

Fact Sheet

Child sexual abuse



What is child sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse of children is against the law.

Child sexual abuse is when an adult, another child or adolescent uses their power to involve a child in sexual activity. Sexual activity includes sexual intercourse and a range of sexual behaviours that can be physical, verbal or emotional.

- Touching or asking a child to touch a penis, vulva, vagina, anus or breasts
- Oral sex or penetrating a child's vagina or anus by either a penis, finger or other object
- Showing sexual body parts to a child or masturbating in front of a child
- Sexual kissing and touching
- Exposure to sexual content and images online, in magazines or on film
- Speaking to a child in a sexually explicit manner in person, on the phone or sending sexual messages via text or online
- Taking sexual pictures of a child

How common is child sexual abuse?

It is hard to determine the prevalence of child sexual abuse. Many children and young people may never tell that they have experienced harm. Many do not disclose until they are adults. Research indicates that between 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will experience sexual abuse before the age of 18.

It is likely that these figures are actually higher due to the low disclosure rate, secrecy and stigma that surround experiences of child sexual abuse. The average age when abuse occurs is 9 years of age.

Who sexually abuses children?

People who sexually abuse children are usually known to the child and/or the child's family.

The rates of strangers sexually abusing children is very low. About 90% of child sexual abuse perpetrated by adults is carried out by adult males who are known to the child. Between 3.9% and 10.7% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by adult women, also known to the child.

Children and young people can also be perpetrators of sexually abusive behaviours towards other children. 30% -50% of all child sexual abuse involves children engaging in sexually abusive behaviours with their peers.

What is grooming?

- People who sexually abuse children will often engage in what is called grooming. Grooming is when a person gains the trust of a child and/or their caregiver by developing a bond.
- This may be a gradual process and often does not start with sexually abusive touch or behaviours. It can be recognised by looking out for signs such as:
- Taking an over interest in a child face to face, by phone, text and/or online
- Regularly offering to spend time with a child alone, wanting overnight visits or co sleeping
- Being exceptionally helpful in supporting a family, in a way that is outside the person's role
- Buying a child gifts or providing food, clothing or other necessities
- Insisting on touching or tickling a child when the child doesn't want to. This touch may increase in intensity and sexual nature as the child grows more used to the initial touch
- Encouraging children to use alcohol and drugs with them
- Showing explicit materials, pornography and/or their body and genitals to a child

Not all people who sexually abuse children will use grooming techniques, some instances of sexual abuse will happen more immediately and be linked to opportunistic or environmental factors (such as place, time or access to a child).

What are the signs of child sexual abuse?

Children do not always verbally tell you they have been abused. Their behaviour can provide valuable clues for the adults around them. Often there will be more than one sign. It is the responsibility of adults to take action and protect children from experiencing harm.

Some indicators can include:

- Changes in normal behaviour for the child including withdrawal, aggression, fear or depression
- Bedwetting, soiling or urinating in clothing and/or having difficulty with personal hygiene
- Using sexual language, engaging in sexual play or displaying sexual knowledge that is above their age and developmental stage
- Masturbation that is excessive and not easily distracted, masturbation in public after age 5
- Bruising, injury, soreness or redness around the penis, vagina, mouth or anus
- Excessive compliance or a desire to be overly obedient
- A child tells you they have been harmed

How can you respond to a disclosure of abuse?

Whether you are a parent, carer or professional your first response in the moment with the child will be to listen and believe. Children very rarely make up stories about sexual abuse.

Stay calm and let the child speak at their own pace. Don't ask leading questions or make promises you cannot keep. Remember that your reaction to the disclosure can make all the difference to a child or young person and their ability and confidence to seek future support, talk to others and process their experience/s of harm.

A disclosure of abuse is usually a staged process for a child rather than one conversation.

Disclosures may be verbal, behavioural, accidental or intentional. We recommend visiting the Australian Institute of Family Studies website where there is an excellent guide to responding to children's and young people's disclosures of abuse <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/responding-children-and-young-people-s-disclosures-abu>.

All disclosures of abuse should be reported to the relevant state or territory child protection agency. If a child is in immediate danger, contact the Police. (See details at end for relevant contact information)

Keeping children safe and preventing child sexual abuse

It is the responsibility of adults to keep children safe, this includes helping children to develop personal safety skills. Talking about personal safety should not be frightening or scary for a child.

Teach children personal safety skills

Talk often, talk early and keep talking about personal safety with children

- Early in a child's life teach them the anatomical names for their private parts – nipples, penis, vagina, vulva, anus
- Explain body boundaries and that it is not OK for anyone to touch their private parts or ask them to touch theirs. It is also not OK for them to ask other children or adults to touch their private parts
- Talk about the rules for touch and teach children they can say no to touch (that makes them feel scared or uncomfortable). Children need to learn that their body belongs to them
- Talk about body clues and how the body can give us warning signs when we are not feeling safe
- Explain the difference between safe and unsafe secrets (ie a surprise birthday party for a family member is a safe secret. An unsafe secret might be if someone showed you rude pictures at school and told you not to tell because you would get into trouble)
- Teach children to Recognise, React and Report when they don't feel safe and use developmentally appropriate resources and games to reinforce safety messages <http://www.keepingkidssafe.com.au>

Listen and learn about the child's world

- Listen when a child tells you they don't want to see a particular person or go to a particular place
- Don't force children to kiss or hug people
- Have an awareness of the day to day life of your child
 - Who are their friends?
 - Where are they spending most time?
 - What are they doing online and who are they communicating with?
 - How can they contact you if there is a problem?

Keep communication open

Discuss who they could talk to if they felt unsafe and what they could do.

- Practice using stories and scenarios to problem solve. Do not always make these about strangers
- Reinforce basic safety messages and ensure children know the phone numbers of people they can call on for help or to talk to
- Explain that it is OK to say no to an adult or child if they are doing something that is not OK or makes the child feel unsafe. Let the child know they will not get into trouble if they tell you about an unsafe secret someone has asked them to keep
- Remind your child that it is always OK to talk to you, no matter what the issue, you care about them and want to help them to stay safe

Where to get help

- In an emergency call triple zero 000
- If you suspect that a child has experienced abuse or is at risk of harm you should contact the relevant state or territory child protection agency. The Australian Institute of Family Studies has an up to date contact list <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/reporting-abuse-and-neglect>
- If you make a report and you still believe that a child is not safe or receiving the support they need you can contact the children's commissioner or guardian in your state or territory. They are independent of government and their role is to advocate for the rights of children <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/mandatory-reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect>
- Parentline 1800 30 1300 provide free telephone counselling and advice to parents and carers. Resources are available to support parents and carers to understand a wide range of issues related to raising children and young people <https://www.parentline.com.au>
- If you would like more information about child abuse or advice about what to do if you are concerned about a child contact Child Wise's National Child Abuse Helpline on 1800 991 099 <http://www.childwise.org.au>
- Resources teach child safety skills to children and young people are available from the Daniel Morcombe Foundation <http://www.keepingkidssafe.com.au>

References and resources

Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2014, *Who abuses children?* viewed 30 January 2018 <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/who-abuses-children>

Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Final report: Preface and executive summary*, viewed 30 January 2018 <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/terms-reference>

El-Murr, A, 2017, *Problem sexual behaviours and sexually abusive behaviours in Australian children and young people: A review of available literature*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, CFCA Paper No. 46, viewed 30 January 2018 <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/problem-sexual-behaviours-and-sexually-abusive-behaviours-australian-children>

Queensland Government, 2017, *Child Sexual Abuse*, viewed 30 January 2018 <https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/protecting-children/what-child-abuse/child-sexual-abuse>