

Response to the questions raised by the Ministry of Education regarding the risk factors associated with sexual abuse in residential special school settings.

Prepared by Dr Christine Wilson, Standards and Monitoring Services (SAMS)

The literature on the prevalence of abuse in out-of-home support should be treated with a degree of caution especially when considering comparisons. In particular, the large studies we have access to are from European countries, such as the Netherlands, Finland, Spain and Croatia and include a large number of unknown variables. For example, Euser and colleagues (2012, 2015) reviewed residential and foster settings, but were not explicit about what these settings involved (size, function etc), how many staff, the degree of training, the mix of residents, the family history, the history of abuse prior to residential placement and so forth. It is not clear whether *any of the residential settings* in the European literature are comparable to New Zealand or the intensive special residential schools in the United Kingdom.

Care is also needed when reviewing abuse in out-of-home placements due to the demographics of the children. For example, Chen and Colleagues (2016) studied an entire school district in the United States and found 19 percent of children in out-of-home placements had school-identified disabilities and received special education services, but the range of disabilities included children with intellectual impairments (11%), learning disabilities (64%) and serious emotional disturbance (11%). The range of children in out-of-home placements includes those with a range of disabilities and also includes children without disabilities who require out-of-home support due to family, mental health or youth justice issues.

The literature review by Parker and Wilson (2016) for the Ministry of Education in New Zealand looked at general prevalence and concluded that the following does occur in these unknown out-of-home settings and with unknown prior histories.

The rate of reported sexual abuse against young people with intellectual disability in out-of-home placements in a single study in the Netherlands was 9.7 per 1000 children. This involved 104 staff (sentinels) observing 1650 children and describing 16 cases of child sexual abuse (89% involving physical contact) in 2010 (Euser et al., 2016). For all children in out-of-home placements (regardless of whether there is a disability present) the rate of sentinel reported cases of sexual abuse was 3.5 per 1000 children. This compares to 0.7 in the general population. In the study for children with mild intellectual disability in out-of-home care Euser et al (2016) found:

- Victims of sexual abuse are more likely to be girls (75%), (but Briggs (2006) working in special schools in New Zealand found that boys were just as likely to be victims of sexual abuse).

with staff being too strict (or rigid), not listening, having poor attitudes toward youth and being unfair (Soenen et al., 2013).

The literature review by Parker and Wilson (2016) highlights a number of variables that make living environments safer for young people who need to live away from their families, and more specifically would be believed to benefit from intensive support in residential special school settings. This included:

- Very clear and well understood policies and procedures
- A clear overall vision and mission that is understood by everyone
- Having good background information on each child/adolescent being supported
- Sufficient and well qualified staff
- Staff that are viewed as trustworthy by children
- Specific key staff assigned to each child – as mentors, case managers etc
- Choice in key staff
- Constant and uninterrupted supervision of all children
- Teaching about sexuality, personal safety and anti-bullying on an ongoing basis
- A clear code of conduct for both children and staff
- Provision of ongoing training opportunities
- Ongoing supervision for staff and frequent opportunities to meet and reflect
- Small residential environments, single bedrooms, sufficient living space, opportunity for privacy
- Support of cultural and spiritual needs
- Appropriate behaviour support including functional behaviour plans where required
- Consistency in implementing behaviour support plans between all staff (residence and school)
- Sufficient professional oversight
- Involvement in the community
- Frequent contact between the child and his/her family
- Very clear and frequent communication between key staff and family
- Support for families when children return home (either permanently or on holidays)
- Support for children/adolescents when they transition to work or alternative living arrangements
- Inter-agency and government department cooperation

The other important point that needs to be considered, is the rate of abuse that occurs in non-residential settings such as schools, and the community generally. In particular, Sullivan and Knutson (2000) in the United States found that abuse in schools occurs in multiple forms (physical, emotional and sexual) and can involve both adults known to the victims and peers. Likewise a whole population study by

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