

Policy & practice recommendations

Improving legal, policy, and practice responses at the intersection of domestic violence perpetration and child sexual abuse offending

1. Provide timely, appropriate, and adequate support for children and adults who have experienced child sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Child sexual abuse and domestic violence often overlap. When they co-occur, risks and harms may be intensified. Children may observe the power dynamics in the household and delay or refrain from disclosing sexual abuse. Domestic violence may reduce mothers' ability to effectively protect their children from sexually abusive fathers. Boys who are sexually abused may be more likely to use harmful sexual behaviours against other children or sexual or domestic violence as adults and girls who have been sexually abused may be more likely to become victims of later sexual violence and/or domestic and family violence. Many women experience sexual abuse as part of domestic violence and coercive control. Adult women and men also experience sexual violence from other perpetrators, which can affect their well-being, intimate partner relationships, and parenting. Timely therapeutic intervention can reduce these risks.

Recommended actions include:

- Mapping the child sexual abuse service landscape to clarify what services exist, who is eligible for services, the distribution of services, service gaps, and linkages to domestic violence services.
- Assessing current wait times to access services and identifying the resources needed to meet demand for child sexual abuse and domestic violence services promptly and into the future.
- Including children in developmentally appropriate screening, assessment, and consultation about their needs.
- Offering therapeutic services to all children and mothers who have experienced co-occurring child sexual abuse and domestic violence to mitigate harm, reduce future revictimisation and offending, and build resiliency for children and protective parents.
- Offering therapeutic services to adult women and men who experience sexual violence.
- Providing an appropriate response to non-offending parents dealing with child sexual abuse concerns with courts, child safety, and police.
- Recognising and incorporating into service delivery and decision-making the gendered factors that shape victimisation, perpetration, reporting, and systems responses to child sexual abuse and domestic violence.
- Adopting a holistic view of family dynamics in child sexual abuse and domestic violence cases to improve responses to co-occurring abuse and perpetration.

2. Develop systems and services designed to respond to co-occurring child sexual abuse and adult domestic and sexual violence

Our research found that domestic violence is identified in up to 91% of child sexual abuse cases, and child sexual abuse is identified in up to 36% of domestic violence cases.ⁱ Co-occurring abuse is a central context for understanding the dynamics of abuse, reporting/non-reporting, and protective parenting. In addition, adult sexual violence is a core tactic of coercive control that is rarely addressed in-depth in discussions about domestic violence. Overlooking co-occurrence creates systemic failures to protect children and non-abusing adults when sexual abuse and domestic violence concerns are raised, increasing risks, and magnifying harm to children and adults.

Recommended actions include:

- Identifying models that effectively address co-occurring domestic and sexual violence.
- Conducting universal screening for domestic violence in child sexual abuse cases using fit-for-purpose tools and protocols.
- Conducting universal screening for child sexual abuse in domestic violence cases using fit-for-purpose tools and protocols.
- Providing developmentally appropriate screening for child sexual abuse and domestic violence for children alongside parents.
- Comprehensively assessing risk using appropriate protocols where concerns are identified.
- Responding to identified risks with protective action.
- Refocusing attention on the need to protect children from child sexual abuse and domestic violence perpetrators.

3. Review how child sexual abuse is responded to in the family law system and make recommendations for improvement

Multi-systemic failures to protect children from ongoing risks due to child sexual abuse and domestic violence necessitate comprehensive changes to law, policy, and practice. Criminal, civil, and family law and child protection systems interact in ways that can create barriers to safety and increase risk for children and adults at the intersection of child sexual abuse and domestic violence.

The Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia (FCFCOA) was a core site of concern for practitioners, survivors, and non-offending parents. However, FCFCOA currently relies on external investigations by child protection, police, family consultants, and other external parties for information. Some child sexual abuse cases are never investigated by child protection agencies due to statutory guidance limiting their scope.ⁱⁱ While some child sexual abuse cases reported to police are investigated by highly trained specialist units, mothers' reports of child sexual abuse may not be actioned when parents are separating, or frontline officers decline to investigate. Where investigations and evidence collection occur, established best practices for interviewing children about child sexual abuse may not be followed.ⁱⁱⁱ A review into family law responses should be led by independent recognised experts in child sexual abuse and domestic and family violence.



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Recommended actions include an independent review of:

- Family Court interactions with state and territory-based agencies, such as child safety and police services, and barriers to child sexual abuse investigation (such as whether these agencies are reluctant to investigate when family law proceedings are underway or anticipated, statutory limitations on child safety investigation when a willing protective parent is identified, or officers decline to investigate due to assumptions about what victims look/act like).
- The ability of Family Court to fully investigate sexual abuse concerns beyond existing external evidence (the “investigation gap” in family law), and recommendations about how to address this gap.
- Attitudes of family law professionals to allegations of child sexual abuse, and whether these inhibit disclosures or affect how cases are presented.
- Whether the Magellan/Evatt models remain fit for purpose, and any recommendations for change.
- Whether family law solicitors are advising victim-survivors not to raise issues about child sexual abuse due to concerns they may lose “custody” of their child.
- Independently evaluating whether and how child sexual abuse investigations are being conducted by child protection, police, and courts. Collecting basic data on the percentage of reports investigated and excluded from investigation, independently studying what investigations involve in practice, and evaluating compliance with established international best practices.
- Independently reviewing screening, evidence gathering, and decision-making/triaging tools and processes in Family Court to determine whether sexual abuse is explicitly screened for, why most cases with child sexual abuse identified are not being referred onto the Magellan/Evatt list, and whether outcomes of Triage are adequate to protect children and mothers.
- Research on matters involving domestic violence and child sexual abuse settled by FCFCOA mediation or private mediation that do not proceed to trial.
- Independent research on family law cases to assess whether reported cases are representative of all family law cases where co-occurring child sexual abuse and domestic violence are indicated.
- Research on perpetrators of child sexual abuse/domestic violence, how they present to systems, and their motivations, including having children with the intention to abuse them or commencing relationships to obtain access to children with the intention of abusing them, understanding tactics of grooming and coercive control and whether current risk assessments and domestic and family violence risk screening and assessment are adequate to identify these abusers.
- Actioning previous recommendations to appoint a Minister for Children at a federal level to help coordinate child safety and well-being concerns across agencies.



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4. Develop a workforce that is competent at responding to child sexual abuse in the context of domestic violence and supported to promote best practices and professional longevity

Frontline professionals experience high levels of vicarious trauma and burnout due to system failures and a lack of resources. Low wages and lack of professional recognition contribute to workforce attrition in the child sexual abuse and domestic violence sectors. Practitioners in our study raised education, training, retention, and burnout as core concerns for building the workforce needed to support integrated responses to child sexual abuse and domestic violence. Professionals noted the difference between education to convey basic facts about co-occurrence, training to teach practitioners to use appropriate tools and guidelines, and professional development and support to continue to practice effectively over time. Institutional betrayal was a significant source of stress in this work.

Recommended actions include:

- Providing ongoing education on basic essential knowledge - child sexual abuse, domestic violence, their relationship to each other, child safety and well-being, revictimisation and perpetration risks, and implications into adulthood.
- Providing training on trauma-informed practice with adult survivors whose children are experiencing child sexual abuse or domestic violence. Adult survivors are often triggered by focusing on their child's experience of abuse and related trauma. Interventions need to be mindful of this potential reaction and the effect on parenting capacity to support non-abusing parents to provide an ongoing supportive response to their child(ren).
- Developing role-specific practice training to support professionals such as Independent Children's Lawyers, child protection, police, family consultants, sexual abuse and domestic violence services to use screening, assessment, and decision-making tools.
- Creating role-specific practice guides and decision-making tools for safely counselling children who are still exposed to abusers.
- Encouraging universities to include child sexual abuse and domestic violence education, including their relationships to one another, in pertinent degrees, including law, psychology, social work, and criminology.

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](#).

ⁱ Olejnikova, L., Dragiewicz, M., Woodlock, D., Salter., M. (2025) *Co-occurrence of domestic and family violence and child sexual abuse: Fact sheet*. Childlight & University of New South Wales.

ⁱⁱ Australian Law Reform Commission, Australian Government. (2025). *Final Report: Safe, informed, supported: Reforming justice responses to sexual violence* (No. 143). Australian Government.

ⁱⁱⁱ Powell, M., Goodman-Delahunty, J., Pichler, A. S., & Westera, N. (2016). *An evaluation of how evidence is elicited from complainants of child sexual abuse*. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child sexual abuse.



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