
Executive Summary

Preventing abuse and promoting personal safety in young people with disability.

Prepared by the Centre for Children & Young People

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This research addresses a knowledge gap about personal safety and abuse prevention by exploring the perspectives of young people with disability, their supporters and families about feeling safe and developing strategies to stay safe.

To do this, the project addressed four research questions:

1. What does 'being safe' mean to young people with disability (aged 16 – 30)?
2. What helps and hinders young people with disability in feeling and being safe?
3. How do people who provide support to young people with disability perceive and respond to young people's concerns about their own safety?
4. What are the implications of this knowledge for policy and practice, particularly in newly emerging models of support?



CONTEXT

Previous research shows that, while there are concerns about violence and abuse of young people with disability, there is little that focuses on preventing harm or promoting safety, or which asks young people themselves what they think is important.

Key findings from a literature review show that safety is embedded in relationships for young people with disability, but that this may also be a source of vulnerability; that access to key trusted adults is a key strategy used by young people to protect their own safety; the cross-cutting impact of social exclusion; and a need for a holistic approach to addressing young people's safety promotion, particularly given that young people identify the need for continuity of support around safety from a network of people.

RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative research was conducted in six sites (three metropolitan, two regional and one rural) across four states. Following this, two surveys were distributed online.

Focus groups, interviews and adapted interviews

68 young people with disability spoke with us about their experiences and ideas about safety.

- 40 young people with disability took part in focus groups, where they talked about what helped them to feel and be safe.
- 12 people had individual interviews, because they preferred to speak privately or they had support needs which made it hard to be part of group activities.
- 16 young people with disability and high and complex support needs and 6 people who support them were also involved, using a range of adapted interview methods.

30 service providers also participated in focus groups in the research sites.

Surveys

2 online surveys were conducted. One was for young people with disability (35 responses) and one was for people who provide paid and unpaid support to young people with disability (138 responses). Most of the survey respondents were family members (70%), and others were service providers, advocates and friends.



RESULTS: YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES

Most of the young people in this research lived in their family homes. Eighteen lived in their own home, with friends, or in group homes. Three were in out of home care, one was homeless, and one at risk of homelessness.

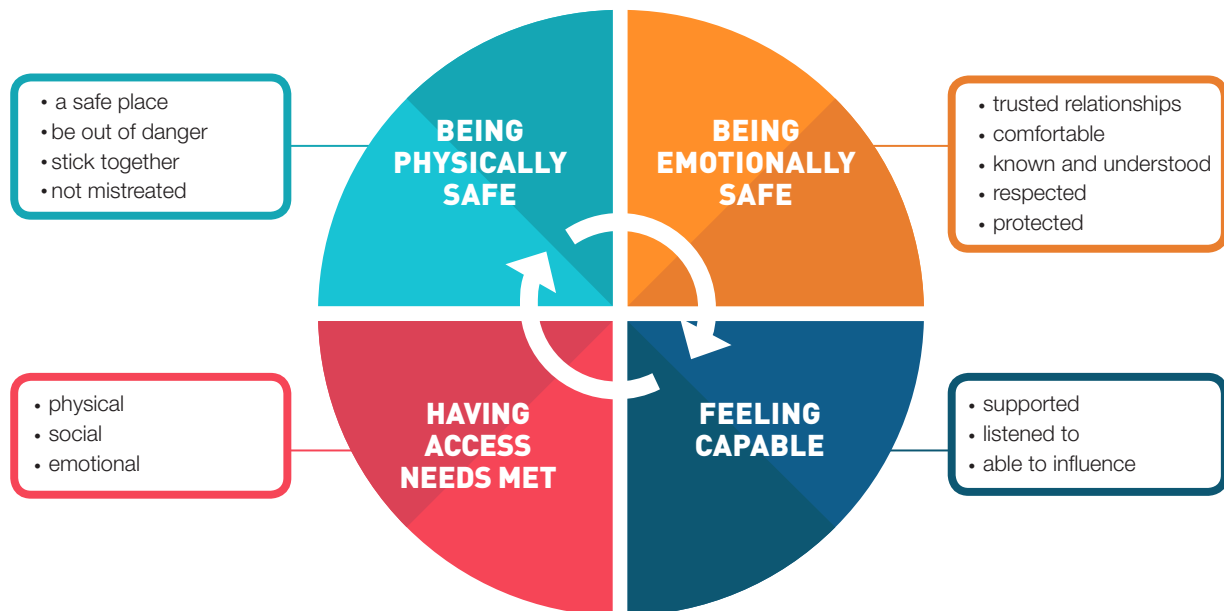
Young people described a range of activities and ways they engaged in their communities. Many were employed, either in voluntary, supported or mainstream employment. A wide range of leisure interests were discussed. Educational pursuits varied widely, from TAFE to postgraduate education. Young people with higher support needs had more limited social networks and engagement with communities.

While most young people reported some involvement with disability service organisations, those with higher support needs were more likely to be involved with a range of services, and those with primarily physical impairments reported less involvement with services, including six who had no involvement with disability or other community services. All of the young people had been to school, most frequently in special units within their local high schools, but also in other systems.

Because the focus of this research was on safety, researchers did not ask young people about abuse or experiences of not being safe. However, 13 (19%) participants reported a range of experiences of violence or abuse.

What does 'being safe' mean to young people with disability?

Four factors were identified by many young people as fundamental to a sense of safety. For them to feel safe, it was essential that all four of these were met.



Young people were clear about connecting safe places with the actions of people in the places that either kept them safe, or would protect them if it was necessary.

Home was felt to be a safe place for most of the young people in the study – a secure base because they had some control over what happened there and because people there knew them and cared for them. Where home was tense or unsafe it had a big impact on young people's sense of safety.



To keep safe is to look after each other. So have each other's back.

[Bianca]

Young person.

It doesn't matter what your disability is, you need to surround yourself with people that know you and respect you.

[Jem]

Almost all young people identified **close relationships** as important to them in supporting a positive sense of safety in their lives. These underpinned their confidence, built resilience, and contributed to their sense of identity. Personal networks that went across different life domains enabled young people to widen their social worlds and draw advice and support from a greater range of perspectives. However, a number of young people discussed their reluctance to have contact with people they did not already know well, either because they did not feel able to move out of a 'comfort zone', because of complex support needs, or because of the impact of previous violence and abuse on their confidence and resilience against potential future harm.

Most (but not all) people in the research had close relationships with **family members**, particularly at least one parent. They talked about trusting their family, feeling understood, acknowledging care and support they provided, and appreciating the long-term nature of this core relationship. However, some young people related difficult and sometimes volatile family dynamics at home which meant they navigated complex relationships to be safe at home.

Many young people talked about **friends** as important to their sense of personal safety, providing emotional support, solidarity, and back-up. For many, friendship was also a source of difficulty and tension, either in the present or the past. Friendship was much less evident for people with high support needs.

As in the home and personal relationships domain, young people's feelings about **safety in services** were integrally connected to relationships with workers and peers also in those places. What mattered most to them was being known and being valued across the different places and relationships in their lives.

Support workers, teachers and managers contributed to young people's sense of personal safety by building their sense of being valued, creating environments in which they felt respected, and taking their concerns seriously. However, young people also provided many examples of times when they spoke to people in authority about experiences of vilification, abuse and violence they were experiencing, to little or no effect. This both heightened young people's fear of abuse and violence, and their expectation that little would be done to prevent, stop or redress it.

Some young people described feeling embedded in organisations and groups in their local **communities** which provided them with a sense of belonging and contributed to a sense of personal safety. Some people felt judged sometimes and it made them very anxious. Threats from people unknown to them worried many young people – either from aggressive strangers in public places or transport, or people who might rob them. Some people were very overwhelmed by lights, music and crowds and needed good support.



Young people's ideas for improving their safety

Underpinning all of these strategies is the basic need expressed by all young people participating in this research to be listened to, to be treated with dignity, and to have their concerns heard and responded to.

<p>Strategies that young people identified that they can do themselves to be safer included:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build stronger and deeper connections and relationships with people who can support them – for advice, guidance and support • Learn skills that will help them to be more resilient, emotionally strong, and able to support peers • Learn who to seek help from, when and how • Know how to act to be safe in common situations • Focus on wellbeing
<p>Strategies that young people identified that other people can do that will help them to be safer included:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take action when something goes wrong (but not take over) • Have proactive strategies and measures to prevent harm in place • Lay strong foundations with high quality relationships – so young people feel comfortable, valued, respected • Understand and respond to the young person's specific context – what is safe for one person is not for another • When one part of a young person's support is lacking, build it somewhere else • Promote young people's capability – learn young people's safety strategies and help them use them & find new ones • Make the most of opportunities for learning – not just training • Change the environment so that young people feel welcome and included (and less personally responsible for keeping themselves safe)
<p>Strategies for how services can improve safety included:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing the priority of responding to concerns about harm (e.g. bullying and violence in schools; abuse and violence in services) • Increasing meaningful choice and control in & over services • Addressing gaps in services that make people unsafe (e.g. lack of choice of same gender or culture provider; lack of services in regional & rural areas) • Education for staff and young people: how to recognise & respond to harm, about all kinds of relationships, & also for leadership development & peer support
<p>Strategies for improving safety at a community level included:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a sense of belonging, to help young people feel more welcome in their communities • Focusing on universal access measures • Connecting safety to a human rights agenda • Focusing on systems reform where young people's safety is at a turning point – legal, out of home care, housing, child protection, domestic and family violence, and school systems • Prioritising choice and control in disability policy reform

PERSPECTIVES OF SUPPORTERS

There was strong agreement by supporters that the safety issues identified as priorities by young people were very important.

Supporters thought young people felt very safe at home and with family. They felt young people were concerned about their own safety when going to new places, and unsure about their safety with paid workers, friends and especially in intimate relationships.

Supporters thought that young people knew most about safety at home, but at least 50% said that the young person they support knew little about safety with friends, with support workers, at work, in the community, and in intimate relationships.

When young people were not safe, supporters said they looked for different ways that they expressed feeling unsafe; and responded to young people's concerns by acting on concerns, minimising risk, and building confidence. They said they helped young people to understand safety by being there for them, providing a safe space, through positive behaviour support and through education.

Things that supporters did to help young people included education and training; building relationships; addressing problems in systems; building safe cultures; planning for safety; improving support; and linking people with advocacy.

Having good relationships was seen as important, but paid workers felt like they did not have enough experience or guidance to know how to support young people well about safety.

Things that made it hard for them to support young people in being safe were when services did not prioritise safety of young people; lack of support from managers; lack of resources; lack of time and location. Families found it more difficult to have safety issues recognised, and workers found it harder to make time to focus on safety issues. It had been hard for some people to find help from other services when they needed it. They also felt that service systems were ill-resourced and under-skilled to respond to the complexity of need of young people who had experienced trauma.

Ideas for improving young people's safety by supporters included building relationships of trust; doing more to protect young people; building young people's capability; education and training; and influencing and improving other systems.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FOR ACTION

The ways that young people understood safety sets the context in which the implications are framed. These four elements highlight the complex interplay between young people being protected by having their safety needs met and being active agents by participating in determining what they want and need to feel and be safe. For young people to be safe and feel confident in their safety, they need to be engaged across all four intersecting elements. This will simultaneously help to ensure they feel protected while also mobilising what they know and can do in contributing to their own and others' safety.

Physical safety

Problems in being physically safe were more likely to create a response in services and systems which activated procedures or policies than any other form of harm.

However, a number of the strategies that young people employed for being safe show how the ways that they negotiate physical safety are more subtle and sometimes come at a cost to their wellbeing or personal growth. For example, a number of young people's strategies for being safe involved them minimising their presence in the community, either by not going to places, or by not going out alone or at certain times of day.



The way I see it is that it's not your skin that gets damaged, but your insides that do

[young person who chose to remain anonymous]

Emotional safety

In this study, young people focused most consistently on relational safety issues in their lives, which were often much more amorphous and more complex to negotiate than physical safety.

Young people commonly spoke about emotional and psychological harm that had caused them significant pain and had been poorly responded to. Central concerns for all the young people were security and insecurity in relationships, navigating interactions and relationships with paid and unpaid supporters, and forming and maintaining peer relationships.

Having access needs met

The meaning of access in this study is broad – being to understand whether young people feel that relationships, services, local and wider communities are physically accessible, available, approachable, welcoming and appropriate for them (Levesque et al., 2013).

Having access needs met is a unique contextualising factor in this research. For young people, it establishes, constrains or makes fragile a sense of safety, impairs or emboldens confidence, and affects how young people feel in their worlds and how secure they feel in engaging outside of their immediate known close relationships.

Widening the lens of access and accessibility to think about the way that places and interactions can help young people with disability to feel safe is important in understanding how to improve communities on a range of levels.

Feeling capable

Young people were much more confident in their knowledge and ability to implement safety strategies than were supporters. It was important to young people that they could use their own safety strategies wherever possible, and that when they needed help it was offered in a complementary way, rather than by taking control.

Depending on their context, they were more or less able to influence how well they could put strategies into action. The context also influenced the likelihood of others listening to them and finding ways to resolve problems with them.

Supporters worried about whether and how young people could put strategies into action, and the lack of safe opportunities they had to learn and explore boundaries in ways that other teenagers and young adults did. They focused primarily on minimising risk, providing safe spaces, and building trusting relationships rather than on building networks or promoting capability with and for young people as a safety strategy.



Implications for young people's lives

- **Sustaining solid, foundational relationships with a range of people support safety.** Where there are limitations in young people's close relationships, it is of paramount importance to build relationships in other spheres of their lives, so they have somewhere else to turn for support.
- **Supporting young people to feel able to take action and have their strategies received and acknowledged helps build resilience and safety.** Organisations need to resource and train supporters to recognise, respond and support young people to raise concerns and resolve them.
- **Information and knowledge about how to build young people's capability around safety is needed** for young people and supporters.

Implications for practice

- **Young people's aim of being more self-determining about safety needs to be built and sustained through high quality relational support.** Strategies to increase choice and decision-making and young people's control over change, and to build robust networks across young people's life domains are important to mitigate negative interactions and the effects of change.
- **Proactive strategies that act early on concerns and avoid abuse are needed in order to build a strong sense of personal safety for young people** and vital to prevent damage to young people's developing identity.
- **Supporters across practice contexts need education and skill development about safety and abuse prevention.**

Implications for policy

- **Agencies relevant to young people need to proactively address abuse prevention and develop evidence-informed strategies for promoting the personal safety of young people with disability.** The need for systematic responses to experiences of violence and harm is clear. However, this is not sufficient to reconcile tensions, constraints and feelings of disquiet in relationships that leads some young people to feel unsafe and unsupported. Capacity in systems needs to be built to support relational support for young people who are lacking it in their informal relationships, and need assistance for purposeful relationship building (and funded where necessary). This includes, but is not limited to, the developmental component of the NDIS Quality and Safeguarding Framework.
- **Expectations about safety in the organisations that young people use need to be made explicit for young people, staff, managers, families and volunteers.** This should include safe and unsafe practices and relationships; boundaries; ways to speak up; and how problems will be resolved. Responsibility for developing and delivering information and responding to concerns about safety needs to be allocated and resourced within organisations. Organisations need to be encouraged to discuss safety with young people, and to develop and use clear definitions of safety to underpin delivery of information.
- **Planning about safety with young people with disability is needed to build resilience and strength throughout the life course.** The high rates of harm experienced by young people with disability (and people with disability more generally) indicate that greater depth and quality in planning around safety is urgently needed. This should not be limited to NDIS planning, but rather developed from a standpoint of positive safety planning similar to that used in the domestic and family violence sector. This includes elements of starting early in the life course, coming from a strengths base, looking at what is needed to build strength and resilience, what is needed to educate, support, and develop knowledge in young people and what is needed in those who support them around safety.



There is a lack of recognition and understanding within disability services and educational institutions regarding how young people with autism and related developmental disorders express feeling unsafe. This results in young people being forced to remain in situations where they feel unsafe, and then punished for behavioural outbursts, causing trauma.

[family member]

Implications for communities

- **Governments at local, state and federal levels need to plan for physical, social and emotional access of young people with disabilities in their communities.**
- **Public awareness strategies need to be developed to encourage solidarity of community members to engage with young people with disabilities.** Strategies to activate bystanders in the general community should be explored, and funded.
- **Governments and organisations need to invite young people to participate in policy processes that inform inclusion and safety policy and practice.** Championing and supporting the leadership of young people shines a light on their capability, resourcefulness and energy and opens new conversations about safety for children and young people with disability at important life stages.

Implications for developing further knowledge

- While recruitment was challenging, and careful and ethical approaches needed, participation was also reinforcing and validating for many young people involved.
- Young people have many ideas about how services and systems can change to improve their lives. They contributed to knowledge across the research process through lived experience, focused reflection, and analysis of data.
- Further theorising of the findings from this research would be valuable. Key elements of the results resonate strongly, for example, with recognition theory and intersectionality.
- Knowledge transfer will help apply the key findings of this research to practical projects to improve young people's safety.

***To read the full report or plain english material go to:
www.rcypd.edu.au/safety***

