



If you have experienced a recent sexual assault or need after-hours help, please call the Sexual Assault Crisis Line on 1800 806 292. If you live outside of Victoria, call 1800Respect.

Child Sexual Abuse – Information for Parents and Caregivers

The purpose of this resource is to:

- provide guidance on recognising potential signs of child sexual abuse
- support you to have conversations with children and young people where you suspect child sexual abuse
- support you to understand the steps to take if you suspect a child has experienced child sexual abuse or you receive a direct disclosure of child sexual abuse
- support you to understand the services available and how to access them for the child or young person, yourself and other family members.

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse is any sexual act or sexual threat imposed on a child or adolescent, aged under 18 years, by an adult. It is an abuse of the authority held by the perpetrator and is never the fault of the child or young person. The recent Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) estimates that 3 in 10 (28.5%) Australians have experienced child sexual abuse.¹

In Victoria, a child or young person under the age of 16 years cannot legally consent to any form of sexual activity with an adult. Those aged 16-17 years cannot legally consent to any form of sexual activity with anyone who is in a role of care, supervision or authority.

All forms of child sexual abuse are illegal and can have significant short-term and long-term impacts on children, families and communities.

Child sexual abuse is a broad term that includes a wide range of behaviours and situations:

It can include:

- contact sexual acts such as touching or fondling the genital area
- non-contact sexual acts such as exposing a child to pornography.

It can also:

- range from one-time occurrences to multiple experiences
- occur with or without the use of physical force or violence
- involve the use of technology – for example, creating child sexual abuse images or videos and sharing this content online.

¹ Mathews B et al. (2023) The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. Med J Aust. 218 (6).



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For more information about child sexual abuse, see SASVic's *Grooming & Child Sexual Abuse* resource at www.sasvic.org.au/csaresource1.

Potential Signs of Child Sexual Abuse

Every child and young person will respond differently to experiences of child sexual abuse.

While there are some potential physical, emotional and behavioural indicators, not all children and young people will display obvious signs.

Often children and young people will express and communicate how they are feeling through their behaviour, as they may not have an understanding or the words to fully describe what they are experiencing.

Emotional or behavioural signs

Emotional or behavioural signs or changes may include:

- depression, anxiety and mood changes, including social withdrawal and dissociation (where a person disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, memories or sense of identity)
- feeling jumpy, nervous, agitated and easily startled
- difficulty regulating emotions (rapid, sometimes exaggerated changes in mood where strong emotions or feelings occur such as uncontrollable laughter or crying)
- difficulty concentrating or learning new information
- change in academic performance
- resistance to going to school or participating in a usual activity (e.g. sport practice).
- trouble falling or staying asleep, sleep disturbances or nightmares
- generalised fear and anxiety (a persistent feeling that they are not safe)
- difficulty building trusting relationships
- difficulty handling and coping with change
- substance use or misuse, self-harm or disordered eating
- sense of helplessness, hopelessness or presenting a negative world view
- significant or extreme changes to the way they dress or to their appearance
- change in general behaviour or seeming out of sorts
- over-compliance and eagerness to please
- fear and avoidance of certain people and places
- self-harm or suicidal ideation.

Emotional and behavioural signs may also include:

- presenting as everything is OK
- no observable behaviour changes



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- asserting that they are OK
- acting as if nothing has happened
- stating that they can deal with it on their own.

Physical signs

Physical signs of child sexual abuse may include:

- headaches
- stomach aches
- fatigue
- bed-wetting
- change in appetite and or weight loss
- nightmares and or sleep disturbances
- bruises on soft parts of the body, like buttocks or thighs
- changes in the genital areas, such as redness, swelling or discharge
- pain or burning when going to the toilet.

Talking to Children and Young People about Child Sexual Abuse

You may have reason to believe or suspect that a child or young person has experienced child sexual abuse. This could be because you have noticed physical or behavioural signs, because they may have said something unusual, because someone may have told you about their concerns, or because there is reason to believe they have had contact with an alleged or known perpetrator.

It can be difficult for children and young people to talk to their parents or caregivers about the abuse they have experienced. Perpetrators put a lot of time and effort into ensuring the child or young person feels that they must keep the abuse a secret.

It is important to understand some of the reasons why a child or young person may find it hard to talk to you about the abuse:

- They are unaware that they are being groomed or experiencing abuse.
- They feel worried, guilty or ashamed about sharing what has happened.
- They think they will be in trouble.
- The perpetrator has told them not to tell anyone or used strategies and threats to make them feel afraid or feel responsible for the abuse.
- The perpetrator has manipulated them into believing that they are in a caring relationship and do not want the perpetrator to get in trouble.
- They think no one will believe them, or are concerned about how others will view them.
- They have fears for themselves or their family.



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- They have fears that the perpetrator will share images or recordings that have been taken of the abuse.
- They blame themselves for getting involved in the situation.

If you notice a change in your child's behaviour or sense that they do not seem quite like themselves, it is important as a parent or caregiver to create opportunities for open conversations that support them to talk about what is happening for them. Make it clear that your support is unconditional and not dependent upon anything they may tell you.

Approaches will differ depending on the child and young person, their age, communication preferences and the capacity of the parent or caregiver.

Starting conversations with open-ended questions

Where possible, try and open the conversation within a calm, safe and comfortable environment for the child or young person.

Create opportunities for the child or young person to talk about how they are feeling and what is happening in their life. Depending on the child or young person, consider open-ended questions that allow them more space and time to talk. For example:

- What was one thing that you enjoyed doing today?
- What was one thing that was challenging today?
- What was one thing that made you sad today?
- You seemed quiet today. Is there anything that happened that made you feel sad or worried?

Some children and young people may benefit from specific prompts and questions, depending on their developmental age and stage. However, asking too many direct questions about child sexual abuse and specific perpetrators can sometimes risk a child or young person withdrawing from a conversation.

Activities such as playing, drawing, or engaging in movement can help a child or young person with emotional regulation and may assist in both verbal and non-verbal disclosures. For example:

- Explain that "Sometimes we feel things in our bodies, but we are not sure what they are or what they mean. It can feel unusual, scary, weird or just different. Sometimes we don't have words to describe these feelings we have. It can be easier to draw them and where you might feel them in your body."
- Another approach is to say something like, "when I feel quiet, sometimes I like someone to sit next to me. Would it be OK for me to sit next to you while you draw?"
- There may be opportunities to begin a conversation about their drawing or ask if there is something they would like to draw that shows you how they are feeling or how their day was. For example, "sometimes things can happen in our day that we can't put into words. Would you like to draw me a picture of something that may have confused, worried, or upset you recently?"

Sometimes a child or young person may feel more comfortable talking to a trusted adult that is not their parent or caregiver. Explore if there is another trusted adult that they



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would like to talk to, for example another family member, counsellor, or support staff at school.

Responding to disclosures of sexual abuse from children and young people

If a child or young person tells you that they or someone they know is experiencing child sexual abuse, it is natural to feel a range of emotions and concern. A compassionate and supportive response from the adults around the child or young person can play a significant role in identifying and stopping the abuse and positively influence their recovery and healing.

It can take a lot of courage for a child or young person to share their experience of sexual abuse. Every disclosure will be different. Keep in mind that:

- often the abuse is not a single event; it may occur on multiple occasions over a long period of time
- disclosures from children are often non-verbal, and can be behavioural
- a child and young person may disclose to a friend or online (e.g. social media)
- a disclosure can be unintentional and in the context of general day-to-day activities
- it may sound incomplete or disjointed
- certain events, environments, interactions, smells, situations etc. (at times called triggers) may prompt a disclosure. These can include other traumatic events, unexpected contact with the perpetrator, media reporting, and respectful relationships classes at school.

It is important not to assume that a child or young person is not distressed because they do not act in a way you might believe someone should behave after experiencing abuse.

It can take a lot of courage for a child or young person to share their experience of abuse. While every disclosure will be different, and there is no one way to respond, these are some key steps you can take to provide a supportive and caring response.

- Listen carefully without interruption or judgement.
- Be yourself, while being mindful of your own emotional reactions; where possible, use a tone of voice and facial expressions that convey a sense of calm and safety.
- Tell them you believe them and they are not responsible or to blame, even if you feel their story is incomplete or doesn't make sense to you in the moment.
- Explain that they deserve to be safe and that you will do everything you can to keep them safe but avoid making any promises that you cannot keep.
- Try not to ask too many questions. Avoid asking direct or leading questions. Use open-ended questions, for example "tell me more about that."
- Tell them that they have done the right thing by telling you.
- Explore what would help them to feel safe and supported.



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- Set the expectation that to keep them safe you will need to talk to other adults and professionals about what has happened and what to do next, but you will be there to support them throughout.
- Let them know that you are always available to continue talking about the topic and that they can ask questions about what will happen next.

[This video by the Sexual Assault Family Violence Centre highlights ways parents and carers can support their child after a disclosure of child sexual abuse.](#)

Responding to Online Child Sexual Abuse

A perpetrator may create child sexual abuse materials. This is any imagery or video that depicts or describes a child, or a representation of a child, who is or appears to be under the age of 18, and who is or appears to be in a sexual pose or sexual activity, or shows or describes the person's sexual organs or breasts as a dominant characteristic.²

If you, or the child or young person, know or suspects that there are images or recordings of the abuse, this can add additional layers of concern. The lack of control over the ongoing sharing of their abuse images or videos and the public accessibility of those materials can be a difficult aspect of abuse to overcome.

The eSafety Commissioner can direct an online or electronic service or platform to remove the content. They work with Victoria Police and a global network called INHOPE to remove child sexual abuse material wherever it is hosted.

For more information, view information from the eSafety Commissioner about child sexual abuse online at www.esafety.gov.au.

How Do I Report Child Sexual Abuse?

Any form of child sexual abuse is illegal.

As a parent or caregiver, if you know or have a reasonable belief that a child and young person has experienced grooming or child sexual abuse or is at risk of abuse, you can contact Victoria Police.

If you are not comfortable contacting police or have concerns or suspicions that you would like to discuss with another professional before contacting police, you can contact the Victorian Government's Child Protection Crisis Line or your local specialist sexual assault service for advice on what steps to take next.

Do not confront the perpetrator or discuss with them what the child or adolescent said.

Victoria Police

If you or a child and young person are in immediate danger, call Triple Zero (000).

To report child sexual abuse to police you contact them in three ways:

- Call your local Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigations Team (SOCIT)

² Hakansson, E., Tucci, J., Mitchell, J. (2024). [Hear us now, act now](#). Australian Childhood Foundation.



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- Call or visit your local police station.
- Call Triple Zero (000).

For more information, visit Victoria Police's reporting sexual offences and child abuse page at www.police.vic.gov.au/reporting-sexual-offences-child-abuse.

Victorian Government Child Protection Crisis Line

You can call 131 278 (24 hours, 7 days a week).

To make a report to child protection, a person needs to have formed a reasonable belief that a child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm as a result of abuse or neglect, and that their parent or caregiver has not protected or is unlikely to protect the child from harm.

For more information visit the Victorian Government's reporting child abuse page at <https://services.dffh.vic.gov.au/child-protection-contacts>.

What will happen after reporting child sexual abuse?

After reporting to Victoria Police, the investigation process is likely to take time. The investigation will be led by a detective who will be the main point of contact. They will ask you how you would like to be kept informed throughout the investigation and be available for any questions you may have.

As part of this investigation process, the child or young person may be required to record a statement recalling what happened in as much detail as possible.

Depending on the time frame of the abuse, the child or young person may be asked to undergo a forensic medical examination. The child or young person will be given the choice of whether they would like to do this, and their parent or caregiver must give consent.

Police may also:

- collect evidence, for example, a mobile phone, computer or clothing
- take statements from people who may have witnessed the abuse or who can provide information.

Not all investigations will proceed to court. This does not mean that the police do not believe that the child or young person experienced child sexual abuse, but that they do not have enough evidence required for criminal prosecution.

If the matter proceeds to court, a detective or prosecutor will talk to the parent or caregiver about the process and support them throughout. There are services available to the child or young person and their family to assist and support at court, such as the Office of Public Prosecution's Child Witness Assistance Service.

For more information on the process of reporting child sexual abuse to Victoria Police, visit Victoria Police's reporting sexual offences and child abuse page.



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Taking Care of Yourself

Parents and caregivers have a significant role in assisting a child or young person to move forward following child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse can not only impact the child or young person directly involved, but also on their families, friends and the wider community.

While impacts of the abuse can vary between individuals, most parents and caregivers can benefit from emotional and/or practical support to cope with their experience while supporting a child or young person who has been impacted by child sexual abuse.

Specialist Sexual Assault Services

In Victoria, specialist sexual assault services work with children and their families after child sexual abuse to help them make sense of what happened to them, make decisions about what to do next and aid recovery in a safe and supportive environment. Specialist sexual assault counsellor advocates can provide free and confidential therapeutic support while also providing information that can help to make decisions and navigate potential legal processes.

How to access a Specialist Sexual Assault Service

Call the Sexual Assault Crisis line on 1800 806 292

This number operates after office hours, on weekends and public holidays, providing free, confidential counselling and crisis support. During office hours the number will divert to your local specialist sexual assault services, which you can find now by scanning the QR code below.

There are specialist services in every part of Victoria that can support children and young people, and their families who have been impacted by child sexual abuse. They also provide support to adults who have experienced historic child sexual abuse.

You can self-refer to a specialist sexual assault service, meaning you don't need a referral letter from a GP. When a child or young person, aged 15 and under, is referred to a service, this must be with the consent of their parent or legal guardian. Third parties, for example a school welfare officer, cannot make a referral to a service without first discussing with the parent or legal guardian and the child or young person.

Find a specialist sexual assault service now by scanning the QR code.



For services outside of Victoria, please refer to the Australian Sexual Assault Services Directory at www.nasasv.org.au/support-directory.