

# Child Sexual Abuse Language Guide

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**Introduction and  
Background Information**



**National Centre** for Action  
on Child Sexual Abuse

## Acknowledgements

The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (National Centre) respectfully acknowledges and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations and pay our respects to ancestors and Elders past and present.

We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culture and lore continue to lead Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and acknowledge the tireless work to pursue justice outcomes for children and young people.

The National Centre supports decisions affecting people's lives being fundamentally informed by those people. And upholds truth-telling and agreement-making for justice as essential components of healing.

We seek to honour the lived and living expertise of all victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, harnessing all ages, cultures, abilities and backgrounds, and commit to substantially addressing the harm of child sexual abuse, now and well into the future.

We recognise that there are children and young people today who are experiencing sexual abuse and dedicate ourselves to doing all we can to expedite and promote their effective protection and care.

Stigma reduction and community awareness are critical priorities of the National Centre. We recognise the role that language plays in reducing stigma and raising community awareness. This document was created through the *Reshaping the Conversation* project, led by the National Centre with funding from the Australian Government Department of Social Services.

We wish to acknowledge the time, effort, and expertise of the advisors and participants who made this project possible. In particular, we would like to thank project advisors Angela Obradovic and Professor Ben Mathews, project working group members Danielle Rifahi and Lynelle Long and more than 100 victims and survivors of child sexual abuse who participated.

To access the Guide containing preferred terms and definitions, please refer to the [Child Sexual Abuse Language Guide](#).

## Our Commitment

The establishment of a national centre to raise awareness and understanding of the impacts of child sexual abuse, support help-seeking and guide best practice advocacy and support and therapeutic treatment was a key recommendation (9.9) of the 2017 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Royal Commission identified that ongoing national leadership is necessary to improve outcomes for victims and survivors of past child sexual abuse and prevent future child sexual abuse.

Established in late 2021, the National Centre is a partnership between three respected organisations with strong histories of leadership in responding to child sexual abuse - Australian Childhood Foundation, Blue Knot Foundation and the Healing Foundation (each a Founding Member). The National Centre has an integrated governance structure that embeds the expertise of adults with lived and living experience of child sexual abuse, the rich strength of knowledge of First Nations Peoples and the voices of children and young people, as well as the expertise of researchers, practitioners, justice organisations, corporate entities, government and policy leaders.

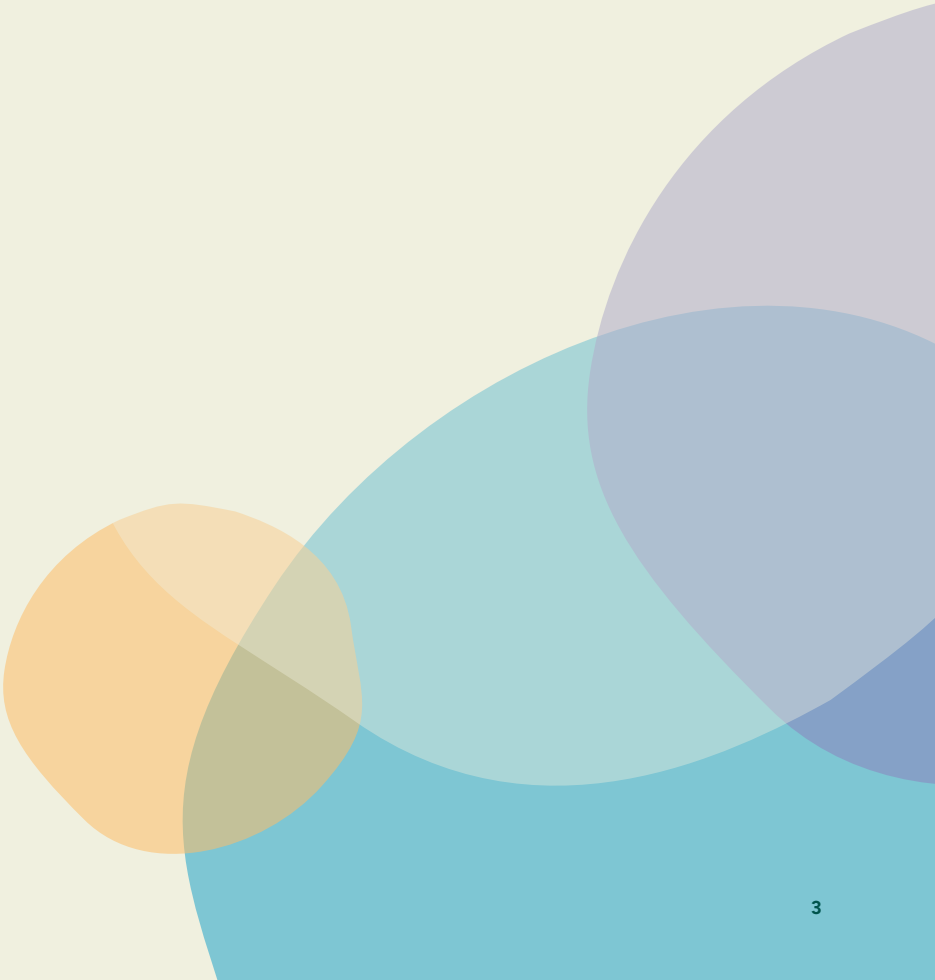
At its core, the National Centre is a symbol of hope and an essential vehicle for action for many victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. Its vision is for a community where children are safe and victims and survivors are supported to heal and recover, free of stigma and shame – a future without child sexual abuse.

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## Foreword

Effective communication about complex issues requires deep consideration of how messages are received by those most directly affected, as well as the broader social impact such language can have. In the context of child sexual abuse, language plays a powerful role. It can either reinforce harmful myths and shift responsibility onto victims, or it can affirm the child's inherent right to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

Language can be a source of profound harm, not only to victims and survivors but also to their families and the wider community. Sometimes, language is deliberately used to downplay the seriousness and consequences of child sexual abuse. More often, harmful language is used unintentionally - repeated without reflection on its impact. Yet the words we choose shape societal understanding, attitudes, and beliefs. We believe that we all have an ethical obligation to use language that reduces trauma wherever we can. This Guide is intended to support reflection and promote language that minimises harm across all contexts.

The origin of this Language Guide is situated in the lived expertise of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. Its development was prompted by a survivor's response to the language used in a public education campaign - language that, albeit unintentionally, appeared to place responsibility on the victim-survivor and perpetuate damaging misconceptions. This response highlighted the urgent need for survivor-informed language guidance and underscored the importance of centring victim and survivor perspectives in all prevention and justice efforts. When survivors are treated with care, respect and dignity, our collective response to child sexual abuse becomes more informed and effective.

Victims and survivors have been central to the creation of this Guide. As members of the project working group, each of us brought lived expertise and critical insight into how language can cause harm - both at an individual and systemic level. More than 100 survivors contributed to the project's research process, where they evaluated a wide range of terms over two rounds of surveys to establish consensus on preferred language and definitions.

Their contribution has been foundational, and we acknowledge their partnership with gratitude and respect.

This Guide highlights terms to avoid. We encourage particular attention to be paid to those terms and their recommended alternatives. Several terms in this Guide have multiple definitions - all of which met the threshold of acceptability by victims and survivors. We see this as a strength of this Guide as it reflects a diversity of child sexual abuse experiences and contexts. While some definitions resonate more than others for individual survivors, according to their experiences, so too might some be more appropriate or relevant in different professional or practice contexts. We invite you to choose the definition that suits your purpose, audience and role. Our intention is that the Language Guide is relevant for a broad range of contexts, including practice, communications, legal, academic and policy.

Importantly, this Guide is a living document. In recent years, the language around child sexual abuse has evolved significantly through critical reflection and survivor advocacy. As our understanding continues to grow, so too must the language we use, and it is important that this Guide reflects those changes. We encourage feedback and are committed to providing accessible ways for individuals and organisations to contribute to this Guide's ongoing development. In partnership with the National Centre, we especially value the continued input of victims and survivors, whose perspectives are essential to ensuring that this Guide remains relevant, respectful and impactful.

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**Angela Obradovic**  
**Lynelle Long**  
**Danielle Rifahi**

*(Reshaping the Conversation Lived Experience Working Group Members)*

**This Language Guide refers to child sexual abuse and includes descriptions that may bring up strong feelings.**

Please take care of yourself when reading the Guide and ask for help if you need it. You might want to talk to trusted family, kin or friends, or your counsellor or doctor or your Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Medical Service. We have also included support services below.

### **Support is available:**

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#### **Lifeline**

13 11 14 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) – crisis support and suicide prevention.

#### **13YARN**

13 92 76 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) – a culturally safe crisis support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

#### **1800RESPECT**

1800 737 732 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) – for people impacted by sexual assault, domestic and family violence and abuse.

#### **Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service**

1300 657 380 (9am–5pm, 7 days a week) – for adults impacted by childhood trauma including child sexual abuse.

#### **Kids Helpline**

1800 55 1800 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) – phone counselling service for young people.

#### **QLife**

1800 184 527 (3PM to midnight, 7 days a week) – anonymous and free LGBTIQ+ peer support and referral for people in Australia wanting to talk about sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships.

#### **MensLine**

1300 78 99 78 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) – counsellors specialise in family and relationship issues, including relationship breakdown, separation and divorce, parenting, family violence, suicide prevention and emotional well-being.

## Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a national crisis with recent data estimating that 28.5% of Australian adults were sexually abused as children<sup>1</sup>. Sexual abuse during childhood can have far-reaching and long-term impacts. Victims and survivors of child sexual abuse can experience lifelong health, social, financial and cultural outcomes as a result of the abuse.

Addressing this complex societal problem is central to the work of the National Centre, together with government, service providers, researchers and policy makers. We know that language matters and in doing our work we must consider how we talk or write about child sexual abuse.

Currently however, there is little consistency in the language that is used in relation to child sexual abuse, across sectors and services. Achieving universal agreement on language across a range of contexts is unlikely given that challenges and purposes differ.

In light of these challenges, we want to ensure that, at a minimum, the language used is respectful, compassionate and inclusive. Further, the way we describe child sexual abuse and those that have experienced it must not cause offense or anguish to victims and survivors, not stigmatise or blame, and not minimise the harm and the lifelong impacts of child sexual abuse.

For this reason, the National Centre has created a child sexual abuse Language Guide, which includes **terms and definitions that are preferred by victims and survivors**.



Policy makers



Practitioners



Academics



Researchers



Healthcare workers



Legal officers



Media



Communications professionals

## Who is this guide for?

This Language Guide can be used by anyone, but may be particularly helpful for people in certain professional roles. This includes people that communicate about child sexual abuse – for example, **policymakers, practitioners, academics, researchers, healthcare workers, legal officers and media and communications professionals**.

Ultimately, it is hoped that this guide can equip people with the correct language to use when talking or writing about child sexual abuse, reducing the harm caused by using offensive, outdated or minimising language.

<sup>1</sup> Mathews B, Pacella RE, Scott JG, et al. The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. *Med J Aust* 2023; 218 (6 Suppl): S13-S18. DOI: 10.5694/mja2.51873

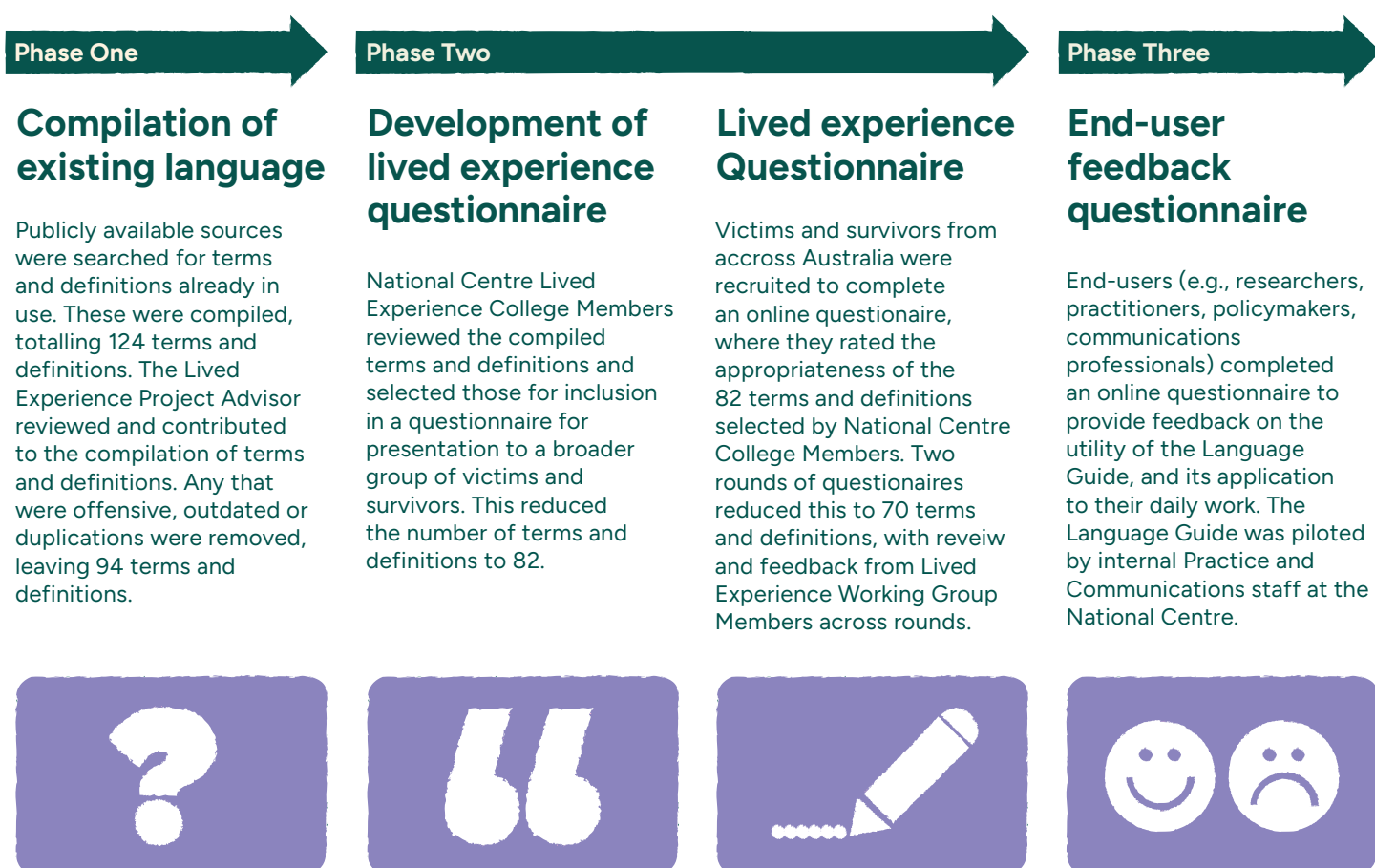
# How was this guide developed?

This guide was developed through a multi-phase research project conducted by the National Centre (see Figure 1). Central to the development of this Language Guide was the input of **108 victims and survivors** of child sexual abuse. Their input shaped many aspects of the project; of significance was their meaningful participation in the Delphi questionnaires that assessed the existing language related to child sexual abuse.

In the two rounds of Delphi questionnaires, victims and survivors rated terms and definitions that had been compiled from those already in use within publicly available sources. In doing so, victims and survivors identified those that they preferred, those they thought were problematic, and changes they wanted. In both rounds of questionnaires victims and survivors were asked to rate the acceptability of a term and its corresponding definition, with each one needing to achieve **at least 90% consensus** amongst all victims and survivors before it could be included in this guide. Across all terms and definitions presented here, the average level of **consensus amongst victims and survivors was very high**, at 95.1%.

This means that, although 95% agreed for a term or definition to be included in this guide, approximately 5% of victims and survivors did not agree (varying across each term and definition). This is important to remember in using this Language Guide; while the terms and definitions included are highly acceptable to most victims and survivors that have participated, they are not universally acceptable to all. Throughout this process, victims and survivors also identified terms and definitions that should be avoided, which are also presented in this guide.

Once this Language Guide was developed, the feedback of end-users (e.g., practitioners, policymakers, researchers etc.) was sought. This feedback further informed how the guide should be presented and disseminated to ensure **maximum impact and uptake** across a range of industries and occupations.





## How to use this guide

In using the Language Guide you will see that there are often several terms included for similar concepts, and sometimes, multiple definitions for the same term. This has been done deliberately, to **allow flexibility for the use of this language** across a wide range of settings. For example, there are times where very brief definitions may be appropriate; at other times, more detailed and descriptive definitions may be needed.

It is also important to note that this guide was written and designed in Australia and has not taken into account the important nuances that occur across social, cultural, religious, and ethnic contexts. These contexts all shape language, and how people talk about their experience of child sexual abuse. For this reason, we acknowledge that not all of the language presented in this guide is the most appropriate for all victims and survivors, depending on their own unique backgrounds.

## Why use this guide

Having a Language Guide preferred by victims and survivors enables the National Centre and all stakeholders to communicate more respectfully with people with lived experience of child sexual abuse. It can also facilitate more effective awareness raising, prevent abuse and its silencing effects, and ensure greater identification of child sexual abuse across populations. More importantly however, naming and defining their own experience has the potential to be individually and collectively **empowering** for all victims and survivors.

In establishing the Language Guide, it is important to consider that language evolves over time, and that **language is significantly shaped by a range of contextual factors**. Factors such as age, gender, culture and ethnic background all contribute to the language in use across society. Language also becomes embedded in generations and eras, and as a result, can take long periods of time to change. The language presented in this guide was informed by over 100 victims and survivors from across Australia, lending itself well to utility in an Australian context. However, both in Australia and internationally, there will be people with lived and living experience of child sexual abuse who disagree with some terms and definitions that are presented here, and feel that alternate language should be used. Over time, it is hoped that this guide can continue to evolve, and will gradually **increase its ability to represent the language preferences of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse**. In particular, we need to include more voices of **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, the LGBTQIA+ communities and people with a disability** to further inform the development of the next iteration of this guide.

## Why is language important?

**“How we language ourselves, and how other people language us can be empowering on the one hand, and dis-empowering on the other”**

- (Lived Experience Participant).

Many of the child sexual abuse terms and definitions that are currently in use came about in the 1970s and 80s. While our understanding of many aspects of child sexual abuse has evolved since then, the same cannot be said for a lot of the language we use. This means there are terms and **definitions being widely used today that are incorrect or outdated, contributing to myths, misconceptions and misinterpretation**. In addition, much of this language may not resonate with people who have experienced child sexual abuse and does not represent or articulate their lived and living experiences appropriately.

There are many forms of child sexual abuse, and every victim and survivor will have had different experiences. For this reason, there may not be a single set of terms and definitions that are universally appropriate. However, to address the myths and misconceptions around child sexual abuse, and to meaningfully build community awareness, **consistency in language is needed**. In addition, consideration must be given to the impact that language has on victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, and how it could be used as a tool for **recognition, acknowledgement, support and healing**.

We believe that how victims and survivors choose to talk about their experiences, and the language they prefer others to use, is critical, and as important as any academic, medical or legal requirement. In some circumstances, their preferred language is more important than these existing definitions. If the language preferred by victims and survivors is not reflected in existing terms and definitions, there is a risk that victims and survivors may not identify their victimisation, may not disclose their abuse, and may not seek therapeutic or legal help. In addition, **there is the risk the language exposes victims and survivors to harm and minimisation when offensive or incorrect language is used in referring to their experiences**. We hope that this guide will contribute to the use of trauma-informed language, which validates victims and survivors experiences in ways that are meaningful to them. Trauma-informed language also challenges the structural violence within some terms by ensuring they do not convey shame or blame. Further, it acknowledges that recovery includes empowerment through self-definition, enabling individual, community and social growth and change.



**For terms and definitions,  
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