

Child abuse



Sometimes children are abused or neglected by their parents, caregivers or others close to them.

Some people think it is only abuse if a child is physically hurt. Children are also abused when they are made to feel worthless or unloved, when they live with violence or their basic needs are ignored. This can be just as harmful and the effects can last a lifetime.

About child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and neglect is when a child is physically, emotionally or sexually harmed. It is also when their health, safety or wellbeing needs are not being met by their family.

Child abuse can happen in families of any income, culture or religion. It often happens over a long period of time, but single one-off events can be abuse too. The effects of abuse and neglect are serious and can last a lifetime.

Physical

Physical abuse is when a child's body is harmed by things such as punching, hitting, shaking, biting or burning. There may be cuts, bruises or broken bones. Sometimes there are no signs because the injuries are internal. In extreme cases, children can die.

A child's physical needs can also be neglected. They may not have a place to live, or live somewhere that isn't safe. They might not have enough food or clothes, or not be kept clean. They might be left alone or not be well supervised.

It is also neglect when a child is not given the health care they need, including mental health care, or when parents don't make sure the child goes to school.

Emotional

Emotional abuse is just as harmful as physical abuse. It is when a child is treated in ways that make them feel scared, worthless or alone. It can be less obvious which means others may not notice it or do anything about it. It can build up over time.

A parent might:

- ignore a child or refuse to accept them
- not show love, or withdraw love to control the child
- constantly shout at a child
- criticise, tease or shame them
- make them feel different from other family members or deliberately target them
- encourage a child to break the law
- threaten someone or something they care about.

Family violence

Living with family violence harms children emotionally, even if they are not the direct victim. It affects their growing brain and can delay their development.

Children can feel they are to blame for the violence. They can feel powerless and scared when a loved parent is mistreated, and ashamed that they can't stop it. They can worry about family members or pets being harmed.

Children can also be physically harmed when there is violence. They may get caught up in what's going on, or be intentionally hurt as a way of 'getting at' the other parent. Children may be neglected because family life is so disrupted.

Children have a right to be safe and cared for in their own home. Child abuse and neglect is against the law.



Sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is when an adult or older or stronger child persuades, tricks or forces a child into sexual activity. It includes sexual acts, inappropriate touching, showing the child pornography, letting them watch adults having sex or involving them in prostitution. They may use threats or bribes to keep the child silent.

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

Not all parents mean to cause harm to their children. Some may be struggling with their own problems, or might not know better ways to care for children. Parents might:

- find life hard and get very stressed. They might have problems with money, alcohol, drugs, relationships or mental health, and lash out at children when under pressure
- struggle to control how they respond to children or not respond at all
- feel alone and unsupported
- expect too much for a child's age and get angry when they can't do something or behave 'well'
- not understand that children need to feel safe and secure
- not understand children's behaviour. A parent might think a child is being naughty when really they are scared and need comfort. Children can also go back to younger behaviours when they are stressed, eg act more like a baby, wet the bed again when they have been dry, or not sleep through the night
- think it's OK because that is how they were treated as children.

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There are services that can help parents to look after their children well, even when they are under pressure.
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Child abuse and discipline

Some parents hit children when they are angry with the child's behaviour. This can cross the line into child abuse. If you feel like harming your child, it can help to ask yourself:

- 'Would it be OK for someone to do this to me?'
- 'Am I taking things out on my child?'
- 'If I hit my child, will they think it's OK to hit others?'
- 'How can I teach my child what I want them to do?'

Hitting, yelling and punishments are not the best way to teach children. They learn to fear you and do not learn the behaviour you want. They can learn that hitting is OK.

- First pause and try to become calm before you respond. It's easier to work out what could be going on for your child. They may be tired or hungry, need extra comforting, or not yet have the skills to behave as you expect.
- It's better to explain what you want patiently and kindly. It takes time for children to learn. You may need to repeat the same thing many times, and it can be hard to stay patient. Praise children when they do well.

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It can help to remember that hitting an adult is against the law. Children are smaller and less able to protect themselves.
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Effects on children

When children are abused their trust in others is broken. This affects how they form relationships in the future and how they interact with other people. It can make them feel worthless, and they are more likely to develop low self-esteem and mental health problems. They can think that what's happening is 'normal'.

They can be more likely to do risky things, eg using drugs and alcohol, having unsafe sex, getting into fights, running away or breaking the law.

Abuse can change how a child's brain develops and how they learn. It can also make it harder for them to manage their feelings and behaviour.

As adults they can be at risk of getting into relationships where there is abuse. This repeats the cycle.



Break the cycle of abuse. Even if you don't see the effects of abuse straight away, the harm can go on for generations.

If a child tells you someone is harming them

Children may be scared they will get into trouble or cause a lot of problems if they tell. They often feel no one will believe them or that they are to blame.

- Listen to them. Don't dismiss what they say. It takes courage for a child to talk about their abuse. Reassure them that they are right to tell you and you believe them. Thank them for telling you and acknowledge how hard it can be to tell someone.
- Stay calm. They may be afraid to say more if you show you are shocked or upset. If it seems like the right thing to do, comfort the child, perhaps by asking if they want a hug.
- Don't ask lots of questions. Let them tell you in their own words at their own pace.
- Tell them that you care about them and want to help them be safe.
- Make sure the child is safe and let them know you will do your best to stop them being harmed. Let them know you might have to talk to someone else, and they are not in trouble.
- Contact the Child Abuse Report Line on 13 14 78. They can help you work out what to do. They are required to keep your details confidential.

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

If you need help to look after your child

If you easily get upset and angry there are services that can help you to manage these feelings. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Your doctor is a good place to start.

You could also:

- spend time with supportive, positive people
- develop a network of family and friends you can talk to, and ask for help when you need it
- seek help with the things that are stressing you in your life, eg money, relationships, drugs, alcohol
- look after your health and wellbeing, including your mental health. With all the demands on parents, it can be hard to get the time to care for yourself. If you look after yourself you can take better care of your children
- learn about child development at different ages. You may be less upset if you know your child isn't yet able to do something you want them to do
- show your child what you expect of them calmly and patiently. Seek support if you need help with your child's behaviour
- show your child that you love them in the things you do and say every day. It will help them to feel safe and secure.

If there is violence in your family

If there is violence in your family it is important to seek help. It doesn't usually stop by itself.

If you or your children are in immediate danger phone the Police on 000, or 131 444 for Police attendance. You can also call the Domestic Violence Crisis Line on 1800 800 098.





Child protection is everyone's business

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

In South Australia there are laws to protect children, and certain people must make a report if they suspect child abuse. This applies to 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 remove children who are at serious risk and cannot be kept safe 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 from being harmed and help a family to get support.

If you suspect a child is being abused, call the Child Abuse Report Line on 13 14 78. They will keep your details confidential.

Want more information?

Police

Phone 000 if there is immediate danger
Phone 131 444 for Police attendance

Crime Stoppers SA

Phone 1800 333 000
To report a crime www.crimestopperssa.com.au

Child Abuse Report Line

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

1800 RESPECT

Phone 1800 737 732, 24 hours
A national online and phone counselling and support service for anyone experiencing family violence or sexual assault www.1800respect.org.au

Domestic Violence Crisis Line

Phone 1800 800 098, 24 hours
For information, counselling and safe accommodation options for anyone experiencing family violence www.womenssafetyervices.com.au

Department for Child Protection

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

National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN)

Information for parents, carers and services on preventing child abuse and neglect www.napcan.org.au

Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 55 1800
Phone and online counselling and support for children and young people 5 to 25 years
www.kidshelp.com.au

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100
Advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri for an appointment. See www.cyh.com for information on child health and parenting

Raising Children Network

Information on raising children, including the impact of abuse and neglect www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including 'Protecting children from sexual abuse', 'Family violence' and 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour' www.parenting.sa.gov.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

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

**Ph: 08 8303 1660
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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