

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is any sexual act or sexual threat imposed on a child or adolescent. The abuse may occur as a single event, or it may be repeated over time. Some children experience child sexual abuse from another child or adolescent. The age of the person engaging in the abusive behaviour has little impact on the effect of that abuse on the child who is the victim of that behaviour.

Abuse is never the fault or responsibility of the child.

Adult perpetrators often use their position of power to abuse children. A child should never bear blame for this. This is at the core of our values at True and underpins all of the work at our service. Children who've experienced abuse may feel guilt, confusion and shame. They might even feel responsible for how this abuse (and talking about it) affects their family. Our workers help children to understand it's not their fault and help them to recover.

What kinds of acts are seen as child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse includes (but is not limited to) the following behaviours by the person who is interacting with the child or young person:

- Exposing themselves to a child or adolescent
- Showing pornography or child exploitation materials to the child or adolescent
- Touching the child in an inappropriate way, that is, touching parts of the body that are socially understood to be private – anus, penis, vulva, vagina, breasts, mouths - without a socially acceptable reason (that is, for medical attention, personal hygiene or required care of the child or adolescent).
- Encouraging a child to touch them in a sexual way.
- Having sexual intercourse with a child or adolescent under 16 years of age or 18 years if the person is in a supervisory role to the adolescent.

Adults who sexually abuse children come from all walks of life.

Research into the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Australia consistently demonstrates that most children who experience the abuse knew the adult or other child or teen who abused them. Some children and adolescents experience abuse or child sexual assault from a stranger. Abusers take advantage of a child or adolescent's dependency or lack of understanding about what is happening.

It is important to remember that many of the people who sexually abuse children are very skilled at building relationships of trust and safety with the child and the important, caring adults in the child's life. The pattern of developing trust is referred to as 'grooming'.

Grooming

Grooming is used to trick or manipulate children and young people to participate in sexually abusive behaviours and to remain silent about the abuse. Tactics of grooming may commence with paying special attention to the child, creating an environment in which the child is reassured they are special and treasured. Unsafe touch may be taught to the child as something that is natural, an expression of love and part of a very nurturing relationship between the child and the person abusing them.

Grooming may also involve bribes, threats, force and deception to coerce children and adolescents. A child or adolescent who has been groomed may feel as if they were consenting to the sexual abuse.

Children won't always understand abuse – and shouldn't be expected to.

Children might find it difficult to see that someone else is abusing them. They may not even know that what has happened is wrong. That is why it is vital that adults are able to talk to children about worries they might have and to respond helpfully to children and young people who need someone to talk to.

All children are vulnerable to abuse.

We're not saying this to frighten you. It has to be said clearly: regardless of gender, ethnicity, background, sexuality or location, all children and young people are vulnerable to abuse. Some might be more vulnerable than others - for example, children who have a disability are three times more likely to be abused than others. Our service is also seeing an increase in children who have been groomed or abused by perpetrators using new technologies like live-streaming, social media, gaming and the dark web. Read our *Information Sheet on Guides to Online Safety* for more information.

Some children are more likely to be missed.

Some victims of child sexual abuse are more likely to be missed out by those who are there to protect them and help them recover. They include boys, children under the age of 10 and LGBTQ children. Young people who have a disability are also more likely to be missed, partly due to the misconception that they're less likely to be targeted by abusers. To add to this, some children won't have the language or the opportunity to speak up about abuse. In some cases, those that could help a young person deem their behaviour as challenging or difficult, without investigating further to understand the cause.

We have to change our view to help to ensure better access to support for all children affected by abuse. We're calling on the Government to make sure all children who've experienced sexual abuse aren't missing out on support.

It is important to remember that no person under the age of 16 years can legally consent to sexual acts. The responsibility for the abuse always rests with the adult.