

Protecting children from sexual abuse



Sexual abuse of children is a crime. It causes serious harm to children, their families and communities. The effects can last a lifetime.

There are things parents can do to help keep children safe. It is important children know when something is wrong and how to tell others about it.

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is when an adult or child involves a child in any kind of sexual activity. It can include:

- showing a child the sexual parts of someone's body or encouraging or forcing a child to show theirs
- encouraging a child to look at sexual videos or images
- making sexual comments to a child, eg about their private parts
- looking at a child in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable while they are going to the toilet, are in the bath or shower or undressing
- doing anything sexual with or to a child's body
- touching a child either over or under their clothing in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable, or encouraging or forcing a child to touch themselves or someone else in a sexual way
- encouraging a child to make or send videos or photos of themselves or other children in their underwear, partially dressed or naked.

Children cannot consent to sexual activity. They are never to blame for sexual abuse.

When sexual abuse happens, children:

- may be scared they will get into trouble or cause a lot of problems if they tell
- often feel no-one will believe them or that they are to blame
- can feel embarrassed or ashamed
- can feel confused about how they feel or how they have responded to the abuse
- can think that what's happening is 'normal'.

Offenders often use a 'grooming' process to build the trust of a child and/or their family. They can use persuasion, tricks or force, or none of these. Offenders may also try to keep the child or parent silent through threats, bribes or other means.

Child sexual abuse can happen in families and communities of any income, culture or religion. It is against the law.

What parents can do

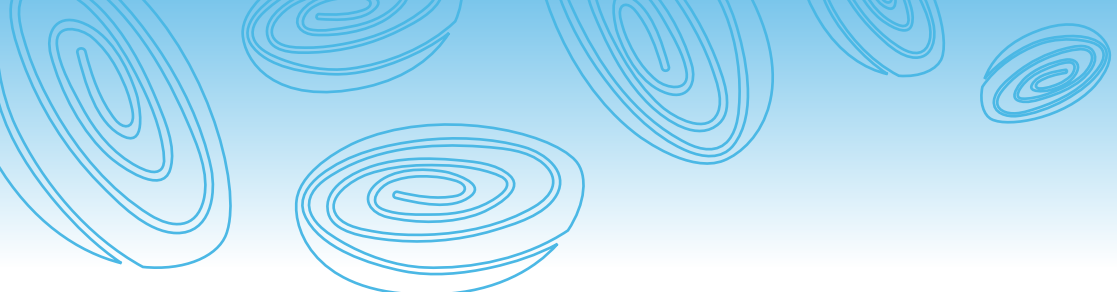
Make time to talk

Make time to talk with your child each day. Stop what you are doing and really listen.

Help them to know:

- they can talk with you about anything – the good things as well as things that worry or confuse them
- that you will listen and understand and they won't be in trouble
- the difference between surprises that are OK to keep, eg birthdays, and secrets that are not.

Good communication means children will be more likely to tell you if something doesn't feel right – even if it is hard to talk about or involves a family member or friend.



Talk about safety

Teach children from an early age:

- what being safe means and what it feels like
- about body signals that tell them when something is wrong or when they don't feel safe, eg shaky legs, sweaty palms, bad butterflies in their tummy
- to name their feelings and tell you if they feel confused or scared.

Teach children about their body

Teach children:

- that their whole body is private. It is not OK for others to touch their private parts (those covered by their underwear), or for them to touch others' private parts
- how to say 'No' or 'Stop' in a loud, clear voice to any touching they do not like or want, and to tell you or someone they trust straight away. Unwanted touching should never be kept a secret
- the correct names for parts of their body, including sexual parts so they are better able to talk about them
- that adults are not always right. Children should feel confident they can trust their feelings.

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While abuse by strangers does happen, most sexual abuse is by someone a child or family knows and trusts.

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Build strong boundaries

Have clear boundaries for personal privacy in your home so that children learn this is a normal part of life. This includes:

- noticing and respecting when children do not want physical contact. Some children will say 'No' and some might pull away from hugs or cuddles
- not making them kiss someone if they don't want to
- giving them privacy in the toilet or shower as long as it's safe.

It can be harder for an abuser to harm a child who can assert their boundaries.

Create safety networks

Help your child identify people they feel safe with that they could contact if needed, eg family members, teachers, local police, community members. Make sure:

- the people they choose are happy to be in your child's safety network
- you update this list often
- your child knows how to contact people in their network
- they know a phone number to call in an emergency or that someone could call for them
- they know a support service to call, eg Kids Helpline, Headspace.

Safety in public places

Teach children to avoid risky situations when away from home, including:

- not going off alone
- being alert to what's going on around them
- running to where you are, or a group of people if a stranger, or someone they feel uncomfortable with approaches them.

Always make sure you can see your children at a park or playground and go with them into the toilet.

If children walk to school make sure they know to:

- walk with friends or where there are other people
- go into a shop or front yard of a house if they are scared. If really scared, knock on the door and ask the person to phone a trusted person (eg, from their safety network) but don't go inside. Help them learn the best number to call.

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Teach children about risky situations rather than dangerous people. An abuser might not seem scary or could be someone they know.

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Online and phone safety

The online world is risky for children. Make sure they know how to use the internet and mobile phones safely, including:

- not sharing private information
- understanding that people online may not be who they seem
- not agreeing to meet new online friends without you
- not taking photos of themselves to share. They not only lose control of the image but can be committing an offence
- the risks of using webcams.

If children get calls, texts or anything that makes them feel uncomfortable, even if from a friend, encourage them to tell you straight away. Explain to older children the dangers of responding and help them keep a record of any numbers or images. You can make a report to eSafety, Crime Stoppers or ThinkUKnow.

Be aware

Be concerned if an adult or child:

- often wants to spend time with young children rather than adults or children their own age
- doesn't respect a child's personal space. They might ask sexual questions or ignore a child when they say 'No' to being kissed, touched or tickled
- talks about sex or tells sexual jokes in front of children
- shows sexual images to children, eg videos, photos
- talks about a child's developing body, makes fun of their private body parts or refers to children in sexual terms, eg 'sexy', 'seductive'
- often offers to look after a child in a private setting
- seeks a special friendship with a child, wants to be alone with them and tries to exclude you from their interactions
- tells children to keep secrets

- is too generous with affection or gifts
- shares alcohol or drugs with children.

Some abusers may offer help and support to vulnerable families and target isolated or lonely children who respond well to special attention.

Children living with disability are at higher risk of abuse as they may depend on adults for their care. Help your child to be as independent as possible in dressing, hygiene, toileting and eating, and learn how to tell someone if something is wrong. Seek support from professionals if you need it.

Watch how children react to others and don't make them be around someone they are not comfortable with.

If a child tells you someone is harming them

Parents may think a child is lying if they talk about sexual abuse, especially if it involves someone the family trusts. Children don't usually make things up about sexual abuse.

If a child tells you someone is harming them:

- listen and don't dismiss what they say. It takes a lot of courage for a child to disclose abuse. Reassure them they are right to tell, and you believe them. Say it is not their fault no matter what anyone has told them
- stay calm. They may be afraid to say more if you seem shocked or upset
- don't ask lots of questions. Let them tell you in their own words at their own pace
- make sure the child is safe and say you will take steps to stop them being harmed. Let them know you will have to talk to someone else so you can keep them safe. Reassure them they are not in trouble
- contact the Child Abuse Report Line on 13 14 78. They can help you work out what to do.

Take action if a child tells you someone is harming them. You may be the only person they tell.



Children displaying harmful sexual behaviours

Some children display harmful sexual behaviours towards other children. They can be a sibling or someone living with or known to the child. Some may be harming more than one child.

If this is happening:

- take immediate action to stop the behaviour. The child being harmed needs to be safe and the child displaying harmful behaviour needs help to stop
- seek professional help for both children. You could contact the Child Abuse Report Line on 13 14 78 for advice.

Possible signs of sexual abuse

Children exposed to sexual attention often change how they behave. They may have physical signs or act in ways that are not usual for them. They might:

- seem to know more about sex than is usual for their age
- become more clingy, wet or soil their pants or the bed or have sleep problems or nightmares
- do drawings which show sexual body parts or being hurt by others. They might also act this out with their toys
- get upset or scared when people talk about bodies or sex
- become withdrawn and compliant, or angry and destructive
- hurt themselves or take big risks
- show sexual behaviour towards younger or more vulnerable children
- start having problems at school, not want to go to school, or neglect personal hygiene to keep people away
- be red or sore around the mouth or genitals for no obvious reason.

Some of these behaviours can be caused by other things in your child's life.

Talk with your child often and don't ignore changes that seem out of character.

Effects of sexual abuse

Sexual abuse has a big impact on a child's ability to trust adults to keep them safe, and to relate to others. They can feel:

- scared, angry or all alone because they can't tell anyone
- helpless because they can't control what is happening to them
- embarrassed or ashamed of what has happened or believe they are to blame.

As adolescents they may become sexually active at an earlier age and/or take other risks. As adults it can affect their intimate relationships or make them feel worthless, anxious or depressed. They can feel fearful for children of their own.

Getting support early can make a big difference to children and young people and help them deal with the impact of the abuse.

Note: 'Child' in this Guide refers to children up to 18 years. This aligns with the national strategy on child sexual abuse. 'Parents' refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.



Child protection is everyone's business

Child sexual abuse can be prevented and stopped. Everyone can help make sure children are safe.

Australia has a National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse. In South Australia there are laws requiring certain people to report suspected child abuse, eg doctors, nurses, dentists, psychologists, police, probation officers, social workers, teachers, family day carers, clergy and those working where services are provided to children, including sports.

The Department for Child Protection and the Police have a legal responsibility to protect children. They investigate reports of child abuse and may remove children who are at serious risk of harm at home.

People in the community can also report their concerns. It is important to do this even if you think it is not your business or you don't want to get involved. You could stop a child being harmed and help a family get support.

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If you suspect a child is being abused, call the Child Abuse Report Line on 13 14 78.
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Want more information?

Police

Phone 000 if there is immediate danger
Phone 13 14 44 for Police attendance

Child Abuse Report Line

Phone 13 14 78, 24 hours
If you are concerned a child is being abused or neglected

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100
For advice on child health and parenting

Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 551 800, 24 hours
Phone and online counselling and support for children and young people aged 5 to 25 and their parents www.kidshelp.com.au

Headspace

Phone 1800 650 890
Talk face to face, by phone or chat online at www.eHeadSpace.org.au
Support and counselling for young people aged 12-25 and their families
Find your local centre at www.HeadSpace.org.au

1800 RESPECT

Phone 1800 737 732, 24 hours
Talk to someone by phone or online about family violence or sexual assault www.1800respect.org.au

eSafety Commissioner

Phone 1800 880 176
For information about keeping children safe online and reporting abuse www.esafety.gov.au

Crime Stoppers SA

Phone 1800 333 000
To report crimes including online grooming
www.crimestopperssa.com.au

ThinkUKnow

Online safety information and to report online grooming to Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation www.thinkuknow.org.au

Department for Child Protection

Phone 8124 4185
For information on child protection and reporting abuse
www.childprotection.sa.gov.au

Department for Education

Keeping Safe: Child Protection Curriculum (KS:CPC)
Information and resources for parents and caregivers to help children and young people keep themselves safe
www.education.sa.gov.au/parents-and-families/curriculum-and-learning/early-years/keeping-safe-child-protection-curriculum-information-parents-and-carers

Department of Human Services

ASK - Adults Supporting Kids
Help and support for parents and caregivers to keep children safe
<https://adultsupportingkids.com.au/seeking-help/are-you-a-parent-extended-family-member-or-caregiver-supporting-kids>

True - Relationships and Reproductive Health, Queensland

Traffic lights brochure on problematic sexual behaviours in children
www.wbsass.com.au/themes/default/basemedia/content/files/Traffic-LightsBrochure.pdf

Women's and Children Hospital

Sexualised Behaviour Therapy Service
Phone 8161 7346, 9am-5pm, Mon to Fri
Therapy for children aged 2-12 showing problematic sexual behaviour and their families
Phone 7321 4500 for advice about referrals for older children

National Office for Child Safety

For the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse and 'A guide for children and young people' (9 years and over), families and communities www.childsafety.pmc.gov.au

Raising Children Network

Information on raising children, including protecting children from sexual abuse www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including 'Cyber safety', 'Child abuse', 'Children and learning about sexuality', 'Talking sex with young people' and 'Family violence' www.parenting.sa.gov.au

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**Government
of South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services
and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Phone: 08 8303 1660

Web: www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended
to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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