



Wise up  
to sexual abuse

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A guide for parents  
and carers.

This booklet contains some sexually explicit material not appropriate for reading by young children.



Child Wise is a charity protecting children's futures.

The Wise Up program aims to educate Australians to become aware of the signs of child sexual abuse in order to:

- Identify risky situations
- Know how to respond to children's disclosures
- Know who to report concerns to.

The definition of a child as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is anyone under the age of 18. Child Wise uses this definition as the only consistent definition able to be applied to any child anywhere in the world.

# “Child abuse is a basic lack of respect for children.”

*The Hon Alistair Nicholson A.O, R.D.F, Q.C, 2005*

## **Physical abuse**

Physical abuse is the purposeful or careless causing of physical harm including punching, beating, shaking, biting, burning or otherwise physically hurting a child.

## **Emotional abuse**

Emotional abuse involves continuing behaviour by adults towards children, which includes verbal attacks, threats, rejection, isolation, belittling or name calling which erodes social competence or self esteem over time.

Exposure to chaotic, controlling or violent environments (including family violence) is also an indicator of emotional abuse.

## **Neglect**

Neglect is the failure to provide for a child's basic needs for food, shelter, supervision and physical and emotional care. This lack of care can negatively impact upon a child's overall development.

## **Sexual abuse**

Sexual abuse occurs when someone uses their power, force or authority to involve a child in sexual activity. There are many forms of child sexual abuse and these are described in more detail in this booklet.

# What is child sexual abuse?

**95% of children are sexually abused by someone they know and trust.**

*(CCPCA, 1992)*

**Child sexual abuse is always a crime. It is never the child's fault and the person abusing the child is ALWAYS 100% responsible.**

**Types of child sexual abuse may include:**

- Verbal/suggestive sexual comments
- Exhibitionism, e.g. 'flashing'
- Touching a child's genitals
- Exposing or involving a child in masturbation

- Oral sex
- Any form of penetration
- Showing a child pornographic images
- Taking photographs of a child for sexual purposes
- The viewing or downloading of sexualised images of children.

**It is estimated that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 7 boys will be subject to some form of unwanted sexual act/activity.**

*(Australian Institute of Criminology, 2000)*

**Some studies show that 1 in every 15 children will experience severe forms of sexual abuse involving penetration.**

*('Childhood Sexual Abuse: An Evidence Based Perspective' by David M. Fergusson and Paul Mullin: 1999 p.28.)*

## What are the impacts on children?

Child sexual abuse harms a child's ability to develop healthily, learn, enjoy feeling safe and reach their full potential.

Child sexual abuse has short, medium, and long term effects on the child's development, their relationships and future.

## Some of these impacts include feelings of:

- Isolation
- Self loathing leading to self harm
- Fear and anxiety
- Guilt and blame
- Lacking trust in self as well as others.

## Why we need to prevent child sexual abuse

We know that the harm caused by child abuse is minimised when intervention takes place as early as possible. It is vital that those caring for children know how to recognise the signs of abuse, talk to children about their safety and know how to report abuse.

Children who are victims of sexual abuse may become vulnerable to repeated sexual abuse in the future. Up to a third of children may go on to perpetrate abuse or harm others if they do not get help as soon as possible.

# What to look for

**There can be behavioural (and more rarely physical) signs that a child has been sexually abused. Children don't often immediately tell an adult they are being abused.**

They are more likely to show confusion or distress through their behaviour and play. They may indicate what's happening through tentative comments such as, "I don't like going there," "he/she does funny things when we go there," and so on.

## **Possible signs of child sexual abuse include:**

### **Sophisticated or unusual sexual behaviour or knowledge**

Children who have been sexually abused may demonstrate sexual

behaviours beyond their age appropriate level. Because they have not understood their abusive experiences, children play them out in an attempt to understand them. Children's sexual play is discussed in more detail later in this booklet.

### **Significant change in level of performance at school**

Children who have been sexually abused can either increase their school performance in an attempt to shift focus or 'block out' their abusive experiences; or decrease their performance, due to a reduced sense of self worth and difficulties concentrating.

### **Storytelling and lies**

Some children may be prone to telling stories known not to be true. This may be to get attention or signal that they have a problem.

### **Isolation and relationship problems**

Sexual abuse can make a child feel they are different, affecting their sense of belonging. Children who have been sexually abused may be reluctant to play with their friends and may isolate themselves.

Abusive relationships can involve trading sexual acts for gifts or protection and this can create confusion for the child in other relationships.

### **Self harm**

Children may demonstrate behaviour which causes harm to themselves or others. This could include self-mutilation, head banging, physical aggression, engaging in high risk behaviour and substance abuse.

### **Physical signs**

Child abuse is a traumatic experience and directly impacts upon a child's general health. Physical signs resulting from this trauma can include continuous or regular headaches, abdominal pain, problems with sleeping, bed wetting and nightmares.

To reduce the chances of getting caught, offenders are often careful to ensure no physical signs are evident. Such signs can include urinary tract infections, rashes, genital redness or bleeding, pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases.

# Who are the offenders?

People who sexually abuse children do not look different. There is no stereotype. They may be parents themselves and may be important and respected people in the community. They often like to spend time with children and are good at relating to children.

- Up to 95% of child sex offenders are male. They can be married and have families of their own, or be single
- Up to six percent of reported offences in Australia are committed by females
- Up to a third of offences are committed by adolescents
- Most sexual offences are committed by men between the ages of 25-40 years.

## Child sex offenders use many strategies to get close to children

They:

- **ALWAYS plan their sexual abuse of children.** They will plan who to target, how they will get close to them and how to prevent the child from telling
- Work hard to be liked and accepted
- Isolate children or groups of children
- Create opportunities to work with or be alone with children
- Target vulnerable communities

- Have frequent job and address changes to avoid detection
- Create 'special' relationships with children and their families or carers
- May spend a lot of time with children outside of their jobs/roles
- Can set a child up as 'having a reputation' for lying or other behaviours to discredit them should they disclose abuse.

This list needs to be carefully interpreted to avoid over or under reaction.



# Grooming

'Grooming' allows child sex offenders to form 'special' or 'power-based' relationships with children. It is also used to maintain secrecy so the child will not tell. Grooming can take place over days, weeks or even years.

This process is designed to build the trust of the child and their family. It also creates opportunities for the abuse to occur.

## Some grooming techniques include:

- Buying children lollies, sporting equipment, swap cards etc. Children appreciate and value these gifts
- Paying special attention to a particular child and making the child feel 'special'
- Asking children to keep secrets from parents, siblings and friends. The secrets may not necessarily be sexual but may be used to 'test' a child to establish if they can keep a secret. Shared secrets help to build a child's feelings of 'being special'

- Showing pornography to the child
- Touching. This may start as a game and then progress to sexualised touching and later to other forms of abuse
- Using threats, bribes, emotional blackmail, and/or physical violence. Some common threats are to say that the child will go to jail, that no one will believe them and that they will be removed from their family if they tell, or that if a parent is sick that they will get sicker if they tell.

# Concerning situations

- Where adults are involved with your child to a greater extent than you would expect in their role or relationship
- Where your child is given gifts or taken on outings which are unexpected
- Special relationships people form with your child that don't involve you and that you have limited knowledge about
- Where your child may be keeping secrets or have built a relationship with a secret friend.

# Internet and mobile phone safety

The internet and mobile phones are used by child sex offenders to groom children by accessing information about them and their families, obtaining photos and developing 'friendships'.

So, be aware of your child's use of mobile phones and the internet and monitor:

- Who they are communicating with on the internet
- What details of their life they are describing and releasing to other people
- New friendships or increasing secrecy about friends on the internet.

Prohibit the sending of photos that are sexualised/involving nudity or sexual acts of any kind, including to their peers.

In addition, when talking to children about their safety it is also useful to install your own internet content filter on your home computer.

## Grooming on the internet

- Offenders pose as children and develop 'friendships' through the internet and chatrooms. This can lead to invitations to meet them in person
- Offenders engage children in sexually explicit conversations
- Offenders get children to send photographs or sexual images of themselves.

## Where to go for help:

### Net Alert

[netalert.gov.au](http://netalert.gov.au)

### Think U Know

[thinkuknow.co.uk](http://thinkuknow.co.uk)

### Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA)

[acma.gov.au](http://acma.gov.au)

### Virtual Global Taskforce

[virtualglobaltaskforce.com](http://virtualglobaltaskforce.com)

# Talking to children

Talking to children about safety, their bodies and how to protect themselves from an early age is an important part of keeping children safe. Children who are confident and have good support networks are less likely to be targeted by child sex offenders. It is important to educate children from an early age in simple safety messages.

A well recognised program to teach children about general safety and well being, and about abuse prevention skills, is the Protective Behaviours program.

## Protective Behaviours teaches children based on the following two principles:

### 1

**We all have the right to feel safe, all of the time.**

Talk to them about their 'body signals' or 'early warning signs' which let them know when they feel unsafe, e.g.

- Butterflies in their tummy
- Jelly legs
- Sweaty palms
- Goose bumps on skin.

Children have their own ways of describing these experiences. They may need help to find the language to tell other people that they don't feel safe.

### 2

**There is nothing so awful we can't talk about it with someone.**

- Help them identify at least five key people in their lives in and outside their family they can talk to if they need help. This is called a safety network
  - Children need to learn that parts of their bodies are private and need to be protected, i.e. our private parts are our mouths, and the ones that our bathers cover (bikini for girls, just pants for boys)\*. Parents/carers need to have a conversation with their children to explain who may have permission to touch their body, including their private parts. This is done according to the child's age and developmental stage
  - Children who know the correct names of their body parts are less likely to be tricked into sexual games
- Talk to your child about who they might talk to if they don't feel safe. Generally be led by your child in their choice of people. Regularly review these people with your child and let those people know that they are on your child's safety network
  - Recognise that your child may not tell you first when they feel unsafe. Generally children try to protect their parents from distress and will sound out other adults first. The important message is for them to tell SOMEONE.

**For further information on Protective Behaviours visit our website.**

\*adapted from protectingkids.com.au

## Sexual development in children

Sexual development is part of human development. All children will show a gradually increasing curiosity and interest in their and others' bodies and body functions, as a part of their overall sexual development.

### A child may wish to explore their sexual development by:

- Holding genitals/occasional masturbation
- Playing games (e.g. mum and dad, doctor and nurse); enjoying 'being rude'
- Kissing, cuddling or holding hands with peers
- Engaging in sexual conversations/ jokes with peers.

These activities are normal and play an important part in children's development. It is expected that these behaviours occur in the context of safe, playful, peer-aged relationships. The behaviour is always mutual and forms a small part of a child's overall interests.

Children have the right to learn how to protect and respect their bodies. It is easier to talk to children about

their bodies if you start at an early age, making sure to teach them the names of all body parts, including the correct names for their penis, vagina, breasts and bottom.

Responding to a child's questions and talking to children about sex does not make them more interested in sex, or more likely to engage in sexual behaviours. Children only retain information on a 'need to know' basis.

Child sex offenders generally do not target children who are confident, knowledgeable and assertive when it comes to protecting their bodies.

### Problematic sexual behaviour

- Sexual play should be like any other experimental play. Therefore, it should always take place within the child's own peer group, i.e. close in age and of similar intellectual ability. Sexual play outside of a child's peer group, e.g. with older or younger children, or children that the child does not normally play with, could be of concern.

- Generally there should never be more than a two-year age gap between children engaging in sexual play.
- Sexual play between children should be fun. Therefore any forced play is concerning. This can be play that involves verbal or physical aggression, play that causes physical/emotional harm, or play associated with shame or guilt.

- Sexual activity with animals is highly concerning. This behaviour must be addressed immediately and may require professional intervention.

The following table highlights a sample of problematic sexual behaviours which, if witnessed, need to be responded to by seeking professional advice immediately.

Pre School: 0-4	Young School Age: 5-7	Latency/Preadolescence: 8-12
Preoccupation with sexual behaviour	Sophisticated sexual knowledge	Constant peeping/exposure of genitals
Constant rubbing of genitals	Constant touching or rubbing of genitals	Preoccupation with masturbation
Simulating sexual activity	Forcing/bribing children to play sexual games	Overly interested in pornography
Highly sexualised language/behaviour	Preoccupation with sexual jokes and/or conversations	Using technology to put themselves or others at risk e.g. disclosing personal details online
Public masturbation	Chronic and/or public masturbation	Simulated/attempted sexual activity with peers
Touching/grabbing others' genitals	Forced exposure of others' genitals	Simulated/attempted sexual activity with siblings
Attempting oral sex	Threats/violence associated with sexual activity	Explicit threats, texts and/or violence associated with sexual activity
Inserting objects in genitals, anus of self and/or others	Inserting objects in genitals, anus of self and/or others	Involving much younger children in sexual activity
Involving animals in sexual activity	Involving animals in sexual activity	Penetration of others; children/animals

**Remember:** Do not over or under react to children's sexual behaviour. Any response or intervention to children's sexual behaviour should avoid punishment and blame.

You can seek assistance from Child Wise, your local sexual assault centre or children's hospital, if you need help to determine the appropriateness of sexual play.

# Responding to children's disclosures

Child sex offenders keep children silent by making them feel responsible for the sexual abuse. Children often believe they will 'be in trouble' or not be believed if they tell someone about sexual abuse.

Depending on the types of tricks or threats used to silence a child, they may be feeling:

- **Scared** about getting the offending person into trouble
- **Guilty** that they are to blame for the abuse
- **Ashamed** that they have been abused
- **Angry** that they have been abused and not protected
- **Powerless** to change their situation
- **Confused** about the consequences of telling.

## Show your care and concern:

How we respond to children telling us about sexual abuse can be an important factor in how much they are affected by the abuse in the long term. The following actions by adults are known to be helpful for children in these situations:

### Do:

- Stay calm and in control of your feelings
- Listen to the child
- Tell the child you believe them
- Tell the child it is not their fault and that they are not responsible for their abuse
- Tell the child they did the right thing by telling you
- Let the child know what will happen next.

### Do not:

- Make promises you cannot keep, such as promising the child that you won't tell anyone. To make sure they are safe you will most certainly have to involve other people
- Make predictions about outcomes
- Show overt anger towards the perpetrator or family members
- Become overly emotional or anxious.



# Who to report concerns to

**You need to speak to a professional about your concerns, but first ask yourself the following questions:**

1. Is the child safe now?
2. Do they need immediate medical attention?

Child sexual abuse involving the child's parents or caregivers needs to be reported to the child protection and/or police service in your State or Territory, so that an investigation is undertaken and a safety plan is constructed for the child.

For the relevant child protection service in your State refer to our Self Help Guide at [childwise.net](http://childwise.net)

If the sexual abuse involves a person outside of the family home, the parents will need to be informed immediately. For further support and referral information, you can contact Child Wise on **1800 99 10 99** for the appropriate services in your area.

If you work in an organisation responsible for children, ensure you are familiar with your Child Protection Policy and/or reporting procedures.

# Keeping children safe when they are not with you

When choosing childcare providers (including babysitters and sporting activities) it is important that your child remains safe from all forms of danger and harm. Childcare organisations need to be equipped to be able to provide a child safe environment.

A child safe environment is one where an organisation or service takes steps to meet the highest standards of child safe practices for children in their care. These organisations have a moral and legal 'duty of care' to take action against any form of child abuse, neglect or bullying whilst the child is under their supervision.

## **A child safe organisation will:**

- Be preventative rather than reacting to incidents after they occur
- Have clear boundaries and guidelines for behaviour of all staff and children
- Be open to people outside the organisation raising questions, comments and concerns
- Have adequate staff supervision and training, including an awareness of child protection.

Feeling 'safe' is unique to each child. When inspecting an organisation it is important that both you and your child feel comfortable and safe in the environment. Encourage children to express their feelings and tell you when they feel safe or unsafe and where possible, why.

Children need to feel cared for and valued within and outside of the home environment, through:

- How they are treated
- How they are encouraged to find and use their voice, and reach their potential.

The safer children feel emotionally, physically and psychologically, the greater chance that they will tell you if they feel uncomfortable or if they are being mistreated at the organisation or at home.

For more information regarding Child Safe Organisations refer to Child Wise "Keeping Your Children Safe" publication available to download at: [childwise.net/resources/online\\_publications.php](http://childwise.net/resources/online_publications.php)

**The following short list  
of contacts can assist you:**

**National Child Abuse  
Prevention Helpline**

1800 99 10 99

**childwise.net**

wiseup@childwise.net

**Australian Federal Police**

02 6223 3000

afp.gov.au

**Kids Help Line**

1800 551 800

kidshelp.com.au

**Life Line**

13 11 14

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## Who is Child Wise

Child Wise is Australia's leading international child protection charity. At Child Wise we know that the biggest threat to children's futures is abuse. It destroys lives. This is why we are dedicated to protecting children from abuse and exploitation in Australia, Asia and the Pacific.

Our programs seek to prevent child abuse by providing greater awareness and understanding, as well as providing the tools and strategies for individuals, organisations and communities to address these issues.

We need help so we can continue to provide direct support to victims and families of child abuse. Through counselling, advocacy, community education, research and training, we can prevent child abuse. Make a tax deductible donation now at **childwise.net** or phone **1800 99 10 99** and help us protect children's futures.

