

What is 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.¹ 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.



What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is defined in different ways which can be confusing. The various definitions often relate to the different uses in areas such as criminal legislation, therapeutic services, or child protection.² Definitions also vary between countries. While definitions matter for our shared understanding, they can also distract from what lies beneath the definition of child sexual abuse.

Put simply, child sexual abuse is when people involve children in any type of sexual activity.³

Across Australia, children aged 16 or 17 years old can legally consent⁴ to sexual activity with adults, except if the adult is a close family member of the child or in a position of authority, supervision, or care in relation to the child (e.g., teacher, coach, the child's employer, or health practitioner).⁵

Child sexual abuse is never the child's fault.

The power structures and dynamics that exist within society and family relationships contribute to and enable child sexual abuse to occur. Children inherently have less choice and control, including over their surroundings and interactions with adults.

What are the different types of child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse can take many different forms and does not always involve physical contact. Child sexual abuse can occur in person, on the phone or online. All forms of child sexual abuse are serious.

Here are some examples:

- touching a child in a sexual way
- encouraging or forcing a child to masturbate or touch themselves or somebody else in a sexual way
- performing oral sex on a child or asking or forcing a child to perform oral sex
- putting penises, fingers or other objects in a child's vagina or anus
- showing their genitals to a child
- encouraging or forcing a child to show their genitals
- peeping while a child is going to the toilet, bathing or undressing, or encouraging or forcing a child to peep on somebody else
- making sexual comments to a child or about a child
- getting a child to look at pornography
- encouraging, bribing or forcing a child to make or send videos or photos of themselves or other children in their underwear, partially dressed, naked, or engaged in sexual acts^{6,7}



Online child sexual abuse is also referred to as [online child sexual exploitation](#) and involves the use of technology and/or the internet to sexually abuse a child.⁸ Online child sexual abuse and exploitation involves a range of situations including:

- any online act or contact with a child that involves sexual content, comments or conversations
- sharing, or threatening to share, a sexualised image or video of a child
- encouraging or coercing a child to livestream sexual activity or conversations
- 'grooming' or manipulating a child for sexual or sexualised activity
- blackmailing a child who has already shared sexual content into sending money, more sexual images, or videos.⁹

Online child sexual abuse and exploitation is a growing area of concern for parents, carers and those who work with children as it is becoming increasingly harder to monitor and protect children from.



How common is child sexual abuse in Australia?

Child sexual abuse is alarmingly common in Australia. It is also chronic, meaning that most children who are sexually abused experience it many times. Children can be sexually abused by different people at different times.

The 2023 Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) found the following:^{10,11}

- 28.5% (more than 1 in 4 Australians) had experienced sexual abuse before they were 18 years old. This statistic included sexual harm by other children, but children were more often sexually abused by adults than other children and young people (18.5% vs. 13.7%).
- Girls experienced child sexual abuse more often than boys (37.3% vs 18.8%). This is more than 1 in 3 girls and almost 1 in 5 boys.
- Almost 80% experienced the abuse on more than one occasion and just over 10% more than 50 times.

We also know that many people do not share (or disclose) their abuse to anyone, so it can be difficult to know the true extent of child sexual abuse.

What makes children more vulnerable to sexual abuse

There are some factors that increase a child's risk of being targeted and harmed.^{12,13} Some of these include:

- Being female.
- Being part of a socially, economically, racially or culturally marginalised group.
- Living in out-of-home care settings, such as foster or kinship care or in residential care.
- Diverse gender and sexuality identities.
- Past or current experiences of maltreatment, including neglect, emotional abuse and family violence.
- Disability, particularly where there is reliance on an adult to assist with personal care or where there are communication difficulties.
- Parental separation and blended families.
- Social isolation, poor social skills or being bullied by peers.

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

¹ Children can also be sexually harmed by other children. This is often referred to as *harmful sexual behaviours*.

² [Child Sexual Abuse: Toward a Conceptual Model and Definition - Trauma, Violence & Abuse](#)

³ [Child sexual abuse: what it is, what to do - Raising Children Network](#), accessed March 2024

⁴ [Age of consent laws in Australia - Australian Institute of Family Studies](#), accessed March 2024

⁵ Variations of the 'position of authority' legislation exist in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia

⁶ [Child sexual abuse: what it is, what to do | Raising Children Network](#)

⁷ [What is Child Sexual Abuse? | Bravehearts](#)

⁸ [What is online child exploitation - Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation \(ACCCE\)](#)

⁹ [Child sexual abuse online | eSafety Commissioner](#)

¹⁰ [Prevalence of child sexual abuse across all Australians - The Australian Child Maltreatment Study \(ACMS\)](#)

¹¹ [Child sexual abuse by different classes and types of perpetrator: Prevalence and trends from an Australian national survey - ScienceDirect](#).

¹² [Child sexual abuse - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(AIHW\)](#)

¹³ [Risk factors for child sexual abuse victimization: A meta-analytic review - Psychological Bulletin](#)

