

Fact Sheet

Signs of child abuse



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Child abuse is one of the most under reported crimes in our community. A recent survey conducted by Act for Kids found that a quarter of adults did not know the signs of child abuse and neglect and would need to google how to report suspected abuse.

Knowing the signs is very important as many children will never tell an adult about their experience. Some will only disclose when they are much older. Children worry about the impact on their family, that they won't be believed or that they will be blamed. Many adults don't make it clear enough to children that they can tell, that we want to know and that we can help.

Harm to children can occur when parents or carers are experiencing stress, have a lack of

positive parenting skills or self confidence. The role modelling of safe parenting in the parent's own childhood can often play a factor. Families with little support and those who are isolated either geographically or socially are also a vulnerable group. Drug, alcohol and mental health issues may also impact on parenting capacity. Often it can be a combination of these factors and others, that can lead to harm for children. It's important to note that these circumstances do not always lead to children experiencing harm.

The majority of parents and carers do not intend to be abusive towards their children and are often doing the best they can with the resources and skills they have. Whether child abuse is intentional or not there are significant impacts on children that can last a lifetime.

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is not a one off incident but rather a pattern of behaviour over a period of time. It impacts on a child's emotional, social, cognitive and intellectual development. It can include persistent behaviour by adults such as rejection, isolation, ignoring, hostility, yelling, criticism or exposure to family violence. Along with neglect, it is the most common type of abuse experienced by children and is likely to be present alongside physical and sexual abuse.

> Possible signs of emotional abuse in children

- constant feelings of worthlessness about life and themselves
- unable to value others
- lack of trust in people
- lack of people skills necessary for daily functioning
- extreme attention-seeking behaviour
- obsessively eager to please or obey adults
- takes extreme risks, is markedly disruptive, bullying or aggressive

> Possible signs of emotionally abusive parents or carers

- constant criticism, belittling, teasing of a child or young person, or ignoring or withholding praise and attention
- excessive or unreasonable demands
- persistent hostility and severe verbal abuse, rejection and scapegoating
- belief that a particular child or young person in their care is bad or evil
- using inappropriate physical or social isolation as punishment

> *Possible signs of emotional abuse in children*

- highly self critical, depressed or anxious
- suicide threats or attempts
- persistent running away from home

> *Possible signs of emotionally abusive parents or carers*

- exposure of child to domestic or family violence

Exposure to family violence

Family violence is when members of a family are violent towards each other. It includes domestic violence, which is violence between two people who are or were in an intimate relationship. Family violence can occur between partners, ex partners, extended family members or adult children towards parents. Exposure to family violence is when a child hears or sees a parent, sibling or other family member experience physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse. It could also be when a child sees the outcomes from the violence. Such as physical injuries to a person or damage to property. The multifaceted nature and length of exposure to family violence can lead children to experience what is known as complex trauma, with impacts reaching well into adulthood.

> *Possible signs of exposure to family violence in children*

Because family violence encompasses a range of types of abuse, behavioural responses from a child may vary depending on their age and what is happening at home.

- tries to stop the abuse and thereby puts themselves at risk
- blames themselves
- copies the abusive behaviour, bullies others or is cruel to animals
- bullied by others
- feels fearful, nervous, guilty or depressed
- fearful of men
- lacks confidence or has low self esteem
- relapse into bed wetting and thumb sucking or nightmares
- shows changes in their school behaviour and performance
- unexplained ailments including headaches, asthma and stuttering
- running away from home
- never wants to take friends home
- attempting suicide or self harm
- abuse of drugs and/ or alcohol

> *Possible signs of family violence for survivor family members*

- isolation from family and friends
- overly anxious to please their partner or other family member
- seems fearful of someone close to them
- expresses fear that they are being stalked or followed
- becomes depressed, anxious and lacking in confidence
- wears inappropriate clothing in warm weather to cover their body, or sunglasses, heavy makeup to cover their face to hide physical injury
- partner/ family member has excessive control over a person's money, social life and interactions
- reluctant to leave child/ren with partner or family member
- has a partner that regularly puts them down or criticises them in public
- partner is jealous and possessive, repeatedly accusing them of affairs
- partner makes all decisions about use of contraception and pregnancy options (forces a person to continue a pregnancy or to have an abortion)

Neglect

Neglect is the failure to provide the basic necessities for emotional and physical development and wellbeing of a child. This includes food, safe and hygienic housing, appropriate clothing, access to medical treatment, personal hygiene and adequate supervision. Along with emotional abuse, neglect is the most common form of abuse in Australia.

> Possible signs of neglect neglect in children

- low weight for age and/or failure to thrive and develop
- untreated physical problems eg sores, serious nappy rash and urine scalds, significant dental decay
- poor standards of hygiene, child or young person consistently unwashed
- poor complexion and hair texture
- child not adequately supervised for their age
- scavenging or stealing food and focus on basic survival
- extended stays at school, public places, other homes
- longs for or indiscriminately seeks adult affection
- rocking, sucking, head-banging
- poor school attendance

> Possible signs of neglect from parents or carers

- unable or unwilling to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, safe home conditions
- leaving the child without appropriate supervision
- abandons the child or young person
- withholding physical contact or stimulation for prolonged periods
- unable or unwilling to provide psychological nurturing
- has limited understanding of the child or young person's needs
- has unrealistic expectations of the child or young person

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is when a child experiences deliberate physical injury or trauma. Most commonly it includes hitting but can also be biting, shaking, burning or poisoning.

> Possible signs of physical abuse in children

- bruising to face, head or neck, other bruising and marks which may show the shape of the object that caused it eg belt buckle, hand print
- lacerations and welts
- drowsiness, vomiting, fits or pooling of blood in the eyes, which may suggest head injury
- adult bite marks and scratches
- fractures of bones, especially in children under three years old
- dislocations, sprains, twisting
- burns and scalds (including cigarette burns)

> Possible signs of physically abusive parents or carers

- frequent visits with the child or young person to health or other services with unexplained or suspicious injuries, swallowing of non-food substances or with internal complaints
- explanation of injury offered by the parent is not consistent with the injury
- family history of violence
- history of their own maltreatment as a child
- fears injuring the child or young person in their care
- uses excessive discipline

> *Possible signs of physical abuse in children*

- multiple injuries or bruises
- explanation of injury offered by the child or young person is not consistent with their injury
- abdominal pain caused by ruptured internal organs, without a history of major trauma
- swallowing of poisonous substances, alcohol or other harmful drugs
- general indicators of female genital mutilation

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is when an adult, child or adolescent uses their power or authority to involve a child in sexual activity. Sexual activity includes sexual intercourse and also a range of sexual behaviours that can be physical, verbal or emotional. About 90% of child sexual abuse perpetrated by adults is carried out by adult males who are known to the child. Usually a relative, family friend, father, step father, acquaintance or neighbour. Between 3.9% and 10.7% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by adult women known to the child.

Children and young people can also be sexually abusive towards other children. 30% -50% of all child sexual abuse involves children as the people who are engaging in sexually abusive behaviours with other children.

> *Possible signs of sexual abuse in children*

- bruising or bleeding in the genital area
- sexually transmitted infections
- bruising to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen or thighs
- child or young person or their friend telling you about it, directly or indirectly
- sexual knowledge or behaviour inappropriate for the child's age
- going to bed fully clothed
- regressive behaviour eg sudden return to bed wetting or soiling
- self destructive or risk taking behaviour eg drug or alcohol dependency, suicide attempts, self harm
- child being in contact with a known or suspected paedophile
- anorexia or over eating
- presence of a sexually transmitted infection in a child under the age of 10 years
- adolescent pregnancy
- unexplained accumulation of money and gifts
- persistent running away from home

> *Possible signs of sexually abusive adults, children or young people, parents or carers*

Grooming behaviours

- taking an over interest in a child face to face, by phone, text and/or online
- regularly offering to spend time with a child alone, wanting overnight visits or co sleeping
- being exceptionally helpful in supporting a family, in a way that is outside the person's role
- buying a child gifts or providing a child with food, clothing or other necessities
- insisting on touching or tickling a child when the child doesn't want to. This touch may increase in intensity and sexual nature as the child grows more used to the initial touch
- encouraging children to use alcohol and drugs with them
- showing sexually explicit materials, and/or their body and genitals to a child

> Other signs of sexually abusive adults, children or young people, parents or carers

- verbal threats of sexual abuse
- exposing a child or young person to opportunistic sex work
- possession or production of child exploitation material (footage, images or other materials that depict real life or fictional sexual acts involving children)
- intentional exposure of a child to sexual behaviour of others
- previous conviction or suspicion of child sexual abuse
- coercing a child or young person to engage in sexual behaviour with other children
- denial of adolescent's pregnancy by family

Where to get help

- In an emergency call triple zero 000
- If you suspect that a child has experienced abuse or is at risk of harm you should contact the relevant state or territory child protection agency. The Australian Institute of Family Studies has an up to date contact list <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/reporting-abuse-and-neglect>
- If you make a report and you still believe that a child is not safe or receiving the support they need you can contact the children's commissioner or guardian in your state or territory. They are independent of government and their role is to advocate for the rights of children <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/mandatory-reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect>
- [Parentline](https://www.parentline.org.au/) 1800 30 1300 provide free telephone counselling and advice to parents and carers. Resources are available to support parents and carers to understand a wide range of issues related to raising children and young people
- Find the right service for you <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/cfca-resource-sheet/helplines-and-telephone-counselling-services-children-young-people> the Australian Institute of Family Studies, helplines and telephone counselling services for children, young people, parents and carers
- [Resources](https://www.danielmorcombe.org.au/resources) to teach child safety skills to children and young people are available from the Daniel Morcombe Foundation

References and resources

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