

Closing The Net – Episode 2, What You Don't Know May Hurt You

Disclaimer:

Due to themes of child sexual abuse and exploitation, the content of this podcast may be distressing to some people. It is not suitable for children and listener discretion is advised. For advice and support, please visit accce.gov.au.

Jessica Gilmore:

Day-to-day walking down the street, you wouldn't point him out and think, "Oh, well that looks like someone who's a child sex offender" by any stretch he just blended in very well.

Natalie Walker:

The truth is approximately 50% of perpetrators have an intimate partner and children, and that's not something we imagine.

Michelle DeLaune:

Knowing that their neighbors may know what's going on or their family knows what's going on, their husband might have been in the news, how does that family put itself back together again?

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

We all want our kids to engage with the world around them so we equipped them with technology to help them do that. But today's technology can be a double-edged sword. Not only can it give our kids access to the world, it can also give the world access to our kids. How many parents can honestly admit to knowing what the kids get up to when they go online? And how many people could cope knowing if someone close to them, someone they love and trust is participating in online child exploitation? The answer to both of those questions is not many. But it's what you don't know that may hurt you.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

I'm Rodger Corser. And this is Closing The Net, a podcast series that explores the world of those policing the borderless crime of online child sexual exploitation, women and men who work tirelessly to protect children from harm and bring child sex offenders to justice. The Australian Federal Police has a significant role to play in ensuring children and young people are safe. It leads the Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation known as the ACCCE, which is at the heart of Australia's coordinated response to this horrendous crime type. The ACCCE is a world-leading facility uniting law enforcement agencies and child protection organisations from across the country and the world to combat child exploitation in all its various forms.

Reece Kershaw:

These are serious sickening, horrific, abhorrent videos and images that I can't even come to describe until you see it. And when you see it, it affects you and it's burned in your memory. That's why we need to alert parents in particular and caregivers and so on, who were responsible for children, to make sure we keep our kids safe.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Some of the stories you're about to hear may be confronting. But they're stories that need to be told, stories that need to be talked about by teachers, by community members, and by parents, people just like you and I. When it comes to protecting children online, parents, carers, and teachers, and all influencers of children each have a role to play. We have a responsibility to be vigilant, to look for the telltale signs, and to know how to report suspicious behaviour. Public perception of online child sex offenders conjures up numerous stereotypes. But the fact is they can be of any age, any gender, and come from any background.

Natalie Walker:

A common misconception that a pedophile is an old man wearing a trench coat on a bench. The misconception about someone using child sex abuse material is that he lives downstairs in mum's basement on his own.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Natalie Walker is the CEO of PartnerSPEAK

Natalie Walker:

More and more men are being arrested at work. So they have a work to go to, they have a professional job, they have a work computer. Which also ties in with another misconception, that if you accidentally click on a few links of child abuse material or if someone sends you something you'll be framed and the police will come knocking down your door. To me, people doing this at work and on planes on their smartphones really demonstrates to me what entitled and deliberate and premeditated behaviour it is. It's something that people are thinking about and feel like that they have a right to do. The truth is approximately 50% of perpetrators have an intimate partner and children, and that's not something we imagine. So when we talk about the horrific increase in offending, we then have to correlate that data and think that half of these guys are leaving a family in trauma.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

PartnerSPEAK was formed as a direct result of the need to provide support and advocacy for the forgotten victims of child sex offenders, their partners, and their families.

Natalie Walker:

Most people I spoke to were confused. They were like, "What do you mean the wives of the perpetrators?" They were confused that he would be married, that he would have a wife. And if he did, the myth of collusion, that she was in on it, was so strong, it was actually treated as fact. So why would the wife of the perpetrator needs support? She would have known about it. PartnerSPEAK was founded in 2004 in direct response to a police operation called Operation Oxen in 2004. Approximately 200 Australian men were charged for offenses relating to child sexual abuse material, which was a huge operation. It was front page news on television, on radio for two weeks solid. It was a really huge event in Australia. When I first heard it, I ran out of the room and tried not to vomit because I had had the experience of discovering my ex-partner was involved with child sexual abuse material only 18 months earlier it was really raw and traumatic. And when I heard the news, it took me back there.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Apart from reliving her own worst life experience, Natalie quickly realised there was no one standing beside the non-offending partners and guiding them through the legal process. There was no one who truly understood their emotional devastation.

Natalie Walker:

As the name partner in it because that was my lived experience. And that's who we started for because the partners weren't being cared for. Those partners are most often women, they can be men. But we support all close affected family members. So recently we've been supporting a number of parents of the perpetrators, siblings, and also now adult children of perpetrators.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The stories are harrowing as partners are left to deal with the shock of discovery, recrimination, and the stigma. PartnerSPEAK offers peer support to those trying to rebuild their lives, knowing that everything they once believed to be real has now been shattered.

Natalie Walker:

I'm going to ask you to imagine what that is like. Before the material has been found, this is the person that knows and loves you best and that you thought you knew and loved them best. And then all of a sudden this completely alternate reality is in front of you. One partner discovered what her husband was doing, she walked in on him live streaming. On the screen she saw the person who was going to abuse the child and she saw the child and she physically froze to the spot for 40 minutes, she was unable to move. And then for the next week, she was unable to have a bowel movement because her whole body just froze. She says that she was worried that she was going to die from that alone.

Natalie Walker:

The non-offending partner's first thoughts are often, "How did I not know?" And deep shame. And in connecting, not with just the peer support worker on the phone, but if the partner is on the forum and is connecting with 700- 800 people hearing this story repeated again and again, it starts to dawn on the partner it wasn't me, they're all acting like this. So once people realise it's not me, he groomed me, this is a pattern of behaviour, and that he has 700 other people saying this is the kind of behavior I saw, then that shame and blame starts to drop of. Which is really powerful because it means now the non-offending partner can speak out, can seek support, and is also more able to engage in detecting and disrupting the crime by engaging with law enforcement. So the role of that PartnerSPEAK has to play when child sexual abuse material is found is enormous.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Discovering that your partner has been participating in online child sexual exploitation in your home, on your shared computer, and going to extraordinary lengths to hide their activity from those closest to them, well, that can be a devastating revelation. And it's happening in Australia as much as anywhere else in the world. Some offenders believe that viewing child sexual abuse material isn't causing any harm. But the fact is viewing and sharing this kind of material is an offense. Every time the material is viewed, the abuse is repeated. With the power and ability to cross borders and unite law enforcement agencies across the country, the ACCCE and the AFP work closely with state and territory police to track

down and arrest offenders who view and share child abuse material online. It's a mammoth task, but one the men and women of the ACCCE are committed to and determined to conquer.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

It's a sobering reality that many online child sex offenders are hiding in plain sight within our very own communities. They can hide behind the facade of a friendly neighbor, the diligent colleague, the loving partner, or even a parent. While child sex offenders can sometimes go to great lengths to disguise their activities and their identity, in many cases they're known to their victims.

Jessica Gilmore:

He had a library of all the images and the videos and things that he'd been doing to not only his own children but to his nieces over that period of time. And he kept that on his computer and was sharing that online. He not only groomed the children, but he groomed his wife. He set up their home so that it was difficult for her to have any idea of what was going on.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

AFP Detective Sergeant Jessica Gilmore has worked these kinds of cases with Victoria Police as part of the Joint Anti-Child Exploitation Teams known as JACETs. The JACETs are Australia's frontline police, a combination of AFP and state and territory police based in capital cities around the country working together to investigate cases of child exploitation, share intelligence, and undertake arrest warrants. For Detective Sergeant Gilmore, one case in particular has stayed with her.

Jessica Gilmore:

The operation we worked on was mostly 2015, some 2014. It was one of those jobs that really hammered home for us. The role of grooming when offenders groom not only the children but also family members, their friends. And that not everyone around that offender is going to know what's going on because of the way in which they groom them to accept behaviour as normal. Which once you understand what they're doing, that really isn't normal. That particular offender was grooming his family. For years, he made admissions to being involved in child exploitation, the sharing online for over 20 years. And over that time, he then escalated to contact offending against familial family members and his own children.

Jessica Gilmore:

There was a lot of speculation and suggestion that his family should have known, his wife should have known. But when we finished our investigation, we were able to identify and prove that she wouldn't have known. All the behaviours that he and the way he conducted himself over those 20 years was a way in which she grew to think that that was normal behavior and had realistically no idea what was going on. That was quite hard for many people to accept that those families wouldn't have known. Particularly the family members of the other victims, not just his wife, they took it very hard. I couldn't understand how they didn't pick up on it and how in some ways they facilitated his ability to have contact with those children unbeknownst to them what he was doing at the time.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Detective Sergeant Gilmore was part of the team that rescued two young girls from a sexual abuse situation in Victoria. Their abuser was their father. The team had also discovered he'd been sexually abusing other young family members in New South Wales. This particular offender's crimes came to

light after child exploitation investigators in Europe came across a series of photos with some specific details, details that prompted swift collaboration with their Australian counterparts.

Jessica Gilmore:

There was a seizure, a large seizure of child exploitation material that had been shared on the dark web that was seized by one of our European partners. They are fantastic at what they do, they were able to identify a very, very small part of an image that identified that as an Australian landmark. And that was then forwarded onto our Victim Identification Team. They were able to, through painstakingly looking through all these images, identify some key elements which were very uniquely Australian. One of those elements was the school uniforms that two of the victims were wearing. And that was what really pointed out the area in which these girls were living because they were able to crop the image, just showing the school uniform, send that out to everyone in the AFP. I think there was three or four people who came forward and said, "That's this particular school." And we're able to identify them from there.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The trial led investigators to a family in Sydney.

Jessica Gilmore:

Once we identified the school, our colleagues in Sydney, they were able to travel to the location in which these kids were being enrolled at school, were able to confirm through the school that the kids were enrolled there. The school said they were a very normal family, very well educated family, just not the family you would expect. As part of our investigation, we of course look at who's got access to those children. So one of those key factors is family members. Because at the age in which those kids were, which was primary school, they're not everyday going to be engaged with a lot of other people and have that access, especially an access in which photographs can be taken. Our colleagues in New South Wales went to the house, we conducted a search warrant. Again, the myth is it's got to be mum or dad. And in this crime type sadly it's usually the male. And through the full extensive investigation to the family, we we're able to identify a lot of the photos were taken at the house, at the family home. So that again suggests that the family members must've been involved.

Jessica Gilmore:

But as the investigation continued, we were able to conclude that mum and dad had no idea. They were devastated, absolutely devastated when we were there. And by looking at all these images and sitting down with the victim's parents, they were able to narrow down a specific group of people to the point of being able to identify who we suspected would have been the culprit in this matter, and that was the paternal uncle who lived in Victoria. The job was then sent down to us in Victoria and we took action by doing a search warrant at his house. We were able to identify early on a concerning fact that he himself had just become a father of two very young girls, which of course had big issues for us. We had to act on that as soon as we possibly could understanding that those two children were at risk.

Jessica Gilmore:

So we did a search warrant at that house, we we're able to intervene, we arrested him. He made full and frank admissions to all the activities that he'd conducted. He had a library of all the images and the videos of the things that he'd been doing to not only his own children, but to his nieces over that period of time and he kept that on his computer and was sharing that online. The children were taken away from him and from his custody and from his wife's custody. That's when we had to really try and identify

whether his wife had any idea what was going on. We were able to prove quite conclusively that she didn't. But convincing other people involved was quite difficult to try and get them to understand that he not only groomed the children but he groomed his wife. He set up their home so that it was difficult for her to have any idea of what was going on.

Jessica Gilmore:

Little things that he would do which ordinarily you just think he's a good dad. He'd come home from work and say to his wife, "You've had them all day, let me look after them. I'll look after them and we'll have some private time together." Anyone else would think, "What a great active parent." But you look at that with the lens of what he was doing and his predilections, that was just facilitating his ability to offend against those particular young children.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Sadly, the number of cases being directed towards Australian JACET teams is growing. And many of those reports are coming into the ACCCE from their international counterparts. Leanne Cooper is a Federal Agent attached to the Child Protection Triage Unit.

Leanne Cooper:

The Child Protection Triage Unit is the front door to the AFP for referrals or reports that come in relating to child exploitation matters. We receive reports from an organisation called NCMEC, which is the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which is located in America. We receive reports from international partners like International Police, Europol, INTERPOL. And we also receive report from members of the public, they can report directly to us. And we receive reports from other Australian organisations or government departments. They all come into our team and we have a look into it to see if there's a matter that we can investigate.

Leanne Cooper:

Every morning we log on and we say, what reports have come to us overnight? We then go into every single report, we look at all the images, and we try and do an assessment as to see if we can identify the person who's done this. We then triage them, the worst case ones are on our top priority list and the others go down the list. And some of them, we just will never find so they go to the bottom of the list. We try and do that before midday, in the afternoons, we will try and find these people, try and identify them. Then once we've identified the person and figure out who they are, what they do, whether they have kids themselves, have contact with kids through their occupation or through a voluntary, like a sporting coach or something like that, they then get prioritised again. And then they get sent out to our JACET teams for investigation.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The sheer volume of reports coming into the ACCCE's Child Protection Triage Unit reports that often contain explicit child abuse material means Leanne and her team need to put emotion to one side as they work through the process of identifying what reports get the highest priority.

Leanne Cooper:

Just reports just from NCMEC, it's common to be somewhere between 40 and 100 reports. Each one of those reports can contain one image or it could contain hundreds of images or videos. We look at each one of the images and videos. So we call this process triaging, we always do it in pairs. So there's always

two of you looking at it, which kinda of takes the emotion out of it. Because the two of you are there, you're looking at it more of an investigative things. So you're trying to figure out how old the child is, where the offender might be. And it takes the emotion out of it because you're talking to each other about those types of things and not how sad it is, what's happening to that child. But yeah, some of the images are confronting and some of them they are quite horrific, but then others they just become everyday images for us.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

It's hard to explain what drives a person to engage with this particular crime type, to view or share, or even produce such material involving innocent children. It's even harder to explain how that person may have been someone we thought we knew, someone we trusted, someone we loved. When it comes to identifying the telltale signs of an online child sex offender, hindsight can be a cruel measure. It can show us that many things we assume to be true actually weren't. Alongside the myth that the wife or partner must've known, there are other misconceptions about child sex offenders and online child sexual exploitation. It's assumed that the victims are typically targeted by strangers, but sadly as we've heard, and that's not always the case. It's assumed that boys are less likely than girls to be abused, but the ACCCE receives a large number of reports every year for both female and male victims. And according to research conducted by the ACCCE in 2020, more than two thirds of parents believe teenage children are more at risk of online child sexual exploitation. But the reality is anyone under the age of 18 can become a victim.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

One thing is for certain, whether they're lone child sex offenders or part of an organised network, online child sex offenders have become very adept at using the latest technology to disguise their activities and fuel their obsession. Assistant Commissioner Lesa Gale, leads the Northern Command of the AFP, which includes the ACCCE. Lesa's acutely aware that technology is one of their biggest challenges.

Lesla Gale:

Certainly with the advent of anonymising platforms, such as the dark web, even encrypted apps, they're not dissimilar because they're all there to try and hide the identity of the person using those particular platforms or apps. As they people are more aware of them and they're more easily accessible, that's where we start to see the networks. We start to see those more organised networks where they all have like interests, rather than using money to get into the networks, et cetera, it's about production of child exploitation material.

Lesla Gale:

We are seeing some of those networks operating in the dark web, but I would also say we also see, of equal volume, those opportunistic people that will look to take any advantage to exploit a child in the online environment, sadly is very easy to do. As I said, with encrypted apps, I'm not going to list them all, but we all know what they are and we've probably all use most of them, it's not difficult at all to take advantage and exploit children online and sadly for a lot of perpetrators in this crime type, their appetite for the material, I would describe it as insatiable. So what we do see is that they are really prepared and willing to take any opportunity to try and access children.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Dr Michael Salter is a Scientia Associate of Criminology at the University of New South Wales.

Michael Salter:

Prior to the advent of the internet in the late '90s, there was actually a lot of disbelief and skepticism when kids or adults were reporting sexual exploitation. There wasn't a lot of belief and acceptance that it took place. And the internet has made it just undeniable, we just can't deny the digital evidence because we can see that offenders are collaborating, working together. I think we've realized just the sheer extent of demand for the sexual abuse of children.

Michael Salter:

I think one point for us as a community is to really think about what our community standards are for the companies that we allow access to our kids. And at the moment I have to say I think that we've got a real problem with the tech industry in terms of they're not keeping our kids safe. They're building platforms that they market to children, they know that children are on, they're really attractive to children, but they're incredibly unsafe for kids. We need to take responsibility for keeping kids safe. But we need to be saying to our governments, and we need to be saying to companies about what our expectations are for companies that are marketing to our kids and encouraging our kids online, "Well, what's your duty of care to my child? And I think the public has a really important role to play in raising their voice and insisting on accountability because tech companies are failing at the moment.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Hamish Hansford is at the forefront of Australia's efforts to try and hold major tech companies to account and drive greater social responsibility. In his role as First Assistant Secretary of the Cyber Digital and Technology Policy Division in the Department of Home Affairs, Hamish has responsibility for child exploitation criminal justice policy and law reform responses. A critical part of that role is setting standards for acceptable online practice and securing a global commitment to those standards.

Hamish Hansford:

Given though global nature of tech companies and the internet, it's really important to have common global standards. And Five Country Ministers back March in 2020, set us on a path of developing Voluntary Principles to Counter Online Child Sex Exploitation and Abuse. Some of the principles are really simple around preventing child abuse online, targeting online grooming and predatory behaviour, targeting the really heinous live streaming of criminal activities, particularly child exploitation. How do you look for search results that don't put up child exploitation material? How do you give a specialised approach for children? How do you look at victim and survivor consideration issues? And how do you respond to some of the evolving threats, particularly those during a crisis? How do you respond to viral images? And how do you try and prevent criminality from occurring on the internet? And the rules that apply online should reflect those that apply in the physical world, and the stark reality is that they don't. And so voluntary principles are a way of trying to get companies to work together with governments to set some of those global standards. There are six leading companies who we worked with, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Roblox, Snap, and Twitter, as well as NGOs and academia. And we've seen broad take-up from both industry and support from governments across the world. So I think this is the new way of doing global policy, is building coalitions of like-minded industry, NGO, and governments and working together on some pretty difficult problems.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

One of the challenges for any law enforcement agency is the battle against technology platforms that deploy end-to-end encryption, that hides the identity of their users and the data associated with them. It's a challenge recognised by the Australian Government, as it works with tech companies to try and filter out online criminal activity, while at the same time protecting the right to privacy for the broader community.

Hamish Hansford:

The government has strong support for encryption and to make sure that our banking, our communications, our data is secure, particularly from a cybersecurity perspective. But where it facilitates criminal activity online, particularly child exploitation and online terrorism, that's a problem. And some companies who are looking at homomorphic encryption, which can both mine for child exploitation material and identify criminality occurring on networks whilst protecting the data and communications of individuals. I'm sure platforms would not want to help child exploitation from occurring on their platforms if they could work with governments to try and prevent that. So homomorphic encryption is one area. The use of really sophisticated artificial intelligence and metadata to try and identify bad users online and try and stop, particularly groups of individuals and pedophiles who are trying to exploit children online, there's a whole range of ways that the government is encouraging tech companies to work with law enforcement to try and stop the problem.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

While the Australian Government through the ACCCE and its partner organisations are putting every effort into eradicating online child sexual exploitation, Assistant Commissioner Gale believes parents must start opening their eyes and ears to the messages about doing more to protect their kids online.

Lesia Gale:

I implore parents, please, when you hear us talking about what's happening in the child exploitation space, don't turn down the television, don't walk away, listen to what we're saying. It's really very simple, know what your children are doing in the online environment, have those honest conversations with your kids so that they know if, "Oh my god, I've been in an app and I've been engaging with someone and I'm feeling a little uncomfortable," that they will come and tell you. Report it, know where to go to. I guess the biggest misconception is that parents think that it won't happen to them and it won't be their kids. But let me tell you, what we see through the Child Protection Triage Unit and what we communicate through our ThinkUKnow program is it can happen to you and your children. And the better educated you are about what they're doing in the online environment and what you can do to help them and support them, the less likely your kids are going to be victims of this crime type.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

For Lesia and the team at the ACCCE who work around the clock to protect children, it's a fine balance between getting the message through to parents about the need to educate themselves and not creating an atmosphere of fear.

Lesia Gale:

It's one of those issues people don't want to hear about, it's just too confronting. People think it's the man in the hat wearing the trench coat. What I would say is that's not true, it can be anyone. It can be your next door neighbour, it can be your relative. They come from all walks of life, the offenders, in relation to this particular crime type. I don't want to terrify people, we just want to make them aware to

educate themselves so that there are some very simple things they can do to better protect their kids and prevent them from becoming future victims. We try and tell anyone that we can please listen, please look at these resources, don't walk away it's really important. You see children using iPads, young as toddlers, it's part of our everyday life now. So it's even more vital and critical that parents, carers, friends educate themselves on what is needed so that they can better educate and protect their children.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

For the victims of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, one of the biggest challenges they have to overcome is who can they tell? Who can they trust? And will they be believed? Alison Geale is the CEO of Bravehearts, an organisation established to protect children, to speak up on their behalf, and prevent child sexual abuse.

Alison Geale:

The offender does in some cases a very good job of making the child believe that not only is it their secret but you won't be believed, you're going to be in trouble, this is what's going to happen if you tell anybody. What they're saying can ring true, families can be split apart. The offender may have convinced them that it's their fault or that it's normal. These kinds of things can be normalised. And what we're finding too is that they can be normalised over a short period of time not just a long period of time. Given the right dialogue and the right convincing dialogue can lead a child to believe that they feel hopeless, they don't have anyone to tell, they're going to be blamed, not going to be believed, and my family may fall apart. And they may, depending on their age, have some elements of shame around what happens to their body naturally when exposed to any kind of sexual activity. Their body may be betraying them and that can reinforce the levels of shame for children. This crime happens in shame, in secrecy, in silence, and grows in the darkness. So creating a place where little ones can look up and say, that person understands those feelings that I've got, getting the child to feel like they can identify a trusted adult that they can tell and that nothing is so bad that they can't share that with someone, you say kids get better. And when we hear stories about early intervention, fantastic support, and good counseling can lead children to have rich and full lives. And this need not change the direction of their life.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the US is a critical partner for the ACCCE in combating online child sexual exploitation. CEO, Michelle DeLaune, believes we can begin to make change around the world if we can start to have the difficult conversations.

Michelle DeLaune:

It's going to take every single one of us at the table and it's going to take the public at large to understand the issue, to be willing to talk about things that are not comfortable to talk about, to recognise that everyone plays a role in protecting their own children, and protecting not only their own children but the children in their community. I think until it's a topic that everyone has some comfort level talking about, it's going to be hard. So podcasts such as this and all of the media attention that has been showered on this particular issue is so critical because finally we have people talking about things that they weren't talking about before.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In episode three of Closing The Net, we asked the question, how young is too young to teach children to be safe online and what can parents really do to keep their kids safe?

Jessica Gilmore:

We're trying to make the internet, which is a rather, from a technical and social perspective, a rather abstract concept. We're trying to drill down to the physicality of the internet so that children can understand the network technologies.

Julie Inman Grant:

We often use the analogy you wouldn't let your child play in a sand pit with a complete stranger at the park, why would you give them a device that opens up their worlds to almost everyone unencumbered without being engaged in their online lives?

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

If the content in this podcast has caused any distress or if you know a child is being contacted or groomed online, visit accce.gov.au to find out how to report and where you can seek support. If you see child abuse material online, it's important to report it to the Office of the eSafety commissioner who can help get it removed. And if you think a child is in immediate danger, please call 000 or your local police. You can provide anonymous information to crimestoppers.com.au or by phoning 1800 333 000.

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