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## Conference Review

# NSW DICE forums and training 2023

24th and 25th August 2023

**Reviewed by: Yvonne Hughes**

Research Associate, University of Sydney  
yvonne.hughes@sydney.edu.au

The Australian Disrupting Child Sexual Exploitation (DICE) project aims to address the need for further development of multiagency prevention and disruption approaches to child sexual exploitation (CSE) to better safeguard children in residential out-of-home-care settings. The tri-state project is led by Professor Cathy Humphreys and Dr Gemma McKibbin and takes place across sites in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Queensland. The NSW chapter is led by Chief Investigator Professor Susan Heward-Belle and is supported by NSW partner agencies – including MacKillop Family Services, Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), NSW Police, The University of Sydney, and the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE).

The NSW chapter of the DICE Project held two key events in 2023: a transdisciplinary forum and a two-day training event. The forum, held in July, featured keynote speakers, including Justice Nell Skinner, President of the Children’s Court of NSW and Dr Robyn Miller, CEO of Mackillop Family Services, and members of the NSW DICE team. The event was attended by over 115 delegates from across police, statutory child protection, and residential care providers.

Mary Jo McVeigh presented DICE’s scoping review on disruptive policing, which had two main lines of enquiry: *What practices are utilised under the auspice of disruptive policing?* and *How effective are disruptive police tactics in preventing, or protecting children and young people from, child sexual exploitation?* Included in the review was an exploration of disruptive strategies, including harbouring



notices, loitering letters, family violence or personal safety orders (IVOs), police presence, visiting premises, and pursuing persons of interest for other crimes.

Jude Ekerick of MacKillop Family Services and Detective Senior Sergeant Adam Wilson of NSW police then presented on opportunities for strengthening multiagency responses to CSE, including an evaluation of the joint protocol, which was originally set up to reduce the contact of young people in residential out of home care with the criminal justice system. They discussed the need for joint accountability to reduce silos and enhance information sharing, to identify existing and emerging issues in CSE and achieve their common aims of protecting children and young people.

Professor Susan Heward-Belle presented some preliminary findings from interviews with 31 police officers, and child protection and residential care workers. Her analysis of practitioners' accounts of children and young people showed that young people who were vulnerable to CSE were often perceived in negative terms, ranging from the more passive, such as vulnerable and victimised, through to being overtly stigmatised, criminalised, and pathologised. The importance of using accurate language was discussed, noting the need to challenge terms such as 'absconder', which actively blames a young person for running away, rather than there being professional curiosity about why they felt they needed to leave.

The final presentation for the day was delivered jointly by Detective Superintendent Darren Newman and NSW Police Force's Detective Senior Sergeant Adam Wilson, who discussed the UK model of responding to and disrupting CSE. They examined the Child Abduction Warning Notice (CAWN) which, in 2021, was found to be the most utilised disruption method by frontline police officers, and discussed the potential merits of similar approaches in Australia.

Following this event, in August 2023 a two-day training event was facilitated by Dr Gemma McKibbin and Megan Port, once again bringing together key multiagency stakeholders. This event was attended by more than 40 professionals from across the three agencies (NSW Police, the Department of Communities and Justice, and MacKillop Family Services).

The training adapted the Power to Kids training developed by MacKillop Family Services in partnership with the University of Melbourne to strengthen prevention of and responses to CSE, harmful sexual behaviours, and dating violence for young people in residential care. As collaboration and developing networks were identified as key ingredients for successful multiagency working, the program structure included break-out sessions. The attendees were pre-grouped, to ensure that each table had representation from across the different agencies.



Each table was assigned a fictitious case study, based on the backgrounds and experiences of many young people in residential placements across NSW. During the course of the training, the groups applied the new learnings to their case study, in order to replicate the experience of multiagency collaboration.

As a research assistant on the DICE project, I was able to observe several of the groups as they participated in the activities. It was interesting to see the differences in approaches, based on both their roles and their professional codes of conduct, ethics, and approaches. While many practitioners' approaches were vastly different, it was heartening to see their common passion for improving the experiences of young people in residential care, and for doing everything in their respective powers to disrupt sexual exploitation and other harmful practices that compromise the safety of children and young people.

The final component of the symposium included an idea generating session, wherein the following two questions were posed: 'The best thing MY agency could do to enhance our response is...' and 'The best thing YOUR agency could do to enhance our response is...'. This generated over 50 responses, which broadly fit into the themes of: information sharing, collaboration, training, resources, legal matters, and roles and responsibilities. The participants then voted on which ideas were the most important. This provided significant data for the research team, who have begun prioritising areas for further development.

In 2024, the national DICE symposium will be held in NSW.

### **About the reviewer**

Yvonne Hughes is a Research Associate at the University of Sydney and a PhD candidate within the University of Sydney's School of Education and Social Work.

