

# Heart Felt

a collection of children's experiences and  
stories of abuse, recovery and hope



Australian  
Childhood Foundation  
Protecting Children






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Childhood Foundation  
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A heartfelt plea....





Children who experience abuse and family violence lose part of their lives forever. It undermines their self confidence and eats away at their self esteem. It makes them feel worthless and unlovable. They take with them memories of confusion and trauma. Even small triggers may cause them to relive their fear, their uncertainty.

In so many ways, children who are the victims of abuse and family violence are robbed of the enjoyment of childhood innocence. They become uneasy about trusting. They often crave safety and security but may never really find it. They can even blame themselves.

The suffering of abused children often is secret. They go unnoticed and unprotected. Abuse isolates and distances children from others who might be able to support them, look out for them, be their friends.

The Heart Felt collection is a unique opportunity for all of us to understand a little more about how child abuse affects and shapes the lives of children.

Children's drawings reflect childhood as they experience it. Children draw pictures of people, events in their lives and ideas that hold some significance for them. Children's drawings give adults a glimpse into their world and how they experience the people in it. They help us to understand the meaning that children attach to events and people in their lives.

All the drawings in this book were created by children who have attended one of the specialist trauma counselling programs run by the Australian Childhood Foundation.

Many of the drawings in the Heart Felt collection are disturbing and distressing. Yet, there are also drawings that show the strength, courage and adaptability of children as they recover from the devastating impact of violence. Indeed, there are drawings that can inspire hope in all of us.

By reading this booklet, we believe that you cannot escape the heart felt plea from children themselves for us as a community to act together to stop child abuse.

All the children and their guardians who have created a drawing or piece of art have given the Australian Childhood Foundation their permission for it to be reproduced in this way. The children have asked only that, as a community, we take some time to understand and respect their experiences.

The reality is that our childhood remains with us. The experiences and memories children receive during childhood influence the sort of adults they can be. It is our hope that you will finish reading through this book with an even greater commitment to the need to take steps to put an end to child abuse in Australia.

Missing my  
sister

It feels like  
a big  
tear.

Counselling is also good  
because it brings the family  
back together



# Abuse and Trauma


The experience of  
child abuse and family violence rocks  
the very core of children.

It undermines their self  
confidence and eats away at  
their self esteem.

It makes them feel worthless  
and unlovable.







The experience of child abuse and family violence rocks the very core of children.

The abuse itself is often accompanied with messages that reinforce children's vulnerability. They are often told that the abuse is their fault. They are told that they are to blame for the family's problems.

Many children are threatened if they tell anyone about their abuse. Others are repeatedly told that they will not be believed if they tell. As a result many children never disclose to anyone about the abuse they are experiencing. They remain frightened, alone and unprotected.

Abused children frequently do not have their feelings acknowledged. They are told that they are not feeling frightened when they really are. They are told to look happy when on the inside they are feeling worried and anxious. They are told to lie about what is going at home. They can feel ignored. Their confusion about the violence is never clarified.

It is not surprising then that children who have experienced abuse stop feeling. They do not trust their feelings. The strength of their fear, shame and sadness can overwhelm them. Indeed, they live in a constant state of alarm, waiting for the next time they will be hurt or rejected. Survival becomes uppermost in their minds.

The effects of abuse and family violence can be so encompassing that children's development slows down. They often experience problems with learning new things, coping with new people or new situations. In fact, anything new is often perceived as a threat to them. This is why children affected by abuse and family violence can have problems at school. This is why they can have trouble with friends. This is why often they cannot feel settled anywhere.

Abuse and family violence traumatises children. It changes the ways they understand their world, the people in it and where they belong. They develop distorted rules about relationships - ones that are built on mistrust, fear and betrayal. They feel out of place in their family and with their friends. They feel separate and alone.

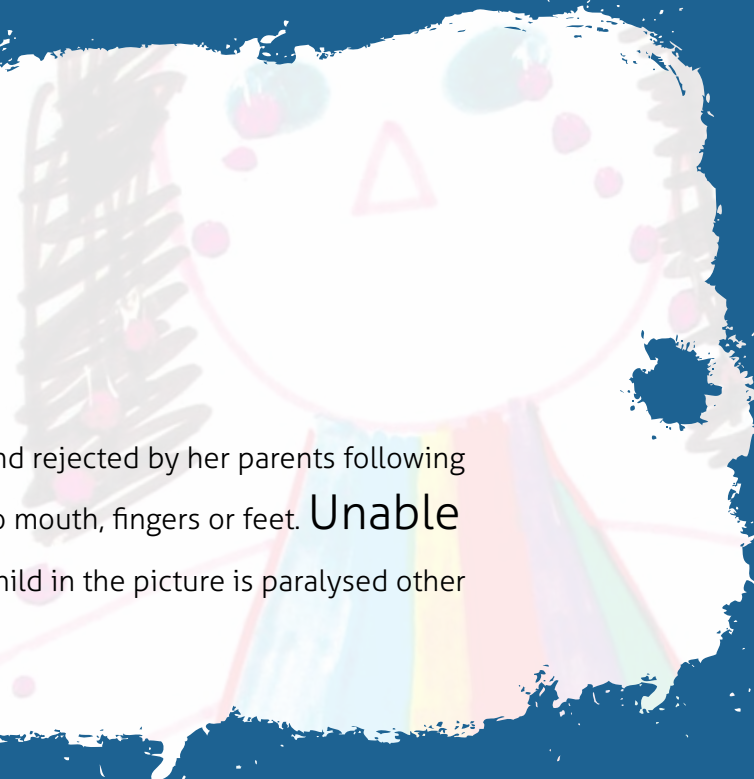
The memories of abuse are pronounced and ever present. Small reminders may cause them to relive their fear and confusion. The world itself, is experienced as dangerous for abused children - a place without haven or safety.



# Crying Child

**REBECCA - 9 years old**

Rebecca was sexually abused by an uncle and rejected by her parents following her disclosure of the abuse. The child has no mouth, fingers or feet. **Unable to speak, fight or move**, the child in the picture is paralysed other than for the tears dropping into two pools.





# The Invisible Princess

**LISA - 14 years old**

Lisa was sexually abused by her father for a period of two years. She has been in counselling for three years. She still remembers how guilty she felt for not telling her mother about the abuse. Her message is clear.



# Butterflies

**STELLA - 13 years old**

Stella feels that she is not able to fit in with her group of peers. She is the black butterfly crying in the corner. She feels different from her group of friends because she was sexually abused. Her friends whom she admires are represented by the butterfly in glorious colour flying far away from the other butterfly.

Fred drew himself after being told that he was not able to go home due to rejection by his parents. The furrowed brow shows how worried he really is about this decision.



Sad Boy

FRED - 8 years old





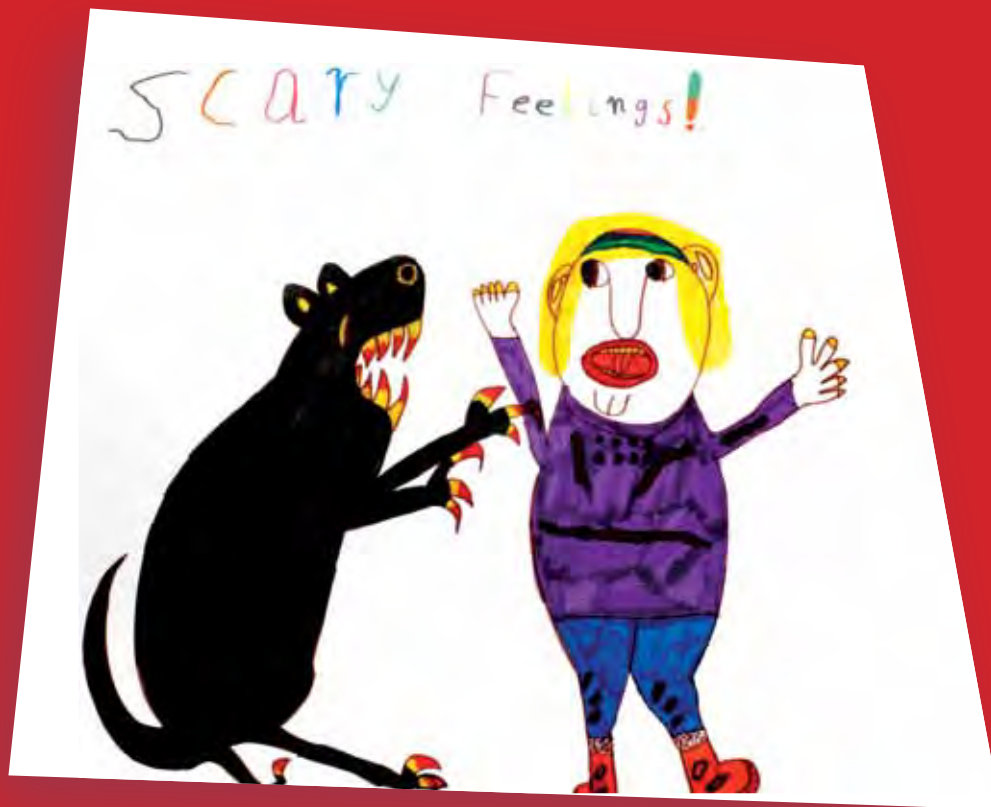
# Alone and Lost

STELLA - 13 years old



Stella was sexually abused by her father between the ages of 4 and 7. Stella's disclosure of abuse was not believed. As a result, Stella has not lived with either parent for 2 years. She feels abandoned by her parents and separated from finding them. In the picture, her parents are turned away from her and leaving her alone and lost in the forest.





## Scary Feelings

**MITCHELL - 11 years old**

Mitchell witnessed long term domestic violence between his parents. He continues to be afraid of his father's return to the family. Mitchell's explanation about his drawing is that *"...Sometimes I have been scared that I will get hurt by a monster just like the person in the drawing..."*

## Suicide

**MELINDA - 15 years old**

At 15, Melinda had already been hospitalised for three suicide attempts. She had suffered emotional and physical abuse by her parents. Melinda felt like scum and wanted to die. Counselling gave her some hope that change could occur.



# Castle and Ponds

**TRACEY - 8 years old**

This is a castle where a princess lives. Beautiful flowers and sunshine. All the animals once lived in the castle with the princess but they were made to go away. They went to live in ponds outside the castle but all eventually died. A snake, 2 ducks and a frog.

**The princess in the picture is sad and lonely.** Tracey has suffered psychological abuse as a result of long term rejection by her parents.





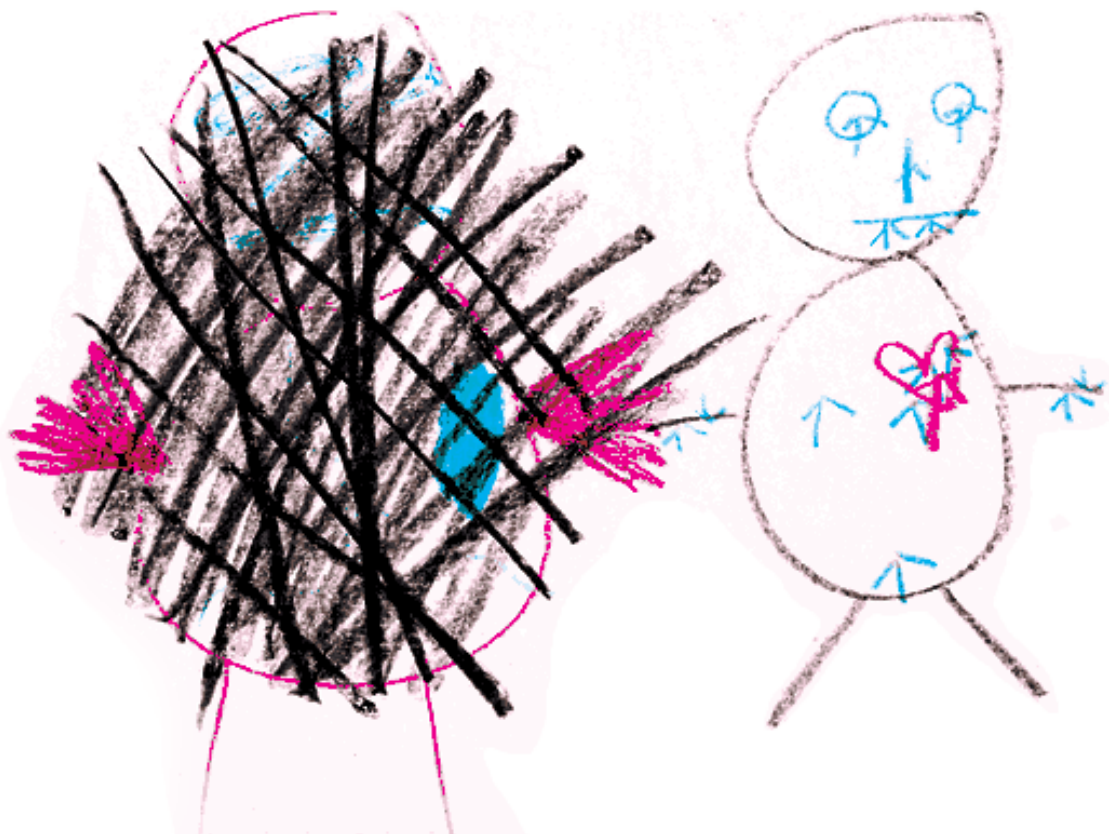
Donald Duck, 8 years old, drew this picture to demonstrate what he wanted to see happen to the two perpetrators of his sexual abuse. He wanted them to be killed, buried and sent to hell. The little figure flying in the clouds is Donald Duck in heaven looking down on the whole scene and being free from the abuse.

Cemetery - Go to Hell

DONALD DUCK - 8 years old

# Where it Still Hurts

JOSH - 9 years old



Josh has been a victim of severe domestic violence from early childhood. He remembers trying to disappear from his body so that he didn't have to watch the violence between mum and dad.

He was also sexually abused by his father. He drew these two pictures six months apart. The first in his early stages of counselling depicts what it is like to be him. His body is blacked out with very dark crayon. His explanation was that he was "hiding". The second picture shows him having emerged from behind the blackness. The arrows in the picture point to the areas where even after counselling Joshua continues to feel hurt.






The word "Recovery" is written in a white, casual script font. It is centered within a horizontal, irregular teal brushstroke that has a textured, painterly appearance. The background of the entire image is a solid, vibrant yellow. Faint, faded text is visible within the teal brushstroke, including "Missing my", "Danny", and "house".

Recovery

The recovery process for children who have experienced abuse and family violence is transformative. It changes the way they see themselves, their relationships and their future.







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Through counselling, children discover the truth of their abuse. They learn about the ways in which they were manipulated and threatened. They come to understand that the abuse was not their fault. They realise that there was nothing that they could have done differently to have prevented the abuse.

They grieve for the parts of themselves and their life that have been destroyed by the experiences of violence. They are supported to reconnect with those difficult feelings that in the past have overwhelmed them. Feelings such as angry, afraid, confused, messed up, numb and closed on the inside are identified. They explore how these feelings come about, what their consequences are and how to manage those times when they feel overtaken by their strength.

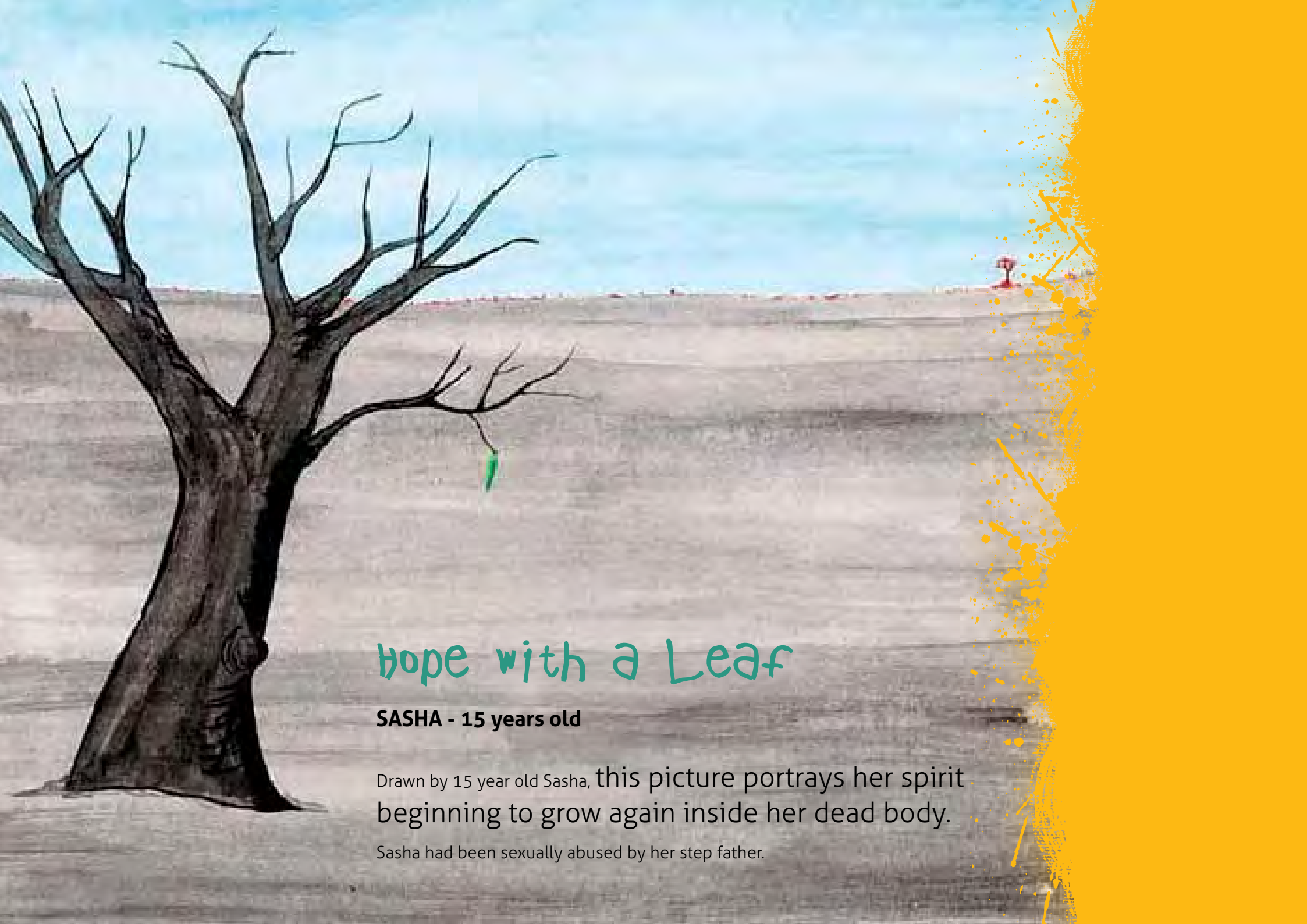
As recovery continues, children start to engage with more emotions, the ones that help them feel good about themselves. They begin talking about feeling happy, brave, smart, enthusiastic and respectful.

They slowly start to believe in themselves. They see themselves as being courageous, as being intelligent, as being a good friend. They learn to know these qualities are a part of them.

Children then begin to look to their friends and their family for support. They want to feel the same as other children. They want to feel like they belong. They start to appreciate encouragement more. They respond by trying harder and feeling more. They feel affirmed and valued by those who they consider to be important to them.

They feel like they are active in their own life. They feel free to be children again. They start to dream about the future. They realise that it is okay for them to hope to feel normal.

They know they may never leave their experiences of abuse behind them. They will probably always have some memories of the pain and fear – but those memories do not control their day to day life. They come to feel a little more free of the devastating effects and a little more strong.



## Hope with a Leaf

**SASHA - 15 years old**

Drawn by 15 year old Sasha, this picture portrays her spirit beginning to grow again inside her dead body.

Sasha had been sexually abused by her step father.





## Flying Above Worries

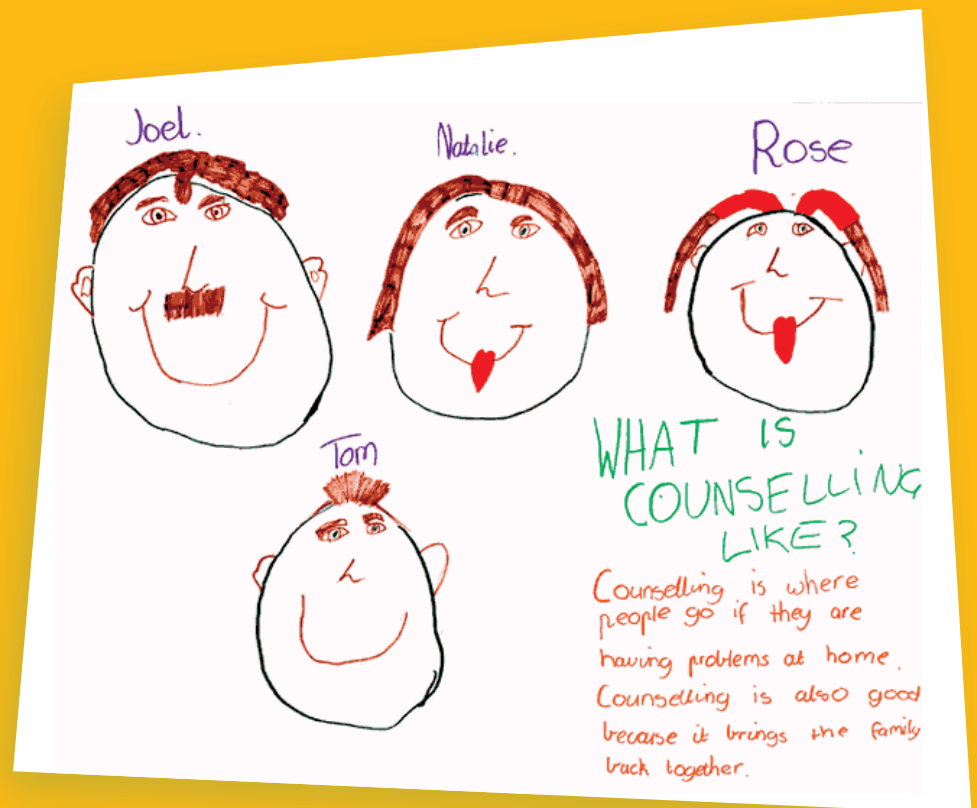
**SCOTT - 10 years old**

Scott witnessed severe domestic violence between his parents for several years. Scott stated that the games in counselling took his mind off other things. The bird is a symbol of freedom in the city and in the air. After a period of counselling, Scott drew this picture claiming that "I feel free now".

## What is counselling like?

**LIAM - 11 years old**

Liam was sexually abused and developed a range of problem behaviours. Liam experienced tension and conflict in his family. In this picture, Liam reflects how counselling has helped bring a family back together again.





## That was Me

**STEVEN, 12 years old**

Steven represented his anger as a volcano that would sometimes get so big that it would explode. With support he is coming to understand that his anger did not feel so out of control.



That Was  
ME!



# Devils & Angels

**LILLY - 14 years old**

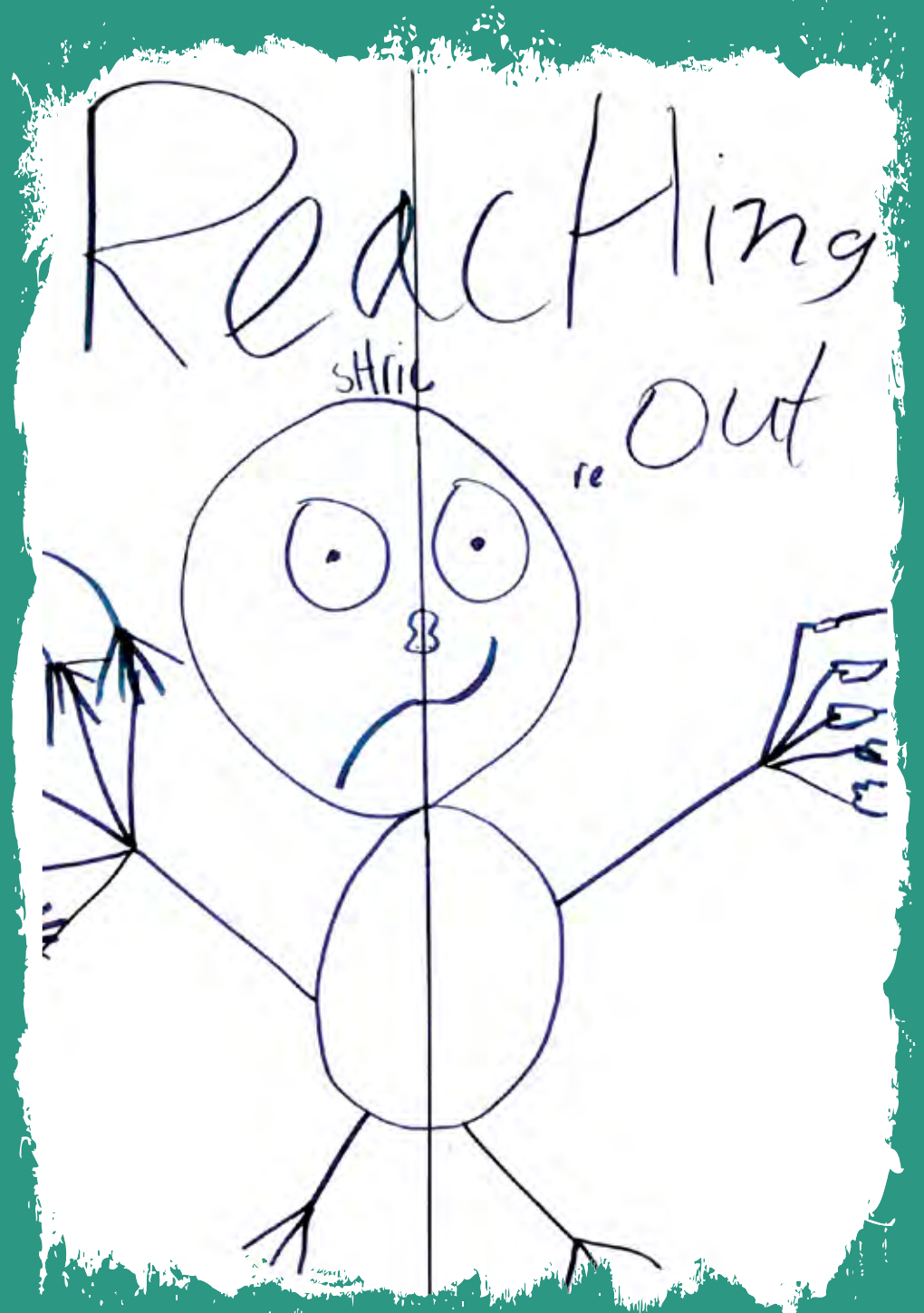
Lilly has drawn the dilemma she experiences when she meets new people. She does not know whether they will turn out to be devils or angels. She knows she finds it difficult to trust people after being abandoned by her parents from an early age. She is trying to learn to regain confidence in herself and others.



# Reaching Out

SHRIC - 11 years old

This drawing is of Shric feeling emotionally torn between his birth mother and his permanent care parents, whom he calls mum and dad. His hands are reaching out in two different directions – one towards his birth mother and the other towards his new family.

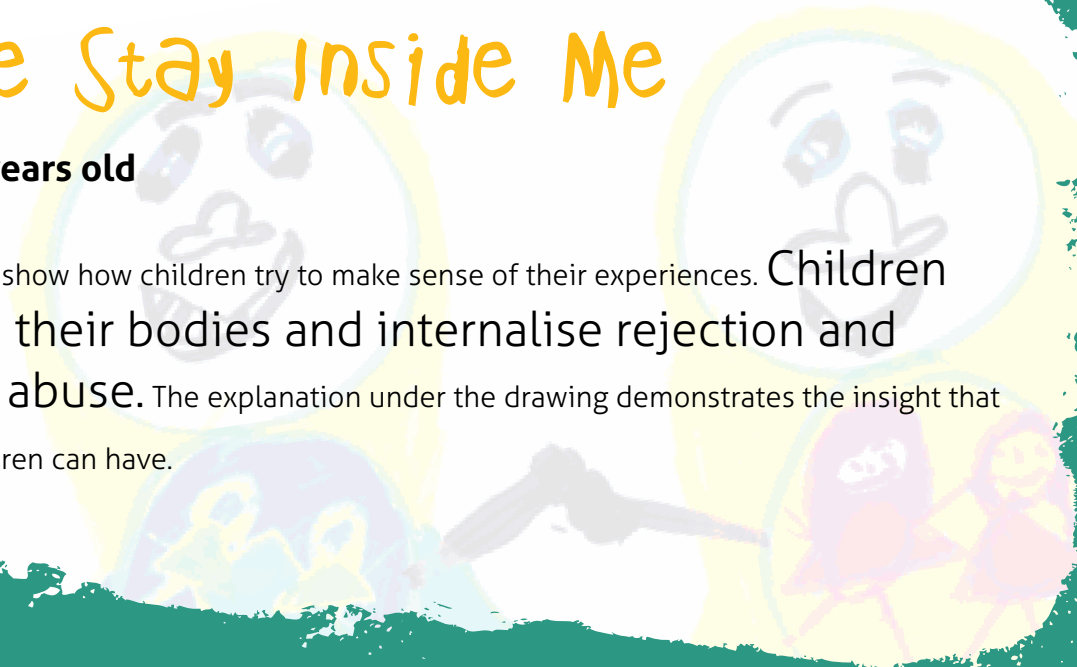




# People Stay Inside Me

**JUSTINA - 7 years old**

The two pictures show how children try to make sense of their experiences. Children feel inside their bodies and internalise rejection and emotional abuse. The explanation under the drawing demonstrates the insight that even young children can have.





Sarah + Nicky both happy living  
away from their "mean strict" mother with their  
new mum who is nice.

# wishes

## BEVAN - 8 years old

Caught in the middle of a difficult family breakdown, Bevan feels distant from his father. In this picture, he expressed his hopes and wishes for himself and his dad.



## Feelings - different faces

**TRISTAN - 10 years old**

Tristan has a long history of physical abuse. In counselling, he was not able to express feelings easily for himself. The drawing shows how sometimes it is easier for children to associate feelings they have with others. These others are given names as a way of assisting the child to externalise difficult emotions.



## Good Side Bad Side

**MELINDA - 13 years old**

Melinda was sexually abused by her step-father for a period of three years. In this picture, she shows how the abuse has made her develop two different sides. At 13, Melinda was in constant conflict with her mother and siblings. Her bad side shows her angry, mad and mean. Her good side, the one she keeps mostly hidden is happy, helpful, full of friendship and love.






Hope

Hope is the outcome of  
change for children. It is like  
a wave that carries them into  
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Hope is the outcome of change for children. It is like a wave that carries them into the future with fun, enthusiasm and optimism. Hope is the first moment in time when they dare to dream.

For these children, hope comes from feeling that their experiences of abuse no longer separate them from their friends and family. They know that they do not have to feel alone any more. They start to really feel a sense of safety in themselves and in those around them.

They can look forward to their next birthday without fear. They can look forward to the next school holidays without feeling worried.

They can tell their parent or carer that they are upset or sad and know that the response will be supportive and caring. They know that they will be living in the one place with the same people for a long time. They can feel secure, safe and loved.

Hope is present for children when they can rely on the adults around them to be consistent, dependable and nurturing. Children begin to feel anchored in the present and trust in the future.

Hope is the beginning of a life capable of not being overtaken by the memories of abuse, violence and trauma.

Children with hope and confidence are adaptable and resilient in the face of challenges. With belief in themselves they begin to do better at school. They find that they can more easily make and keep friends. Their relationships with their family improve. They are happier in themselves. They believe they can.....and they do!





## Smiley Sun

**JODIE - 11 years old**

Jodie loves a bright and smiley sun. When the sun is out, Jodie feels that nothing can go wrong. The sun is her protector, looking down on her and making her feel warm and safe.



## My Best Friend

ELIZABETH - 11 years old

After a lifetime of feeling alone and not important to anyone, Elizabeth is now able to draw a picture of people in her life who care about her.





## Friends are like diamonds

**JAKE - 11 years old**

Jake has drawn a vivid pictorial representation of an old saying that he feels is very important to him. True friends are like diamonds, false friends are like leaves.



## Hope

### CYNTHIA - 16 years old

Cynthia, 16 years old painted this picture entitled Hope. It shows that getting over the pain, anger and despair associated with abuse is slow but steady process. Cynthia carried the secret of sexual abuse by a cousin for over 10 years. After several months of counselling, her drawings of despair changed to hope and optimism.







# Good Friends

ANITA - 6 years old

Anita could not really make friend because she kept having to change foster families. Finally, after two years, she was told that she did not have to move anymore. Her foster sister became her friend. They did everything together. Most of all, she liked to hold hands and play out in the garden. The garden was full of magic flowers, rainbows and games.

Jane drew a picture of the ideal home for her. In this place, she would be loved, cared for and supported. Nothing bad could happen to her here. Jane had watched her mother beaten by her father and hospitalised on three separate occasions. A happy house is a safe one.

## A happy house

JANE - 9 years old



A  
Happy house  
Where no bad things  
happen.

# I am a princess

**JAY - 7 years old**

Jay stopped feeling anything for a long time after she was sexually abused by the man who lived next door. Her mum and dad made her feel special by telling her how much they loved her and were proud of her for telling them that she had been hurt. **She started to feel more and more like a princess** because she was being kind to her friends and her brothers and sisters. To her, princesses are kind and beautiful.







# Under the rainbow

**JILL - 6 years old**

Jill drew herself and her brother under a rainbow after six months of counselling. She had watched her mother overdose on heroin. Under the rainbow, “yucky things” did not happen to her any more. She always wanted to be close to her brother, Charlie. Under the rainbow, she could play and have fun for as long as she wanted.





## A full heart

### **ALEX - 8 years old**

After counselling, Alex felt that his heart was finally full again. He had lost a lot of his heart when he kept having to hear and watch his father hit and hurt his mother. A full heart meant that he could feel good about himself. The colours inside his heart show just how full his heart feels.

# Take action to stop child abuse:

The issue of child abuse can be overwhelming and confronting but we can't turn away from the problem. Doing so leaves children abused and alone.

Together, we can create a safer community for children. Child abuse will only stop if we all play our part. Here are some simple steps you can take to make a difference to the protection of children.



## Know more

- How confident are you that you understand what child abuse is in all its forms?
- Would you recognise the signs of child abuse?
- Do you understand the seriousness and consequences of child abuse?
- Do you know how significant the problem of child abuse is in Australia?
- Do you know what to do if you are concerned about a child being at risk of abuse?

Knowing more about the issue of child abuse and its signs can give you increased confidence to know what to do if you are concerned about a child.

To learn more about child abuse visit

**[www.stopchildabuse.com.au](http://www.stopchildabuse.com.au)**

## Stand in a child's shoes

- Show and tell children that they are important to you and that you care about how they feel.
- Understand and respect children's vulnerabilities as well as their abilities.
- Appreciate the insights of children. They understand more than you think.

## Do something...

### ...for children

- Be someone special for a child to turn to. Be there to listen.
- Believe children if they tell you about their abuse.
- Trust your judgement. Don't keep it to yourself – do something if you are worried about a child.

### ...for parents

- Be a support person for a stressed parent.
- Be there to listen. The chance for a parent to talk and share concerns can be very effective in relieving pressure.
- Offer support, babysitting or practical assistance to families in your neighbourhood.
- Let parents know that you understand how challenging parenting can be. All parents need help and support at some time.
- Encourage parents to seek some additional support. Let them know that asking for support when it is needed is a strength not a failing.

### ...to raise community awareness

- Talk to friends and neighbours about the problem of child abuse.
- Raise the issue of children's safety and protection in your local community groups, sporting clubs and service groups. As a group, you may be able to improve community awareness about the problem of child abuse and ensure the safety of children in your area by staging local events about children and their need for protection.
- Ensure organisations and clubs that have contact with children in your community have policies that outline safe and respectful ways of interacting with children. These guidelines should address bullying, discipline of children, sexism and racism. There should also be procedures for supporting children if they disclose that they are being hurt or abused by an adult involved in the organisation.



## Supporting the work of the Australian Childhood Foundation

The Australian Childhood Foundation is an independent children's charity working in a number of ways to prevent child abuse and reduce the harm it causes to children, families and the community.

- » **Specialist trauma counselling.** We provide a range of specialist counselling services for children and young people affected by abuse and for their families.
- » **Therapeutic care programs.** We provide a range of therapeutic care programs within residential and foster care settings.
- » **Advocacy for children.** We speak out for effective protective and support services for children and young people. All our programs affirm the importance of children.
- » **Education.** We provide community and professional education, consultancy and debriefing programs. These programs aim to improve responses to children and young people who have experienced or are at risk of abuse, family violence and neglect.
- » **Safeguarding children in organisations.** We build the capacity of organisations to ensure they protect children from abuse by their staff and volunteers.
- » **Child abuse prevention programs.** We run nationally recognised child abuse prevention programs that seek to decrease the incidence of child abuse and raise awareness about how to stop it even before it starts.

- » **Inspiring and supporting parents.** We provide ongoing parenting education seminars and easily accessible resources to strengthen the ability of parents to raise happy and confident children.
- » **Research.** In partnership with Monash University, we have established Child Abuse Research Australia to research the problem of child abuse and identify constructive solutions.

The Australian Childhood Foundation won the 1998 National and State Violence Prevention Awards for its efforts to prevent child abuse. In 2005, it was awarded the National Child Protection Award by the Australian Government.

The Australian Childhood Foundation relies on the support of the community to enable it to continue its programs and services.

Make a donation to the Australian Childhood Foundation by contacting us on 1800 176 453 or visiting our websites at [www.stopchildabuse.com.au](http://www.stopchildabuse.com.au) or [www.childhood.org.au](http://www.childhood.org.au)

Australian Childhood Foundation  
WHAT IS COUNSELLING LIKE?  
Counselling is where people go if they are





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We thank the children who let us use their drawings and stories. All stories have been modified to protect the identity of children.