

Safeguarding Children Program

What is child abuse?

Protecting children is a shared responsibility. A first step is identifying when a child is being harmed. Often child abuse is ignored or minimised because a child can't always tell you what's happening to them or fully understand that what is happening to them is wrong.

Key messages

- Child abuse is a complex problem affecting many millions of children around the world. It takes many forms.
- Child abuse can have devastating long term consequences for children and the community.
- It can occur in the community and within organisations that provide services to children and families. Organisational abuse has been of increasing concern.

What is child abuse?

Abuse, neglect, maltreatment and exploitation are terms commonly used to describe situations where a child may need to be protected from harm. Sometimes we use the term 'child abuse' to cover all these. A common definition of child abuse is:

Child abuse is an act or omission by a parent, caregiver, other adult or child that endangers or impairs a child's physical or emotional health and development.

It is not usually a single incident, but generally takes place over time. A person committing child abuse may intentionally or inadvertently cause harm, or may fail to prevent harm.

Defining the main types of child abuse provides a basis for understanding what represents illegal, harmful or inappropriate conduct towards children and young people.

Legal Definitions of Child Abuse

The legal definition of child abuse varies between States and Territories. Legal definitions of child abuse set a point at which statutory or legal intervention is required. They define a level of significant harm at which it is deemed that a child is likely to be in need of protection and in most jurisdictions set a threshold for mandatory reporting.

It is important for you know the legal definitions that apply in your State or Territory. The legal definitions become important when you are deciding whether you should make a report to child protection authorities or the Police. You can source information from the relevant government department in your state or territory through their web sites.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) summary of definitions of child sexual abuse is good place to start. <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/what-child-abuse-and-neglect>

Some classes of people e.g. teachers doctors are required by law in most States to report child abuse. They are called 'mandated reporters'. The AIFS also has a summary of these requirements.

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/mandatory-reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect>

Historically definitions have been referred mostly to abuse by parents and/or caregivers and have not considered abuse within organisations. While child abuse most commonly occurs in families and extended family networks, children and young people also experience abuse in organisational settings. Acts of child abuse can be committed by people who work in organisations in a paid or voluntary capacity, either directly or indirectly with children and young people. An example of a person



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who works directly with children is a childcare worker whereas an example of person working indirectly with children is a gardener or cleaner working at a school.

Types of Harm

In order to decide whether we think a child is being harmed it is helpful to understand a bit about the types of harm that children may suffer. These are generally considered under the headings of:

- Physical Harm
- Sexual Harm
- Emotional Harm
- Neglect

Physical Harm

Physical harm is when a child suffers or is likely to suffer significant harm from an injury inflicted either intentionally or inadvertently. This includes where the child's parents or caregivers have failed to protect the child from dangerous or life-threatening situations.

Sexual Harm

Sexual harm is when a person uses their power over a child to involve the child in sexual activity and includes where the child's parent or caregiver has not protected the child. It includes fondling of the child's genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger or other object, or exposure of the child to pornography.

Emotional Harm

Emotional harm is when a person repeatedly rejects and denigrates the child or uses threats to frighten the child to the extent that it damages the child's physical, social, intellectual or emotional development. Exposure to domestic violence is a significant cause of emotional harm in children to the extent that it is often included as its own category of harm.

Neglect

Neglect is when a child's parent or caregiver doesn't provide the child with the basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, shelter, medical attention or supervision, to the extent that the child's health and development is significantly harmed.

Whenever we try to categorise human behaviour we have trouble fitting it into boxes or under headings. These are helpful headings but researchers have identified many other types, including: foetal abuse; bullying; peer and sibling abuse; witnessing domestic violence and community violence; institutional abuse; organised exploitation; and state-sanctioned abuse.

Indicators of Harm

Often a child will not tell anyone that they have been harmed or will make seemingly vague statements about what is happening to them. We need to be alert to behavioural or physical signs of harm. These are known as indicators of harm.



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Generally **physical** indicators are things that you would see in the physical presentation of the child and can include:

- physical abuse - bruises, burns, cuts, broken bones
- sexual abuse - injuries and infections of the genitals and anus
- neglect - hunger, poor growth, hygiene and medical care
- emotional - delays in physical, emotional and social development

Behavioural indicators are things that you would see in the behaviour of the child or their carers and can include:

- physical abuse - aggression and hyperactivity, passivity and compliance, fear
- sexual abuse - age inappropriate sexual activity and knowledge, self-harming, regression, depression
- neglect - hunger, poor growth, lack of hygiene and medical care
- emotional - withdrawn, passive, low self-esteem

You may observe a whole range of indicators or a single indicator that leads you to believe that harm is occurring. The presence of an indicator does not always indicate that a child is being abused; and the absence of the signs does not indicate that the child is not being abused. As you can see from these indicators, child abuse and neglect affects a child's intellectual, physical, emotional and social development.

Is a child being harmed?

Often when confronted with a situation where a child is being harmed we immediately start to think about other factors like: who is responsible? Did they do it intentionally? Are they a bad person? These things can take our focus away from the child or lead us to downplay the risk of harm to the child. If we think about the question 'is a child being harmed?' it helps to focus on the effects on the child rather than the actions of the adult or the person doing the harm. For example if we hear about a child being left in a locked car we might think about whether their parent had been gone long, was it a hot day, did they have other children to care for and no one to help them? These are all important considerations but the first thing we need to think about is whether there is likely to be harm to the child. The fact is that a child can die very quickly in a hot car.

The consequences of abuse and neglect can appear in childhood, adolescence or adulthood and be severe and long-lasting. So if a child you think a child is being harmed then you need to do something about it.

