



# Indicators and impacts of child sexual abuse

## Content warning:

*This material contains information that may be distressing for readers.*

This resource focuses on the sexual abuse of children by adults.<sup>1</sup> When we talk about a *child*, we mean a person aged **under 18 years**. We recognise and acknowledge the diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, abilities, and genders of children.



## Indicators of child sexual abuse in children

Children often do not disclose (or tell) about their experience of being sexually abused. On average, it takes victims and survivors of child sexual abuse 23.9 years to disclose.<sup>2</sup> This means that it is important for all adults to know what physical and behavioural signs to look for that might indicate a child is being or has been sexually abused.

Behavioural and psychological indicators are common and include:<sup>3, 4, 5</sup>

- noticeable change in a child's usual behaviour
- change in mood and mental health including anxiety, depression, and eating disorders
- dissociation (detaching from reality), out of body experiences and attention problems
- poor self-care or personal hygiene
- high risk behaviour such as alcohol and drug misuse and running away

- self-harm or suicide attempts
- overly compliant, shy or attention-avoidant behaviour
- aggression and anger
- fear and avoidance of certain people or places
- disengagement of usual life activities, including social withdrawal
- sexualised behaviours like acting out their abuse with dolls or toys, preoccupation with their genitals in public and talking or acting in sexualised ways
- desexualisation, such as wearing baggy clothes to hide their gender and bodies
- using harmful sexual behaviours.

Though physical signs are less common, they can include:<sup>6,7</sup>

- headaches
- stomach aches
- regressive behaviours such as bedwetting
- loss of appetite or losing weight
- bruises on areas like the thighs and buttocks
- redness, swelling or discharge in the genital area
- pain or burning when toileting
- sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy.

It is important to remember that some children who have been sexually abused will not show any signs or symptoms, and that children who have not been sexually abused may also display some of these indicators. It is also important to note that signs and indicators of child sexual abuse differ for children and adults.



# Impacts of child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse usually happens more than once<sup>8</sup> and can cause a wide range of long-lasting and significant harms and distress for a child that continue through adolescence and early, middle, and late adulthood.<sup>9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14</sup>

The harms that result from the abuse are often compounded by widespread negative beliefs, stigmas, and secrecy around child sexual abuse. This can lead victims and survivors to experience shame, humiliation, guilt, ridicule, exclusion, and being blamed for what happened. Children often blame themselves rather than the perpetrator for the abuse.

The lifelong impacts of child sexual abuse cut across multiple and different areas of life and can appear at different times. The impacts can vary depending on the perpetrator-victim relationship, duration, and circumstances of the abuse.<sup>15, 16, 17</sup> No two victims and survivors are the same. Each has a unique story and experiences a distinct pattern of impacts. However, some commonly reported impacts that can occur across different areas of a person's life and lifespan include:

- **physical** such as chronic health conditions, inflammatory disorders, sexually transmitted infections, and poor dental health
- **interpersonal** such as difficulty developing and maintaining relationships, such as intimate relationships and friendships; high-conflict relationships; social isolation and cultural, religious and spiritual disconnection
- **sexual** such as confusion in sexual development
- **economic** such as poor educational engagement and outcomes; difficulty maintaining employment, leading to financial difficulties and poor housing security
- **behavioural** including involvement in antisocial or criminal activities.





Many victims and survivors of child sexual abuse experience significant impacts on their mental health and psychological wellbeing. This can include:

- sleep disruption and insomnia
- chronic stress, difficulty coping and low self-esteem
- post-traumatic stress, depression, generalised anxiety and eating disorders
- attention-deficit/hyperactivity and conduct disorders
- severe substance dependence
- personality trait disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, mania, and schizophrenia
- dissociation
- self-harm and attempts at suicide.

This was emphasised by the Australian Child Maltreatment Study that found compared with people who had not experienced child sexual abuse, victims and survivors were:<sup>18, 19</sup>

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**2 x** more likely to currently experience **post-traumatic stress disorder**

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**1.7 x** more likely to currently experience **anxiety**

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**2.1 x** more likely to currently experience **severe alcohol use disorder**

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**1.7 x** more likely to have ever experienced **depression**

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**2.7 x** more likely to have **self-harmed** in the prior year

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**2.3 x** more likely to have attempted **suicide** in the prior year

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**2 x** more likely to be **cannabis dependent**.

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Victims and survivors of child sexual abuse are also more likely to be victims of subsequent assaults and violence.<sup>20</sup>



# The ripple effect of child sexual abuse

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The impacts of child sexual abuse are not limited to victims and survivors. Parents, siblings, children, partners, institutional communities, and society at large are all impacted by child sexual abuse.<sup>21, 22, 23, 24, 25</sup> These ripple effects can be long-lasting, even affecting future generations.<sup>26</sup>

The stigma associated with child sexual abuse extends beyond victims and survivors to impact their families as well. Entire families can experience shame, humiliation, blame and exclusion from the broader community. This helps keep child sexual abuse a secret, continues the harm caused, and isolates people from support when needed most. Families are often splintered with key relationships disrupted, which can also compromise the support that is necessary for victims and survivors to heal and recover.

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## Supporting healing and recovery

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It is essential to understand the impacts of child sexual abuse so that victims and survivors, and their networks, can be provided with compassionate and appropriate responses in a timely manner throughout different life stages. Creating a sense of safety where victims and survivors can share and disclose, be believed, supported and protected from further abuse, and helped to process difficult feelings and emotions can help to limit the traumatic effect of these impacts.<sup>27</sup>

Despite these potential impacts, there is hope for healing and recovery. Under supportive conditions the strength and resilience of victims and survivors can emerge and develop. People who get the right support and treatment can and do go on to lead full and enriching lives.

# Find out more

The National Centre has a range of resources designed to support you to understand and respond to child sexual abuse. You can access these at:

[Resources - The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse.](#)

## If you need support, please contact:

**Lifeline - 13 11 14**

**13YARN - 13 92 76**

**1800RESPECT  
1800 737 732**

**Blue Knot Helpline and  
Redress Support Service  
1300 657 380**

**Kids Helpline  
1800 55 1800**

- <sup>1</sup> Children can also be sexually harmed by other children. This is often referred to as *harmful sexual behaviours*.
- <sup>2</sup> [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - \(Royal Commission\)](#)
- <sup>3</sup> [How to recognise and respond to child sexual abuse - NOCS, accessed March 2024](#)
- <sup>4</sup> [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - \(Royal Commission\)](#)
- <sup>5</sup> [Dissociation predicts later attention problems in sexually abused children - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)
- <sup>6</sup> [How to recognise and respond to child sexual abuse - National Office for Child Safety \(NOCS\), accessed March 2024](#)
- <sup>7</sup> [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - \(Royal Commission\)](#)
- <sup>8</sup> [Prevalence of child sexual abuse across all Australians - The Australian Child Maltreatment Study \(ACMS\)](#)
- <sup>9</sup> [Impacts of child sexual abuse for adult survivors experiencing complex trauma or complex post-traumatic stress disorder - National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse \(National Centre\)](#)
- <sup>10</sup> [Childhood sexual abuse and pervasive problems across multiple life domains: Findings from a five-decade study - Development and Psychopathology](#)
- <sup>11</sup> [Impacts - Royal Commission](#)
- <sup>12</sup> [Impacts of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse on Victims/Survivors: A Rapid Review of Research Findings - Blakemore et al.](#)
- <sup>13</sup> [Child sexual abuse, academic functioning and educational outcomes in emerging adulthood - Journal of Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- <sup>14</sup> [The association between child maltreatment and health risk behaviours and conditions throughout life in the Australian Child Maltreatment Study \(wiley.com\)](#)
- <sup>15</sup> [Child sexual abuse, academic functioning and educational outcomes in emerging adulthood - Journal of Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- <sup>16</sup> [Childhood sexual abuse and pervasive problems across multiple life domains: Findings from a five-decade study - Development and Psychopathology](#)
- <sup>17</sup> [Dissociation predicts later attention problems in sexually abused children - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)
- <sup>18</sup> [ACMS-Launch-slides.pdf](#)
- <sup>19</sup> [The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: 2023 Brief Report - The Australian Child Maltreatment Study \(ACMS\)](#)
- <sup>20</sup> [Child sex abuse survivors are five times more likely to be the victims of sexual assault later in life](#)
- <sup>21</sup> [Impacts - Royal Commission](#)
- <sup>22</sup> [Impacts of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse on Victims/Survivors: A Rapid Review of Research Findings - Blakemore et al.](#)
- <sup>23</sup> [Non-offending parents as secondary victims of child sexual assault - Australian Institute of Criminology \(AIC\)](#)
- <sup>24</sup> [Secondary traumatization in parents following the disclosure of extrafamilial child sexual abuse: Initial effects - Child Abuse & Neglect](#)
- <sup>25</sup> [Production and distribution of child sexual abuse material by parental figures - AIC](#)
- <sup>26</sup> [Impacts - Royal Commission](#)
- <sup>27</sup> [Impacts of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse on Victims/Survivors: A Rapid Review of Research Findings - Blakemore et al.](#)