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# TRAUMA INFORMED CARE IN SPORT TWO-PART WORKSHOP SERIES REPORT

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## Introduction

In December 2023, Victoria University researchers (Drs Mary Woessner & Aurelie Pankowiak) developed and delivered an educational workshop to the Vicsport Child Safeguarding Community of Practice that aimed to increase the capabilities of sport managers and volunteers to recognise and respond to child abuse in sport. The evaluation of this workshop (Woessner et al. 2023) identified a significant gap in sport staff and volunteers' capabilities to respond to disclosures of child abuse in a trauma-informed manner. There was little knowledge of what trauma-informed care is and how to apply it when responding to disclosures.

As a result, Vicsport invited VU researchers to develop and deliver a two-part workshop series on Trauma Informed Care focusing on interpersonal and organisational responses to disclosures of child abuse in sport. This workshop series was led by Prof Alex Parker, Professor of Psychology and member of the Safety and Wellbeing research team. Drs Mary Woessner and Aurelie Pankowiak, child abuse prevention in sport experts, supported the development and delivery of the two-part workshop series.

## Workshop format and Attendance

Due to the intent to have a relatively small group of attendees (under 50), the workshops were advertised primarily for Child Safeguarding Officers (CSOs) and Member Protection and Information Officers (MPIOs) as well as staff who look after Child Safeguarding and Member Protection from Victorian State Sport Associations (SSAs), Regional Sport Assemblies (RSAs) and State Sport & Recreation Bodies (SSRBs). The two hour workshops took place on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September and on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 2024, with attendees being asked to confirm attendance to both and ideally have at least one other staff from their organisation in attendance as well.

**Workshop one focused on individual knowledge and skills to interpersonally respond to child abuse disclosure following trauma-informed principles. The learning outcomes were to:**

- Gain a foundational understanding of trauma-informed practice.
- Understand the relevance and application of trauma-informed principles in sports.
- Develop and apply skills to provide a trauma-informed response to disclosures of abuse.

**Workshop two focused on the application of trauma-informed principles to the organisational response to a disclosure of child abuse. The learning outcomes were to:**

- Identify gaps in the implementation of trauma-informed principles within your organisation.
- Apply trauma-informed care principles to your sporting organisation.
- Prepare to respond effectively to resistance to change.

The workshops were attended by 31 (workshop one) and 30 (workshop two) participants. Overall, these individuals represented 15 SSAs, two NSOs, one RSA: two Club/ leagues (and three from other organisations).

Each workshop rigorous teaching and learning methods including didactic presentation of conceptual and theoretical information followed by practical exercises based on scenario and case-studies.

## Evaluation of workshops

Each individual workshop was evaluated through a post survey which asked quantitative and qualitative questions to identify:

- 1/ the usefulness of the workshop's theoretical and practical content,
- 2/ recommendations and suggestions for improvements including what content participants would like to learn about in the future, and
- 3/ whether participants would recommend the workshop series to others.

A summary of the findings is provided below.

The workshop one survey was completed by 11 people (35% response rate) and workshop two survey was completed by 18 people (60% response rate). The difference in response rate is likely explained by the workshop one survey only being delivered in a post-workshop email whereas the workshop two survey was presented as a QR code at the end of the session as well as in a post-workshop email.

### Valuable aspects of the workshops

#### 1. Practical applications of the theoretical principles of trauma-informed care

Following both workshops, all survey respondents agreed that they benefited both from the theoretical content and from the practical application.

For workshop 1, all respondents (n=11) agreed that the theoretical content provided was sufficient to help them understand what a trauma-informed approach is. Respondents also thought the practical activities were useful for them to think about how to apply the theoretical content (n=10 fully agreed and 1 somewhat agreed).

Several individuals commented on how much they valued the role play activity in particular as it helped them learn and practice how to respond to an individual disclosing their experience of abuse in sport:

*"I thought the role playing where we dissected the role play and reworded it to use a trauma-informed approach was useful to think about the language that is good to use in that situation. Although it was a specific example, I think the initial responses would be similar for each case and allowed me to think about how to open up the conversation to make the disclosure a safe space/conversation." (Workshop one participant).*

Similarly, all respondents in workshop two agreed that the theoretical content provided in this workshop helped them understand what it means to apply a trauma-informed approach within their organisation (club, SSA, NSO, etc.) (17 fully agreed and 1 somewhat agreed). They also agreed that the practical activities were useful for them to think about how to improve policies and practices in their organisation so they follow trauma-informed principles (16 agreed and 1 somewhat agreed). One of the participants specifically noted that they appreciated having a “*worksheet [to] take back to my team to do together*”.

Further analysis of the qualitative data provided by respondents identified the following benefits from the workshop.

## 2. Collaboration, peer-support, and knowledge exchange

In both workshops, attendees strongly valued the opportunity to exchange, learn and feel a sense of connection and collaboration with their colleagues as well as with individuals from other sport organisations. For example, in reflecting on the emotional and intellectual challenge associated with the role of responding to abusive behaviours, an individual suggested that this workshop provided a space for sharing and connection: “*Hearing other sporting groups struggles and what has worked for them. Knowing we are not alone.*” (Workshop two participant). This reinforces the need for continued peer-support which the community of practice can provide, particularly for those in roles where people are more likely to be in direct contact with participants disclosing violent experiences.

## 3. Reassurance and confidence that one can ‘be human and empathetic’ during procedures

Several individuals shared how the first workshop had reassured and reminded them of their responsibility to provide empathetic, human-centred response to children and families disclosing their experience of abuse in sport. Of note, an attendee shared that this workshop made them realise that they could provide empathy when children/a parent shared poor/abusive experiences. Based on the participant’s comment, this empathetic approach was not necessarily a message that had come across in prior training:

*“I think the permission to empathise with the victim and family. In other MPIO training I have done it has been encouraged that it remains factual, I like that we can show empathy at disclosure even if it become more process driven throughout investigation.”* (Workshop 2 participant).

## 4. The conceptual framework for the application of the trauma-informed principles to an organisation (workshop two) was said to be incredibly useful, and several individuals described how stimulating workshop two was. One individual shared that the workshop was:

*“Thought provoking on how the organisation can do better on both providing our clubs with support and also how we can support”* (workshop two participant)

Another shared it helped “*Thinking about all of the different stakeholders involved. Also thinking about informal ways of supporting those involved.*” (Workshop two participant).

## Education/content attendees would like in the future

### Practical and easy to access resources.

- Access to practical resources to translate written procedures in writing, such as scripts/ guides for people answering the phones to parents who call to report traumatic events that their child experienced.
- List of local support services (e.g. potentially local specialist services that support children victim of crimes/violence, mental health support lines, police station information, legal services etc.) to provide to individuals who have made disclosures/ reports/ complaints.

### Further training on the application of trauma-informed principles for diverse roles and departments

- How to apply trauma-informed care principles to specific parts of the sporting ecosystem (i.e tribunal) and different groups (i.e. how to communicate with parents victims of trauma).
- How to apply trauma-informed concepts within the specific context of their sport organisation
- How to support volunteers who are in roles where the risks of vicarious trauma are higher.
- Case studies/ presentation of research on how sport organisations have implemented trauma-informed principles in their organisations [note: such evidence does not exist so far and would need to be drawn from other sectors or the evidence should be developed through a research project].

### Developing organisational culture for child safety

- How to manage resistance 'from reluctant board'.
- Board/committee member training around child safety.
- How to create an overall culture of safety in clubs (e.g. a culture that deters potential perpetrators from joining) and how to make families feel confident that childrens' wellbeing is a key priority.
- Reinforcement to people in managerial positions in sports organisations that they have a responsibility to lead change to create safer organisations and educate clubs on how to enact this.

### Anti-bullying initiatives

- One participant requested information on how to conduct an anti-bullying program in sport.

## Facilitation

People had opportunity to provide additional feedback, and several shared their positive experience of the facilitation "*It was a great workshop! I thought the presenters/academics were very relatable and really dissected disclosures and how to respond.*"

## Recommendation of the workshop series

All 18 survey participants after workshop two agreed that they would recommend this two-part workshop series to others working or volunteering in sport.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The two-part workshop series on trauma-informed care was appreciated by the participants who benefited from both the conceptual tools provided and the practical exercises facilitated during the two workshops. Participants were clearly new to the fundamental concepts of trauma-informed care, how to provide a trauma-informed response to a child disclosing abuse and how to apply trauma-informed principles within their organisations. Participants particularly benefited from rehearsal exercises where they practiced real-world scenario responses and engaged in discussions with colleagues from their own organisations and from other sports.

**We strongly recommend the Child Safe Sport Community of Practice in Victoria to continue.** Based on the evidence from this evaluation, creating a recurrent time and space where staff can gather and discuss specific scenarios or challenges they are experiencing in their organisation, facilitated by a professional in trauma-/ healing-informed care response to violence (e.g. social worker/ psychologist) seems critical.

From the information provided in this evaluation and from our observations as researchers during the delivery of this workshop series, it is clear that **there is a need for continued initiatives, development of resources, and further implementation support for applying trauma informed care principles in sport.** The request for additional training to support for change management and respond to cultural resistance suggests that the sporting sector is at the beginning of its journey in creating a culture of child safety. The evaluation of this workshop indicates that, currently, the sport sector is not responding to disclosures of abuse in sport in a trauma informed manner. This complements our previous study (Woessner, Pankowiak et al., 2023). **We have developed a working check list which provides suggestions for the implementation of trauma-informed care principles in sport clubs and other organisations** (see Pankowiak et al., 2024 in references).

We recommend a continued focus on promoting the message that everyone has a responsibility to respond to a child/ young person/ parent, when they are sharing concerns about abusive behaviours in sport. While many volunteers may not have a formal investigative role in relation to abuse in sport, all individuals should be confident and have the skills to be able to **listen, believe and support the victims, children and families disclosing experiences of abuse in sport.**

When someone receives a disclosure of a particular abusive behaviour, keeping note of what is said is important as it constitutes evidence that is of potential importance for investigations (internally, by the police, or child protection authorities). However, individuals who are not in a role to investigate should not be searching for additional evidence in an effort to 'look for the truth'. Investigations should be left to the people trained to lead them. Additionally, people in investigative positions should, as best as possible, **listen, believe, and support the victim,** and consider how to **connect the victim/ people impacted to**

**people/ services that can give them a space to be listened to, believed and supported, if they choose to do so.**

Believing, listening, supporting – and giving control and choice - is of the utmost importance for the healing, justice and recovery of the victim/ survivor and other people impacted.

## References

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