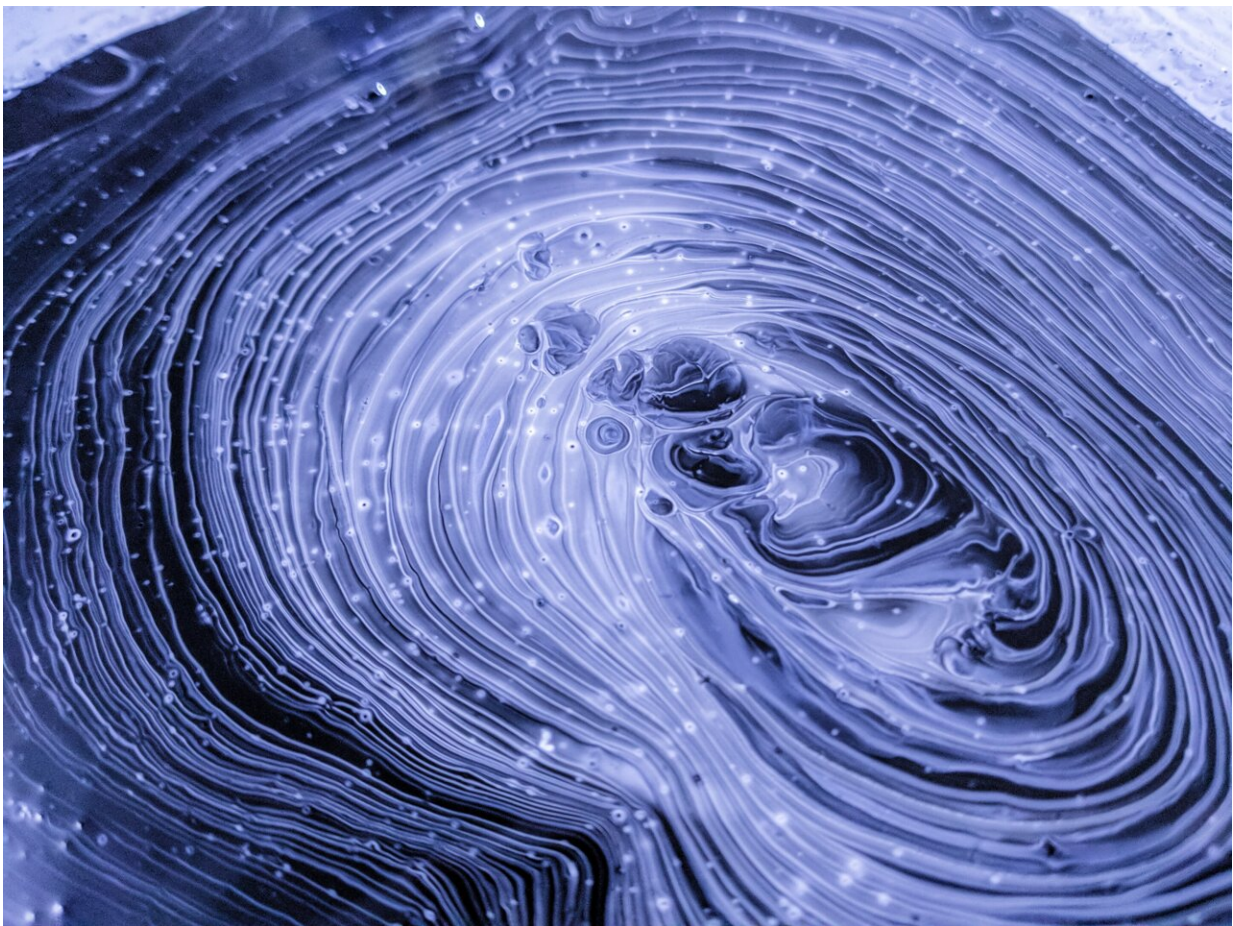


Researchers started a service for people worried about their sexual thoughts about children: Here's what they found

October 3 2023, by Gemma McKibbin and Jacqueline Kuruppu



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In its 2017 [final report](#), the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse identified that there was no large-scale national early intervention service in Australia for people worried about their sexual thoughts or behaviors in relation to children. Among the Commission's final recommendations was the implementation of such a service to help stop people from committing such abuse.

In September 2022, [Stop it Now! Australia](#) was launched, an anonymous service for people worried about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts and behaviors in relation to children. The aim of the service is to provide help to callers in order to keep children safe from [abuse](#).

The program, operated by Jesuit Social Services' The Men's Project, includes a phonenumber and live chat service, as well as a website containing self-help resources. It is modeled on Stop it Now! services that have worked effectively overseas for decades, including in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

[Research demonstrates](#) there can be a 10-year gap between someone first realizing they have sexual thoughts about children, and first coming to the attention of police. Stop it Now! aims to intervene during that gap.

The need for a perpetration prevention service

The need for an evidence-based service such as this is clear. [Research shows](#) 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 5 boys in Australia are victims of [child sexual abuse](#). Over the 2021–22 financial year, the Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation [reported](#) it received more than 36,000 reports of child [sexual exploitation](#), with each report containing images and videos of children being sexually abused or exploited.

We know that working with potential perpetrators is challenging and confronting work. But real and lasting progress in decreasing child

sexual abuse will only occur when we work with (potential) perpetrators to prevent harm. Stop it Now! is built on the assumption that as a community, we cannot simply shun (potential) perpetrators and hope they go away, or leave them in the hands of police. We need to work with these individuals to prevent child sexual abuse occurring in the first place.

Collaborating with victim-survivor groups such as Bravehearts is a key part of the Stop it Now! Australia operation. Our [research with victim-survivors](#) shows they are supportive of Stop it Now! Australia as long as certain conditions are met, such as loud public health messaging about child sexual abuse being illegal and wrong. They felt that if the service saves just one child from sexual abuse, it is worthwhile.

Stop it Now! Australia's phonenumber is staffed by experienced practitioners who engage callers to explore their concerns, address any immediate child protection considerations, provide information and discuss next steps. The aim is that at the end of every call, an individual leaves with actions they can take, such as implementing child protection measures, undertaking psychoeducation, or accessing self-help modules.

We have built relationships with Google, Apple, the E-safety Commission, Helplinks and Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation to develop innovative approaches to reaching potential offenders, such as warnings with contact details for Stop it Now! Australia when a user searches for child sexual abuse material online.

The service also takes referrals from Victoria Police, Queensland Police and Western Australia Police. A Queensland Police officer who has actively referred to the service describes having the service as a referral option for (potential) perpetrators as "an enormous relief," as the time that police become involved presents a high risk of perpetrators taking their own lives.

While Stop it Now! Australia is new, the model isn't. Stop it Now! UK and Ireland, which collaborated closely with the Australian team ahead of the local service, has operated for more than 20 years. Close to half the calls the UK and Ireland service receives (47%) are from adults worried about their own thoughts and behaviors in relation to children.

Over its first year, Stop it Now! Australia has received more than 200 calls and live chats and its website has been accessed by over 12,000 people. The service was established with funding by a Westpac Safer Children, Safer Communities grant. The relatively small amount of funding for such a large endeavor, and the fact it has not received any government funding to date, means its hours are very limited. Currently, Stop it Now! Australia's phonenumber is only open for 14 hours a week between Mondays and Thursdays.

Early intervention is key

Close to 70% of adult callers to the Australian service, who have self-identified concerns about their own sexual thoughts or behaviors, are unknown to police. This indicates the service is reaching people before they come to the attention of authorities, and in this way is providing early intervention.

People often ask us why someone would call the service—during our first year of operation, we've heard from callers who feel like they have nowhere else to go. They talk about struggling with problem thoughts or behaviors for years and wanting to change, but not knowing how. Simply, Stop it Now! Australia offers an anonymous space for individuals to manage and change their thoughts or behaviors, and this helps prevent child sexual abuse.

Stop it Now! Australia is currently being evaluated by the University of Melbourne, and the preliminary findings indicate the service is having its

intended effect of reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors for people concerned about their own thoughts and behaviors.

Additionally, the service is supporting friends and family and potential perpetrators to keep children safe. One family member said, "[The clinicians being] non-judgmental and trauma-informed makes me feel safer to be able to talk about difficult subjects and at the same time know that they're not negotiating on children's safety."

The service's limited opening hours has been identified as a barrier for some people being able to access the program. Jesuit Social Services has been exploring a Stop it Now! Australia service since publishing a scoping study in 2019. The [National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse](#), handed down in September 2021, recommended an offender prevention service for adults who have sexual thoughts about children or young people and look forward to this type of work being federally funded in the near future.

Fundamentally, Stop it Now! Australia is focused on putting the responsibility for child sexual abuse prevention on adults and (potential) perpetrators. By supporting individuals who are concerned about themselves or another adult to seek guidance to make behavior changes and build an offense-free life, we can keep children safer from [child](#) sexual abuse.

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