

Child to Child abuse the latest Commission case study

Francis Sullivan 19 October 2016

Later this week the Royal Commission will start its 45th public hearing which will inquire into the response to children with problematic or harmful sexual behaviours in schools.

The hearing will investigate 10 different institutions including seven schools, two government agencies and the Association of Independent Schools NSW.

The focus will initially be on The King's School, Parramatta, Trinity Grammar School, Summer Hill and Shalom Christian College in Queensland. Three public primary schools in NSW will also be examined.

Importantly the systems and policies within the Department of Education NSW, Association of Independent Schools NSW and the Department of Family and Community Services NSW will also be examined.

While the Royal Commission has advised that St Ignatius' College, Riverview is not being investigated for any abuse at the school, it will be looking into the way the school responded to a student who is alleged to have been sexually abused at another school.

Child to child abuse is an issue and while sexual development and exploration is a normal part of healthy adolescence it can go badly wrong with some young people engaging in sexual behaviour that is not within the 'normal' bounds of development.

This can often take different forms but ultimately has the potential to be extremely harmful. The point at which 'normal' sexual behaviour becomes abusive cannot always be decided based on the behaviour alone.

As with most forms of abuse, sexual or otherwise, the three factors of equality, consent and coercion, and to what extent they are present in the relationship between the young people involved in the sexual interaction, are important.

The rate of sexual abuse of young people by young people has been difficult to determine but some studies suggest that these types of offences could account for up to half of offences against children and around a third of rapes of adolescent girls and adult women.

This area of abuse, while not as prominent or discussed to the same extent as other forms of child sexual abuse, is significant and needs to be examined.

And the extent to which it takes place in schools, the effectiveness of policies to guard against it and an understanding of its impacts all needs to be looked at with the same forensic intensity the Commission has brought to its other case studies.