

ISPCAN Working Group on Schools & Child Protection – Melbourne 2026

Thank you to everyone who joined the first pre-conference workshop of the ISPCAN Working Group on Schools & Child Protection. Around 35 practitioners and researchers took part, representing a wide range of countries, including Australia, Japan, India, Switzerland, the Cayman Islands, the USA, Indonesia, Kenya, and Taiwan. For almost all participants, this was their first involvement with the working group – an encouraging start as we begin to build this international community.

It was a real pleasure to bring together such a diverse group of people, and we hope this is the beginning of many more conversations and collaborations.



The workshop opened with two keynote presentations. Professor Kerryann Walsh reflected on the intersection of schools, child protection and safeguarding, looking at how the field has developed and where it needs to go next. Professor Judith Howard then considered how education systems can respond to the complex systemic problem of child abuse and neglect.

Participants subsequently took part in three roundtable discussions. Across the different topics, we focused particularly on examples of promising practice, current challenges, and priorities for future research, policy and practice. Some of the key points that emerged from these discussions are summarized below.

What we discussed

Roundtable 1: The role of the socio-cultural context in responding to abuse and neglect — *Moderated by Jodie Kinsmore, Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance*

Main themes

- **Responses to abuse and neglect are deeply shaped by socio-cultural context.** Participants from Japan, Thailand, Australia, Switzerland and New Zealand described differences in understandings of harm, childhood, acceptable behaviour and family responsibility. Concerns were raised about systems blaming parents without considering cultural context and broader issues, including mental health and disability. Participants emphasized the need for responses that are culturally informed rather than “one-size-fits-all,” and that recognize children’s holistic wellbeing.
- **Safeguarding systems need to balance clear standards with cultural and community perspectives.** One example concerned corporal punishment in Japan, where participants described a mismatch between current legislation and community attitudes. Many parents in Japan do not support corporal punishment within the education system; however, despite this opposition, the law still stands. More broadly, participants highlighted the importance of reviewing policies and systems, strengthening child-safety standards, and involving local communities in shaping responses.
- **Educators need sustained training, resources and support to respond effectively.** Participants highlighted gaps and inconsistencies in training, as well as limited time and emotional support for educators. Promising approaches included educator training and government guidance on bullying and sexual abuse, alongside culturally focused education and stronger leadership from schools through to government and system levels.
- **Children and young people should have a stronger voice in shaping safeguarding responses.** Participants pointed to youth councils and other opportunities for young people to contribute, and emphasized the importance of embedding children’s rights in policy and practice. Ensuring that systems and resources respond directly to children’s experiences and perspectives was identified as an important priority for future action.

Roundtable 2: What happens after the harm – supporting children back into learning — *Moderated by Prof. Judith Howard*

Main themes

- **Safety and relationships provide the foundation for returning to learning.** Schools need to recognize that, for children affected by trauma, establishing safety and supportive relationships may need to come before academic learning. A fundamental principle is that adults listen to children, believe them, and take their experiences seriously.
- **Trauma-informed responses need to be culturally and locally grounded.** Participants shared examples of approaches adapted to particular contexts, including culturally grounded sexual education in Indonesia and localized child-safeguarding training in the Cayman Islands. Responses need to reflect the communities and systems in which schools and children are situated.
- **Implementation remains a major challenge.** Insufficient staffing and funding can constrain schools’ capacity to provide appropriate support. Participants also emphasized the importance of evidence-based approaches, measuring outcomes, and ensuring that interventions intended to help children do not inadvertently cause harm.

- **Supporting children requires whole-school and system-level change.** Trauma-informed practice cannot rest solely on individual teachers. Teachers need to be engaged as collaborators, school leaders need to understand trauma and enable organizational change, and schools need broader systems that support rather than hinder trauma-informed responses.

Roundtable 3: Who helps the helper? Supporting educators exposed to child abuse and neglect —

Moderated by Dr. Eran Melkman

Main themes

- **Supporting educators requires a systemic rather than solely individual response.** Heavy workloads, limited resources, stigma and a professional culture that can discourage help-seeking may all prevent educators from accessing support. Rather than simply emphasizing “self-care,” systems and organizations need to take greater responsibility for providing care and support.
- **Professional supervision may offer an important model.** Although supervision is common in social work and mental health settings, it is much less established in education and may be perceived as monitoring rather than emotional and professional support. Developing appropriate models for educators could help reduce secondary traumatic stress and strengthen professional confidence.
- **Schools cannot respond alone.** Stronger collaboration between schools, child protection, health and community services can provide opportunities to share responsibility, reflect together and develop more coordinated responses around children and families. Community hubs and interdisciplinary teams provide promising examples.
- School social workers and other school-based support professionals may provide an important bridge, although their availability varies considerably across systems and more needs to be understood about both their contribution and their own support needs.

Across the three roundtables, the discussions highlighted both the diversity of educational and child protection systems internationally and the considerable common ground between us. We hope this workshop will be the beginning of continued exchange and collaboration through the ISPCAN Working Group on Schools & Child Protection.

We would also love to hear from you. Although you were unable to join us in Melbourne, we invite you to complete a [short survey](#), sharing your ideas about the topics and activities the working group should focus on and how you might like to be involved. Your input will help us shape our future activities and collaborations.

We hope to see many of you at future working group activities, whether online or in person, including at the next ISPCAN Congress in Lugano, Switzerland, in November 2027. We look forward to continuing to build this international community together.

On behalf of the organizing committee,

Eran