Supervision in early childhood education services:

Recognising and responding to the barriers

Dr Marg Rogers
Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education (UNE)
Postdoctoral Fellow (Manna Institute)
LinkedIn – *Marg Rogers* marg.rogers@une.edu.au
Facebook/Insta – *Children's Family Resilience Programs*

une University of New England

manna INSTITUTE
Mental health research and training for regional Australia

Support services

If this presentation raises any issues for you, please contact one of the services below:

- 1800 Respect, National counselling helpline: 1800 737 732
- Bravehearts, counselling and support for survivors of child sexual abuse: 1800 272 831
- Child Wise, counselling provider: 1800 991 099
- Lifeline, 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention: 13 11 14
- Care Leavers Australia Network: 1800 008 774
- PartnerSPEAK, peer support for non-offending partners: (03) 9018 7872

Outline

A) Recognising and responding to supervision Barriers

1. educator leave and a lack of casual educators
2. educator attrition, burnout and busyness
3. times of stress
4. loopholes such as “under the roof” ratios
5. profit driven decisions
6. individual times between children and educators
7. quiet and secluded spaces for children

Activity

8. the nature of grooming

Scenario 1 and 2

Activity

B) What helps you to provide effective supervision?

A quick background to supervision

There are national standards, laws and regulations about ratios applicable to ECEC services in all states and territories, with some very minor variations.

The ratios between educators and children depend on the type of service and the age of the children.

For example:

- Babies up to 24 months need one educator for every four children.
- For 24-36 months, this generally increases to one educator for every five children.
- Preschoolers (3-5 years) require one educator for up to 11 children.

Government regulations say children should not be alone with educators.

1. Educator leave and a lack of casual educators

- Educators taking leave means there are gaps in who is available and who knows the children, what they are likely to do (or not do), routines and relationships.
- A solid pool of casual educators who regularly work at the service can help fill these gaps.
- Tight labour market (currently only 4.2% unemployment), = fierce demand for reliable, capable and engaged casual educators.

2. Educator attrition, burnout and busyness

Due to attrition and increased demand, more than 20,000 educators needed in Australia.

Increased regulation means educators are unable to keep up with the paperwork, meaning they are taking the work home, causing burnout.

The COVID-19 pandemic meant educators were overwhelmed with changes and work.

Ongoing stresses with natural disasters, cost-of-living and the pandemic has increased societal stress levels and sometimes that plays out in children’s behaviours and staff stress.

New staff mean less supervision as they often need time and support to get to know the children, routines and families.

3. Times of stress

There are peak times of stress in services that can be a barrier for supervision.

These can include:

- Assessment and Rating - when there are mountains of paperwork and tasks to be completed.

- New regulations/practices/policies to be implemented or completed.

- Reporting deadlines.
- Excursions, experience days at school, and incursions
- Traumatic events e.g. natural disasters, incidents with staff, children or parents.

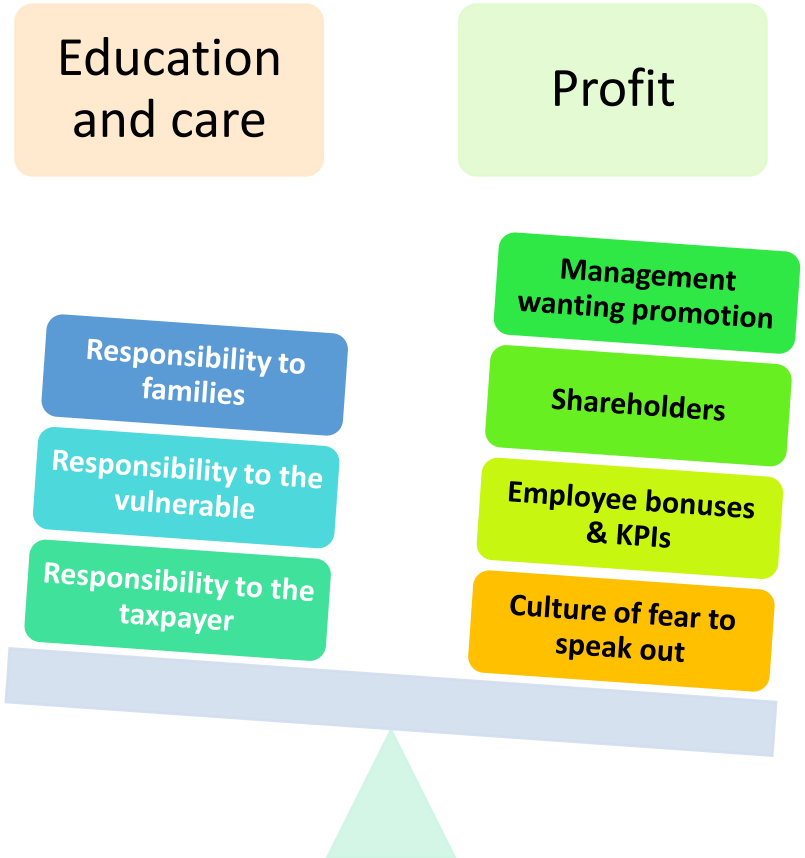
4. Loopholes

Loopholes include “under the roof” ratios.

This where every adult in the building (such as administration staff and cooks) are illegally counted as educators supervising children.

Using loopholes means that everyone loses and everyone is missing out – the children, parents, educators, and the taxpayers.

5. Profit driven decisions



6. Individual times between educators and children

These might include:

- Nappy changing and toileting
- Times when the child is unsettled, unwell or distressed
- Times a child is struggling to keep up or doing a different activity or in a different area than the other children.
- When the child is the last one to be collected.

7. Quiet and secluded spaces and indoor/outdoor choices

The rise of trauma informed approaches (which are positive), has meant more secluded places for children to hide.

These can include:

- tents and teepees
- cubby houses,
- draped areas
- hammocks
- dress up rooms
- heavy bushland or shrubbed areas
- times when the children can be either indoors or outdoors

More supervision is needed in these areas. Thought needs to be given to when these areas are available e.g. staffing.

Activity A: What do you know about sexual grooming of children?

e.g., who is involved, when does it happen, what are the behaviours, why is grooming used, risk and protective factors, why perpetrators do what they do?

Rate your knowledge in the chat e.g. 10 for you are a leading expert in this area, and 1 means you know nothing about it (which is why you are here today).

7. The nature of grooming

Grooming behaviours make it hard to supervise.

By their very nature, the behaviours make the children flock towards the perpetrator. The children are not distressed when they are being groomed, most likely.

The perpetrator will make the child/ren feel special and cherished. Perpetrators often look for children who are isolated, lonely and who feel ignored.

It is important to learn about grooming as it leads to childhood sexual abuse. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2025), child sexual abuse is associated with diagnoses of lifetime major depressive disorder, alcohol use disorder, generalised anxiety disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Many of our systems and practices mean children are afraid of speaking out (Rogers et al., 2022).

‘Risk factors:
- gender, with girls generally more than twice as likely
- sexuality, with an increased risk for children with diverse sexual orientations
- age and developmental stage, with the risk for sexual abuse increasing with age past experience of maltreatment
- family characteristics, such as unstable living arrangements, and a history of FDV
-parental characteristics, such as lower levels of parent education and employment, drug use, mental health
- experiences of disability’ (AIHW, 2025)

‘Protective factors:
- supportive and trustworthy adults
- supportive peers
- an adequate understanding of appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour
- the ability to assert themselves verbally or physically to reject the abuse - -
- strong community or cultural connections’ (AIWH, 2025)

‘The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), the first nationally representative study of child maltreatment rates, found that 28.5% of Australians experienced child sexual abuse. Girls experience double the rate of child sexual abuse (37.3% c.f. 18.8% of boys’ (Bravehearts, 2025).

Who is being groomed?

Perpetrators groom everyone: educators, parents, friends of the children, and the children themselves.

Perpetrators are obliging, charming, available, and usually very smart. They are not necessarily either quiet or outgoing.

When does it happen?

Perpetrators groom everyone **before, during and after** any sexual activity.

Grooming continues so that they are not suspected.

It also helps the child to keep the secret as they are still being made to feel special, even when sexual activity starts or stops.

What are the behaviours?

There are a range of behaviours to look for.

Each behaviour on its own does not mean grooming, but **clusters of behaviours** mean you need to look deeper.

- Special attention and favours
- Expensive presents/presents normally given to lovers
- Unbelievable amounts of Support and emotional help from someone you hardly know

- Making people feel treasured and important
- Honing in on children who are normally overlooked
- Children flocking to a particular educator.
- Special jobs for children that they supervise.
- Too good to be true behaviour
- Parents who are also charmed by the educator.

Wedging behaviours

Perpetrators use wedging to put distance between the child and the person they are most likely to tell. e.g. their best friend, their sibling closest in age, an educator they trust, their parent.

They do this by making the child doubt that person's:

1. Reliability
2. Trustworthiness
3. Honesty
4. Sanity

Why is grooming used?

Grooming is used to prepare the way for child sexual assault.

Access: Perpetrators will start and stay in relationships that will give them access to children. They will start and stay in workplaces/sectors that give them access to children.

They normally groom many children at once, as they don't know which children they will comply.

Most perpetrators will groom (not abuse) hundreds of children in their lifetime.

Why do perpetrators do what they do?

Perpetrators are not mentally ill. They are people who break the law. Perpetrators are attracted to children. However, I might be attracted to wearing pearls, but if I steal pearls from a jewellery shop, I am breaking the law.

The Australian Criminal Code Act 1995 includes ‘engaging in sexual intercourse or sexual activity with a child, grooming or procuring a child’ (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2025).

Perpetrators are highly UNLIKELY to have been sexually abused as children.

They are likely to have been in a household
that involved domestic and family violence.

While perpetrators are attracted to children, ultimately, they are attracted to power.

They are attracted to being able to get children to be obedient and get them to do things they want the child to do, as well as things the child doesn’t want to do. i.e. having power over the child.

For them, regardless of age, love is about obedience and sex.

It should be noted that being attracted to children is not a crime. Acting on these desires is a crime.

Disclosure and courses for children

Most children disclose first to another trusted child, e.g. a friend or sibling. So, we need to ensure children know what to do with that information. They need to know the difference between secrets and surprises.

There are now many effective prevention programs that educators can utilise to reduce risks and harm to children (Sims et al., 2024).

Apart from including age-appropriate discussions about appropriate forms of touch and consent, the program emphasises the need for children to tell a trusted adult (Rudolph et al., 2018).

The programs emphasise the need for parent-educator communication to ensure children feel safe sharing information and asking questions.

Scenario 1: You are an educator in a mobile preschool that works in a remote area using the undercover area of the local school. When you return to work after the school holidays, you notice Izzy (4) has a new necklace that seems expensive for a child. She is keen to show it to you. She says Ben, their new farmhand, gave it to her for minding his dog while he was away. She tells you she is his special helper and goes over to to his house feed the dog often. She also helps him with other small tasks on the farm, according to her mother. The mother tells you she is Ben's little shadow now, and she hardly sees her anymore. They are always off on the quad bike, feeding the poddy lambs and fixing fences. The mother thinks it is cute, and it gives her more time with the twin boys, who are now crawling. Izzy's dad reports that he is the best farm hand he has, quiet, reliable, and he can't do without him.

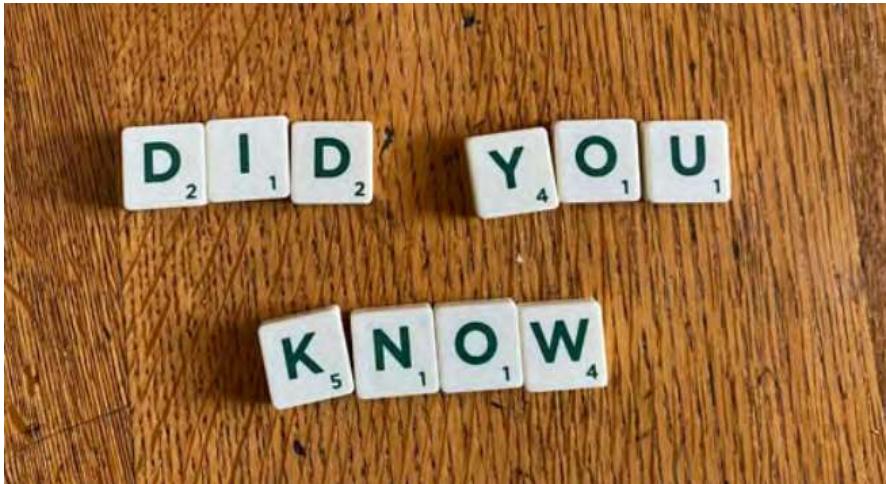
Scenario 2

Lydia started working at your service last year and has quickly moved from casual to full-time. She is beyond charming, and the parents, children and other staff all seem to adore her. She is smart and capable and has a band of children who follow her around all day. This loyal band is comprised of those who don't usually receive attention, but she shares little secrets with them and gets them to be her special helpers. These children are typically those who struggle to make friends. She often does small favours for these children. She says it is her way of building their confidence and making them feel special. It has been wonderful to see some of these children cherished. She is always bringing cakes, treats, cards full of praise, and expensive presents for the staff. It has certainly boosted the team's morale, which had been low.

Activity B: What do you know about sexual grooming of children?

e.g., who is involved, when does it happen, what are the behaviours, why is grooming used, risk and protective factors, why perpetrators do what they do?

Rate your knowledge in the chat e.g. 10 for you are a leading expert in this area, and 1 means you know nothing about it.



Overall conclusion

While some improvements have been made, much more needs to happen to fix the long-neglected issues that allow abuse in early learning settings.

Attracting more staff is a starting point. This may require equal pay to school teachers with the same qualifications, and an overall improvement in wages. The status of early childhood educators needs to be lifted within the community.

Effective child protection training is also needed for educators that covers grooming behaviours.

Parents need training on these behaviours and how to recognise signs their child might be being abused or targeted.

Children need to learn ways to protect themselves from harm. They need to know what to do if someone asks them to keep secrets (different to surprises), pressures them to do something they don't want to do, or uses threats.

NSW DET Workplace Wellbeing online resources

'Workplace Wellbeing' resources for early childhood professionals in response to the educator shortages and attrition cycles in the early childhood education and care sector, the NSW Department of Education's Early Childhood Outcomes team have co-created research-based resources.

These free, online 'Workplace Wellbeing' resources are for educators, directors and management in the sector. They were co-created with educators, directors, management, mental health service providers, peak bodies, and
researchers.

These include videos, webinars, case studies and other resources.

They can be used for professional development and a springboard for reflection and discussions during staff meetings.

References

Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2025). *Child sexual abuse.* *https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/access-and-accountability/our-commitments/child-safeguarding/child-sexual-abuse*

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022). *Family, domestic and sexual violence. Australian Government* *https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence*

Bravehearts. (2025). *Prevalence of child sexual abuse.* *https://bravehearts.org.au/research-lobbying/stats-facts/prevalance-of-child-sexual-abuse/*

Rudolph, J., Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J., Shanley, D. C., & Hawkins, R. (2018). Child sexual abuse prevention opportunities: Parenting, programs, and the reduction of risk. *Child maltreatment, 23(1), 96-106.*

Rogers, M., Sims, M. & Boyd, W. (2022). The bold and the backlash: When marginalised voices are heard in neoliberal land. International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 14(4), 459-473. https://doi.org/10.26822/iejee.2022.256

Sims, M., Lawson, M., & Rogers, M. (2024). Silencing Children About 'Forbidden' Topics: Discussing Prevention Education in Australian Early Childhood. International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 17(1), 25-34. https://www.iejee.com/index.php/IEJEE/article/view/2253/690

Support services

If this presentation has raised any issues for you, please contact one of the services below:

- 1800 Respect, National counselling helpline: 1800 737 732
- Bravehearts, counselling and support for survivors of child sexual abuse: 1800 272 831
- Child Wise, counselling provider: 1800 991 099
- Lifeline, 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention: 13 11 14
- Care Leavers Australia Network: 1800 008 774
- PartnerSPEAK, peer support for non-offending partners: (03) 9018 7872

B) **What's working for you** in providing effective supervision?

Please put this **in chat**.

Questions – please **raise your hand** (virtually) to ask questions

Thank you

manna INSTITUTE

Mental health research and training for regional Australia

mannainstitute.au

Regional University Network (RUN) partners:

une University of New England

CQUniversity Australia

Charles Sturt University

Southern Cross University

University of the Sunshine Coast

University of Southern Queensland

Federation University

Foundation partners:

Australian National University

Lifeline

EVERYMIND