

# Multi-type child maltreatment and child sexual abuse in Australia



The [Australian Child Maltreatment Study \(ACMS\) 2023](#)<sup>1</sup> found that many people have experienced multi-type child maltreatment, involving a combination of:

- sexual abuse
- physical abuse
- emotional abuse
- neglect, and/or
- exposure to domestic violence.

The study also showed that a child experiencing any type of maltreatment is likely to have experienced *multiple* events of that type of maltreatment – this is called chronicity. For example, the ACMS found that of the 78% of people who experienced child sexual abuse more than once, 11% experienced child sexual abuse more than 50 times. Australians are more likely to have experienced *multiple* types of child abuse than to have experienced one type of abuse<sup>2</sup>. In this Knowledge Summary, the ACMS findings in relation to multi-type maltreatment are described. We shine a light on the forms of child maltreatment with which child sexual abuse commonly co-occurs. These findings reflect the experiences of many (although not all) victims and survivors that have experienced multiple and different types of abuse. Understanding the extent of these abuses helps to comprehend the possible cumulative impacts of multi-type maltreatment over the lifespan, and the coping strategies that victims and survivors have deployed to cope with the experience of child sexual abuse.

## Prevalence of multi-type child abuse

*“Not only is the true prevalence of maltreatment far higher than the proportion of cases coming to the attention of government agencies, but that for the many Australians experiencing any form of child maltreatment (62.2%), the typical experience is of multi-type maltreatment”.*<sup>3</sup>

The ACMS found that just under 40%, or two in five people, responding to their survey had experienced two or more types of child maltreatment.<sup>4</sup> This was higher for women, with 43% experiencing multi-type maltreatment, compared to 35% of men. Gender diverse people were at much higher risk of multi-type maltreatment, with 66% of gender diverse survey participants reporting more than two types of abuse as children. Women and gender diverse people experienced higher rates than men of four of the five different types of maltreatment.

Higher rates of this multi-type maltreatment were reported among people aged 16-24 years, and 25-44 years. In total, the study estimates that over 700,000 Australians over the age of 16 years have experienced all five types of abuse recorded in the study: sexual, physical, emotional, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence.



## Most common types of child maltreatment co-occurring with child sexual abuse

The study examined 26 different combinations of multi-type maltreatment. Child sexual abuse occurred in three of the six most commonly reported combinations,<sup>5</sup> as seen in the table below. This means that for 5% of people who experienced multi-type maltreatment in childhood including sexual abuse, it was also inflicted with physical abuse, emotional abuse, and/or exposure to domestic violence.

The six most commonly reported combinations of multi-type child maltreatment (≥ 3% prevalence)

Prevalence	Exposure to domestic violence	Emotional abuse	Physical abuse	Sexual abuse	Neglect
5.1%	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5.1%	✓	✓	✓		
3.7%	✓	✓			
3.5%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3.4%	✓		✓		
3.0%	✓			✓	

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## Impacts of multi-type maltreatment

It is no surprise that people who experience multiple forms of child abuse may also experience strong impacts of that abuse during their childhood, youth and adult lives.

*Emotional abuse, sexual abuse and multi-type maltreatment are strongly associated with mental health disorders.*<sup>6</sup>

People who reported multi-type child abuse had some common risk factors in their families. These included:

- living with someone who was mentally ill, suicidal or severely depressed
- living with someone who had a problem with alcohol or other drug use
- experiencing family economic hardship, and
- parental separation or divorce.

Experiencing multi-type maltreatment was associated with a diagnosis of mental health issues for 54% of people, compared to 36% of people who experienced single types of abuse. Similarly, people who experienced multiple types of child abuse were more than three times as likely (as those who were not maltreated) to experience major depressive disorder. This did not change when factoring in people's socio-economic status. It can be expected that people who experience child sexual abuse amongst other types of abuse are more likely to need support in their lifetimes.



The table below illustrates these risks found in the ACMS.

% ACMS survey respondents who experienced mental health disorders						
	Post-traumatic stress disorder	Generalised anxiety disorder	Major depressive disorder	Alcohol use disorder - mild	Alcohol use disorder - moderate	Alcohol use disorder - severe
No maltreatment	1.3	4.3	8.1	8.9	2.8	1.9
Multiple forms of maltreatment	10.8	20.8	28.9	11.9	6.8	7.1

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### National Centre Insight

There is still much more to learn about the interaction of child sexual abuse and other types of maltreatment in Australia: the how, the why and what form prevention of child sexual abuse should take. The *Australian Child Maltreatment Study* has made a major contribution to our knowledge with these first steps into rigorous, reliable data representative of all communities. What the ACMS has shown reflects the real lived and living experience of victims and survivors, who continue to experience the legacy of child maltreatment – the pain, fear and shame of child sexual abuse accompanied by put downs, physical violence, or living in a household in which family and domestic violence creates conditions in which the reality and impacts of child sexual abuse may be minimised.

As the authors of the study have noted, this evidence underscores two key directions for action. Firstly, there needs to be consideration given to the likelihood that friends, family members or colleagues may have experienced multiple forms of abuse. This highlights the need for greater awareness, understanding and compassion within our communities and access to support for people struggling with the impacts of childhood maltreatment. Secondly, it draws the attention of leaders to a crisis in prevention. The evidence of this study suggests that children and young people within families struggling with intersecting risk factors and pervasive violence need better support to create abuse-free environments and respectful and supportive interactions. In this context, the need to upscale evidence-informed and culturally responsive programs that build and support healthy families within networks of extended community support is one priority that may help to prevent child sexual abuse and mitigate its impacts.

### Help us understand your learning needs

The National Centre’s Learning and Professional Development Plan aims to build and strengthen the capability of workers and organisations in how they respond to and support victims and survivors of child sexual abuse through training, learning, development and knowledge exchange resources and activities. Please help us to understand your learning needs by emailing us your feedback at: [practice@nationalcentre.org.au](mailto:practice@nationalcentre.org.au).

- 1 Haslam D, Mathews B, Pacella R, Scott JG, Finkelhor D, Higgins DJ, Meinck F, Erskine HE, Thomas HJ, Lawrence D, Malacova E. The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology 2023.
- 2 Higgins DJ, Mathews B, Pacella R, Scott JG, Finkelhor D, Meinck F, Erskine HE, Thomas HJ, Lawrence DM, Haslam DM, Malacova E and Dunne MP. The prevalence and nature of multi-type child maltreatment in Australia. The Medical Journal of Australia Supplement. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study: National prevalence and associated health outcomes of child abuse and neglect 2023; 218 No6: S19-25.
- 3 Higgins et al., 2023: S23
- 4 Higgins et al., 2023: S21
- 5 Higgins et al., 2023: S22
- 6 Haslam et al., 2023: S25