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Australian Parents, Child Sexuality, and Boundary Setting: Informing Preventative Approaches to Child Sexual Abuse

Thesis submitted by
Georgia Charlene Babatsikos, BA *Tulane University*, MPH, *Tulane University School
of Public Health and Tropical Medicine*

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James Cook University

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STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

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Georgia Babatsikos

Date

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Georgia Babatsikos

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years, child sexual abuse has been recognized as a significant social problem in both Australia and other countries worldwide. In response to this increased concern, many preventive initiatives have been developed. Prevention programs in Australia have mainly focused on children in school settings and their teachers, with few programs targeting parents and other caregivers. Parents' role in prevention is critical as they are the primary protectors of children. However, there has been little Australian research to explore the issues and challenges faced by parents/caregivers as they manage the risk of child sexual abuse. The aim of this research is to identify the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and practices of parents and primary caregivers in Australia that influence their management of this risk. This research also explores the ways in which parents access support, information and education on issues related to child sexuality and child sexual abuse.

For this research, qualitative interviews with Australian parents of children aged 5-15 years were conducted using the Grounded Theory approach developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), with each stage of sampling being analysed and used to inform subsequent stages of sampling and interviewing. The outcome of this research was the development of a theory which explains the ways in which parents manage the risk of sexual abuse to their children. The central theme of this theory is balance, reflecting the challenge faced by parents in balancing social relationships when the sexual boundaries of their children were crossed by another person. The theme is also reflected in the challenge parents face when providing their children with sufficient information to protect the children without frightening them.

Findings from the research inform a number of recommendations for policy and practice aimed at preventing child sexual abuse. The development of alternatives to formal reporting when child sexual abuse is suspected was identified as important by parents in this study. Recommendations are made for programs which develop parental skills and knowledge in areas such as: the subtleness of grooming behaviours; the use of language that empowers children without scaring them; how to initiate child sexual abuse prevention discussions with their children; developing general communication skills; and developing strategies beyond relying on children to disclose. (368 words)

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