

SUBMISSION TO THE NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE.

Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention, Child Empowerment, and Early Disclosure Pathways

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INTRODUCTION

This submission supports the intent and objectives of the Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026, particularly its emphasis on:

- child wellbeing and safety
- earlier intervention
- prevention of harm
- strengthening child-centred responses
- family accountability
- and improving long-term outcomes for vulnerable children

This submission specifically addresses the growing need for reform in child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention and disclosure systems.

It is submitted that current school-based child sexual abuse prevention approaches, while well-intentioned, are no longer sufficient to address the realities of modern abuse patterns, particularly where abuse is:

- intra-familial
- sibling-based
- peer-instigated
- digitally facilitated
- or reinforced through grooming and coercive control

The proposed legislative reforms present an important opportunity to explore child-centred safeguarding mechanisms that empower children to safely activate protective responses before abuse becomes entrenched.

THE REALITY OF MODERN CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Research consistently demonstrates that most child sexual abuse is committed by someone known to the child.

This includes:

- parents and caregivers
- siblings and older children
- extended family members
- peers
- trusted family friends
- coaches and authority figures

Increasingly, abuse also occurs within peer groups and among children themselves, often influenced by exposure to pornography, online grooming cultures, and harmful sexual behaviours.

Many children do not disclose abuse due to:

- fear
- shame
- emotional attachment to the offender
- family pressure
- confusion created through grooming
- or distrust that adults will act protectively

These realities create significant limitations for traditional prevention approaches that rely heavily on children identifying a “trusted adult” and verbally disclosing abuse.

LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING PROTECTIVE BEHAVIOURS PROGRAMS

This submission acknowledges the important work undertaken by Protective Behaviours and school-based child safety education providers across Australia.

Such programs have increased general awareness around body safety and personal boundaries.

However, there remains limited evidence that these approaches have significantly reduced child sexual abuse incidence at a population level.

Further concerns include:

- reliance on trusted-adult disclosure assumptions despite evidence that many offenders are family members or known adults
- limited focus on sibling-on-sibling and peer-instigated harmful sexual behaviour
- insufficient mechanisms for overcoming grooming dynamics
- episodic classroom delivery models that may not create lasting behavioural impact
- limited technological safeguarding pathways for children
- and inadequate adaptation to modern digitally facilitated abuse environments

Importantly, many existing programs continue to place significant responsibility on the child to verbally disclose abuse despite overwhelming evidence regarding the psychological barriers created by grooming and trauma.

The issue is not whether existing programs are beneficial.

The issue is whether current systems adequately reflect the realities of how abuse actually occurs and why children often do not disclose.

THE NEED FOR CHILD-CENTRED SAFEGUARDING

The proposed legislative reforms create an opportunity to strengthen child-centred safeguarding approaches that empower children while supporting statutory child protection systems.

This submission proposes that future safeguarding models should:

- provide children with safe, low-friction pathways to activate protective responses
- reduce fear and shame associated with disclosure
- recognise that children may still love or trust the offender
- accommodate situations where caregivers may be unable or unwilling to protect the child
- increase certainty of detection
- and create stronger early intervention pathways for both harmed children and children displaying harmful sexual behaviours

THE GUARDIANS OF EARTH CHILD EMPOWERMENT MODEL

The Guardians of Earth (GOE) framework proposes a child-centred, culturally adaptable prevention model designed to empower children through:

- narrative-based engagement
- trusted mentoring relationships
- AI-supported emotional support systems
- positive behavioural reinforcement
- and child-activated safeguarding pathways

Within the framework, grooming behaviours are explained through age-appropriate storytelling mechanisms that separate the harmful behaviour from the emotional attachment children may feel toward the offender.

This approach seeks to:

- reduce shame
- reduce fear of “betraying” loved ones
- encourage early reporting
- and increase children’s confidence to seek help

Importantly, the framework does not replace statutory safeguarding systems.

Rather, it is designed to support:

- mandatory reporting obligations
- child protection responses
- early intervention systems
- and trauma-informed professional oversight

CHILD-ACTIVATED, ADULT-ASSISTED REPORTING

One of the major weaknesses in current prevention systems is the absence of child-accessible reporting pathways that function safely in situations involving:

- family abuse
- sibling abuse
- peer abuse
- or coercive household environments

The proposed child-activated reporting mechanisms are designed to:

- allow children to safely initiate concern reporting
- create contemporaneous safeguarding records
- connect children to external adult support
- and increase the likelihood of early intervention

These pathways should always operate within professionally supervised child protection frameworks and include:

- trauma-informed responses
- privacy protections
- triage systems
- and mandatory safeguarding oversight

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY INTERVENTION

The long-term impacts of child sexual abuse are profound and include:

- suicide risk
- mental illness
- substance abuse
- homelessness
- educational disengagement
- family violence
- youth offending
- and intergenerational trauma

Early intervention and earlier disclosure pathways can significantly reduce long-term harm.

This is particularly important given increasing evidence that many young people who display harmful sexual behaviours can achieve dramatically reduced reoffending rates when identified and treated early.

Accordingly, prevention systems must focus not only on punishment after abuse occurs but on:

- earlier detection
- behavioural intervention
- child empowerment
- and community-wide safeguarding cultures

RECOMMENDATIONS

This submission recommends that the Northern Territory Government:

1. Recognise the limitations of disclosure-only child sexual abuse prevention frameworks.
2. Support independent evaluation of innovative child-centred safeguarding and disclosure models.
3. Invest in early intervention approaches addressing:
 - sibling abuse
 - peer abuse
 - digitally facilitated grooming
 - and harmful sexual behaviours among children and young people.
4. Explore child-activated, adult-assisted safeguarding mechanisms capable of operating safely where abuse occurs within family or peer environments.
5. Ensure all safeguarding innovations operate within trauma-informed and professionally supervised child protection systems.
6. Support culturally adaptable safeguarding frameworks capable of integrating Aboriginal community leadership and culturally safe child engagement approaches.
7. Expand child wellbeing responses beyond classroom awareness education toward integrated prevention ecosystems involving:
 - trusted mentoring
 - emotional support
 - technology-assisted safeguarding
 - and long-term child empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026 presents an opportunity to strengthen child protection systems by recognising the realities of modern child sexual abuse and the barriers many children face in seeking help.

While existing Protective Behaviours programs have contributed positively to awareness, further innovation is required to address:

- intra-familial abuse
- sibling and peer offending
- grooming dynamics
- digital exploitation
- and low disclosure rates.

Children require systems that do more than teach awareness.

They require:

- trusted relationships
- safe disclosure pathways
- emotionally accessible safeguarding mechanisms
- and environments where seeking help feels safe, empowering, and achievable.

The Northern Territory has an opportunity to lead nationally in supporting child-centred safeguarding innovation and earlier intervention responses that better reflect the realities faced by vulnerable children today.

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