

# Working with Children Checks

## OUR POSITION:

**Bravehearts advocates for national consistency across approaches for screening for suitability to work with children and vulnerable person, to promote best practice in ensuring suitability for working with vulnerable persons and monitoring compliance with legislation across Australia.**

- **While Bravehearts advocates for a centralised national Working with Children Check (WWCC) system, we understand the complexity of this given jurisdictional legislative differences, and we support at the bare minimum a centralised database of WWCC decisions accessible to all States and Territories.**
- **All child and youth focused organisations (including those that employ young people) have a responsibility to ensure a child safe environment. See Bravehearts Briefing Paper Child Safeguarding.**
- **Bravehearts strongly recommend the adoption of mandatory child abuse prevention training for all WWCC applicants.**

## Background

Key factors that contribute to an organisation being child-safe include robust recruitment, selection, and screening practices. Within this framework, Working with Children Checks are an essential tool that aids in ensuring that the right individuals are chosen to engage with children. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, in its Working with Children Checks report (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2015), called for a nationally consistent model and a centralised database of WWCC decisions accessible to all States and Territories (recommendation 3).

## Working with Children Checks in Australia

In Australia, a Working with Children Check (WWCC) is a mandatory screening process for individuals who work or volunteer in child-related roles. The purpose of the WWCC is to help protect children from harm by preventing people with a known history of certain criminal offences from working with them. Each state and territory in Australia has its own system and requirements for obtaining a WWCC, though they all serve the same fundamental purpose to ensure a safer environment for children.

The process typically involves a criminal history check, including any pending and non-conviction charges or convictions related to child abuse, violence, or sexual offences, as well as relevant workplace disciplinary actions. The check usually results in either a clearance to work with children for a specified period (usually 3 to 5 years) or a bar, which prevents the individual from engaging in child-related work.

## Does a Working with Children Check Ensure Safety?

While WWCCs serve as a crucial instrument, their effectiveness is limited in the absence of wider child-safe strategies. While it can be legitimately argued that these checks may act as a deterrence

for those with unacceptable histories to apply to work or volunteer in child or youth focused organisations (Tilbury, 2014) They can instil a false sense of reassurance among parents and communities, potentially causing organizations to grow complacent, believing that those who have passed WWCCs are free from risks to children (Budiselik, Crawford & Squelch, 2009; South, Shlonsky & Mildon, 2015).

### Cautions and limitations

There are a number of cautions and limitations with respect to WWCC:

- **Only Detects Known Offenders:** The WWCC only flags individuals with a criminal history or disciplinary findings relevant to child-related work. It will not identify people who haven't been caught, reported, charged, or disciplined. This means that any risk they pose to children would not be detected via a WWCC.
- **No Universal National System:** Each state and territory has its own WWCC system (e.g. Blue Card in QLD, WWCC in VIC and NSW). Clearance in one state is not automatically valid in another; people may be cleared in one jurisdiction but barred in another.
- **Not an Assessment of Suitability:** The WWCC is not a character check or psychological assessment. Someone might legally pass the WWCC but still be unsuitable to work with children due to poor judgment, boundary issues, or inappropriate behaviour not captured in police or disciplinary records.
- **Can Create a False Sense of Security:** Employers or organisations may rely too heavily on the WWCC, thinking it's a guarantee of safety. It should be used alongside other child-safe practices, such as reference checks, supervision and training, clear codes of conduct, mandatory reporting procedures.

As noted above, holding a WWCC clearance is not a guarantee of suitability for a role involving children, and should be considered as one part of broader child safety policies and procedures. Employers and organisations need to implement additional safeguards, such as reference checks, supervision, and child protection training (see Bravehearts' Briefing Paper *Child Safeguarding*).

### **Bravehearts Position**

Bravehearts advocates for national consistency across approaches for screening for suitability to work with children and vulnerable person, to promote best practice in ensuring suitability for working with vulnerable persons and monitoring compliance with legislation across Australia.

- The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, in its Working with Children Checks report (2015), called for a nationally consistent model and a centralised database of WWCC decisions accessible to all States and Territories. While Bravehearts advocates for a centralised national WWCC system, we understand the complexity of this given jurisdictional legislative differences, and we support at the bare minimum a centralised database of WWCC decisions accessible to all States and Territories. However, we emphasise that a national, centralised administration system to undertake screening checks for suitability

to work with children promotes best practice in ensuring suitability for working with children and monitoring compliance with legislation across Australia.

- All child and youth focused organisations (including those that employ young people) have a responsibility to ensure a child safe environment. The WWCC should not replace an emphasis on sound organisational responsibility around risk management and child protection policies, including preventing, identifying or responding to concerns around inappropriate behaviours of staff. WWCC will only ever tell us about those individuals who are ‘known’ risks to children. See Bravehearts Briefing Paper *Child Safeguarding*.
- Bravehearts strongly recommend the adoption of mandatory child abuse prevention training, as recently introduced in states such as Victoria for all WWCC applicants. This training equips adults with essential knowledge and skills to:
  - Recognise the signs of grooming, manipulation, and abuse.
  - Challenge harmful stereotypes about who can be a perpetrator.
  - Understand the complexities of abuse, particularly when it involves trusted figures.
  - Promote children’s rights and create environments where young people feel safe to speak openly.

Implementing this training is a vital step in strengthening child safety. It empowers adults working with children to respond effectively, take protective action, and contribute to safer communities.

## References

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