

# A look inside the room where former detectives spend their days tracking child abusers

**MEET** the Aussie team doing a necessary but gruelling task. They have powers police don't but their work comes at a cost.



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Video

Image



Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner

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WARNING: Graphic content

**BEHIND** frosted glass in a locked room on the fifth floor of a nondescript Sydney tower, former police detectives carry out conflicting tasks.

In one corner, a man looks through pictures and videos of some of the worst child abuse material on the internet, tracking the content to its source and pulling it down.

In the middle of the room, a woman shreds on Guitar Hero — a flawless rendition of *Bloodlines* by death metal band Dethklok.

“Not a single error,” her colleague remarks, also a pro on the plastic guitar. “That’s the calibre of our people, right there.”

Both tasks are important. They all acknowledge you can’t do the former without the latter.

When I’m led through the doors a staff member announces, obviously for my benefit, “Content down”. The screens switch off and employees emerge from behind their desks with warm smiles.

Welcome to one of the most bizarre office environments in Australia, the office occupied by a crack team assembled to protect our most vulnerable from predators lurking in parts of the internet most Australians wouldn’t even know how to access.



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Guitar Hero is popular with staff at the office. *Source:news.com.au*

## ‘THE WORST CONTENT I’VE SEEN’

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“I didn’t think it was possible for me to imagine before I started this role just how bad the material was,” Senior Investigator Toby Dagg says.

“I remember the first time I encountered the worst material I’ve seen. Still to this day it’s the material that affects me more than any other. It was really tough at the computer that day. I won’t go into the details but it is literally worse than anything I could’ve possibly imagined.”

The content, he explains, includes “adults not only raping children but torturing them”.

“The material that we see is at the upper end. There is a community which wants more, fresher, worse material and there are individuals who are willing to satisfy that demand.”

But as more and more material goes up, the Sydney-based team — part of the office of the Children’s eSafety Commissioner — pulls more and more of it down. They’re able to do so thanks in part to powers above and beyond those wielded by police.

Between 2014 and 2015, the team and its international partners removed more than 4000 URLs containing child abuse material. Behind each page was a victim whose images would otherwise still be circulating within the most unsavoury circles on the dark web.

A normal day at the office starts with emails. In them are complaints and requests for help from people who’ve seen something terrible — an image or a video either filmed, stolen or appropriated for the sick pleasure of the perverted community that gathers and shares abuse material online.

The content is categorised and prioritised so the most urgent matters — they call those “criticals” — can be attended to first. Mr Dagg and his team then go searching. They enter pages on the internet that users think afford them anonymity. They can’t be found via search engines including Google but they can be found.



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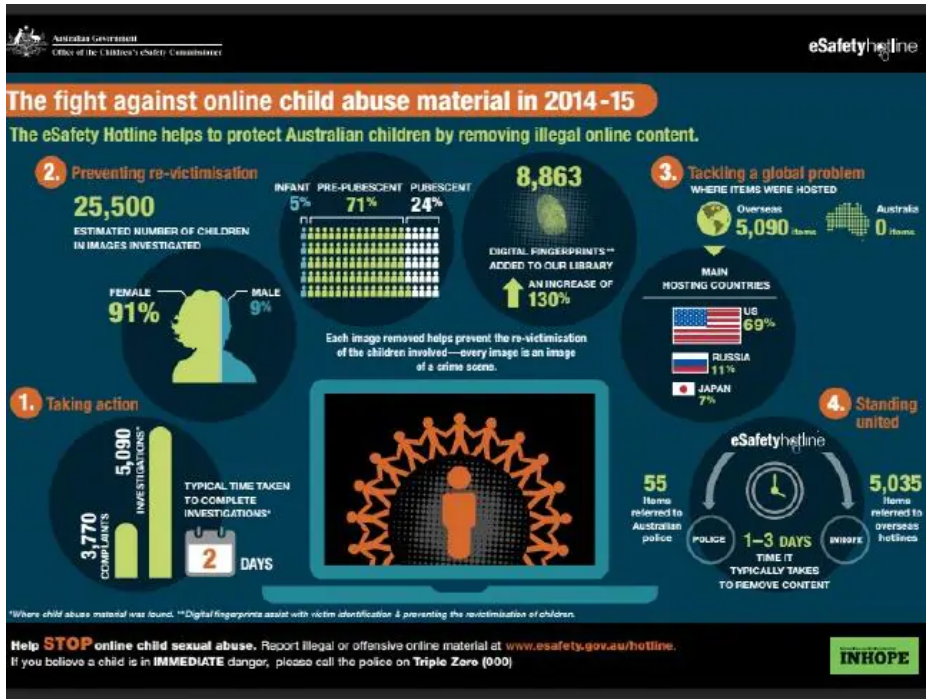


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The team investigated more than 25,000 images in 2014-15.

## PUZZLES, CRAFTS, VIDEO GAMES

Coping with what they see is the tricky part. That's where the games come in. When a staff member reaches their self-imposed "threshold", when they can't view another image, they walk away from their screens and take time out.

In the office there are half-completed puzzles littering an empty desk and a craft section that features adult colouring-in books. One female staff member has a particular talent for bringing black and white pages to life.

"We've got a really supportive team environment built on ensuring people have a balance to their day," Mr Dagg says.

"For me it's being able to communicate with my colleagues."

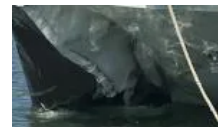
He makes it sound simple but it's much more complex than that. The team is also scheduled in for quarterly clinical psychological evaluations and made to adhere to strict staff welfare plans. It's an important part of the job given the lingering spectre of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that their colleagues in the police force know all too well.

Melissa Hickson has been a senior investigator at the office for eight months. She says staff set their own limits and stick to them.

"Basically you set your limit for how much content you can see per day. Everyone has a different threshold so it's about managing that and acting on it.

"If I was to see some really intense content, I'll stop. I like to go for a walk or do online shopping or talk to the guys in the office. You can unload it that way, too."

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It might seem like a silly idea, but puzzles are a great way for staff to take their mind off the job. *Source:news.com.au*

## ‘YOU COULD HEAR THE LITTLE GIRL’S EMOTIONS’

Mrs Hickson says a video she encountered during the first two months in the role left her speechless and with tears rolling down her face.

“With images you can just look at it and you can compartmentalise it,” she says.

“With a video you can develop an emotional attachment. The video I saw was of a child that included sound so you could hear the little girl’s emotions. It was really distressing, I was shocked and I had to leave the office for a few hours. I started crying because it was just so horrific.”

She says not every day is like that, in fact most are not like that at all.

“Most days I don’t think about it after an investigation.”

Most days there’s good news to take her mind off the misery she’s exposed to as part of her job. Others in similar roles have not been so fortunate.

Narelle Fraser had to watch 1700 videos of the worst child sex abuse material on the internet over a 48-hour period. She told news.com.au [the result was that her “bottle overflowed”](#) and she developed acute PTSD.

She was a senior detective with the Child Abuse Investigation Team in Melbourne at the time and they were trying to prosecute a person to whom the material allegedly belonged.

“A couple of times I was so shocked at what I was seeing,” she says.

“I could never describe it to anybody. I still can’t tell anybody what I saw. There was sound with the videos and I was hearing children screaming in pain. I had to turn the sound off. I didn’t sleep after. From that day on, I started to unravel.”

She’s better these days and she has a new role: helping others deal with similar difficulties.



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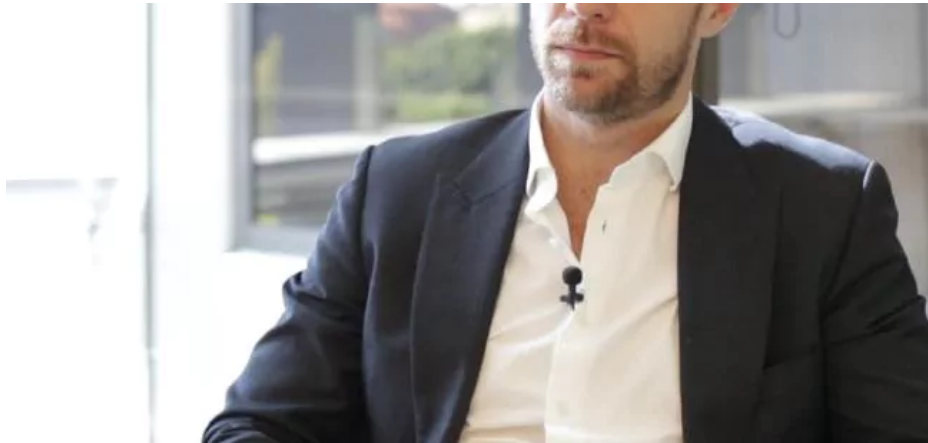


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Toby Dagg was a detective with NSW Police before joining the office Children's eSafety Commissioner. *Source: news.com.au*

## 'WE PREPARE THEM BEFORE THEY LOOK AT IT'

Dr Jane Richards has published extensive research on the effects of exposure to highly confrontational material. She told news.com.au a single image can be all it takes to do damage.

"What we know about exposure is that it can have a psychological impact," she said.

"We know exposure can cause trauma with either one exposure or it can have a cumulative effect. Cumulative is often the case with police and emergency services who see difficult things every day."

Dr Richards, who conducted her research for the University of South Australia, said the best thing police, emergency services or specialist staff like Mr Dagg and his colleagues can do is be prepared.

"We do some preparation for people before they look at this material because they need to be cognitively prepared. In a way it's like preparing yourself to watch a movie. You prepare yourself to watch a comedy, to watch a drama, to watch a horror movie."

She said distraction techniques are hugely important and known to be effective.

"The things that I would promote would be preparation strategies prior to viewing, collegiate and peer support, distraction techniques and then some frequent contact with professional psychologists."

As I leave the office, the screens fire back up and the team members resume their day. They'll see things that make their stomachs sick but they say they know they're making a difference.

Mr Dagg finishes our interview with a message for the people he chases every day.

"To the people who are involved in producing and distributing and sharing child abuse material and fuelling the global economy, (they) should really start looking over their shoulder because the people that I know are coming for them."

**Help stop online child abuse — if you see something that's not quite right, report it at [esafety.gov.au/reportillegalcontent](https://esafety.gov.au/reportillegalcontent)**

**If you or somebody you know needs help, phone crisis support service Lifeline on 13 11 14 or visit [www.lifeline.org.au](https://www.lifeline.org.au)**





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twins come in every size, shape and colour. They are as diverse as the children they are raising and we want to celebrate them all.

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