



Government of Western Australia
Department of Communities



Recognising Child Abuse





Child abuse is a serious issue. It refers to any kind of action or failure to act that results in harm or possible harm to a child. A child who is being abused or neglected may feel fear, shame or confusion. The child may be afraid to tell anyone of the abuse, particularly if the person harming them is known to them and their family.

Child abuse is not isolated to specific cultural or socio-economic groups. It can happen through a person within the family (for example a parent or relative) or outside the immediate family (perhaps a teacher or sports coach), or an unknown person.

The following information about recognising signs of abuse may be helpful if you are concerned that a child has been harmed or is at risk of being harmed.

There are four main types of child abuse:

- Physical
- Sexual
- Emotional – including psychological abuse and exposure to family and domestic violence
- Neglect.

A child can suffer one or more of these types of abuse. Abuse can be hard to spot. Some children show no signs of abuse, while others may show signs of abuse through their behaviour, emotions or physical appearance. Common signs across different types of abuse include:

- bedwetting
- being unable to explain an injury or giving inconsistent, vague or unlikely explanations for an injury
- unusual fear of physical contact
- frequent headaches or stomach pains
- concerning behaviours that may be harmful to themselves or others, or
- being extremely sensitive and alert to their surroundings (hypervigilance).

Other signs may suggest a child is experiencing trauma or grief. Watch for any changes in the child's general mood. The child may become anxious, irritable, depressed, angry, or show a combination of emotions. However, don't assume that just because you see these symptoms, the child is being abused. Keep in mind that these symptoms can apply to a child under stress and may not be related to abuse.



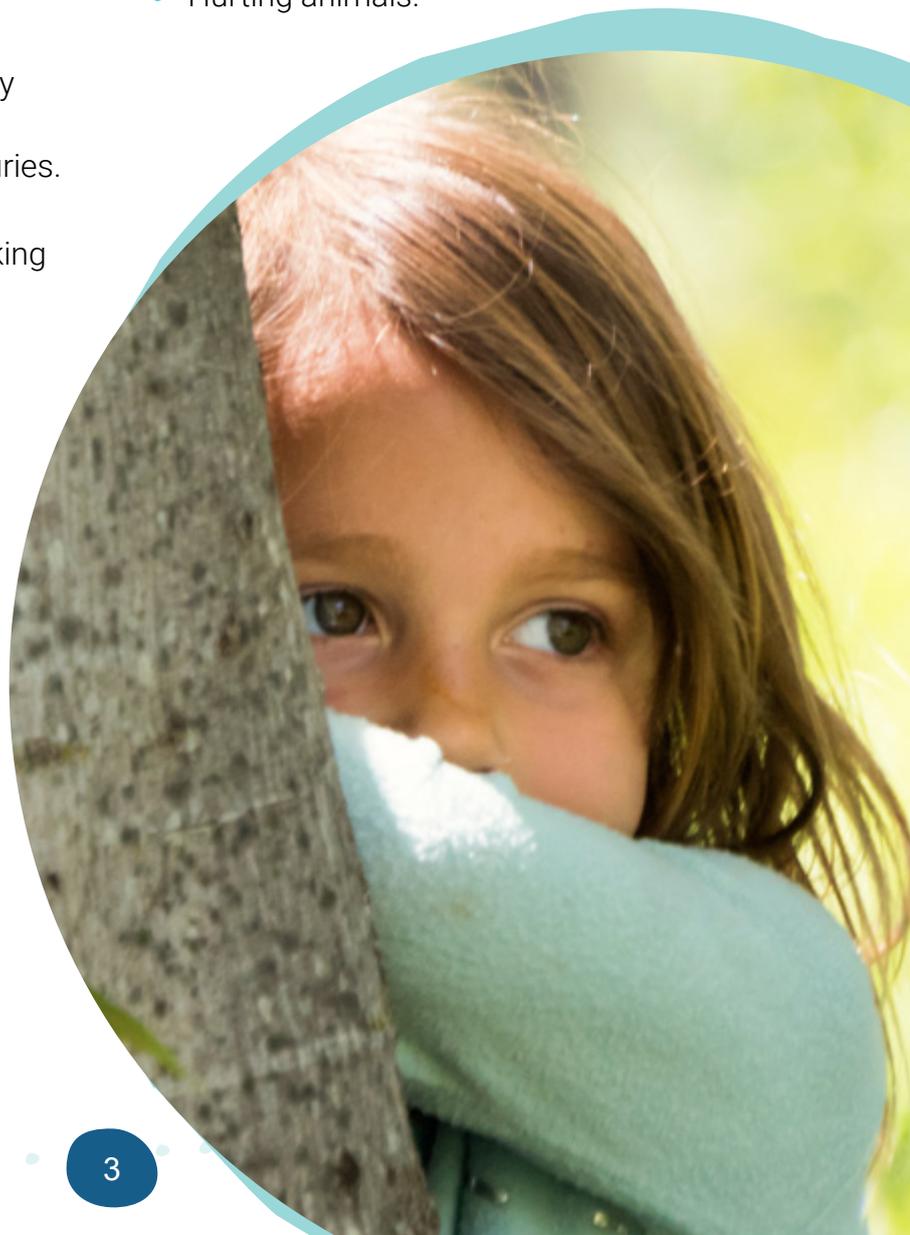
Physical abuse

Physical abuse is when a child is deliberately hurt or is at serious risk of being hurt by someone they know such as a family member, relative, carer, another adult or child. The signs of physical abuse may be subtle and may be easier to spot if the child has no way of concealing the injury.

Examples of physical child abuse may include beating, strangling, biting, shaking, throwing, scalding, burning and/or suffocating the child; poisoning, being given or forced to ingest alcohol or drugs; assault using implements; and female genital cutting.

Possible indicators or signs of physical abuse include (but are not limited to):

- Broken bones, unexplained bruising and/or burns in different stages of healing.
- Being unable to explain an injury or giving inconsistent, vague or unlikely explanations for an injury.
- Unusual or unexplained internal injuries.
- A history of family violence.
- A delay between the injury and seeking medical assistance.
- Repeated visits to the doctor with injuries, poisoning or minor complaints.
- Habitual absences from school and other usual activities.
- Being unusually frightened of a parent or carer.
- Wearing inappropriate clothing in warm weather (to hide bruises, cuts or marks).
- Avoiding physical contact.
- Becoming scared when other children cry or shout.
- Being excessively friendly to strangers.
- Self-stimulatory behaviours such as rocking or head banging.
- Starting fires or being fascinated with fire.
- Destroying property.
- Hurting animals.



Sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is when a child is forced or persuaded to take part in sexual activities. This may involve physical contact or non-contact activities and can happen online or offline. A child may not always understand that they are being sexually abused.

Sexual abuse includes:

- Sexual touching of any part of the body, whether the child is wearing clothes or not. This includes, kissing, holding or touching the child in a sexual way.
- Forcing or encouraging the child to take part in sexual activity.
- Making a child take off their clothes or touch someone else's genitals
- Rape or penetration by putting an object or body part in a child's mouth, vagina or anus.
- Exposing genitals to a child.
- Encouraging or forcing a child to watch or hear sexual acts.
- Not taking proper measures to prevent a child being exposed to sexual activities by others.
- Encouraging or making a child masturbate while others watch.
- Persuading a child to make, view or distribute child abuse images (such as performing sexual acts over the internet, sexting or showing pornography to a child).
- Making, viewing or distributing child abuse images.
- Allowing someone else to make, view or distribute child abuse images.
- Sexual exploitation – occurs when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child into sexual activity in return for gifts, money or reasons.

Children who are sexually abused have often been groomed into trusting their abuser and many do not understand they are being abused. Grooming is a process a person uses to prepare a child, significant adults and the environment around the child for the abuse. Grooming can happen anywhere including online, in organisations and in public spaces.

Children may not realise or say that they have been sexually abused. Signs of sexual abuse include changes in the child's behaviour, emotional state and physical signs. These include:

- knowing more about sexual activities than other children their age
- masturbating more or in way that is unusual for their age and stage of development
- involving other children in concerning sexual behaviours
- refusing to undress for activities or often wearing layers of clothing
- bruising, bleeding, swelling, tears or cuts on their genitals or anus
- difficulty walking or sitting
- unusual vaginal odour or discharge
- itching or pain in the genital area and/or difficulty going to the toilet
- having a sexually transmitted disease
- torn, stained or bloody clothing, especially underwear
- being afraid of being alone with a particular person
- being frequently depressed, feeling suicidal or attempted suicide
- frequent head aches and stomach pains

- creating stories, poems or artwork about abuse, and
- unexplained goods, possessions or money.

Sexual abuse can cause harm to the child including significant emotional trauma, physical injury, infections and impaired emotional and psychological development.



Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse occurs when a child is repeatedly rejected, isolated, threatened or humiliated.

Emotional abuse also includes exposure to family and domestic violence which causes serious emotional, physical and psychological harm to children, as well as placing them at increased likelihood of other kinds of abuse and neglect.



The term emotional abuse also include psychological abuse which involves behaviours such as isolating, discrediting, and disregarding.

A child can be emotionally abused when they experience hostility, derogatory name-calling and put-downs, repeated physical or social isolation, and persistent rejection or coldness from a person (such as a parent, sibling, carer or teacher) over an extended period.

Possible signs of emotional abuse include (but are not limited to):

- unexplained mood swings between aggressive and passive behaviour
- significant delays in emotional, mental and physical development including gross and fine motor skills
- language delay or stuttering
- poor self-image and low self-esteem (feelings of worthlessness)
- compulsively lying or stealing
- high levels of anxiety or distress
- lack of trust in others
- heightened desire for attention or affection from known and unknown adults
- reluctance to go home
- regressive behaviours such as rocking, sucking their thumb and bedwetting
- fear of someone they know
- self-harming, overeating or starving themselves, and
- creating violent drawings or writing.



Neglect

Neglect is when a child does not receive adequate food or shelter, medical treatment, supervision, care or nurturance to the extent that their development is harmed, or they are injured.

Some examples are:

- Leaving a child alone without appropriate supervision.
- Not ensuring the child attends school or enrolling them in school.
- The child having an infection because of poor hygiene or lack of prescribed medication.
- Not giving a child appropriate attention and emotional support.
- Not seeking medical help for the child when required.

Possible signs of neglect include (but are not limited to):

- showing signs of malnutrition and hunger
- begging, stealing or hoarding food
- persistent uncleanliness and poor personal hygiene such as matted hair, dirty skin, sores and/or body odour
- frequently ill, untreated medical problems or lack of routine medical care
- often being tired, late for school or non-attendance
- being left without appropriate supervision for their age, development and/or for the environmental circumstances
- left at school for long periods after the end of the school day
- lack of weather appropriate clothing
- inadequate shelter or unsafe conditions
- when a baby or preschool aged child does not meet physical and developmental milestones and there are no underlying medical reasons for this.





Family and domestic violence

Family and domestic violence is an intentional pattern of behavior intended to coerce, control and create fear within a current or former intimate partner or family relationship. It includes, but is not limited to, emotional and/or psychological abuse, physical violence, sexual violence, financial abuse, technology-facilitated abuse and religious/spiritual violence. The perpetrator of the violence is the person responsible for the abuse.

Exposing a child to family and domestic violence by being present and seeing or hearing the violence, or witnessing physical injuries resulting from the violence, is a form of emotional abuse. In addition to the harm caused by the emotional abuse, exposing a child to family and domestic violence can cause physical harm if they are hurt when a perpetrator assaults the adult survivor; and neglect where the violence contributes to a child's basic needs not being met.

Being exposed to family and domestic violence, particularly when it involves parents and/or caregivers, can seriously affect a child's emotional wellbeing and development. A child is likely to experience profound emotional, social and behavioural difficulties and may suffer from post-traumatic stress due to memories of the abuse.

Signs of a child having been exposed to family and domestic violence are similar to those of emotional abuse, physical abuse and neglect, as listed on page six.



What you can do

Children can't protect themselves. They rely on responsible adults to be the voice they don't have. If you are worried about the wellbeing or safety of a child and you are not sure what to do, you can contact the Department of Communities (Communities). An experienced child protection worker will talk to you about your concerns to inform what should be done about them.

Unless there is an imminent risk to a child's safety, do not ask the child a lot of questions yourself. The appropriate people will take action to investigate.

Mandatory Reporters

Under the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*, it is a legal requirement in Western Australia for doctors, nurses, midwives, teachers, police officers and boarding supervisors to report all reasonable beliefs of child sexual abuse to Communities.

You can lodge a verbal mandatory report by calling the Department's Mandatory Reporting Service on free call **1800 708 704**.

By law, you must also lodge a written report. It is important to provide as much information as possible in the written report, as this will assist with the assessment of the child's safety.

You can use the Department of Communities' secure Web System to lodge a written report or alternatively download the mandatory reporting template form (PDF). Links to the online Web System and template form can be found on the Child Protection and Family Support website at <http://mandatoryreporting.dcp.wa.gov.au/Pages/Home.aspx>.

Under other legislation, the reporting of child sexual abuse requires Family Court personnel and child care licensees to report child abuse to Communities.

The *Family Court Act 1997* (s.160) and the *Family Law Act 1975* (s.67ZA) require Family Court personnel, such as Family Court registrars, counsellors and independent legal practitioners who represent children in Family Court matters, to report when they have reasonable grounds for suspecting a child has been, or is, at risk of being abused. These mandatory reports are referred to the district office from the senior practice development officer located at the Family Court.

Regulations made under the *Child Care Services Act 2007* (WA) require persons who hold a child care license to report any allegation of abuse, neglect or assault of an enrolled child during a care session that is made against a licensee, managerial officer, staff member or volunteer of the child care service to the Department.



Where to go for advice and support

Department of Communities

If you are concerned about a child's wellbeing, please contact the Central Intake Team on **1800 273 889** or email cpduty@communities.wa.gov.au.

To report a concern out of business hours please contact our Crisis Care Unit on **9223 1111** or country free call **1800 199 008**. If you believe a child is in immediate danger or in a life-threatening situation contact the Western Australia Police immediately on **000**.

Refer to the [Department of Communities](#) website for your local office.

Western Australia Police Force

131 444
(General enquiries and police attendance)

Life threatening emergencies

000

Ngala Parenting Line

(08) 6279 1200 / 1800 654 432
(24-hour support and advice for parents)

HealthDirect Australia

1800 022 222
(24-hour general health information and advice)

Kids Helpline

1800 551 800
(5-25 years old)

Youth Beyond Blue

1300 224 636
(12-25 years old)

QLife (LGBTI+)

1800 184 527
(3pm to midnight – note: time may change)

Men's Domestic Violence Helpline

(08) 9223 1199 / 1800 000 599

Women's Domestic Violence Helpline

(08) 9223 1188 / 1800 007 339

Sexual Assault Resource Centre

1800 199 888

Department of Communities

5 Newman Court, Fremantle WA 6160
Postal address: Locked Bag 5000, Fremantle WA 6959
Telephone: 1800 176 888
Email: enquiries@communities.wa.gov.au
Website: www.communities.wa.gov.au

Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) – Telephone: 13 14 50

If you are deaf, or have a hearing or speech impairment, contact us through the National Relay Service. For more information visit: www.communications.gov.au/accesshub/nrs

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