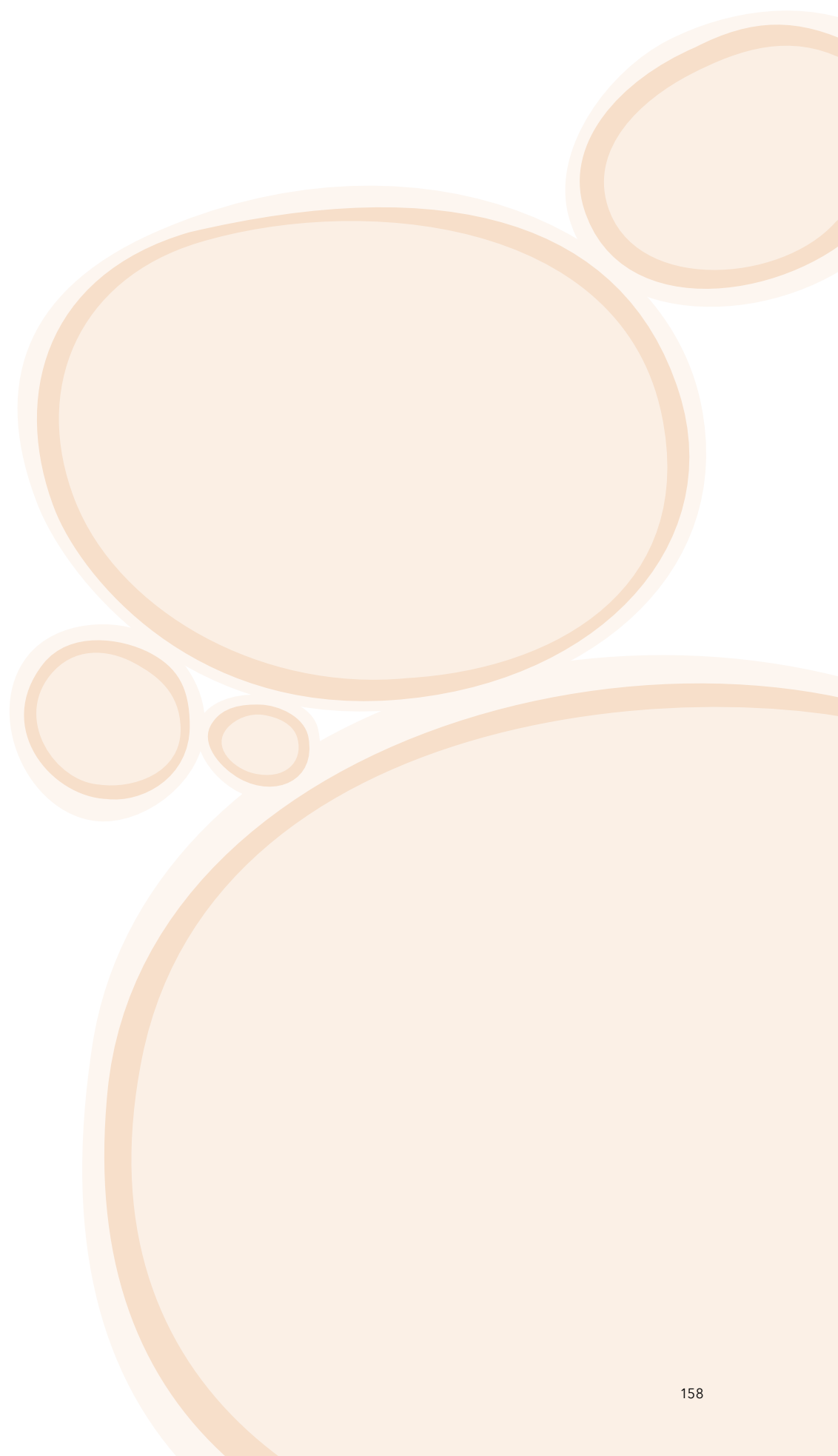
I want my experience to not be repeated and that requires concerted, focused action now.<sup>86</sup>

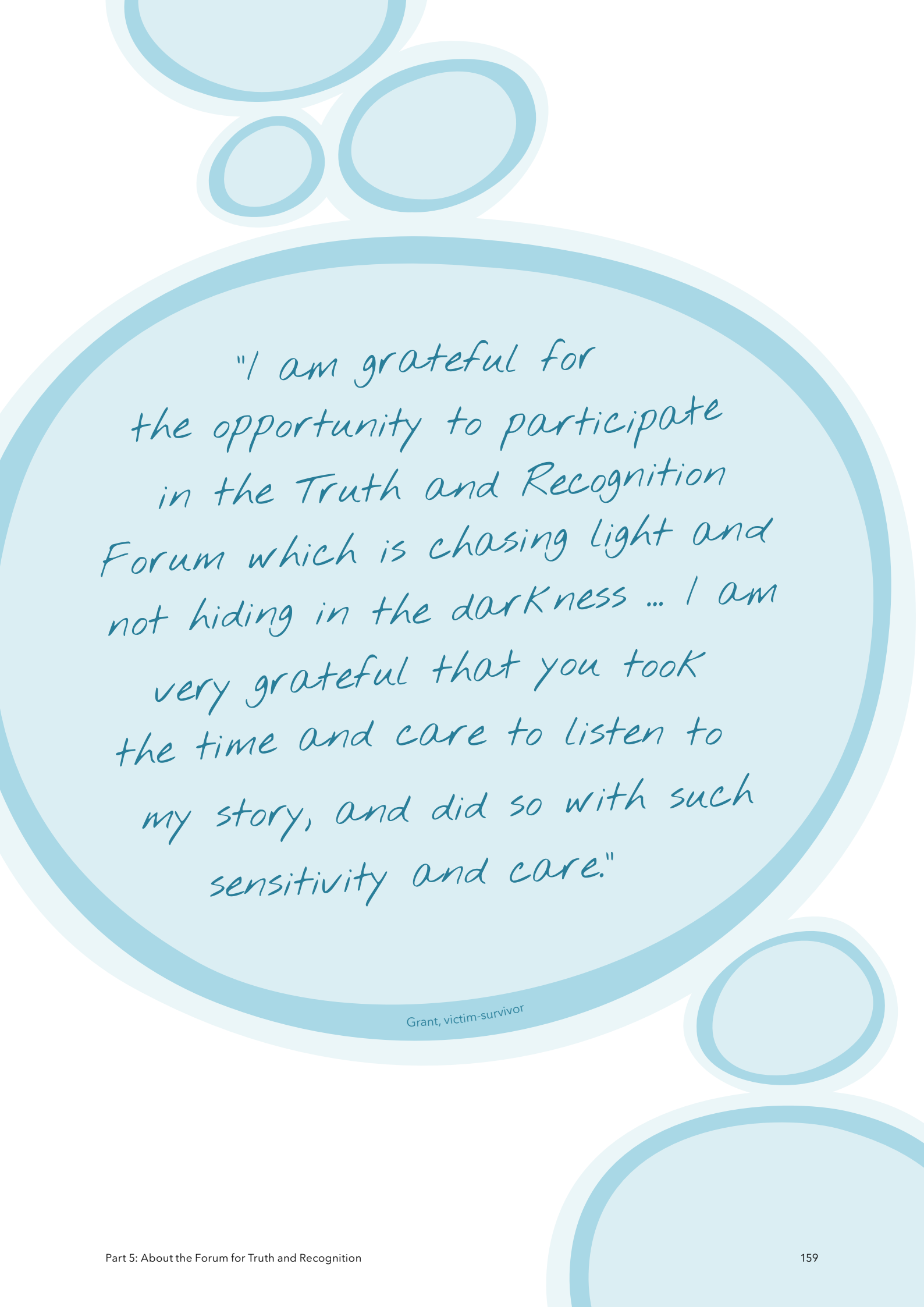
## Part 4 Endnotes

1. Submission from 'Boudicea', p 1.
2. Refer to Part 3.
3. The groundbreaking Australian Child Maltreatment Study in 2023 found that the national prevalence of child sexual abuse in Australia in all settings was 28.5%, or more than one in four: D Haslam et al., *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study – brief report*, Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology, 2023, p 17.
4. Commission for Children and Young People, *Annual report 2024-25*, 2025, pp 109-110. 'Sexual misconduct' against, with or in the presence of a child is a category of reportable conduct that includes grooming behaviour: *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* (Vic), s 3(1).
5. Personalised session with 'Sarah'.
6. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
7. Submission from 'Betty', p 6.
8. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
9. Submission from 'Betty', p 6.
10. Personalised session with Daz Gibbs; submission from Daz Gibbs, p 1.
11. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
12. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
13. Personalised session with 'Claire'.
14. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 5.
15. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 5.
16. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 6.
17. Submission from 'Sigrid', pp 12-13.
18. Personalised session with 'Sarah'.
19. Personalised session with 'Claire'.
20. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.
21. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
22. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
23. Personalised session with 'Charles'.
24. Personalised session with 'Brendon'.
25. Personalised session with James Macbeth.
26. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
27. Submission from Daz Gibbs, p 2.
28. Personalised session with 'Warren'.
29. Personalised session with Tim Courtney.
30. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
31. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
32. Personalised session with 'Grace'.
33. Personalised session with 'Oscar'.

34. Personalised session with AJ Toughill.
35. Personalised session with AJ Toughill.
36. Personalised session with 'Grace'.
37. Personalised session with 'Claire'.
38. Personalised session with 'Claire'.
39. Personalised session with Janelle Tasic.
40. Personalised session with 'Charles'.
41. Personalised session with Ann Maree Sloan-Coleman.
42. Submission 4 from 'Boudicea', pp 2-4.
43. For example, personalised session with Tim Courtney; personalised session with 'Violet'; personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
44. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
45. Personalised session with 'Sarah'.
46. Personalised session with 'Ethan'.
47. Personalised session with Tim Courtney.
48. Personalised session with Phil.
49. Personalised session with AJ Toughill.
50. Personalised session with 'Grace'.
51. Personalised session with 'Warren'.
52. Personalised session with Andy McCreery.
53. Personalised session with James Macbeth.
54. Personalised session with 'Charles'.
55. Personalised session with 'Charles'.
56. Personalised session with Andy Balfe.
57. Personalised session with James Macbeth.
58. Personalised session with Grant Holland.
59. Personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
60. Submission 2 from 'Boudicea', p 5.
61. Submission 3 from 'Boudicea', p 4.
62. Submission from Grant Holland.
63. Personalised session with James Macbeth.
64. Organisational culture is the shared values and beliefs that guide how members of an organisation approach their work and interact with each other: R Cooke and J Szumal, 'Measuring normative beliefs and shared behavioural expectations in organisations: the reliability and validity of the organisational culture inventory', *Psychological Reports*, 1993, 72(3):1299-1330. For example, as seen in Family and Community Development Committee, *Betrayal of trust: Victorian Parliamentary inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other non-government organisations*, Parliament of Victoria, 2013, vol 1, p 168; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: final report, 2017, vol 6, p 12; Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings, 2023, vol 8, p 14; Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Part C, p 172.

65. Commission for Children and Young People, *Being a child safe organisation*, CCYP website, accessed 7 April 2026. <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safe-standards/being-a-child-safe-organisation/>
66. Victorian Government, *Child Safe Standards guidance for schools*, Victorian Government website, 2026, accessed 7 April 2026. <https://www.vic.gov.au/child-safe-standards-schools-guidance>
67. Ministerial Order No. 1359 operationalises the Child Safe Standards for schools and provides additional guidance on expectations around compliance.
68. L Ghukasyan, *Why organizational culture eats strategy for breakfast*, Global Policy website, 2024, accessed 13 April 2026. <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/16/10/2024/why-organizational-culture-eats-strategy-breakfast>
69. Personalised session with 'Joshua'.
70. For further information refer to D Hummerdal, *An invitation to safety conversations: real dialogue, better work*, Open Change Press, 2026.
71. We note that the Department of Education collects information about student safety through annual anonymous Attitudes to School Surveys: Victorian Government, *Attitudes to School Survey (AtoSS)*, Victorian Government website, 2026, accessed 4 May 2026. <https://www.vic.gov.au/attitudes-school-survey-atoss>. A departmental staff member from the School Compliance Unit also visits and assesses each school's compliance with the Child Safe Standards at least once every four years: Information provided to the Forum by the Department of Education on 1 May 2026.
72. For example, some independent regulators (such as the Social Services Regulator and the Victorian Institute of Teaching) can receive information or complaints directly from students.
73. For further information refer to KE Reimer, 'Relationships of control and relationships of engagement: how educator intentions intersect with student experiences of restorative justice', *Journal of Peace Education*, 2019, 16(1):49-77.
74. Refer to Appendix B, which includes the percentage of participants who told the Forum the perpetrator of the abuse they experienced was a principal.
75. Refer to Part 3.
76. For example, personalised session with Tim Courtney; personalised session with Aden Hemmerling.
77. Personalised session with Tim Courtney.
78. A Sharma, 'The role of emotional intelligence in crisis leadership: effects on employee morale and organizational resilience', *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 2024, 12(10):98-119.
79. For further information refer to S Chandler, *The relational school: from behaviour management to cultural transformation*, Amber Press, 2025; TJ Hoogsteen, 'Collective efficacy: toward a new narrative of its development and role in achievement', *Palgrave Communications*, 2020 6(1).
80. For example, personalised session with Janelle Tasic; submission 1 from 'Boudicea', pp 1, 5.
81. For example, personalised session with Janelle Tasic; personalised session with 'Oscar'.
82. For example, personalised session with Janelle Tasic; personalised session with 'Martin'; personalised session with 'Violet'.
83. Personalised session with George De Domenico.
84. Personalised session with 'Charles'.
85. National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, *The Australian child sexual abuse attitudes, knowledge and response study: report 1*, 2024, p 9.
86. Submission from 'Sigrid', p 8.





"I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Truth and Recognition Forum which is chasing light and not hiding in the darkness ... I am very grateful that you took the time and care to listen to my story, and did so with such sensitivity and care."

Grant, victim-survivor

# About the Forum for Truth and Recognition

## **5.1 Introduction**

Part 5 describes the scope and operations of the Forum for Truth and Recognition.

Section 5.2 outlines why we were established and explains the legal document (known as the 'establishing instrument') that sets out our objectives, powers and terms of reference. This section also explains how we have interpreted key terms that guide who was able to share their experiences with us and the scope of our power to make recommendations.

Section 5.3 overviews how we went about our work, including how we engaged with victim-survivors, the community and relevant organisations throughout the Forum.

## **5.2 Our scope**

The Forum was established in response to a recommendation by the Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools, which delivered its report to the Victorian Government in 2024. The Beaumaris Board of Inquiry was tasked with investigating concerns about a cluster of incidents of child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School during the 1960s and 1970s.

During the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry, some victim-survivors and advocates raised concerns about the scope of its terms of reference.<sup>1</sup> Its final report acknowledged these concerns and referred to a public statement from a group of victim-survivors calling for the terms of reference to be expanded. Those victim-survivors cautioned that ‘by narrowing the scope ... to only a select number of schools and offenders, we feel there is a disservice being done to the broader Survivor community who also suffered abuse within the Victorian State School system’.<sup>2</sup>

Recommendation 3 of the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry called on the Victorian Government to establish a statewide truth-telling and accountability process. This would create a public record of victim-survivors’ experiences of historical child sexual abuse in all Victorian government schools (and non-government schools where the perpetrator had previously worked in a Victorian government school). The Victorian Government accepted this and all other recommendations (either in full or in principle).

On 6 August 2025, the Victorian Premier, the Hon Jacinta Allan MP, announced the establishment of the independent Forum for Truth and Recognition.<sup>3</sup> The Premier appointed Ms Angela Connors as Chair.<sup>4</sup> The Premier also announced that the Department of Education would undertake a systemic review of its past responses to child sexual abuse in government schools, to be overseen by an Independent Monitor. Together, these initiatives aim to acquit recommendation 3 of the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry.

## Our parameters

We were asked to create a safe and trauma-informed process for victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in schools to tell their truth and be heard. Our role was to translate the experiences they shared with us into a public record that would allow the entire community to bear witness to the scale of harm experienced in Victorian government schools.

Past inquiries into child sexual abuse have grappled with the challenge of how to draw lines around what they can consider, hear and report on – and what they cannot. We were especially sensitive to this question because the Forum was partly created to address the concern that some people could not share their experiences with the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry. However, we also had parameters around our work. These were designed to help ensure we did not duplicate other reviews and inquiries and could deliver a clear and focused report – including a unique and important public record – within a reasonable time.

This section describes our establishing instrument (included in full at Appendix A). While some parts of our scope were clear, others required interpretation, as outlined below.

## Our overarching role and objectives

The role of the Forum was to contribute to victim-survivors' healing by ensuring their truth was heard, acknowledged and recorded by an independent body. To achieve this, we had two key tasks. The first was to create a safe environment for people to share their experiences. The second was to translate their experiences into an enduring public record. Creating an accessible public record invites the Victorian community to bear witness to the experiences shared with us and ensures they are never forgotten.

We consider that this report, in its hardcopy, digital and accessible summary forms, serves as this public record.

### Objectives

The objectives of this Formal Review are to:

- Provide a State-wide forum that provides victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse suffered at government schools and certain non-government schools an opportunity to share their experiences in a safe environment, and in turn create an independent public record of their accounts;
- Support the individual and collective healing of the affected victim-survivors;
- Contribute to a shared understanding, among all Victorians, of the significant and far-reaching impacts of historical child sexual abuse in Victorian schools; and
- Allow the Victorian Government to learn from the experiences and information shared, to better prevent and respond to child sexual abuse in government schools now and into the future.

(Establishing instrument, clause 2)

## Eligibility to take part in the Forum

The experiences of child sexual abuse in schools that we were empowered to hear were similar to the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry, with some key differences. Our scope enabled us to hear experiences of child sexual abuse that occurred in primary and secondary schools across Victoria. It also allowed us to hear experiences of child sexual abuse that happened in non-government schools in certain circumstances.

### Terms of reference

Having regard to the background and objectives set out above, you are required to inquire into and report on the following terms of reference:

- The experiences of victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse who were abused by a relevant employee in any Victorian government school; and
- The experiences of victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in a Victorian non-government school where the alleged perpetrator was previously a relevant employee of a Victorian government school and allegedly committed child sexual abuse while employed at that government school.

(Establishing instrument, clause 3.1)

Certain parameters determined whether a person's experience of child sexual abuse would fall within our scope (Figure 5.1).

**FIGURE 5.1: ELIGIBILITY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE FORUM**



Some of these terms are explained in the pages that follow and in the Glossary.

We sought to interpret and apply our terms of reference as generously as possible to maximise the opportunity for victim-survivors to take part. However, there were instances where a person wanted to share experiences that were outside our scope. While we have not been able to record and reflect these experiences in this report, we sought to offer compassion, care and support to everyone who contacted us. This included making referrals to counselling or other services and making appropriate reports to relevant agencies.

### **People who experienced child sexual abuse**

Our scope was to hear from people who experienced child sexual abuse. It did not generally extend to family or friends of victim-survivors (sometimes referred to as 'secondary victims') or to other people who may have been affected by child sexual abuse (such as witnesses).

However, we felt it was important to reflect the experiences of people who have passed away. As a result, we invited family or friends to share information on a deceased loved one's behalf, for inclusion in the public record. We also offered accommodations for people who may have needed assistance from a family member to support them to contribute to the Forum.

### **'Child sexual abuse' and 'grooming'**

We adopted the following definition of 'child sexual abuse'.<sup>5</sup>

Child sexual abuse is any act that exposes a child to, or involves a child in, sexual processes beyond their understanding or contrary to accepted community standards. Sexually abusive behaviours can include the touching of genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger or any other object, the touching of breasts, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and exposing the child to or involving the child in child exploitation material. It includes grooming, which is defined below.

We also adopted a definition of 'grooming' that captures the varied ways a perpetrator can manipulate and control a victim, recognising that it is a form of sexual abuse.<sup>6</sup>

Behaviours that manipulate and control a child, their family, kin and carers, their communities or institutions in order to perpetrate child sexual abuse. The intent of grooming is to gain access to the child, obtain sexual material of the child, obtain the child's trust and/or compliance, maintain the child's silence and/or avoid discovery of the sexual abuse.

We considered other forms of abuse (such as emotional and physical abuse) to be within scope if they occurred in connection with sexual abuse.

## **‘Relevant employees’**

The term ‘relevant employee’ is defined in our establishing instrument.

relevant employee – means:

- in relation to a government school, a teacher or other government school employee or contractor; or
- in relation to a non-government school, a teacher or other non-government school employee or contractor who was previously a relevant employee of a government school and allegedly committed child sexual abuse while at that government school.

(Establishing instrument, clause 6)

We considered ‘relevant employees’ to be principals, teachers or other school-based staff or contractors (such as gardeners or cleaners), but not volunteers. Head office staff within the Department of Education also fell outside the definition of ‘relevant employee’.

## **Government and non-government schools**

The term ‘government school’ is defined in the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (Vic). In general, it includes primary and secondary schools that are (or were) funded, established and run by the Victorian Government. The establishing instrument excludes schools attached to orphanages or group homes.

Sexual abuse in private and religious schools was a key focus of the Royal Commission and the Betrayal of Trust Inquiry. Our scope only allowed us to hear from people who experienced child sexual abuse in non-government schools if the perpetrator had previously worked at a Victorian government school and was alleged to have committed child sexual abuse while working there. This recognises that the failure to address the abuse in the government school might have allowed a perpetrator to go on to perpetrate abuse at other schools.

Some victim-survivors who had taken part in other inquiries also wished to contribute to the Forum and to have their experiences included on the public record. We did not exclude people on the basis that they had taken part in previous inquiries if they fell within our scope.

We have chosen not to name schools as some victim-survivors did not reveal the specific school they attended and many schools from that era have since closed, merged or changed names. Refer to Appendix B for high-level information about the general locations of schools identified by victim-survivors.

### **‘In a school context’**

Our scope was limited to child sexual abuse that occurred ‘in a school context’. This meant that child sexual abuse perpetrated by a relevant employee fell outside our scope if it had no connection to a school – for example, abuse perpetrated by a family member in a private setting.

The establishing instrument defines child sexual abuse ‘in a school context’.

Child sexual abuse happened in a school context if, for example:

- it happened on the premises of a school, where activities of that school took place, or in connection with the activities of that school; or
- it was engaged in by a relevant employee in circumstances (including circumstances involving settings not directly controlled by the school) where you [the Forum] consider that the school had, or its activities had, created, facilitated, increased, or in any way contributed to (whether by act or omission) the risk of child sexual abuse or the circumstances or conditions giving rise to that risk.

(Establishing instrument, clause 6)

The above definition allowed us to hear about sexual abuse that happened beyond school grounds (such as on school camps or excursions). We also considered sexual abuse to have occurred ‘in a school context’ in circumstances where a perpetrator’s status as a school employee was relevant to a role they held in another organisation that engaged with children.

### **‘Historical child sexual abuse’**

Our establishing instrument required us to consider ‘historical child sexual abuse’. This is defined in the establishing instrument as ‘sexual abuse of a child in a school by a relevant employee which occurred prior to 1 January 2000’. This is consistent with the date range considered in the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry.

As discussed in ‘A note on language’ and the Message from the Chair, we had reservations about the word ‘historical’ and have chosen to avoid it wherever possible.

## Matters out of scope

The Forum focused on placing the experiences of victim-survivors on the public record. It was designed to support an individual and collective healing process that emphasised listening, reflecting and remembering. This represents a different focus and approach than other inquiries and reviews into child sexual abuse in schools that investigated failures in preventing and responding to child sexual abuse or explored policy solutions and reforms. Child safety in institutional settings is an area that has undergone significant reform and continues to do so (refer to Part 3). Our role was not to add to this reform landscape other than to create a lasting reminder of the impact of failures to protect children and to reinforce the importance of ongoing vigilance about safety in schools.

The establishing instrument reflects our mandate to centre personal experiences by placing some issues outside of scope.

The following matters are outside the scope of your inquiry. You should not inquire into or make findings or recommendations on:

- The management and resolution of any legal claims or applications under the Commonwealth redress scheme by victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse ...

(Establishing instrument, clause 4.3(a))

This reflects the importance of not compromising the legal position of victim-survivors with current or future civil claims relating to their experiences of sexual abuse. It also reflects that the National Redress Scheme is an Australian Government – not Victorian – responsibility.

- The response of the State (including the Department of Education and its staff) to any allegations, complaints, legal proceedings or legal claims in relation to incidents of historical child sexual abuse in a government school, except insofar as those matters are relevant to recording a victim-survivor's account of their experience of historical child sexual abuse referred to in clause 3.1 above, and recording any response from the Department of Education as referred to in clause 4.1(l) above;  
...
- The State's systemic response to historical child sexual abuse matters, as may be identified through civil claims records and other disclosures made to the Department of Education.

(Establishing instrument, clause 4.3(b) and (d))

These matters are being considered outside the Forum through a systemic review conducted by the Department of Education and overseen by an Independent Monitor.

- Matters which were the subject [of] findings by the Board of Inquiry, including:
  - departmental child safety policies and practices;
  - guidance and training for staff to manage and prevent child sexual abuse; and
  - investigation, record keeping and disciplinary processes,noting that a victim-survivor is not prevented from referring to these policies and practices as part of the victim-survivors' accounts of historical child sexual abuse referred to in clause 3.1 ...

(Establishing instrument, clause 4.3(c))

The Beaumaris Board of Inquiry made a range of findings about responses to child sexual abuse in schools that occurred in the same period that we considered. Many of these findings reflected statewide failures that we consider relevant to many of the experiences we heard. (Refer to Appendix G for an overview of these.)

While systemic and policy issues were out of scope for the Forum, victim-survivors were free to share whatever they liked, including their views on policy and practice failures or on what needs to change. Some of the views of victim-survivors and the observations from the Chair are reflected in Part 4.

## **Powers**

The Forum was established as a 'formal review' under the Inquiries Act. This is different from a board of inquiry or royal commission and is consistent with the objectives of the Forum – to faithfully reflect personal experiences rather than investigate and verify them. It was not our role to test or scrutinise the information we received, nor was it to inquire into potential failings or to make adverse findings. In line with this, we did not have powers to compel witnesses or documents.

We decided not to hold public hearings. Past inquiries have shown that while some victim-survivors are comfortable sharing their experiences in a public forum, many prefer to do so privately in a safe and comfortable environment. While personalised sessions were held in private, victim-survivors were consulted about how their experiences and information could be used. Victim-survivors could indicate how much of their identity and experiences they wished to make public. They could also decide to remain anonymous or only disclose information confidentially. Personalised sessions were offered in person across Victoria, or participants could join a session online. Participants also had the option to bring support people, such as family, friends and counsellors. (Section 5.3 has more details on this.)

## Recommendations

Clause 3.2 of the establishing instrument describes the Forum’s power to make recommendations. This was limited to making recommendations about public access to our report and our records.

Consistently with the objectives of the inquiry, you may make recommendations on the form of any restrictions to be placed upon public access to the report and any records of your inquiry.

(Establishing instrument, clause 3.2)

Ultimately, we made two recommendations, which can be found in the Summary and Part 1.

## 5.3 Our approach

The Forum ran between August 2025 and May 2026, delivering this final report to the Premier of Victoria on 29 May 2026. This section describes how we conducted our work – including how we engaged with the Victorian community and supported victim-survivors – and outlines our operational approach.

### Expert advice and guidance

We drew on a range of experts to inform our approach. Not long after our establishment, we convened a lived experience advisory group. These experts generously offered insight into how we could make our processes feel safe, inclusive and empowering. They continued to offer support and suggestions that helped shape our work.

We also spoke to professionals who worked on the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry and the Royal Commission, as well as relevant academics and experts. We consulted with First Peoples-led organisations and other stakeholders (detailed in ‘Engaging organisations’ below and in Appendix H).

## **Critical Friends of the Forum**

A key source of guidance was our 'Critical Friends of the Forum' group. This comprised people with a broad range of skills and experience (refer to Appendix I for a full list of members). It included people with experience in engaging with people who have experienced trauma, such as victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. This group played an important role in challenging and affirming our approach to personalised sessions and this report. The group offered invaluable guidance across three meetings in December 2025 and in March and April 2026.

## **Beaumaris Board of Inquiry community reference group**

The community reference group supporting consultation on the Victorian Government's implementation of the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry's recommendations also offered us guidance. This group includes people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and others with relevant professional and advocacy backgrounds. The Chair of the Forum presented to this group in August and November 2025 and in March 2026. The group's feedback on the Forum's approach included:

- emphasising the importance of clarity on our purpose and objectives
- using inclusive and sensitive language
- having trauma-informed processes and tailored supports for victim-survivors
- developing an engagement strategy that anticipates and addresses potential barriers that may have otherwise discouraged people from participating in the Forum.

## **First Peoples-led organisations**

We wanted the Forum to feel safe, inclusive and welcoming for First Peoples. We sought and took advice from First Peoples organisations on how best to achieve this.

We knew our timeframe would be a challenge for victim-survivors, but particularly for First Peoples victim-survivors for whom ensuring cultural safety is critical. We understand that making connections and building trust with First Peoples communities takes time. We were also conscious of the many other significant processes that First Peoples organisations and communities have engaged with recently, including the Yoorrook Justice Commission and Treaty negotiations.

The Forum sought to share information about our work through First Peoples organisations and networks and valued the feedback we received. We also considered issues relating to Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

Our experience suggests greater consideration could be given to ensuring reviews and inquiries are well-placed to meaningfully deliver on the core principles of Treaty – particularly in ensuring they are able to create the time and space for cultural safety and self-determined approaches when engaging with First Peoples.

## Community and media engagement

It was important for us to tell the Victorian community about our work. We needed to ensure people who had experienced child sexual abuse in a school context were aware they could share their experiences with us. Our objectives also called on us to build awareness and understanding across the broader community of the impacts of child sexual abuse in schools.

### Information on our website

Not long after the Forum was established, we launched a website with information and resources describing our work and how people could take part. The website included guidance on how to report child sexual abuse and relevant support services. We set up a dedicated 'News from the Chair' page in November 2025, where the Chair published regular reflections.

Due to the time-limited nature of our work, we did not create dedicated social media channels. We did not have time to build a meaningful following and would have had to decommission the accounts after delivering our report. Instead, we leveraged the existing social media channels of several stakeholder organisations.

### Information webinars

The Chair hosted eight information webinars between November 2025 and March 2026. These webinars were designed to allow victim-survivors to learn about the Forum's process, hear from the Chair and ask questions. Webinars were open to everyone, including services that support victim-survivors. People could join and participate anonymously. Twelve people joined our webinars.

### Advertising campaigns

We also used advertising to increase our reach, publishing advertisements through social media, newspapers and streaming services to raise awareness of our work statewide (refer to Figure 5.2 for a selection of our promotional materials). These campaigns targeted media more likely to reach people who attended primary or secondary school before 2000. This included radio advertising through 3AW, SEN and Southern Cross Austereo and print advertising through *The Age*, the *Herald Sun*, *The Weekly Times* and a wide range of regional newspapers. We also ran advertising through podcasts and audio platforms, through streaming services and on various popular websites.

FIGURE 5.2: A SELECTION OF THE FORUM’S PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS



## **Engaging organisations**

We reached out to more than 100 organisations (some of which are noted in Appendix H) across Victoria to raise awareness of our work. This included victim-survivor networks and advocacy groups, community organisations (including neighbourhood houses and men's sheds), health and wellbeing services, education bodies, multicultural and First Peoples-led organisations, The Orange Door, prisons and law firms. We also contacted relevant Victorian government departments and local government agencies.

We met with many of these organisations to discuss our work and to provide information packs. The pack included material for organisations to use on their websites, in newsletters and in emails to their networks and through social media. We also provided posters and brochures for organisations to display.

## **Media engagement**

The Forum adopted an open approach with the media, sharing media releases with outlets to communicate updates and milestones. Both the Chair and our chief executive officer gave media interviews describing the Forum's work and inviting people to participate.

## **Supporting victim-survivors**

We sought to ensure the preferences and needs of victim-survivors were at the centre of our decisions and actions. This reflects our core objective of providing a safe and respectful space to support the individual and collective healing of victim-survivors.

### **Care and compassion at every step**

From the outset, we designed an approach to engaging with victim-survivors that was flexible and personalised, reflecting the diverse preferences, backgrounds and life experiences of people who have experienced child sexual abuse.

In doing so, we actively sought the expertise of victim-survivors and support services. We considered research on best-practice approaches to engaging with people who have experienced trauma, as well as the lessons learnt from previous inquiries.

Our approach to engagement with victim-survivors was built on the following foundations:

- Transparency – we were clear about what the Forum could and could not do, whose experiences we could hear and what our role and objectives were.
- Choice – we gave victim-survivors options for the sharing of their experiences, invited them to lead discussions with us and allowed them to indicate how they wanted their information to be used in this report.

- Acknowledgement – we believed what victim-survivors told us and recognised the wide-ranging impacts their experiences of child sexual abuse have had on their lives.
- Support – we made sure everyone who shared their experiences had the opportunity to access personalised support from our Engagement and Support Adviser and wellbeing facilitators. We also made ‘warm referrals’ to other services, as needed, by initially engaging with the support service on behalf of the victim-survivor.

We designed our internal processes to maintain continuity and avoid victim-survivors having to re-introduce themselves or repeat information already provided. We also asked each personalised session participant whether they were open to further contact if we had questions or updates. Support for participants could be scaled up or down depending on their needs and preferences.

### **Ways for victim-survivors to participate**

People could call the Forum and speak to our Engagement and Support Adviser, send a message via email, mail us items or fill out an online form to register their interest in us contacting them.

When people made contact and their experiences fell within our scope, we told them they could:

- book a personalised session with the Chair (discussed below), which could be conducted in person or online
- make a submission to the Forum – this could be in writing, an audio or video recording, or a creative piece such as an artwork, poetry or a song. People could also submit statements they had already made to other bodies (such as redress or victim impact statements).

We recognised that some people may have needed extra support to take part in the Forum. We worked with three organisations to raise awareness of our work among people detained in Victorian prisons.<sup>7</sup> These services had established relationships with many people in prison and were well-placed to support anyone wishing to share their experiences to do so safely and confidentially.

We were also able to arrange interpreting services for anyone wishing to contribute in a language other than English.



## **Personalised sessions**

The Chair travelled across metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria to hear people's experiences of child sexual abuse, holding 32 personalised sessions with people who fell within our scope between November 2025 and mid-March 2026.

Personalised sessions were conversations held in private between the Chair, a victim-survivor and any support person (or people) the victim-survivor invited to attend. A Forum scribe was present to take notes and record the conversations (with the consent of the participant). We published 'A guide to your personalised session' on our website (refer to Appendix D) and provided it to all participants beforehand so they knew what to expect.

Personalised sessions offered a safe space for participants to share whatever they wished. Some participants chose to describe the child sexual abuse they experienced; others focused on sharing its impacts. Many participants shared their hopes and suggestions for change.

Wellbeing facilitators with qualifications in social work, psychology and/or counselling were on hand to offer support before, during and after each session. Participants were offered up to three counselling appointments following their personalised session. If a participant had other needs during or after sharing their experiences, a tailored support package could be created.

## **Submissions**

Victim-survivors were invited to make submissions in whatever format they preferred – including in writing, as an audio or video recording or through an artwork, poem or song. We created 'A guide to making your submission', which is at Appendix E.

People could make submissions until the end of March 2026, alongside (or instead of) a personalised session. The Forum could arrange assistance for people to prepare their submission, if they needed it. We received submissions from 18 participants who were within our scope. People who prepared a submission were also offered up to three counselling sessions.

Because the sole focus of the Forum was on individual experiences, we did not invite organisations to make submissions.

## **Choice over how information is used**

Every victim-survivor who shared their experiences with us – whether through a personalised session or submission – was asked how they would like their information to be used.

In October 2025, we published an online guide 'Providing information to the Forum: Information for the public'. This document explained our approach to managing the information we received (refer to Appendix C).

Participants could request to have their information treated in one of three ways:

- Public – people could use their real name and consent to their information (including things that may identify them) being included in the report. Forty-two per cent of participants were treated as public.
- Anonymous – people could contribute anonymously, which allowed us to reflect their experiences without their name or any identifying material. Fifty-three per cent of participants were treated as anonymous. We used pseudonyms to reflect the contributions of anonymous participants.
- Confidential – people could provide some or all their information confidentially, meaning it informed the Forum’s work but did not appear directly in the report. Five per cent of participants were treated as confidential.

Participants could request to make some parts of their experiences public and other parts anonymous or confidential. They could change their mind about how they wanted their information managed up until we finalised the report. Participants also have a range of rights and protections under the Inquiries Act covering the information they shared (explained in Appendix C). These protections continue to apply after the Forum’s work is complete.

Our guidance also outlined the limited circumstances in which we might need to disclose certain information for safety or legal reasons. This was described on our website and in our guidance material. It was also explained to everyone who shared information with us.

## **Engagement with government departments and agencies**

The Forum was independent of government, including the Department of Education and the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

Consistent with this independence, the Forum and the Department of Education signed a protocol governing the sharing of information. This covered several circumstances, including where the Forum might need access to information to confirm a person’s eligibility to share their experience with us, or for us to share information to enable the Department of Education to meet its child safety obligations.

We met regularly with the Department of Education and the Department of Premier and Cabinet to provide progress updates. We also met with the Department of Government Services on issues relating to our establishment and decommissioning.

## **Meeting legal obligations**

We engaged the law firm Corrs Chambers Westgarth to act as our legal team. The team provided advice and support in relation to conducting our work and managing operations, information and risk. They worked with us to ensure we operated in line with relevant legislation and our establishing instrument. Their lawyers also assisted in transcribing personalised sessions.

## **Reporting obligations**

Upholding child safety was paramount in the Forum's operations. We had arrangements in place to comply with all reporting obligations – whether to Victoria Police, the Commission for Children and Young People, the Social Services Regulator or the Victorian Institute of Teaching – that arose from information we received.

## **Preserving victim-survivors' ability to engage in legal proceedings**

The legal team ensured we did not prejudice current or future criminal or civil proceedings, including the legal rights of victim-survivors. In some instances, this meant we had to carefully consider whether and how to include certain information in this report. These matters were discussed with victim-survivors on a case-by-case basis.

One way the Forum sought to prevent prejudicing other proceedings was by not naming perpetrators. While some experiences referenced in this report may have been proven to a legal standard in a court, most have not. We have adopted a consistent approach of not using the word 'alleged' in relation to perpetrators to reflect that our role was to believe victim-survivors and record their experiences. This does not mean the experiences set out in this report have been legally proven. By not naming perpetrators, the Forum does not intend to devalue or ignore any experiences or information shared with us.

## **Privacy, record keeping and document storage**

While the Forum did not have to comply with the *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014* (Vic) or the *Health Records Act 2001* (Vic), a Privacy Impact Assessment was nonetheless prepared to identify and appropriately safeguard the information privacy of participants.

Forum staff and contractors signed a legally binding confidentiality agreement that also required them to declare any conflicts of interest.

Forum documents were securely stored in keeping with the Privacy Impact Assessment, with particular consideration given to protecting sensitive participant information. Staff access to these documents was restricted based on their role and function.

At the conclusion of the Forum, our records were managed in line with the Inquiries Act.

We also made a recommendation in relation to the treatment of our records. This is outlined in Part 1.

## **Finances**

Clause 8 of the establishing instrument authorised the Forum to spend up to \$7,800,516 to cover all administration, travel, venue, staff and consultant costs.

## Part 5 Endnotes

1. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report*, 2024, Part A, p 52.
2. National Advisory Committee, National Survivors' Day, 'Call for the Victorian Government to expand the terms of reference of the Beaumaris Inquiry', *Star Mail*, 28 November 2023, accessed 11 February 2026. <https://ferntreegully.mailcommunity.com.au/opinion/2023-11-28/call-for-the-victorian-government-to-expand-the-terms-of-reference-of-the-beaumaris-inquiry/>
3. Premier of Victoria, *Ensuring truth and accountability for victim-survivors* [media release], Victorian Government, 6 August 2025, accessed 15 February 2026. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/ensuring-truth-and-accountability-victim-survivors>
4. Premier of Victoria, *Appointment of the Forum for Truth and Recognition: victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools*, Establishing instrument, 9 June 2025.
5. This is consistent with the definition of 'child sexual abuse' adopted by the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry.
6. This definition is based on the definition of grooming in *The child sexual abuse language guide*: National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, *The child sexual abuse language guide: terms and definitions preferred by victim-survivors of child sexual abuse*, 2025.
7. Drummond Street Services and two centres against sexual assault (Central Victoria and Western).

# Glossary

| Defined term               | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| anonymous                  | A participation option offered by the Forum under which a victim-survivor's experiences could be reflected in the public record without their name or any identifying information, including through the use of a pseudonym (an alternative name used to protect identity). Victim-survivors could express a preference to provide some or all parts of their information anonymously.                                                                                                                                           |
| Beaumaris Board of Inquiry | Refers to the 'Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools' – a Victorian Government inquiry established in 2023 to investigate child sexual abuse at Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools from the 1960s to 1990s. The Beaumaris Board of Inquiry recommended that the Victorian Government establish a statewide truth-telling and accountability process, which led to the creation of the Forum for Truth and Recognition. |
| Betrayal of Trust Inquiry  | Refers to the <i>Betrayal of trust: Victorian Parliamentary inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other non-government organisations</i> report, tabled in 2013. Many of the inquiry's findings and recommendations were relevant to the Department of Education and contributed to reforms across all Victorian schools, including the introduction of the Child Safe Standards and the Reportable Conduct Scheme.                                                                                          |
| bodily autonomy            | A person's right to make decisions about their own body without coercion or interference from others. In this report, bodily autonomy is discussed in the context of children's understanding of their own bodies and their right to safety from unwanted physical contact.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

| Defined term                    | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Chair                           | The Chair of the Forum for Truth and Recognition was Ms Angela Connors. The Chair was appointed by the Premier of Victoria and was responsible for leading the Forum's work, including conducting personalised sessions with victim-survivors across Victoria and online. The Chair also hosted information webinars, engaged with community organisations and oversaw the preparation of this report.                                                                    |
| child                           | A person under 18 years of age.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Child Safe Standards            | A set of 11 principles-based standards in Victoria that apply to schools and other organisations working with children. The Child Safe Standards are designed to embed children's safety into everyday organisational thinking and practice, covering areas such as policy and governance, leadership, staff training and empowering children to raise concerns. The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority monitors schools' compliance with the standards. |
| child safety                    | The policies, practices and standards in place within an institution to protect children from harm, including sexual abuse. In the context of this report, child safety refers to the measures schools and the Victorian Government have implemented to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| child-safe culture/organisation | A culture or organisation that puts children first and prioritises their safety. This involves genuinely engaging with and valuing children, creating the conditions that minimise the likelihood of harm (and increase the likelihood that harm is detected) and responding appropriately to any concerns, disclosures or allegations.                                                                                                                                   |

| Defined term            | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| child sexual abuse      | Any act that exposes a child to, or involves a child in, sexual processes beyond their understanding or contrary to accepted community standards. Sexually abusive behaviours can include the touching of genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger or any other object, the touching of breasts, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and exposing the child to or involving the child in child exploitation material. It includes grooming, which is defined below. This report focuses on child sexual abuse perpetrated by a teacher or other school employee or contractor in a school context in a Victorian government school or in certain non-government schools before 1 January 2000. |
| confidential            | A participation option offered by the Forum under which a victim-survivor's experiences informed the Forum's work but were not published and did not appear directly in the public record. Victim-survivors could express a preference to provide some or all of their information confidentially.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| criminal justice system | The network of government institutions and processes including police, courts and correctional services that are responsible for investigating crimes, prosecuting offenders and administering penalties.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Department of Education | The Victorian Government department responsible for overseeing government schools in Victoria and the employment of teachers at these schools. In this report, the Department of Education is discussed in the context of victim-survivors' descriptions of its responses to their allegations of child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools. It is also intended to encompass the various names the department has had over time.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

| Defined term                   | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| disclosure                     | The act of a victim-survivor (whether as a child or an adult) conveying (or attempting to convey) to another person that they have been sexually abused. Disclosure may take many forms and may be verbal or non-verbal. Non-verbal disclosures are more common among young children and children with cognitive or communication impairments. Non-verbal disclosures may include painting, drawing or gestures. Children may disclose sexual abuse through emotional or behavioural changes, such as heightened anxiety, withdrawal or aggression. Disclosures may be made to a trusted adult, a school staff member, police or another authority, and may occur at any time, including many years after the abuse took place. |
| eligibility                    | The criteria that determined whether a person's experiences fell within the scope of the Forum. To participate, a person must have experienced child sexual abuse perpetrated by a relevant employee in a school context in a Victorian government school (or certain non-government schools) before 1 January 2000. The Forum interpreted and applied these criteria as generously as possible to maximise the opportunity for victim-survivors to take part.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Engagement and Support Adviser | The Forum staff member responsible for the first point of contact with participants. The Engagement and Support Adviser provided information about the Forum and its processes and coordinated participant engagement with the Chair.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| establishing instrument        | The formal document issued by the Premier of Victoria under the <i>Inquiries Act 2014</i> (Vic) that established the Forum for Truth and Recognition. The establishing instrument sets out the Forum's objectives, powers and terms of reference, including the eligibility criteria for participation and the scope of the Forum's power to make recommendations.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

| Defined term                    | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| First Peoples                   | The Forum recognises the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living throughout Victoria. While the terms 'Koorie' or 'Koori' are commonly used to describe Aboriginal people of southeast Australia, we have used the term 'First Peoples' to include all people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.                                                                  |
| formal review                   | A type of inquiry established under the <i>Inquiries Act 2014</i> (Vic). Unlike a royal commission or board of inquiry, a formal review does not have powers to compel the production of documents or the attendance of witnesses. The Forum was established as a formal review, consistent with its objective of faithfully reflecting personal experiences rather than investigating or verifying them. |
| Forum for Truth and Recognition | An independent statewide truth-telling process established by the Victorian Government in 2025. The Forum created a safe and trauma-informed process for people who experienced child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools or in certain non-government schools before 2000 to share their stories and produced an enduring public record of their experiences.                                   |
| governance                      | The systems, policies and practices through which an organisation is directed and controlled. In the context of child safety, good governance includes effective policies to prevent, identify and respond to child sexual abuse, clear codes of conduct, regular staff training and robust record-keeping and information-sharing practices.                                                             |
| government school               | A school established by the Minister for Education and conducted under Part 2.2 of the <i>Education and Training Reform Act 2006</i> (Vic). For the purposes of this report, government schools exclude schools that were attached to orphanages or group homes at the relevant time.                                                                                                                     |

| Defined term                       | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| grooming                           | Behaviours that manipulate and control a child, their family, kin and carers, their communities or institutions in order to perpetrate child sexual abuse. The intent of grooming is to gain access to the child, obtain sexual material of the child, obtain the child's trust and/or compliance, maintain the child's silence and/or avoid discovery of the sexual abuse. Grooming became a criminal offence in Victoria in 2014.                                                                                   |
| high/secondary school              | The senior years of schooling in Victoria (Years 7 to 12). The Forum notes that the Department of Education's preferred term is secondary school; however, many participants referred to high school in their submissions and personalised sessions. In this report we use both terms interchangeably.                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| historical child sexual abuse      | A term used in the Forum's establishing instrument to refer to child sexual abuse that occurred before 1 January 2000. The Forum has reservations about this term and has minimised its use wherever possible. The word 'historical' may reinforce the misconception that child sexual abuse in schools is a problem of the past, when in fact child sexual abuse can, and does, still happen. This language also risks failing to recognise the lasting and sometimes lifelong impacts of abuse on victim-survivors. |
| in a school or in a school context | Describes the connection required between a victim-survivor's experience of child sexual abuse and a school for their experience to fall within the scope of the Forum. Child sexual abuse occurred 'in a school context' if it happened on the premises of a school, where the activities of that school took place, or in connection with those activities, including activities that took place off school grounds, such as on camps or excursions.                                                                |
| Independent Monitor                | The independent person appointed to oversee the systemic review conducted by the Department of Education into historical child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools, including patterns of offending and institutional failings.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

| Defined term                                       | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Indigenous Data Sovereignty                        | The right of First Peoples to govern how data about them is collected, owned, stored, used and shared. In the context of this report, Indigenous Data Sovereignty refers to considerations around how information provided by First Peoples participants to the Forum was managed and protected.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Inquiries Act                                      | The <i>Inquiries Act 2014</i> (Vic) is the Victorian legislation under which the Forum was established. The Inquiries Act governs the conduct of royal commissions, boards of inquiry and formal reviews in Victoria, including the powers available to them and the protections afforded to people who share information with them.                                                                                                                                    |
| institutional or organisational child sexual abuse | Child sexual abuse that occurs within an institutional or organisational setting, such as a school, where a perpetrator exploits their position of trust, authority or power to gain access to children. This report focuses on child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools and certain non-government schools before 2000. The terms 'institutional' and 'organisational' have been used interchangeably to align with the relevant context or source material. |
| LGBTIQA+                                           | An initialism referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer and asexual people. The '+' recognises that the initialism does not capture the full diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and intersex variations within these communities.                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| lived experience                                   | Personal, first-hand experience of a particular issue or circumstance. In this report, 'lived experience' refers specifically to the experience of child sexual abuse. The Forum sought advice and input from people with lived experience of child sexual abuse in developing our approach.                                                                                                                                                                            |

| Defined term            | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| National Redress Scheme | A scheme commenced by the Australian Government on 1 July 2018 in response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The scheme offers monetary payment, a direct personal response from the responsible institution and counselling for people who experienced child sexual abuse in an institutional setting, including schools. It provides victim-survivors a pathway to recognition that does not involve formal legal proceedings. |
| non-government school   | A school other than a government school that is registered or required to be registered under Part 4.3 of the <i>Education and Training Reform Act 2006</i> (Vic). This can include religious or private schools.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| organisational culture  | The shared values, beliefs, customs and practices that shape how people within an organisation behave and interact. In the context of this report, organisational culture refers to the culture of schools and the Department of Education, and how that culture is relevant to child sexual abuse.                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| participant             | An eligible victim-survivor who chose to engage with the Forum by attending a personalised session, making a submission, or both. The term is used in certain contexts in this report as an alternative to 'victim-survivor'.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| perpetrator             | A person who has been accused of committing an act of child sexual abuse, regardless of whether they have been charged or convicted. In this report, perpetrators are not named as some victim-survivors did not provide the name of the perpetrator and also to protect the legal rights of victim-survivors and avoid prejudicing any current or future criminal or civil proceedings.                                                                                                          |
| personalised session    | A meeting between a victim-survivor and the Forum's Chair, held in person at locations across Victoria or online, according to the victim-survivor's preference. Sessions were unstructured and guided by what the victim-survivor chose to share. Victim-survivors were able to bring support people and access wellbeing support before, during and after their session.                                                                                                                        |

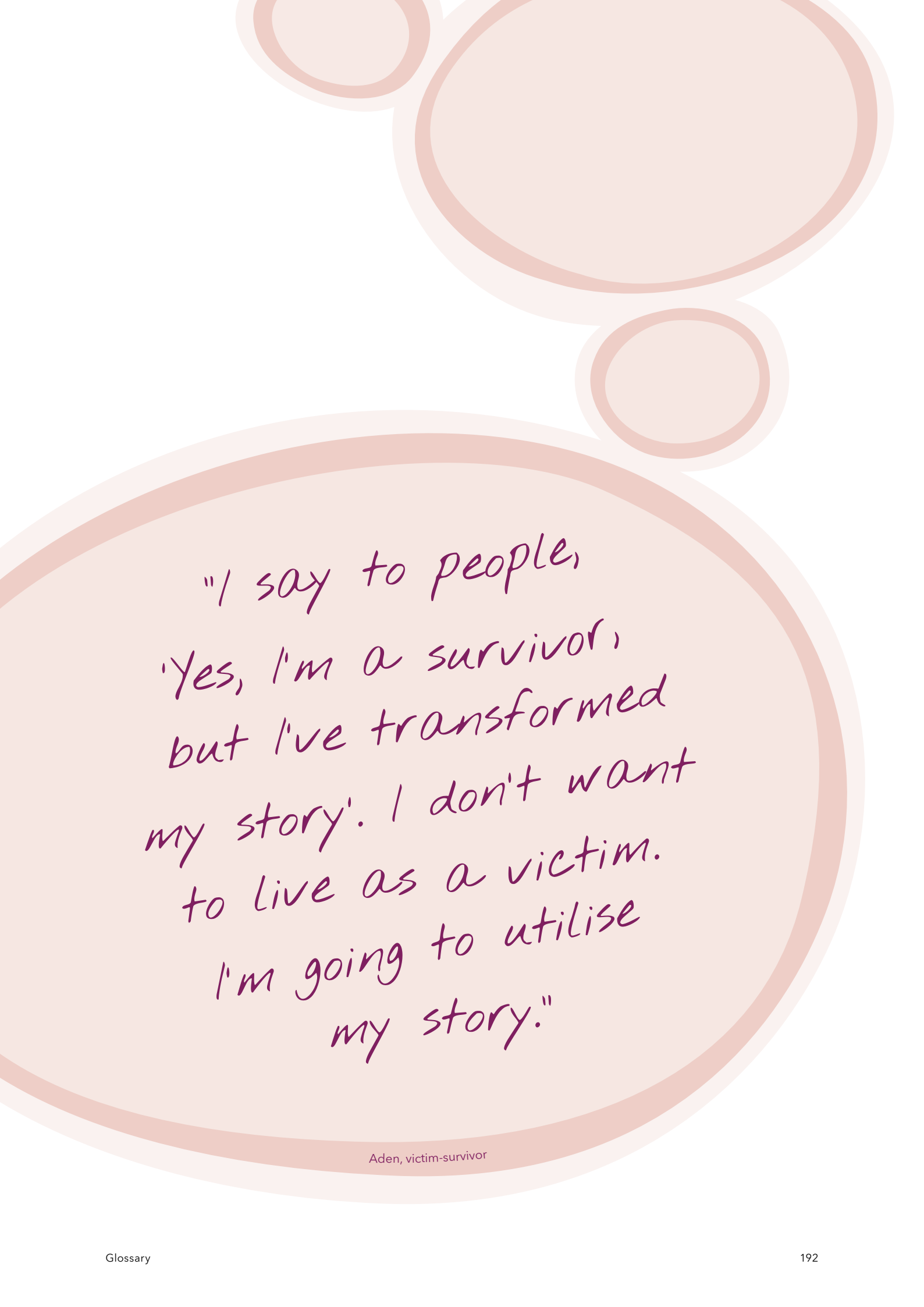
| Defined term              | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| public                    | A participation option offered by the Forum under which a victim-survivor consented to their name and the information they provided being included in the public record. Victim-survivors could express a preference to make some parts of their experiences public and other parts anonymous or confidential.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| relevant employee         | A term used in the Forum's establishing instrument to define who could be considered a perpetrator for the purposes of the Forum's scope. A relevant employee in relation to a government school is a teacher or other government school employee or contractor. A relevant employee in relation to a non-government school is a teacher or other non-government school employee or contractor who was previously a relevant employee of a government school and allegedly committed child sexual abuse while at that government school. Relevant employees do not include volunteers or head office staff within the Department of Education. |
| Reportable Conduct Scheme | A Victorian regulatory scheme established in 2017 to provide independent oversight of how organisations (including schools) investigate and respond to allegations of child abuse and misconduct by their workers or volunteers. Under the scheme, the Department of Education is required to notify an independent regulator of any allegations of reportable conduct (including sexual offences and sexual misconduct involving a child), and the regulator oversees the organisation's response.                                                                                                                                            |
| Respectful Relationships  | A primary prevention initiative to reduce family violence. The initiative supports schools to promote and model respect, gender equality, positive attitudes and behaviours, and teaches students how to build healthy relationships, resilience and confidence. Victorian government schools deliver respectful relationships and consent education from Foundation to Year 12. This includes teaching students about consent in an age-appropriate way and learning activities that specifically support prevention of child sexual abuse.                                                                                                   |

| Defined term              | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Royal Commission          | Refers to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, a national inquiry established by the Australian Government in 2013 to examine how institutions – including schools, churches and other organisations – responded to child sexual abuse. The Royal Commission’s final report was published in 2017 and made extensive recommendations for legislative, policy and cultural reform.                                                                                                                                                            |
| secondary victim          | A family member, friend or other person who has been indirectly affected by child sexual abuse experienced by someone close to them. This may include partners, children, parents, siblings and extended family. The Forum’s scope was directed at hearing from people who had experienced child sexual abuse themselves, though exceptions were made to allow family or friends to share information on behalf of a deceased loved one.                                                                                                                                         |
| self-harm                 | When a person deliberately hurts themselves, often in response to intense emotions, difficult memories or overwhelming distress. Self-harm is not the same as suicidal behaviour. People who self-harm may be attempting to cope with or manage distress rather than to end their lives. In this report, self-harm is referenced as one of the impacts that victim-survivors have experienced due to child sexual abuse. If you or someone you know is affected by self-harm, support is available – see the support services listed in the introductory section of this report. |
| Social Services Regulator | The independent regulatory body responsible for overseeing the Reportable Conduct Scheme in Victoria. The regulator receives notifications of reportable allegations from schools and other organisations, oversees how those organisations investigate and respond to allegations, can share information and can conduct its own investigations where necessary. This function was undertaken by the Commission for Children and Young People until early 2026. The Social Services Regulator also administers the Working with Children Check scheme.                          |

| Defined term       | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| submission         | An account of a victim-survivor's experiences provided to the Forum. The Forum accepted submissions in any form chosen by the victim-survivor, including written statements, audio or video recordings, artwork, poetry and songs. Victim-survivors could also submit statements they had already made to other bodies, such as redress or victim impact statements. Assistance was available to help people prepare their submission if needed.                                                           |
| support person     | A person who attended a personalised session with a participant to provide support. Support people could include professional support providers, friends and/or family members, including chosen family.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| support services   | Services that offer mental health and wellbeing, legal and other relevant support or assistance to victim-survivors.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| terms of reference | The component of the establishing instrument that sets out what the Forum is to inquire into and report on. Refer to the definition of 'establishing instrument'.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| trauma-informed    | An approach that recognises the widespread prevalence and impact of trauma and prioritises the safety, dignity and wellbeing of those who may have experienced it. The Forum adopted a trauma-informed approach to ensure victim-survivors felt safe, respected and supported.                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| trigger            | A stimulus that activates a person's stress response by evoking memories or feelings associated with a past traumatic experience. Triggers can include sensory experiences such as sight, smell, sound or touch; environmental cues such as a particular time of day or an anniversary; or interpersonal cues such as a tone of voice, a look or physical proximity. Even when a person is aware that they are not in immediate danger, their body may respond as though the original trauma is recurring. |
| truth-telling      | A process through which individuals and communities share and bear witness to experiences of harm or injustice, with the aim of creating an accurate public record and supporting healing and accountability.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

| Defined term                                                | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| United Nations <i>Convention on the Rights of the Child</i> | An international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations in 1989 that sets out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of children. Australia ratified the convention in 1990, and it came into effect in Australia in 1991.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| victim-survivor                                             | The establishing instrument defines a victim-survivor as a person who is a victim of child sexual abuse in a government school prior to 1 January 2000, or in a non-government school in the same timeframe, where the alleged perpetrator was previously a relevant employee of a government school and allegedly committed child sexual abuse while at that government school. This report uses 'victim-survivor' as its primary term, acknowledging that people have different perspectives on the words 'victim' and 'survivor' – some people identify with one, both or neither, and this may change over time. The term 'participant' is also used in certain contexts to describe victim-survivors who engaged with the Forum. |
| Victorian Institute of Teaching                             | An independent statutory authority established in 2002 to register and regulate teachers in Victoria. The institute assesses and monitors teachers' suitability to teach and has powers to address misconduct or inappropriate behaviour with children, including suspending or cancelling a teacher's registration. It also maintains the Victorian teaching profession's code of conduct.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority         | The independent statutory authority responsible for monitoring Victorian schools' compliance with the Child Safe Standards and other minimum registration standards. The authority conducts cyclical reviews of schools and can perform out-of-cycle compliance checks where there are concerns.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| wellbeing facilitator                                       | A Forum staff member with qualifications in social work, psychology and/or counselling who was available to offer support to participants before, during and after personalised sessions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |

| Defined term                | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Working with Children Check | A screening process introduced in Victoria in 2005 that assesses the suitability of people to work or volunteer with children. All non-teaching staff and volunteers at schools are required to hold a current Working with Children Check. Teachers who are registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching are generally exempt from having to hold a Working with Children Check as they are assessed as 'suitable to teach' by the Victorian Institute of Teaching. |
| Yoorrook Justice Commission | Victoria's first formal truth-telling inquiry led by First Peoples, established to investigate and report on the impact of colonisation and ongoing systemic injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria. The Forum acknowledges the Yoorrook Justice Commission's work in building a shared understanding of the importance of truth-telling.                                                                                                                      |



"I say to people,  
'Yes, I'm a survivor,  
but I've transformed  
my story'. I don't want  
to live as a victim.  
I'm going to utilise  
my story."

Aden, victim-survivor

"I'm a lot stronger  
than I otherwise would be.  
But I know I still display  
the pain. And I think it's  
important for people to  
see that it lasts. It's  
a lifetime."

Janelle, victim-survivor

# Appendices

## Appendix A — Establishing instrument

### Inquiries Act 2014

#### APPOINTMENT OF THE FORUM FOR TRUTH AND RECOGNITION: VICTIM-SURVIVORS OF HISTORICAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

##### Establishing Instrument

I, Jacinta Allan, the Premier of Victoria, appoint Angela Connors to constitute a Formal Review to inquire into and report on the terms of reference specified in this instrument under section 93(1) of the *Inquiries Act 2014*.

This instrument comes into effect on the date it is executed.

### 1. BACKGROUND

- a) The *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic) (the Charter) recognises that every child has the right, without discrimination, to such protection as is in their best interests and is needed by them by reason of being a child. All forms of child sexual abuse are a gross violation of a child's right to this protection.
- b) The State of Victoria is committed to the protection of all children in Victoria and to uphold the rights of every child in Victoria under the Charter.
- c) The Victorian Government acknowledges the substantial work undertaken by the Commonwealth Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-Government Organisations and the Board of Inquiry into Historical Child Sexual Abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and Certain Other Government Schools (the Board of Inquiry).
- d) The Victorian Government and its schools share a commitment to, and responsibility for, the learning and development of children and young people in Victoria. However, the State recognises that some government schools have historically failed to protect children attending government schools from child sexual abuse. The Board of Inquiry was established as a mechanism for certain victim-survivors to speak to their experiences and to document the experiences of such abuse.
- e) On 26 February 2024, the Board of Inquiry delivered its report to the Governor in accordance with its Terms of Reference. On 19 June 2024, the Victorian Government released its response to the report, accepting all nine recommendations, either in full or in principle.
- f) In particular, in response to Recommendation 3 of the Board of Inquiry's report, the Victorian Government has committed to establish a State-wide independent truth-telling function to afford victim-survivors an opportunity to share their experiences of historical child sexual abuse in government schools and relevant non-government schools. This inquiry is being established as a trauma-informed and independent forum for victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse to share their experiences in a safe environment, and for their experiences to be documented.
- g) The Victorian Government has established a separate systemic review of the State's past responses to child sexual abuse in government schools in response to the matters raised in the Board of Inquiry's report.

### 2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this Formal Review are to:

- a) Provide a State-wide forum that provides victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse suffered at government schools and certain non-government schools an opportunity to share their experiences in a safe environment, and in turn create an independent public record of their accounts;
- b) Support the individual and collective healing of the affected victim-survivors;
- c) Contribute to a shared understanding, among all Victorians, of the significant and far-reaching impacts of historical child sexual abuse in Victorian schools; and

- d) Allow the Victorian Government to learn from the experiences and information shared, to better prevent and respond to child sexual abuse in government schools now and into the future.

### 3. TERMS OF REFERENCE

3.1 Having regard to the background and objectives set out above, you are required to inquire into and report on the following terms of reference:

- a) The experiences of victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse who were abused by a relevant employee in any Victorian government school; and
- b) The experiences of victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in a Victorian non-government school where the alleged perpetrator was previously a relevant employee of a Victorian government school and allegedly committed child sexual abuse while employed at that government school.

3.2 Consistently with the objectives of the inquiry, you may make recommendations on the form of any restrictions to be placed upon public access to the report and any records of your inquiry.

### 4. CONDUCT OF THE FORMAL REVIEW

4.1 Without limiting your powers under Part 4 of the *Inquiries Act 2014*, you are directed to:

- a) Conduct your inquiry in accordance with this instrument, the *Inquiries Act 2014*, and all other relevant laws;
- b) Conduct your inquiry with a focus on providing a forum for victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse suffered at government schools and certain non-government schools to share their experiences of historical child sexual abuse and documenting (in an appropriate manner) such experiences;
- c) Provide a safe, accessible, supportive, appropriately trauma-informed and culturally safe forum and environment for victim-survivors to participate in your inquiry, including:
  - i. accommodating their choice as to how they wish to participate in your inquiry to the extent it is practicable to do so and without limitation to the powers of the Formal Review set out in the *Inquiries Act 2014*;
  - ii. employing or engaging staff with appropriate training and expertise; and
  - iii. recognising that some people may not wish to share their experiences;
- d) Adopt practices and approaches to minimise harm and re-traumatisation for victim-survivors;
- e) Provide sensitive, culturally safe and appropriately trauma-informed community outreach, mental health and counselling supports for victim-survivors, including referring victim-survivors to the appropriate support service. For any person who wishes to be heard but whose experience is not within the scope of the terms of reference at clause 3.1 above, direct the person to an appropriate external mental health, counselling or support service;
- f) Have regard to the need to ensure that evidence that may be received by you that identifies particular individuals as having been involved in child sexual abuse or related matters is dealt with in a way that does not prejudice current or future criminal or civil proceedings, disciplinary actions or other contemporaneous inquiries;
- g) Assist victim-survivors to report incidents of child sexual abuse to Victoria Police, if desired by the victim-survivor;
- h) Have regard to the findings and recommendations of previous relevant reports and inquiries, including the Commonwealth Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-Government Organisations, and the Board of Inquiry, including any implementation of recommendations directed to supporting victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse.
- i) Regularly communicate with the Victorian community on the progress and conduct of your inquiry;
- j) Where there is some doubt about whether a victim-survivor is within scope of your inquiry, you may request information from the Department of Education. The Department of Education will use reasonable endeavours to search for the information in centrally held records to advise on:

- i. a victim-survivor's attendance at a government school, in the period identified by your inquiry and with the consent of the victim-survivor;
    - ii. whether the alleged perpetrator was or is an employee at the relevant government school, and whether allegations had been made against the alleged perpetrator for historical child sexual abuse committed while they were employed at the relevant government school, limited to information centrally held in employee statements of service, personnel and disciplinary files;
  - k) For any evidence received by you involving historical child sexual abuse, notify:
    - i. the Department of Education where the alleged perpetrator is a current employee of a government school;
    - ii. the Commission for Children and Young People and the Victorian Institute of Teaching where the alleged perpetrator is a current employee of a non-government school;
  - l) Without limiting the obligation set out in section 108 of the *Inquiries Act 2014* in relation to any adverse findings, provide the draft report of your inquiry to the Department of Education and the Department of Premier and Cabinet for an opportunity to respond to any matters raised in the report at least one month prior to the delivery of this report under clause 5.
  - m) Have regard to the desirability of conducting your inquiry and producing your report without unnecessary cost or delay; and
  - n) Otherwise conduct your inquiry as you consider appropriate, subject to the matters set out in section 99 of the *Inquiries Act 2014*. This may include but is not limited to obtaining and considering verbal and/or written information, documents and evidence from victim-survivors, and adopting any informal and flexible procedures and practices.
- 4.2 Other than as set out in clause 4.1(j) above, consistently with the objectives of the inquiry, you should not request information or documents from the State, including the Department of Education, relating to allegations of historical child sexual abuse.
- 4.3 The following matters are outside the scope of your inquiry. You should not inquire into or make findings or recommendations on:
- a) The management and resolution of any legal claims or applications under the Commonwealth redress scheme by victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse;
  - b) The response of the State (including the Department of Education and its staff) to any allegations, complaints, legal proceedings or legal claims in relation to incidents of historical child sexual abuse in a government school, except insofar as those matters are relevant to recording a victim-survivor's account of their experience of historical child sexual abuse referred to in clauses 3.1 above, and recording any response from the Department of Education as referred to in clause 4.1(l) above;
  - c) Matters which were the subject findings by the Board of Inquiry, including:
    - i. departmental child safety policies and practices;
    - ii. guidance and training for staff to manage and prevent child sexual abuse; and
    - iii. investigation, record keeping and disciplinary processes,
 noting that a victim-survivor is not prevented from referring to these policies and practices as part of the victim-survivors' accounts of historical child sexual abuse referred to in clause 3.1 above; and
  - d) The State's systemic response to historical child sexual abuse matters, as may be identified through civil claims records and other disclosures made to the Department of Education.

## 5. REPORTING

You are required to deliver a report of your inquiry to me by 29 May 2026.

## 6. DEFINITIONS

In these terms of reference, for the purpose of this inquiry:

**child** – means a person under 18 years of age.

**Commonwealth redress scheme** means the National Redress Scheme established on 1 July 2018 under the *National Redress Scheme for Institutional Child Sexual Abuse Act 2018* (Cth) in response to the

recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse's Redress and Civil Litigation Report released in September 2015.

**Department of Education** – means the Department with primary responsibility for the employment of teachers in government schools at the relevant time, including the current Department of Education's predecessors over time.

**government school** – has the same meaning as 'Government school' in the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* but excludes schools that were attached to orphanages or group homes at the relevant time.

**non-government school** – has the same meaning as 'non-Government school' in the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* but excludes schools that were attached to orphanages or group homes at the relevant time.

**historical child sexual abuse** – means sexual abuse of a child in a school by a relevant employee which occurred prior to 1 January 2000.

**in a school** – means in a school context. Child sexual abuse happened in a school context if, for example:

- a) it happened on the premises of a school, where activities of that school took place, or in connection with the activities of that school; or
- b) it was engaged in by a relevant employee in circumstances (including circumstances involving settings not directly controlled by the school) where you consider that the school had, or its activities had, created, facilitated, increased, or in any way contributed to (whether by act or omission) the risk of child sexual abuse or the circumstances or conditions giving rise to that risk.

**relevant employee** – means:

- a) in relation to a government school, a teacher or other government school employee or contractor; or
- b) In relation to a non-government school, a teacher or other non-government school employee or contractor who was previously a relevant employee of a government school and allegedly committed child sexual abuse while at that government school.

**victim-survivor** – means a person who is a victim of child sexual abuse:

- a) in government schools prior to 1 January 2000; or
- b) in a non-government school prior to 1 January 2000, where the alleged perpetrator was previously a relevant employee of a government school and allegedly committed child sexual abuse while at that government school.

## 7. EXERCISE OF POWERS

You may exercise the powers of a Formal Review in accordance with the *Inquiries Act 2014*. You may enter into agreements or arrangements for the provision of services to support your inquiry, including, without limitation, any agreements or arrangements with one or more Australian legal practitioners for the provision of legal services.

## 8. EXPENSES AND FINANCIAL OBLIGATIONS

You are authorised to incur expenses and financial obligations up to a maximum amount of \$7,800,516 in conducting this inquiry, including to make any payment of reasonable expenses and allowances to persons who attend the Formal Review at the request of the Formal Review.

Dated: 9/6/2025

Responsible Minister:



HON JACINTA ALLAN MP  
Premier

## Appendix B — Data from the Forum

This appendix gives an overview of the demographics and key trends emerging from the information participants shared with the Forum. It reflects the profile of people we heard from and should not be read as representing the prevalence or characteristics of people who have experienced child sexual abuse in schools more broadly.

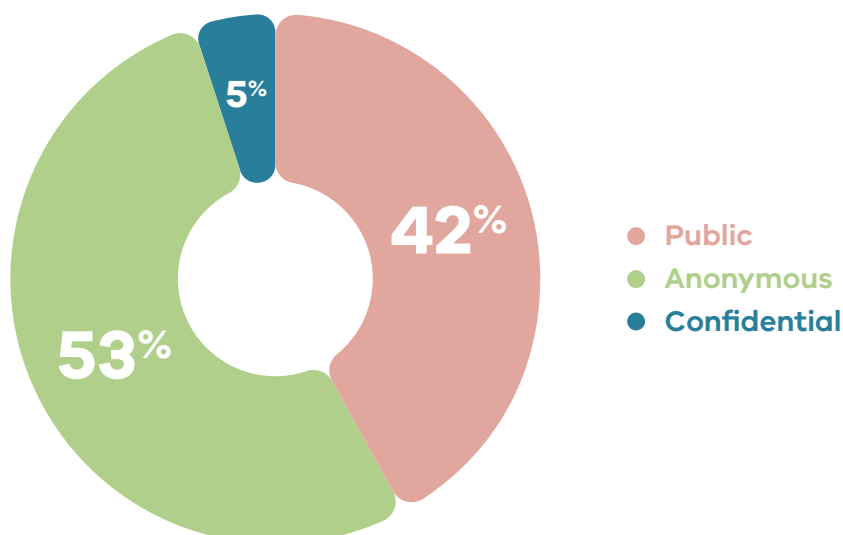
Overall, the experiences of 38 people who chose to participate fell within the scope of the Forum. Of these people, 32 attended personalised sessions and 18 provided submissions.



Of the 38 participants:

- 20 (53 per cent) were treated as anonymous
- 16 (42 per cent) were treated as public (some with reference to their first names only)
- 2 (5 per cent) were treated as confidential, which meant they could not be quoted or identified, but were considered by the Chair (Figure B.1).

**FIGURE B.1: TREATMENT OF PARTICIPANT INFORMATION**



More than half (58 per cent) of participants identified as male and just over one third (37 per cent) identified as female (Figure B.2). Two participants did not disclose their gender.

In relation to the age of participants when engaging with the Forum (Figure B.3):

- 8 per cent were over 70
- 45 per cent were in their 60s
- 29 per cent were in their 50s
- 5 per cent were in their 40s
- 3 per cent were under 40
- 10 per cent did not disclose their age.

FIGURE B.2: GENDER OF PARTICIPANTS

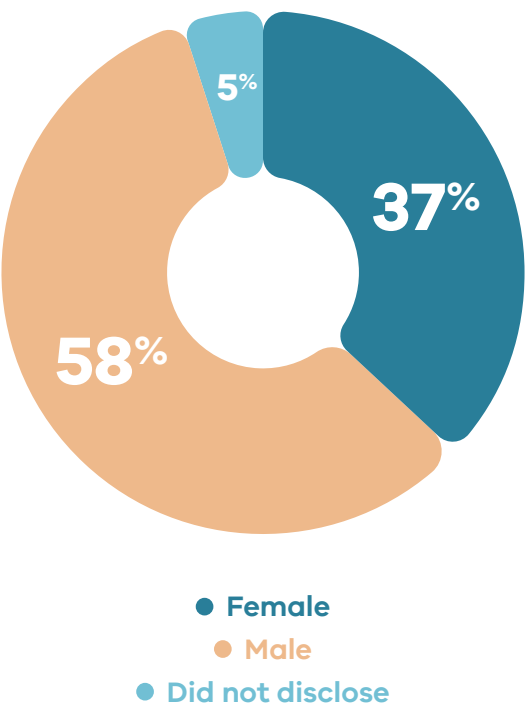
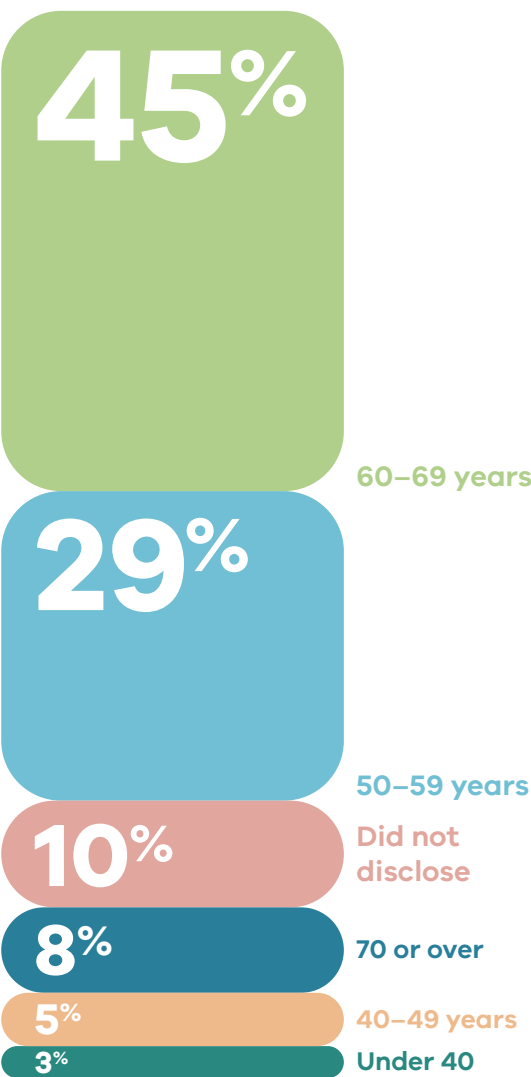


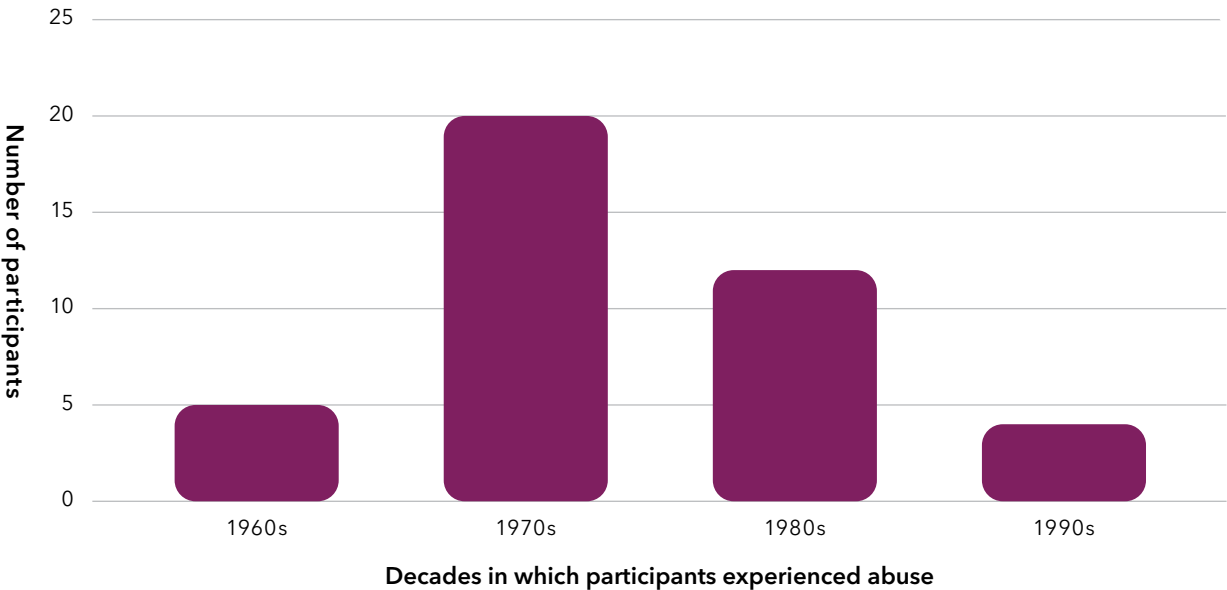
FIGURE B.3: AGE OF PARTICIPANTS



One participant identified as First Peoples.

Overall, participants described child sexual abuse perpetrated from as early as 1960 to as recently as 1998, with most participants experiencing abuse in the 1970s (Figure B.4).

**FIGURE B.4: WHEN PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**

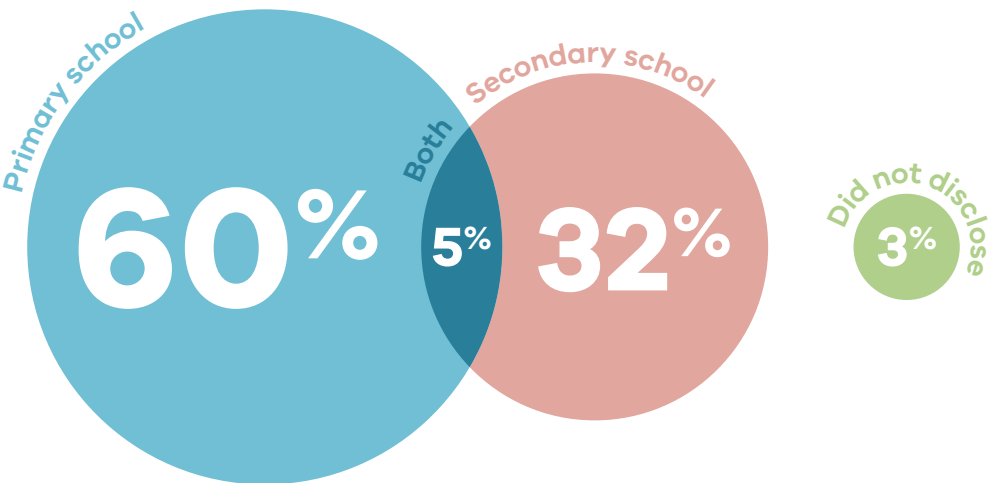


**Notes:** This data does not include participants who did not disclose the years that they experienced abuse. This data reflects that some participants experienced abuse over multiple decades.

In relation to the type of school where participants experienced abuse (Figure B.5):

- 60 per cent of participants described child sexual abuse that occurred in primary school
- 32 per cent said they were abused in secondary school
- 5 per cent disclosed abuse occurring in both primary and secondary school
- 3 per cent did not disclose the type of school.

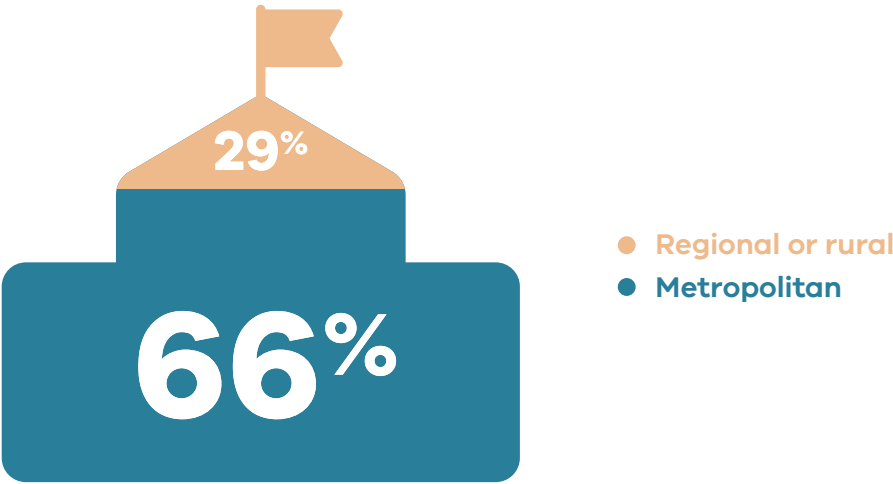
**FIGURE B.5: WHETHER CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE OCCURRED IN PRIMARY OR SECONDARY SCHOOL**



Not all participants named the school where they were sexually abused, and some were sexually abused at multiple schools. We have chosen not to identify schools in this report. Of the schools that participants did name, one was a non-government school but fell within the scope of the Forum because the perpetrator had previously been the subject of allegations of child sexual abuse at a government school.

The school locations reported by participants were spread across Victoria (Figure B.7). Of these, 66 per cent were in metropolitan Melbourne and 29 per cent were in regional or rural Victoria (Figures B.6 and B.7). Five per cent of participants did not disclose the location of the school.

**FIGURE B.6: SCHOOL LOCATION**



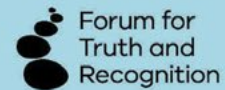
**Note:** This does not reflect the 5 per cent of participants who did not disclose the school location.

Participants were not specifically asked to name the perpetrator of the abuse they experienced, and many did not. However, 16 per cent of people identified a principal as a perpetrator of the abuse they experienced.

The experiences of 29 additional people fell outside the Forum’s scope. This was for a variety of reasons – for example, because the child sexual abuse took place outside Victoria, was not perpetrated in a school context or occurred in a non-government school in circumstances where the perpetrator had not previously been the subject of allegations of child sexual abuse in a government school (refer to Part 5 for an explanation of our scope).

The map shows the state of Victoria, Australia, with a dashed blue box highlighting the Melbourne CBD area. A dashed line extends from the box to a larger, more detailed map of the Melbourne CBD area below. The detailed map shows the city's layout, including the Yarra River, the CBD, and surrounding areas. A label 'Melbourne CBD' points to the central business district. The map also shows the surrounding regions of Victoria, including the Mallee, Wimmera, and Gippsland.

# Appendix C — Providing information to the Forum



## **PROVIDING INFORMATION TO THE FORUM INFORMATION FOR THE PUBLIC Released 21 October 2025**

This document explains how the Forum for Truth and Recognition (**Forum**) will treat the information provided to it. This includes information that is provided by telephone, email, written submission or in other formats to the Forum, the Chair and Forum staff.

### **WHAT HAPPENS TO THE INFORMATION PROVIDED?**

The Forum will keep records of the information it receives. The type of record kept will depend on how the information is provided. For example, it may be kept in the form of summary notes, an audio recording or a document.

Information provided to the Forum may be used to inform its work or made public. This means some information may be uploaded to the Forum's website, made available for review at the Forum's office and referenced or included in the Forum's report.

### **CAN INFORMATION BE PROVIDED ANONYMOUSLY?**

Yes, you can request to provide information anonymously or use a pseudonym (a made-up name). The Forum will keep a record of your identity, but it will not name or identify you as being the source of the information that it decides to make public (including in its report).

### **CAN INFORMATION BE PROVIDED CONFIDENTIALLY?**

Yes, you can request to provide some or all your information confidentially. While your information will generally inform the Forum's work, it will not publish or quote the confidential information (including in its report).

The Forum may still be required to disclose confidential information if it is required to do so by law (as discussed further below).

[contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](mailto:contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au)

## WHAT PROTECTIONS ARE AVAILABLE IF YOU PROVIDE INFORMATION?

If you provide information to the Forum, you have rights and protections under the *Inquiries Act 2014* (Vic) (the **Act**):

- **You have the protections of a witness in Supreme Court proceedings**  
If you give information to the Forum, you have the same protection and immunity as a witness in Supreme Court proceedings (section 111(4) of the Act). This includes protection against being sued for defamation or negligence.
- **Your information cannot be used against you**  
Any information you give to the Forum cannot be used as evidence or used against you in any other proceedings, subject to limited exceptions (section 112 of the Act).
- **Others cannot hinder or obstruct your participation in the Forum's proceedings**  
It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly engage in conduct that hinders, obstructs or causes a serious disruption to the Forum's proceedings (section 119 of the Act).
- **Your employer cannot take detrimental action against you (including dismissing you)**  
If you give information to the Forum without breaking the law, your employer cannot threaten or take detrimental action against you (including dismissing you) because you have given that information (section 121(1) of the Act).

You also have responsibilities in providing information to the Forum. It is an offence to make a statement or provide information to the Forum that is false or misleading (section 120 of the Act).

The Forum may request information that is relevant to its work. It will usually issue these requests in writing. The Forum cannot make you provide information. It is your choice if you provide any information and the Forum will respect your choice.

If you have information you want to provide to the Forum but are concerned about providing it, please contact the Forum to discuss your options on 1800 967 933 or email [contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](mailto:contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au).

## **WHAT HAPPENS TO INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE?**

To ensure that all information is properly considered, the Forum will keep records of all information that it receives. These records may include notes, audio recordings or copies of documents provided to it.

### **Sharing information with the public**

The Forum may decide to publish some of the information that it receives, including uploading it to its website or referencing or including it in its report.

The Forum will generally not make public any names, addresses, schools, places of employment or information that identifies, or is likely to lead to the identification of a person.

If the Forum intends to publish information that it receives, it will generally seek to obtain consent in advance from the relevant participant.

### **Sharing information in specific circumstances**

The Forum will seek to manage information that it receives in a way that appropriately protects those who provide it. There are, however, certain limited circumstances in which it may be necessary or appropriate for the Forum to share information with others.

#### *Reporting abuse to Victoria Police*

The *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) requires anyone aged 18 or older who reasonably believes that a sexual offence has been committed in Victoria against a child under the age of 16 by another person aged 18 or older to disclose it to a police officer as soon as it is practicable to do so (section 327(2)). This obligation only applies if the person who has experienced the abuse was aged less than 16 as of 27 October 2014 or subsequently if the offence was committed later.

This obligation is imposed on all members of the general public, including Forum staff.

A person does not, however, have to disclose it if they (among other reasons):

- have a 'reasonable excuse', for example if the person fears for another person's safety (other than the person believed to have committed the offence) if they were to disclose the information to police or the person believes that the information has already been disclosed to police by someone else and they have no further information to provide;
- received the information from the person who has experienced the abuse (directly or indirectly), they were aged 16 years or older at the time of providing the information, and have requested that the information not be disclosed;

- obtained the information when they were a child; or
- obtained the information solely through the public domain.

The Forum may be subject to other legal requirements to disclose information.

It may also be necessary or appropriate for the Forum to disclose information if there is a risk to the safety, health or wellbeing of another person.

The Forum will seek to consider the safety, health or wellbeing of people who have experienced child sexual abuse in schools and other persons who provide information to it. Generally, the Forum will not report abuse if it fears for another person's safety in doing so (other than the safety of the alleged perpetrator).

The Forum will seek to consult with people who choose to participate to confirm whether they want to report the abuse to a police officer. The Forum will seek to respect how people want information about the abuse to be managed or disclosed.

#### *Disclosing information to other people*

The Forum may disclose information which it receives to any person or body if it considers that the information is relevant to the performance of the functions of that person or body and it is appropriate to disclose that information (section 116(1) of the Act).

Before disclosing information, the Forum may redact or remove any names, addresses, schools, places of employment or information that identifies, or is likely to lead to the identification of a person who has experienced child sexual abuse.

The Forum will seek to respect how participants in the Forum want information about them to be managed or disclosed.

**The information provided in this document is not legal advice. Please seek your own legal information if required.**

**Providing information to the Forum may be difficult, confronting and upsetting for some people. If you need to talk to someone, support is available from the services listed on the Forum's website.**

# Appendix D — A guide to your personalised session



## A guide to your personalised session

### What is a personalised session?

A personalised session is an individual face-to-face or online conversation with the Chair of the Forum. This is an opportunity for you to share your experience of child sexual abuse at school in a safe and respectful space.

A personalised session usually runs for about an hour. At the start, we will ask for your consent to record your session and take notes. You can decide if the information we gather is used publicly, anonymously or kept entirely confidential. You can also tell us if you would prefer not to have your session recorded. A personalised session is guided by you and your preferences.

### Who will be there?

A personalised session will usually include the following people:

- yourself;
- the Chair of the Forum, Angela Connors;
- a support person if you choose to bring one; and
- a Forum staff member to take notes.

We will also have a Wellbeing Facilitator available if you wish to speak with them before and after your session to offer you support.

### Can I bring a support person?

Yes. You can bring a support person to your personalised session. Your support person could be a family member or friend. You may also bring your counsellor or another professional. They can come into your session or wait for you in a room nearby. If you decide to bring a support person into your session, their role will be to support you while you share your experience.

[contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](mailto:contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au)

### What do I need to prepare for my personalised session?

Before you attend your session, it can help to think about what you would like to talk about. It can also be helpful to think about what you do not want to talk about. The Chair of the Forum may ask general questions to prompt you to share your experience, but you do not need to speak about anything you do not want to discuss. You might like to think about the following questions:

- What is your experience of child sexual abuse in a Victorian government school or certain non-government school prior to the year 2000?
- How has the abuse affected your life and the life of your family, friends and other support people?

### How can I share my information with the Forum?

How you share your information is entirely your choice. You can choose to share information with the Forum on the basis that it is:

- **Confidential** – You can request to provide some or all of your information confidentially. While your information will generally inform the Forum's work, the Forum will not publish or quote the confidential information you provide (including in its report or on its website). The Forum may still be required to disclose confidential information it is required to do so by law.
- **Anonymous** – You can request to provide information anonymously or by using a pseudonym (a made-up name). The Forum will keep a record of your identity, but it will not name or identify you as being the source of any information that it decides to make public (including in its report and on its website).
- **Public** – You can choose to make the information you provide public. This means the Forum may publish information in its report or on its website, including your name and other identifying information.

For more information, please see the Providing Information to the Forum document on our website on the [Resources](#) page.

### Can I bring documents or materials with me?

Yes. If you have documents or materials you would like to share with the Forum, they can be provided prior to your personalised session via email. You can also bring them on the day if you would prefer. This might include:

- letters;
- school reports; and
- photographs.

If the documents or materials are originals, copies will be made, and the originals will be returned to you following your session. Electronic materials can be emailed to [contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](mailto:contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au). You are also welcome to

attend your session and decide afterwards if there is anything you wish to provide to the Forum.

### **Additional information about your personalised session**

#### **Where can I find details about my personalised session?**

Depending on your preferred contact method (phone, email or post), a Forum staff member will contact you to confirm your session's location, date and time.

#### **I have booked a **face-to-face** personalised session, what can I expect?**

Prior to your session, we will send information about accessing the building where your session will be held. We ask that you arrive 20 minutes prior to your session time.

Before your session begins, you will be greeted by a Wellbeing Facilitator who is available to offer you support if you wish. The session will be held in a room, usually with a table, chairs or couch. The room is intended to make you feel safe and comfortable while you share your experience.

Following the session, you will have an opportunity to meet with the Wellbeing Facilitator again who will offer you support and referrals for ongoing support.

Water, tea and coffee will be available before, during and after your session.

#### **I have booked an **online** personalised session, what can I expect?**

Prior to your session, we will send information and a link to your online session. You will need a laptop, desktop computer or smartphone to access the online session. We also recommend that you find a quiet space to join the session, so you feel comfortable and safe to share your experience.

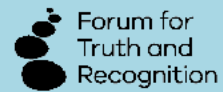
Before your online session begins, a Wellbeing Facilitator is available to give you a call to offer you support if you wish. They will also be available following your session to offer you support and referrals for ongoing support.

### **Contact us**

If you have any questions about attending your personalised session or wish to discuss any specific needs, please contact us by phone on 1800 967 933 (free call) or by email at [contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](mailto:contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au).

For more information about the Forum, visit our website:  
[www.truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](http://www.truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au).

# Appendix E — A guide to making your submission



## A guide to making your submission

### What is a submission?

You can choose to share your experience of child sexual abuse in school prior to the year 2000 with the Forum by sending a written or creative submission. Your submission can be any length and format such as:

- written letter;
- voice recording;
- video recording;
- an artwork;
- song;
- poem; or
- another format of your choice.

### What do I need to consider when preparing my submission?

When preparing your submission, you might like to think about the following:

- What is your experience of child sexual abuse in a Victorian government school or certain non-government school prior to the year 2000?
- How has the abuse affected your life and the life of your family, friends and other support people?

### Creative submission cover sheet

If you choose to make a creative submission, you will need to complete and include the creative submission cover sheet which can be found on the [Resources page](#) on our website. The cover sheet provides additional information to assist the Forum to understand your creative submission.

### Participant consent form

In addition to your submission and cover sheet (if applicable), you will need to complete and include our participant consent form found on the [Resources](#)

[contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](mailto:contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au)

[page](#) on our website. This includes telling us how you choose to share your information with the Forum, whether it be confidential, anonymous or public.

### How can I share information in my submission with the Forum?

How you share your information with the Forum is entirely your choice. You can share information with the Forum on the basis it is:

- **Confidential** – You can request to provide some or all of your information in the submission confidentially. While your information will generally inform the Forum’s work, the Forum will not publish or quote the confidential information you provide (including in its report or on its website). The Forum may still be required to disclose confidential information it is required to do so by law.
- **Anonymous** – You can request to provide the information in your submission anonymously or by using a pseudonym (a made-up name). The Forum will keep a record of your identity, but it will not name or identify you as being the source of any information that it decides to make public (including in its report and on its website).
- **Public** – You can choose to make the information you provide in your submission public. This means the Forum may publish information in its report or on its website, including your name and other identifying information.

For more information, please see the Providing Information to the Forum document on our website on the [Resources](#) page.

### Where do I send my submission?

All submissions can be sent to the Forum by email or post.

- **Email:** [contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](mailto:contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au)
- **Post:** PO Box 256, Collins Street West, VIC 8007

### What happens when I send a submission to the Forum?

When the Forum receives your submission, it will be reviewed by Angela Connors, Chair of the Forum, and Forum staff members. The contents of your submission will inform the Forum’s work, including its report.

### Contact us

If you have any questions about making a submission to the Forum please contact us via phone on 1800 967 933 (free call) or by email at [contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](mailto:contact@truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au).

For more information about the Forum, please visit our website: [www.truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](http://www.truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au).

## Appendix F — Causal layered analysis

Causal layered analysis (CLA) is a way of understanding complex issues by looking at them at different levels.<sup>1</sup> It can help policymakers and organisations move beyond quick fixes and consider the deeper drivers of change.

CLA consists of four levels:

- the litany
- social causes
- discourse/worldview
- myth/metaphor.<sup>2</sup>

CLA works by identifying the four levels of analysis to create ‘coherent new futures’. CLA requires its users to conduct research up and down the layers of analysis to ensure that different ways of knowing are included.<sup>3</sup>

CLA can be used to unpack issues. In theory, after articulating the ‘litany’ of the issue, systemic causes can be explored, allowing the worldview that creates the system to be identified. As a result, the underlying supportive myth or core metaphor that underpins the worldview can be articulated, meaning that solutions are explored for every level. It is intended that ‘digging deeper’ will seek more effective solutions that are less tied to short-term or quick-fix solutions.<sup>4</sup>

The Forum used CLA to think through the underlying assumptions and systemic conditions that give rise to child sexual abuse. This helped inform the Chair’s reflections in Part 4.

### Appendix F Endnotes

1. Causal layered analysis was first developed by Dr Sohail Inayatullah, as seen on *Sohail Inayatullah, Causal layered analysis: poststructuralism as method*, Metafuture website, 2023, accessed 17 April 2026. <https://www.metafuture.org/category/main-topics/cla/>
2. Sohail Inayatullah, *Causal layered analysis: Poststructuralism as method*, Metafuture website, 2023, accessed 17 April 2026. <https://www.metafuture.org/category/main-topics/cla/>
3. S Inayatullah, Causal layered analysis. In: *Prospective and strategic foresight toolbox*, Futuribles International, 2017, p 7.
4. S Inayatullah, Causal layered analysis. In: *Prospective and strategic foresight toolbox*, Futuribles International, 2017, p 7.

# Appendix G — Summary of Beaumaris Board of Inquiry

This appendix contains extracts from the findings and recommendations of the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry.

## Findings

The Beaumaris Board of Inquiry concluded that the Department of Education's response to allegations of child sexual abuse between 1960 and 1994 was an 'appalling and systemic failure'.<sup>1</sup> Below, we set out the Beaumaris Board of Inquiry's six findings.

### **Finding one: an absence of policies and procedures**

'Between 1960 and 1994, there were no policies or procedures concerning child sexual abuse, including how to respond to allegations. This is despite the fact that the Department knew of the risk of child sexual abuse by teachers, and despite there being a legislative and regulatory framework in place during this period that gave the education system power to discipline staff ... This meant that staff of the Department were left to respond to allegations of child sexual abuse in an inconsistent and ad hoc way – if they responded at all'.<sup>2</sup>

### **Finding two: an absence of guidance to staff**

'Between 1960 and 1994, there was not only a lack of policies or procedures, but also no other guidance to staff instructing them on how to identify, report, manage, respond to and prevent child sexual abuse. What little guidance existed (for example, in the form of formal instructions to teachers) focused on the physical safety of children or, disturbingly, existed only to avoid reputational damage to teachers. The result of this was that staff did not know how to adequately respond to allegations of child sexual abuse and implement measures to protect children's safety'.<sup>3</sup>

### **Finding three: a culture that prioritised the reputation of the education system over the safety of children**

'Between 1960 and 1994, the Department prioritised the reputation of the education system, including the schools and teachers within it, above the safety of children. A primary example of this was the Department's use of transfers to move teachers between schools or to non-teaching positions as a way of 'managing' allegations of child sexual abuse'.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Finding four: a lack of staff training**

‘Between 1960 and 1994, there was a lack of training to assist staff to identify risks of child sexual abuse, or to recognise, raise concerns about and appropriately respond to child sexual abuse. The Board of Inquiry heard that on several occasions, teachers and senior staff were aware of, or at the very least were suspicious about, the behaviour of some of the alleged perpetrators. However, the Department provided evidence that there was no training to help teachers to identify this type of behaviour as sexual abuse or to understand its seriousness, let alone to know what to do with their suspicions’.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Finding five: poor record-keeping and information-sharing practices**

‘Between 1960 and 1994, the Department had poor record-keeping and information-sharing practices concerning child sexual abuse. With regard to record-keeping, the Department did not have any policies in place to inform staff of the need to document disclosures of child sexual abuse from adults or children; to guide them in documenting such disclosures; or the need to document any actions taken in response to such disclosures. Despite some records being kept, this meant that disciplinary processes and outcomes, and investigations into child sexual abuse, were not consistently or comprehensively recorded ... With regard to information-sharing, the Department did not have any policies instructing staff when they should share allegations of child sexual abuse with Victoria Police’.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Finding six: no systemic reviews**

‘Finally, and putting aside the work done by the Department in response to this inquiry, the Board of Inquiry found that the Department has never undertaken a review of allegations of historical child sexual abuse. There has been:

- no review of allegations of child sexual abuse at Beaumaris Primary School and other government schools within the scope of this inquiry at or around the time of the alleged abuse (once the Department became aware of concerns or allegations of child sexual abuse by a teacher)
- no review of allegations of child sexual abuse at Beaumaris Primary School and other government schools within the scope of this inquiry when more concerns and allegations began emerging in 2000 and 2001
- no broader systemic review of allegations of historical child sexual abuse in all government schools to understand the scale of child sexual abuse across government schools on a statewide basis ...

Further, while the Department has undertaken a range of work in response to this Board of Inquiry, it has not undertaken a systemic review to understand the scale of allegations of child sexual abuse across all government schools. As a result, in contrast to victim-survivors whose experiences came within the scope of this inquiry, victim-survivors from other government schools have not been afforded an opportunity to gain an understanding of the extent of child sexual abuse at their school, or of whether they were alone in their experience.

This failure has also meant that some children were put at risk of further child sexual abuse. In addition, it has limited the Department's ability to understand, acknowledge and learn from past failures, and compromised its ability to extend support and acknowledgement to former students who have been harmed'.<sup>7</sup>

## Recommendations

The Beaumaris Board of Inquiry made nine recommendations, which we set out below.

### Recommendation 1: A statewide public apology

'The Board of Inquiry recommends the Victorian Government formally apologise to all victim-survivors, secondary victims and communities affected by historical child sexual abuse in government schools. The apology should:

- be made in Parliament, with victim-survivors and secondary victims invited to be present
- specifically address the sexual abuse that occurred at Beaumaris Primary School and other government schools within the scope of the Board of Inquiry
- be accompanied by commitments to action from government.'<sup>8</sup>

### Recommendation 2: A new memorial and a consistent process

'The Board of Inquiry recommends the Department of Education:

- work with victim-survivors, secondary victims and affected community members to co-design the location and form of a memorial acknowledging historical child sexual abuse at Beaumaris Primary School
- consider, facilitate and fund requests for other memorials to acknowledge historical child sexual abuse in government schools in accordance with new policy guidance for memorials. This policy guidance should be trauma-informed and:
  - be developed in consultation with victim-survivors and secondary victims of historical child sexual abuse in government schools
  - provide for consistent assessment of requests for memorials, and
  - describe decision-making processes, types of memorialisation to consider and requirements for facilitating engagement with victim-survivors, secondary victims, local communities and other stakeholders.'<sup>9</sup>

### **Recommendation 3: A statewide truth-telling and accountability process**

'The Board of Inquiry recommends the Victorian Government establish a statewide truth-telling and accountability process for victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in all Victorian government schools that:

- is independent and time-limited
- is available to:
  - victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in any Victorian government school
  - victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse in a non-government school where the alleged perpetrator previously worked at a government school and allegedly committed child sexual abuse at that government school
- results in an independent public record of victim-survivors' experiences shared through the truth-telling process, that includes recognition of past failings of the Department of Education.'<sup>10</sup>

### **Recommendation 4: A restorative engagement program**

'The Board of Inquiry recommends the Department of Education establish a restorative engagement program for adult victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in government schools who:

- cannot or do not wish to make a civil claim or National Redress Scheme application, or
- have finalised a civil claim against the Department of Education, without the need to make a separate application through the National Redress Scheme, or
- finalised a civil claim before Direct Personal Responses were available.

This program would allow these victim-survivors to safely share their experience of child sexual abuse and the harm caused, and receive a personal response from the Department of Education.'<sup>11</sup>

### **Recommendation 5: Improving information access**

'The Board of Inquiry recommends the Department of Education implement:

- trauma-informed practices for responding to requests for information and records that are related to historical child sexual abuse in government schools (including requests identified as such while being processed), including through:
  - delivery of trauma-informed training for archivists and staff in Freedom of Information units
  - development of information materials that provide transparency to people seeking records about what records may or may not be available and why
  - provision of individualised information and support to people seeking records
- a program of work to improve its records management processes, including digitising and cataloguing records to support ease of access, and publishing school records that are able to be released publicly.<sup>12</sup>

### **Recommendation 6: A new online hub and telephone line providing information and assistance for adult victim-survivors**

'The Board of Inquiry recommends the Department of Education establish an online hub and telephone line for adults who are victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in government schools to seek information and initial assistance.'<sup>13</sup>

### **Recommendation 7: Improved coordination, navigation and advocacy support**

'The Board of Inquiry recommends the Victorian Government, in consultation with victim survivors, develop and trial a coordination, navigation and advocacy function for adult victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in schools.'<sup>14</sup>

### **Recommendation 8: A targeted program of work to improve service responses**

'The Board of Inquiry recommends the Victorian Government design and implement a targeted program of work to improve service responses to adult victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. This includes:

- in consultation with victim-survivors, designing, developing and implementing a formal peer support program for adult victim-survivors of child sexual abuse
- in consultation with sexual assault support services and Sexual Assault Services Victoria, develop a consistent approach to how adult victim-survivors of child sexual abuse may access sexual assault support services in a timely way
- reviewing and updating public-facing information of sexual assault support services to grow awareness that services are available for and responsive to people of all genders.'<sup>15</sup>

### **Recommendation 9: Legislative reform to ensure the enduring protection of personal information provided to boards of inquiry**

'The Board of Inquiry recommends the Victorian Government amend *the Inquiries Act 2014* (Vic) to ensure that personal information identified by the relevant board of inquiry as confidential, anonymous or sensitive:

- is kept confidential for a minimum of 99 years following the end of a board of inquiry
- be exempted from the application of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Vic) for a minimum of 99 years following the end of a board of inquiry.

These changes should apply retrospectively to this Board of Inquiry.'<sup>16</sup>

## Appendix G Endnotes

1. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xvi.*
2. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xiii.*
3. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xiv.*
4. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xiv.*
5. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, pp xiv–xv.*
6. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xv.*
7. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xv–xvi.*
8. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xxi.*
9. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xxi.*
10. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xxii.*
11. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xxii.*
12. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xxiii.*
13. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xxiii.*
14. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xxiii.*
15. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xxiv.*
16. *Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report, 2024, Executive summary and recommendations, p xxiv.*

## Appendix H — Forum stakeholders

The Forum reached out to more than 100 stakeholders across Victoria and nationally where relevant. The following departments, agencies and organisations played an important role in meeting with the Forum and supporting our operations.

### Government departments and agencies

Australian Department of Social Services  
Commission for Children and Young People  
Public Record Office Victoria  
Victorian Department of Education  
Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing  
Victorian Department of Government Services  
Victorian Department of Health  
Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety  
Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet  
Victoria Legal Aid  
Victorian Multicultural Commission

### Organisations

About Time for Justice  
Australian Community Support Organisation  
Australian Psychology Society  
Blue Knot Foundation  
Centres Against Sexual Assault  
Centre For Excellence in Child and Family Welfare  
Connecting Home  
Dardi Munwurro  
Drummond Street Services  
National Survivors Foundation (formerly IGFF)  
Neighbourhood Houses Victoria

Public Libraries Victoria

Relationships Australia Victoria

Sexual Assault Services Victoria

Survivors and Mates Support Network (SAMSN)

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

Victorian Men's Shed Association

## **Educational organisations**

Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools

Victorian Catholic Education Authority

Victorian Institute of Teaching

## **Local government**

Municipal Association of Victoria

Melbourne City Council

# Appendix I — Acknowledgements from the Chair

The Forum for Truth and Recognition would not have been possible without the advice, assistance and contributions of a range of people and organisations.

I wish to extend my thanks and appreciation to everyone listed below.

## Staff

- Leanne McGaw, Chief Executive Officer
- Bridie McNally, Senior Communications Officer
- Nick Bridgman, Senior Project Officer
- Caoimhe Hughes, Engagement and Support Adviser
- Alyssa Johnson, Policy Officer
- Nur Kystina Mohd Azhar, Student intern (The University of Melbourne)

## Participant supports

Wellbeing facilitators: Colleen Clark, Honnie Cook, Rosemarie Iachelini, Enza Marino, Chaille Perrett, Hallie Shellam

Counsellors: Enza Marino, Chaille Perrett, Hallie Shellam

## Critical Friends of the Forum

Jennifer Coate AO, Michaela Hart PSM (Senior Archivist, Department of Health and Department of Families, Fairness and Housing), Craig Hughes-Cashmore (CEO, Survivors and Mates Support Network (SAMSN)), David McGinniss (Deputy Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne), Mary McKinnon (Executive Director – Strategic Advisor to the CEO, Life Without Barriers)

## Lived experience advisers

Michael Constable, Ingrid Magnusson, Karuna Santosa, Karen Walker

## Legal team

Corrs Chambers Westgarth: Led by Jared Heath with the support of Natalie Cooper, Bella Cullinan, Laura Deschamps Ferrari, Sonia Divina, Leah Eglezos, Kaitlin Jempson, Jesse Jin, Thilini Joseph, Marin Kraljevic, Kevin Neneh, Jamie Oslington, Louis Panozzo, Brynnie Rafe, Georgia Smith, Shreya Srivastava, Emily Steiner, Ying Wong

## Other service providers

Blue Knot Foundation (Dr Peter Streker and Sue Moffat), Matt Davies (copyeditor), Foresight Lane (Kieran Murrihy), Impact Co (Ming Low and Jacqui McKenzie), Tilda Hum (professional writer), Lewis Wanstall & Associates (Kerry Sayburn and Christine Wanstall), WOO Agency (Travis Atkins, Michael Canturi, Lucy Warriner and wider team), Katya Zissermann (professional writer)

## Prison support services and outreach

Centre Against Sexual Assault Central Victoria (Kate Wright, CEO)

Drummond Street Services (Karen Field, CEO and Louisa Shillingford-Brown, Manager, Complex Trauma)

Western Region Centre Against Sexual Assault (Annette Vickery, CEO)

## Government agencies

The Forum was independent of the Victorian Government. However, I am grateful to key staff from the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Department of Government Services who helped support our establishment and corporate operations. I also appreciate the information and assistance provided by the Department of Education.

## Appendix J — Easy Read guide



AN EASY READ GUIDE

# Truth, recognition and healing

Report on victim-survivors' experiences of child sexual  
abuse in Victorian government schools and certain  
non-government schools before 2000

MAY 2026

**ISBN:** 978-1-7646719-3-4 (PDF)

## Support services



The Forum for Truth and Recognition understands this report may be upsetting to read.

**You are not alone. Support is available.**

If you or someone you know needs support, the following free services are available:



### **1800 RESPECT**

Call 1800 737 732 – 24-hour sexual assault and domestic violence support

### **Sexual Assault Crisis Line Victoria**

Call 1800 806 292 – 24-hour support for people who have experienced sexual assault

### **13 YARN**

Call 13 92 76 – 24-hour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support

### **Lifeline**

Call 13 11 14 – 24-hour crisis support

### **Beyond Blue**

Call 1300 224 636 – 24-hour mental health support



If it is an emergency, call triple zero (000) straight away.



## What is in this guide?

|                                          |    |
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| Support services                         | 1  |
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| What did we hear?                        | 12 |
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| How has child safety in schools changed? | 26 |
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# Introduction

## About this guide

This guide was prepared by the Forum for Truth and Recognition in Victoria.

**It is written in an easy to read way.**



The guide uses simple words and short sentences.  
It uses boxes like this one to help explain important information.



If you are unsure, you can ask someone you know to help you read this guide.  
You may want to have a family member or a friend with you for support.

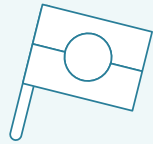


This guide is a summary of the Forum's full report.  
You can find the full report and videos on the Forum's website: [truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au](http://truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au).



The term **victim-survivor** is used in this guide.  
A victim-survivor is someone who was sexually abused as a child.

## Acknowledgements



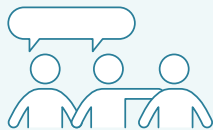
We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners of Victoria.



We acknowledge all victim-survivors. Your strength and bravery helped make this Forum happen.



We thank everyone we spoke to for trusting us with their experiences. We do not take that lightly.



Some people chose not to share their experiences with us. We hope this report still shows how important your experiences are.

## What is in the full report?

The report has 5 parts:



**Part 1** shares the experiences of victim-survivors in their own words.



**Part 2** uses research to explain what puts children at risk of sexual abuse at school.



**Part 3** looks at how child safety in Victorian schools has improved since 2000.



**Part 4** shares ideas on how to make schools safer and better support victim-survivors.



**Part 5** explains how the Forum worked and what we wanted to do.

There is also a summary at the front of the full report.

# What was the Forum?



The Forum for Truth and Recognition gave people who experienced child sexual abuse in schools across Victoria a chance to share their truth.



We gave victim-survivors a safe place to share what happened to them.



Their experiences were recorded to create a record everyone can read that will last forever.

## Who could take part?

The Forum was open to people who experienced child sexual abuse:



In a Victorian government school before 1 January 2000.



In some non-government schools before 1 January 2000, if the abuser had also worked in a government school and abused someone while working there.

## What did the Forum do?



We gave victim-survivors a safe way to share what happened to them.



We created a public record for the community and Victorian Government to learn from.



We wanted to support healing for people who were abused.



Our report helped the Victorian Government learn how to make schools safer for children.

## Why was the Forum set up?



In 2023, the Victorian Government looked into child sexual abuse at Beaumaris Primary School and some other government schools.



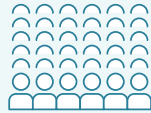
That inquiry said a truth-telling process was needed across all Victorian schools.



That is why the Forum for Truth and Recognition was created.

# What did we hear?

## Who shared with us?



**38** people shared their experiences.



**32** people had private meetings with the Forum.

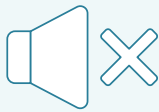


**18** people described what happened to them in writing or artwork.

## Looking back



Many victim-survivors talked about how things were different when they were growing up.



Children were expected to be seen but not heard.



People believed adults more than children.



Child sexual abuse was not talked about openly.



Many children did not understand what was happening to them.

## The abuse



Almost all victim-survivors said they were groomed before the abuse happened.



Grooming is when an abuser tricks a child, their family and others to get close to the child and stop them from speaking up.



Some abusers used gifts and attention to make children feel special. Others used threats and fear to stop children from telling anyone about the abuse.



What abusers did was wrong. Victim-survivors told us things abusers did to hurt and upset them.

Some abusers:



Touched children's bodies in ways they did not like.



Asked children to take their clothes off for photos.



Made children do sexual things.

## Speaking up



Victim-survivors told us it can take many years to tell someone about the abuse.



Many felt too scared or ashamed to tell anyone.



Some did not understand they were being sexually abused.



Others were scared people would not believe them.



Some children who did speak up were not listened to. Some were even punished for telling the truth.

## How the abuse affected people



Victim-survivors told us that the abuse affected different parts of their lives, often for many years.

As children, victim-survivors had:



Feelings of confusion, shame, anger and guilt.



Deep worry and distress, including thoughts of hurting themselves.



Changes in the way they acted at home and at school.



Trouble with friendships and growing up.

As adults, victim-survivors had:



Mental health problems like anxiety, depression and ongoing trauma.



Trouble trusting others and making friends or having relationships.



Problems with work, study and earning money.



Physical health problems like becoming ill for a long time.



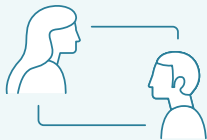
Trouble sleeping.

## Healing and recovery



Child sexual abuse can affect people deeply and for a long time.

Victim-survivors shared what helps them heal. They talked about:



Spending time with partners, family, friends and other victim-survivors.



Ways to care for their mind.



Exercise, being in nature and spending time with animals.



Helping others (especially children) through work, volunteering and speaking up.

## Actions for the government



The Forum asked the Victorian Government to do two things.



The first action is to make the report public and share it in libraries.



The second action is to better protect information victim-survivors told the Forum they wanted to stay private.

# Why did abuse happen?

## What people believed



What people believe affects how schools and staff treat children.



In the 1960s and 1970s, children were taught to always obey adults.



People trusted schools completely. Parents did not question what schools did.



Talking about sex or abuse was not ok. Many children were never taught what abuse looked like.

## How abusers avoided getting caught



Many abusers seemed friendly and popular.



Some abusers were people in charge. They were teachers and other adults at school. Children and families trusted them.



This made it hard for children, parents and staff to speak up or question them.



Abusers carefully planned how they groomed children, families and those around them.

## School culture and leadership



Some schools did not listen when people raised concerns.

In some schools one person often made all the decisions. This made it easier for abuse to happen.

Schools put children at greater risk when they:



Did not believe children who spoke up.



Made it hard for people to raise concerns.



Did not follow their own child safety rules.



Cared more about what people thought of them than children's safety.

# How has child safety in schools changed?



A lot has changed since 2000 to help prevent child sexual abuse in Victorian schools.

## In the community



People understand more about child sexual abuse today.



Children's rights are better understood.  
Children are listened to more.



Victim-survivors have helped change people's thinking by sharing what happened to them.

## In schools



All Victorian schools have rules to keep children safe.



Schools teach children what is safe and what is not safe.



Schools check that the people who work with children are safe.



School staff are trained to spot abuse and tell someone about it.

## In the law



Victoria Police has special teams to help children who have been abused.



New laws show that child sexual abuse is very serious.



Adults who work with children must pass a safety check.



There are rules about how schools must deal with complaints about staff.

# A focus for the future



Many victim-survivors shared what happened to them to help make schools safer for children.

Victim-survivors said they want:



More people to understand child sexual abuse.



Help for parents to talk with their children about staying safe.



Better protection for children at school.



School staff to feel safe speaking up about someone they work with.



Better support for victim-survivors.

# Key messages



Child sexual abuse hurts children deeply.  
We must do everything we can to stop it.



We did this work with care and hope.



Talking about what happened, and what  
is changing, helps people trust schools.



Real change takes time. We must keep going.



Everyone can help keep children safe at school.



Together, we can make a difference.

**truthandrecognition.vic.gov.au**

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