

Executive Brief

The National Childhood Protection Initiative — A National School-Centred Prevention Platform

EMPOWERING STUDENTS · SUPPORTING EDUCATORS · STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

The Child Protection Foundation is a grassroots charity, founded in 2007 and endorsed as a Deductible Gift Recipient. We believe every child has the right to feel safe. Our directors and staff are volunteers; we are independent and non-partisan, and while we welcome support from across the community, no sponsor or political party controls our work.

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Executive Summary

Childhood maltreatment is not only a personal tragedy; it is a predictable upstream driver of downstream societal harm — including mental illness, suicide risk, justice-system involvement, homelessness, and intergenerational disadvantage. Schools are uniquely positioned to interrupt this trajectory.

The National Childhood Protection Initiative is a national, age-appropriate, school-based engagement platform that combines education, creative expression, and community advocacy to strengthen early awareness, normalise help-seeking, and reinforce schools as safe, informed environments for children and young people.

It is designed to complement existing national frameworks by providing a practical, scalable, grassroots mechanism that operates where children already are, and where early signals are most likely to be seen.

Why This Matters: The Evidence

Childhood maltreatment is widespread

- National prevalence research (the Australian Child Maltreatment Study) shows around **62% of Australian adults** experienced at least one form of maltreatment in childhood — physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, or exposure to domestic violence.
- Substantiated cases represent only a fraction of true prevalence; most abuse is never formally reported. In 2023–24, **42,100 children** were the subjects of substantiated maltreatment (about 1 in 137 children).

The downstream impacts are severe and measurable

Childhood maltreatment is strongly associated with poorer mental health, substance dependence, homelessness, youth-justice and adult incarceration, and intergenerational harm. Recent Australian research (JAMA Psychiatry, 2024) estimates that around **41% of suicide attempts** can be causally attributed to childhood maltreatment. Bad childhoods do not stay contained — they compound across systems.

Schools are the most effective early-warning system we have

- In 2023–24, **school personnel were the single largest source of child protection notifications — 28%**, ahead of police (21%) and health personnel (11%).
- Educators are often the **first trusted adults** to notice changes in behaviour, attendance, mood, or disclosure. This makes schools the highest-leverage prevention environment in the country.

Why This Initiative Works

The Initiative is deliberately designed to:

- Shift from silence to safe dialogue.
- Build protective knowledge without fear-based messaging.
- Respect developmental maturity and emotional safety.
- Empower student voice while reinforcing adult responsibility.
- Strengthen — not burden — schools' existing safeguarding roles.

Creative expression is used not as an end in itself, but as a low-threat, age-appropriate entry point into awareness, values, and help-seeking pathways.

How the Initiative Is Structured

Age-appropriate thematic scaffolding

Themes are aligned to developmental stages, not exposure to explicit content:

- **Kindergarten–Year 4:** Safety and Support.
- **Years 5–8:** Voice, Boundaries, and Speaking Up.
- **Years 9–12:** Youth Voice, Agency, and Cultural Change.

All statistics, policy context, and adult framing are for educators and government stakeholders only. Student-facing materials are carefully scaffolded and trauma-informed.

Clear, fair evaluation structure

Student submissions are assessed through clearly defined year-level categories. Alongside these, the Initiative offers self-selected entry doorways — including a First Nations doorway and an All Abilities (Accessibility) doorway — chosen by the educator and student together as the lens that best reflects the child's experience, never assigned by the Foundation. All doorways carry equal prize value.

Safeguarding and Risk Management

The Initiative is preventive and educational, not investigative.

- Teacher guidelines accompany all materials.
- Participation aligns with existing mandatory-reporting obligations.
- Clear protocols support the sensitive handling of disclosures.
- Schools retain full control over pastoral and reporting pathways, and hold their own students' information; the Foundation judges entries without receiving student identities.

Alignment with National Policy

The Initiative is complementary to *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*. Where national frameworks provide strategy, this Initiative provides visibility, engagement, cultural normalisation, and community-level reinforcement.

Strategic Value

- Low-cost, high-reach prevention.
- Strengthens educator confidence and school culture.
- Engages parents and communities through student voice.
- Invests in long-term harm reduction, not reactive crisis response.

Vision and Future Direction

The Initiative is conceived not as a one-off programme, but as the foundation for a recurring, trusted moment within the school year — a time when conversations about safety, voice, and support are deliberately opened, and when students are reminded that they are not alone.

Launched initially as a national pilot, it is designed to establish a shared annual touchpoint across schools that normalises safe dialogue, reinforces peer and adult support, and gives students confidence that when they speak, someone is listening. Over time it grows by amplifying student participation rather than institutional messaging — through evolving themes shaped by student insight, opportunities to share selected student work, and pathways for older students to contribute leadership and advocacy.

With appropriate evaluation and carefully aligned philanthropic and corporate partnerships, the long-term vision is a lightweight but enduring national platform that strengthens school culture year on year and embeds prevention, voice, and early action into the rhythm of the school calendar.

We look forward to working with schools, government representatives, and the wider community to bring this Initiative to life for every child. Thank you for your time, and for all the work you do for our children and communities.

Sincerely,



Kerry Fozzard

Director, The Child Protection Foundation
0414 653 954 · kerry@cpf.org.au

The Child Protection Foundation · Suite 14, Level 2, 51–53 Spring Street, Bondi Junction NSW 2022
0421 822 576 · info@cpf.org.au · schools@cpf.org.au · www.cpf.org.au