

Child Sexual Abuse: An Overview

In your role, you will support children and young people (child) who are at risk of or have been sexually abused by a family member or carer.

Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) conducts investigative interviews and risk assessments for children where sexual abuse is suspected. Your responsibilities include:

- respond to a child's sexual abuse disclosures in a way that makes them feel heard, understood, and supported
- report allegations of child sexual abuse to DCJ
- undertake a reportable conduct investigation when the suspected offender is a carer
- support a child to heal from the trauma of sexual abuse.

This fact sheet will help you understand:

- what child sexual abuse is
- grooming tactics used by offenders and their impact on the child
- risk factors that can increase a child's vulnerability to being targeted for sexual abuse
- the impact of sexual abuse on children
- common myths and facts about child sexual abuse.

The fact sheet [Responding to Child Sexual Abuse](#) will help you to understand:

- barriers to children disclosing sexual abuse
- recognising disclosure and responding to children
- how you can work effectively with children, trusted parents and carers and offenders

- the different roles of your organisation and DCJ when a child discloses sexual abuse.

Working in a trauma-informed way will help you build a trusting relationship with a child that enables you to have an understanding of the sexual abuse the child has survived and the way it affects their thoughts, feelings, behaviours and relationships.

Information for these fact sheets is taken from DCJ's practice kit. [See 'understand & respond to child sexual abuse'](#) (2016), which is available on the DCJ website.

“Sexual abuse is when someone involves a child or young person in a sexual activity by using their power over them or taking advantage of their trust. Often children or young people are bribed or threatened physically and psychologically to make them participate in the activity.
Sexual abuse is a crime.”

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse are generally closely connected to children. In a 2016 [Personal Safety Survey](#) detailed in the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 88% of children under 15 years who were victims of sexual abuse, knew their offender. Perpetrators are uncles, dads, mum's boyfriend, cousins, coaches, teaches and more.

The range of abusive behaviours perpetrated by an offender include, but are not limited to:

- using coercion, deception, threats, bribes, or other types of trickery to force the child to perform sexual acts
- touching the child's body or genitals causing fear, confusion or distress
- coercing or forcing a child to view a person's genitals
- coercing or forcing a child to touch a person's genitals
- coercing or forcing a child to pose, undress or perform acts of a sexualised nature on video or in person

- making threats, using trickery or blackmailing a child and forcing them to take part in sexualised abuse
- making remarks of a sexual nature
- coercing or forcing a child to look at sexual material
- making humiliating comments about a child's actions or body using sexualised language.

Tip: Offenders may use more playful tactics to engage children in sexual activities. Therefore, children may not be frightened at the time and only realise later they were being sexual abuse.

Sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse where children are targeted, groomed and gradually introduced into a 'relationship' or situation that they perceive as normal but is actually abusive. Children (or a third person/s) receive something for performing, or others performing on them, sexual activities, i.e. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts or money. Sexual exploitation can also occur through the use of technology without the child noticing. For example, they may be persuaded to post or send sexual images on the internet or by mobile phone with no immediate payment or gain. In all cases those exploiting the child have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength or economic or other resources.

Grooming

Grooming describes behaviour by the offender towards the child. This behaviour is focused on increasing opportunities for sexual abuse to occur and reducing the child's ability to tell others what is happening. Grooming can also refer to the deliberate manipulation of the child's family, carers and community (including professionals) to obscure their abuse and minimise the risks of disclosure.

The impact of offender tactics on the child

To work with children who are at risk or have survived sexual abuse, we need to understand the way in which the offender is likely to have manipulated and groomed the child; and how this has influenced their identity, their view of the world and their view of others.

Offender tactic: Building trust & connection	Impact on child: Disconnect and confusion
<p>This tactic can be very difficult to distinguish from a supportive and healthy adult-child relationship. The offender develops a relationship with the child by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spending extra time with them giving them gifts • offering support and encouragement • making statements about how much they care about them • singling one child out of a sibling group and treating them as ‘special’. <p>The offender may develop strong relationships with family and community members by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • becoming indispensable • supporting the child and family financially, emotionally, or practically • discrediting the child to decrease the likelihood the child will be believed if they do disclose. 	<p>Child sexual abuse changes a normal and healthy connection into one that is harmful and confusing. This can have a profound effect on the child’s identity and sense of reality. The child may hold two realities. They may love and idealise the offender and not want them to leave their life. At the same time, they want the abuse to stop.</p> <p>The child’s experience of closeness is strongly linked to their experience of abuse which can create confusion and distress. It may cause the child to believe the abuse is normal and acceptable or to believe they enjoyed the abuse.</p> <p>When the child is aware of the offender’s connection to their family and community, they may feel isolated, confused, and doubtful that they will be believed. They may believe the abuse is normal or permitted by their family.</p>
Offender Tactic: Secrecy	Impact on Child: Isolation
<p>The offender may isolate the child by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • belittling or discrediting the child • blaming the child for ‘bad behaviour’ • preventing the child from spending time with friends or protective adults. 	<p>The process of isolating and stigmatising the child means that they become alienated from those people they may have otherwise disclosed to. They may believe that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • their parents, carers or people in the community think that the abuse is acceptable • no one will believe their disclosure.

Offender Tactic: Responsibility	Impact on Child: Guilt & self-blame
<p>The offender tells the child that the abuse is their fault because they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘led them on’ • ‘benefited from the abuse’ and therefore are responsible. <p>The offender tells the child they are responsible for protecting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • their parents, carers and siblings from the distress and shame of the abuse • their parents and carers from relationship breakdown or community retribution • the offender from criminal proceedings • their brothers / sisters from abuse. 	<p>The child believes that the abuse is their fault. The child believes that they are responsible for the wellbeing of others and is fearful of the consequences of disclosure for themselves, their family, and the offender.</p>
Offender Tactic: Power & control	Impact on Child: Powerlessness
<p>The offender uses tactic of power and control such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • threatening the child • telling the child that no one will believe them • threatening people who are close to the child • increasing the abusive acts against the child. <p>These threats and intimidation may be quite difficult for the outside observer to notice and may be as subtle as a glance or a code word that only the child understands.</p>	<p>The child may become so fearful of the offender that they believe they cannot change or stop the abuse. They become worried about the consequences of disclosing the abuse, both for themselves and others.</p>

Source: [Working with Children](#), See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse: A practical kit, Family and Community Services, p.11-12.

For more information on the ways an offender can groom the community around the child, go to the fact sheet [Responding to Child Sexual Abuse](#).

Children who display sexually harmful behaviour

Sexually harmful behaviour is when a child has used their power, authority or status to engage another child in sexual activity that is unwanted or where the other child is not capable of giving consent, i.e., younger or cognitively impaired children. Physical force or threats are sometimes involved.

For more information, see [Safety Planning](#) and [Responding to Child Sexual Abuse](#).

How often are children sexually abused?

Australian and international data suggests that girls are more likely to be sexually abused than boys. In Australia, between 12 and 22 per cent of girls and five and seven per cent of boys are sexually abused in their childhood.

How does gender affect prevalence?

- Girls are more likely than boys to be sexually abused by stepfathers, biological fathers and other male relatives in the family home.
- Boys are more likely than girls to experience abuse by strangers or people outside the family. They are also more likely to be abused in the offender's home, institution or in a public space, and more likely to have witnesses to their abuse.
- Boys are more likely than girls to be sexually abused by peers or others of similar age including siblings, cousins, other relatives, and residents in institutions.

Go to chapter two of the [OSP Child Sexual Abuse Literature Review](#), for an overview of studies looking at how often children are sexually abused and chapter three for more information about the impact of gender on children's experiences of sexual abuse.

Risk Factors

Child sexual abuse occurs across all cultural groups, genders, ages, and socioeconomic groups. However, several studies have shown that offenders target children and families who have certain characteristics and are already under stress, marginalised and vulnerable.

This table gives an overview of these risks and vulnerabilities:

Risk factors that increase a child's vulnerability	
Individual	
Gender	Girls are more likely to be victims of child sexual assault
Sexuality	Gay and bisexual males are more likely than heterosexual males to be sexually abused. Lesbian and bisexual females are more likely than heterosexual females to be sexually abused.
Age	Children are most vulnerable to abuse between the ages of 7 and 12. Children abused by a family member are more likely to be younger than those abused by non-family members. Teenagers report sexual abuse more often than younger children. In the majority of cases the offender is another young person.
Disability	Children with mental health issues or intellectual or physical disabilities are more likely to be sexually abused than other children and to have been abused more than once. Children with intellectual and sensory disabilities, communication impairments and behavioural difficulties are at heightened risk of sexual abuse compared to children with other types of disability.
Experience of other forms of abuse	It is likely that children who have been sexually abused have also experienced and been victims of another form of abuse.
Social Isolation	Children with few friends, who lack confidence and have low self-esteem are at increased risk of child sexual abuse.
Family & Community	
Family size & make-up	Children living without either biological parent are at increased risk of sexual abuse. Children living with a single parent who has a live in partner are 20 times more likely to be victims of child sexual abuse. Children living with another child or sibling who has been sexually abused are at increased risk of being sexually abused.
Family functioning & domestic violence	Children who experience domestic violence are at significant risk of child sexual abuse. If a mother is assaulted by her partner, her daughters are nearly six times more likely to be sexually abused than other girls. Young people who were exposed to violence in the home when they were growing up are twice as likely to have been forced to have sex and four

	<p>times as likely to have admitted that they have forced a partner to have sex later in life.</p> <p>Marital conflict and separation are linked to increased risk of child sexual abuse</p>
Homelessness & housing instability	There is a small amount of evidence suggesting homelessness and moving house regularly makes children vulnerable to child sexual abuse.
Parent age/ education/ employment	Children of mothers who are young with low levels of education and employment are at increased risk of sexual abuse.
Parent mental health	There is a strong link between parental (especially a mother's) mental health issues and a heightened risk of child sexual abuse for their children.
Parent alcohol & substance misuse	<p>Parental drinking is strongly associated with risk of sexual abuse, especially if both parents drink.</p> <p>Children with foetal alcohol syndrome are 10 times more likely than those without to be sexually abused</p>
Parental history of abuse	Children whose mothers were sexually abused as children are at increased risk of child sexual abuse.
Parent/ child relationship & emotional availability	Poor parent-child attachment, including neglect and emotional unavailability, is associated with children being sexually abused.
Cultural & social experiences, attitudes, and practices	<p>A growing body of evidence shows the risk for child sexual abuse can be influenced by cultural and social attitudes and practices such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas about gender roles which may give men more power in the family or community and make them expect women to be compliant • attitudes towards sexuality that limit women's sexual expression and support aggressive male sexual behaviour • a lack of encouragement for open communication about sex and appropriate sexual behaviour • a limited understanding of child sexual abuse and indicators of sexual abuse. <p>Multiple government reports and a large body of literature have shown that Aboriginal children are at increased risk of sexual abuse. There appears to be consensus in the literature that this overrepresentation is due to the widespread disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal children, families, and communities.</p>

Source: [Overview](#), *See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse: A practical kit*, Family and Community Services, p. 8-9.

Offenders of sexual harm are skilled at exploiting these vulnerabilities by isolating them from people that can protect them.

Tip: Not all children who are being sexually abused will experience these risk factors and vulnerabilities.

What is the impact of child sexual abuse on children?

While every child's response to sexual abuse is individual, a number of short- and long-term negative impacts have been consistently reported. Even when other forms of abuse or childhood adversity are taken into account, children who have been sexually abused are at higher risk of experiencing a broad range of negative experiences throughout their lives, including.

- mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety; psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia and delusional disorders, personality disorders and eating disorders
- inflicting pain or injury on themselves
- suicidal thoughts or behaviour
- alcohol and substance misuse
- difficulties learning or concentrating
- difficulties maintaining supportive relationships
- difficulties parenting
- sexual and physical abuse or assault, including domestic violence, in childhood and as adults
- engagement in risky sexual behaviour such as having sex at a younger age, more sexual partners, and unprotected sex, leading to increased risk of contracting STDs and engaging in sex work.

Positive experiences from a child’s network, such as belief that the abuse occurred, social supports and therapeutic intervention, may significantly reduce the negative impact of sexual abuse.

Your work in seeing, understanding and responding to child sexual abuse can make the difference between children feeling heard and understood and a child feeling silenced and marginalised.

For more information, see [Responding to Child Sexual Abuse, Mental Health - Working with Children and Young People in PSP](#), [Talking with Children and Young People about Mental Health](#), [Trauma in Children in Out of Home Care](#).

Myths and Facts

There are several common and myths about child sexual abuse that may be held by parents, carers, community members and professionals. Offenders may rely on these myths to hide their abuse. These myths may also prevent professionals from seeing and understanding risk to children.

Myth	Fact
Children who do not appear to be stressed and traumatised have probably not been abused.	Some children will behave differently as a result of abuse. Noticing different behaviour and asking about it can increase the chances of disclosure. Yet some children who have been abused may not appear emotionally distressed; they may even respond warmly towards the suspected offender. This does not mean the child has not been abused and does not mean the child is not traumatised by the abuse. Children may mask their emotions for several reasons and may hold conflicting views about the suspected offender. For example, they may love him as their dad but hate his abuse.
There will be physical evidence of the abuse.	Some acts of sexual abuse (for example oral and digital abuse), leave no trace. Research conducted in 2002 reviewed 2384 children who were referred for medical investigation of sexual abuse. Only four per cent of the total number of children had medical findings that diagnosed sexual abuse
Children tend to lie and exaggerate their claims of	Labels like ‘liar’ and ‘attention-seeking’ are commonly used to silence and discredit children. Broad ranging research consistently shows that

sexual abuse, particularly those who are seeking attention from adults.	children are much more likely to minimise and deny their abuse than exaggerate or make up allegations.
Sex abuse is not related to other types of abuse	There are strong links between the presence of domestic violence and increased rates of sexual abuse of children, particularly when the abuse is perpetrated by a family member. There is an increased risk that a child will be sexually abused by a brother or sister within a family when a parent or other person is physically and emotional abusive, uses harsh discipline, is neglectful or uses pornography.
Mothers who are undergoing divorce proceedings make false allegations of sex abuse.	The separation of parents may present the first safe opportunity for a child to disclose sexual abuse. Most allegations are not false and the view that mothers make false allegations of sexual abuse has been frequently refuted by the research.
The parent or carer did not immediately believe their child, therefore they are not protective.	It is understandable that it can take parents and carers time to accept what their child tells them. Parents may question allegations, consider alternative explanations and fact check with other people. Initial disbelief does not mean the parent or carer cannot believe their child or will never believe their child.
Each suspected offender has a 'profile' which means they target children of specific genders of age groups and exclude children from other age groups.	While some offenders may target one gender or age group, many do not and there are no absolutes. The gender or age of previous victims does not mean another gender or age group is safe.
People who sexually harm children are always adults	Children also sexually harm other children. Research has found that the number of offences is likely to be much higher than recorded crime data and may be as high as 50 per cent of child sexual abuse offences.
Community members will quickly believe a suspected offender is guilty even if there is no supporting evidence.	It is difficult to believe a child's disclosure of abuse, particularly when the suspected offender appears 'normal'. This is because believing that a child has been sexually abused is confronting, particularly if we feel responsible for a child's safety. It can also make us question our core beliefs about our safety and the safety of our children and communities. It can be easier to believe a child has lied than to believe that the suspected offender has committed these acts of abuse.

All children in all communities are equally vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse can happen to any child. However, there are particularly vulnerable groups:

- children in care are almost twice as likely to be sexually abused and children in residential care are almost four times as likely to be sexually abused as other children.
- children with disabilities are more likely to be sexually abused than children without a disability. Large studies have shown that children with disabilities are between two and four times more likely to experience sexual abuse.
- data collected by NSW Government agencies suggests that Aboriginal girls are almost two and a half times more likely to be victims of child sexual abuse than non-Aboriginal girls. This is likely to be an underrepresentation due to underreporting of child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities.

Source: [Overview](#), *See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse: A practical kit*, Family and Community Services, p. 11-13.

References:

[DCJ's See, understand and respond to child sexual abuse resource kit](https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/providers/children-families/child-protection-services/resources), <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/providers/children-families/child-protection-services/resources>

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