

# Child abuse

**Sometimes children are abused or neglected by their parents or carers.**

**Some people think it is only abuse if a child is physically hurt. Children are also abused when they are made to feel worthless or unloved, when they live with violence or their basic needs are ignored. This can be just as harmful and the effects can last a lifetime.**

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## About child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and neglect is when a child is physically, emotionally or sexually harmed. It is also when their health, safety or wellbeing needs are not being met by their family.

Child abuse can happen in families of any income, culture or religion. It often happens over a long period of time, but single one-off events can be abuse too. The effects of abuse and neglect are serious and can last a lifetime.

### Physical

Physical abuse is when a child's body is harmed by things such as punching, hitting, shaking, biting or burning. There may be cuts, bruises or broken bones. Sometimes there are no signs because the injuries are internal. In extreme cases, children can die.

A child's physical needs can also be neglected. They may not have a place to live, or live somewhere that isn't safe. They might not have enough food or clothes, or not be kept clean. They might be left alone or not be well supervised.

It is also neglect when a child is not given the health care they need, including mental health care, or when parents don't make sure the child goes to school and gets an education.

### Emotional

Emotional abuse is just as harmful as physical abuse. It is when a child is treated in ways that make them feel scared, worthless or alone. It can be less obvious which means others may not notice it or do anything about it. It can build up over time.

A parent might:

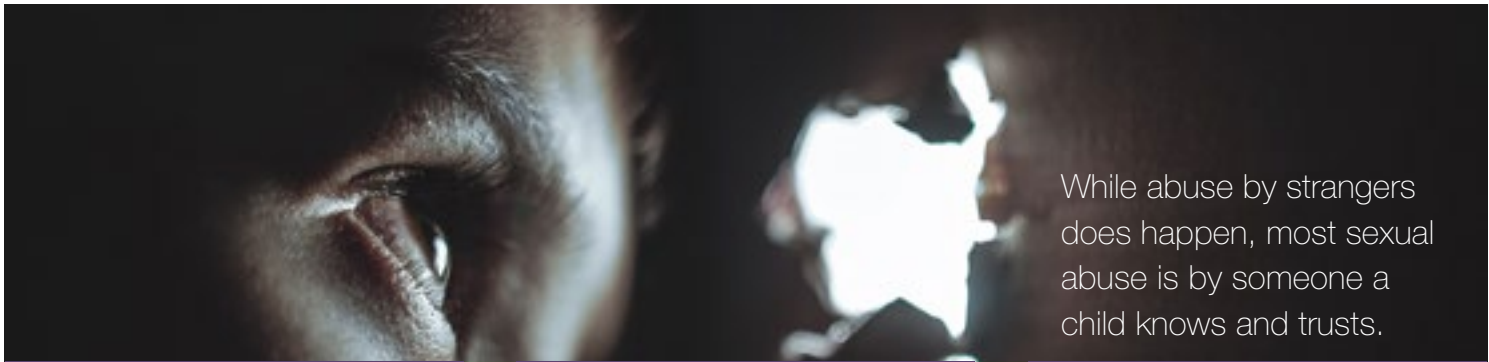
- ignore a child or refuse to accept them
- not show love, or withdraw love to control the child
- constantly shout at a child
- criticise, tease or shame them
- make them feel different from other family members or deliberately target them
- encourage a child to break the law
- threaten someone or something they care about.



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While abuse by strangers does happen, most sexual abuse is by someone a child knows and trusts.

## About child abuse and neglect *continued*

### Family violence

Living with family violence harms children emotionally, even if they are not the direct victim. It affects their growing brain and can delay their development.

Children can feel they are to blame for the violence. They can feel powerless and scared when a loved parent is mistreated, and ashamed that they can't stop it. They can worry about family members or pets being harmed.

Children can also be physically harmed when there is violence. They may get caught up in what's going on, or be intentionally hurt as a way of 'getting at' the other parent. Children may be neglected because family life is so disrupted.

Children have a right to be safe and cared for in their own home. Child abuse and neglect is against the law.

### Sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is when an adult or older or stronger child persuades, tricks or forces a child into sexual activity. It includes sexual acts, inappropriate touching, showing the child pornography, letting them watch adults having sex or involving them in prostitution. They may use threats or bribes to keep the child silent.

## Why does child abuse happen?

Not all parents mean to cause harm to their children. Some may be struggling with their own problems, or might not know better ways to care for children. Parents might:

- find life hard and get very stressed. They might have problems with money, alcohol, drugs, relationships or their mental health. They might not have family support and may lash out at their children when under pressure
- not know how children learn and develop. They may expect too much from a child for their age and get angry when they can't do something
- not understand their child's behaviour. A child needs to feel safe and secure but can't always say what they need or feel. A parent might think a child is being naughty when really they are scared and need comfort. Children can also go back to younger behaviours when they are stressed, e.g. acting more like a baby, wetting the bed again when they have been dry, or not sleeping through the night
- not have learned how to look after children properly
- think it's OK because that is how they were treated as children.

There are services that can help parents to look after their children well, even when they are under pressure.

## Child abuse and discipline

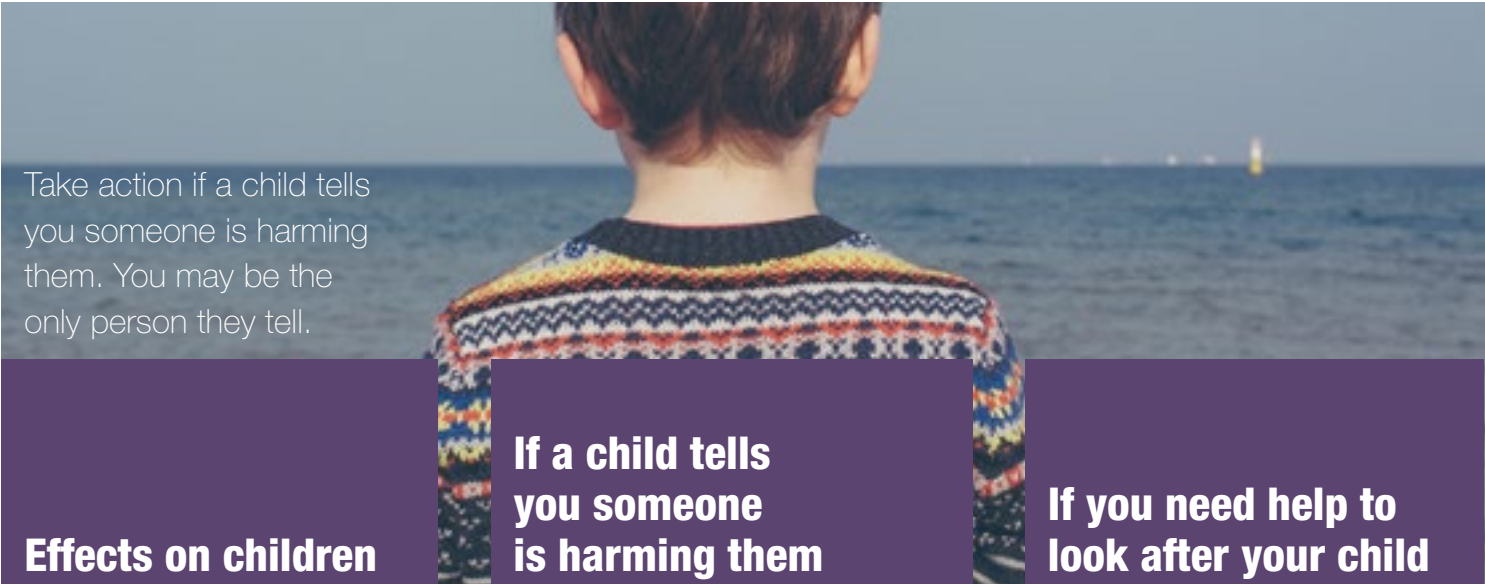
Some parents hit children when they are angry with the child's behaviour. This can cross the line into child abuse. If you feel like hitting your child, it can help to ask yourself:

- 'Would it be OK for someone to do this to me?'
- 'Am I taking things out on my child?'
- 'If I hit my child, will they think it's OK to hit others?'
- 'How can I teach my child what I want them to do?'

Some parents have grown up with hitting or smacking and may not know other ways to teach children.

- Hitting is not the best way to teach children. They learn to fear you and do not learn the behaviour you want.
- Try to show children what you want, and then praise them when they do it. It takes time for children to learn. It can be hard to be patient and calm when you need to repeat the same thing many times.
- Hitting children teaches them that hitting is OK. It is important they learn other ways to deal with things.

It can help to remember that hitting an adult is against the law. Children are smaller and less able to protect themselves.



Take action if a child tells you someone is harming them. You may be the only person they tell.

## Effects on children

When children are abused their trust in others is broken. This affects how they form relationships in the future and how they interact with other people. It can make them feel worthless, and they are more likely to develop low self-esteem and mental health problems. They can think that what's happening is 'normal'.

They can be more likely to do risky things, e.g. using drugs and alcohol, having unsafe sex, getting into fights, running away or breaking the law.

Abuse can change how a child's brain develops and how they learn. It can also make it harder for them to manage their feelings and behaviour.

As adults they can be at risk of getting into relationships where there is abuse. This repeats the cycle. Even if you don't see the effects of abuse straight away, the harm can go on for generations.

Break the cycle of abuse. Even if you don't see the effects of abuse straight away, the harm can go on for generations.

## If a child tells you someone is harming them

Children may be scared they will get into trouble or cause a lot of problems if they tell. They often feel no-one will believe them or that they are to blame.

- Listen to them. Don't dismiss what they say. It takes courage for a child to talk about their abuse. Reassure them that they are right to tell you and you believe them. Thank them for telling you and acknowledge how hard it can be to tell someone.
- Stay calm. They may be afraid to say more if you show you are shocked or upset. If it seems like the right thing to do, comfort the child, perhaps by asking if they want a hug.
- Don't ask lots of questions. Let them tell you in their own words at their own pace.
- Tell them that you care about them and want to help them be safe.
- Make sure the child is safe and let them know you will do your best to stop them being harmed. Let them know you might have to talk to someone else, and they are not in trouble.
- Contact Child, Youth Protection Services to make a child concern report on 1 300 556 729. They can help you work out what to do. They are required to keep your details confidential.

## If you need help to look after your child

If you easily get upset and angry there are services that can help you to manage these feelings. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Your doctor is a good place to start.

You could also:

- spend time with supportive, positive people
- develop a network of family and friends you can talk to, and ask for help when you need it
- seek help with the things that are stressing you in your life, e.g. money, relationships, drugs, alcohol
- look after your health and wellbeing, including your mental health. With all the demands on parents, it can be hard to get the time to care for yourself. If you look after yourself you can take better care of your children
- learn about child development at different ages. You may be less upset if you know your child isn't yet able to do something you want them to do
- show your child what you expect of them calmly and patiently. Seek support if you need help with your child's behaviour
- show your child that you love them in the things you do and say every day. It will help them to feel safe and secure.

# Child abuse

## Finding help

### Police

- 000 — if there is immediate danger
- 131 444 — Police attendance

### Child Concern Report Line

- 1300 556 729

If you are worried a child is being abused or neglected

### 1800 RESPECT

- 1800 737 732 — 24 hours

National Sexual Assault Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service Information, support, telephone and web counselling for people experiencing domestic and family violence or sexual assault

[www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au)

### Kids Helpline

- 1800 55 1800

Phone, web or email counselling, resources and activities for children and young people 5–25 years

[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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## Looking for more information?

ACT Government Publication No. 17/0608 (November 2017)



## Child protection is everyone's business

Child abuse and neglect can be prevented or stopped. Everyone can help make sure children are safe.

In the ACT there are laws to protect children, and certain people must make a report if they suspect child abuse. This applies to doctors, nurses, dentists, psychologists, police, probation officers, social workers, teachers, family day carers, clergy and those working where services are provided to children, including sports.

The ACT's Child, Youth Protection Services and the Police have a legal responsibility to protect children. They investigate reports of child abuse and

remove children who are at serious risk and cannot be kept safe at home.

People in the community can also report their concerns. It is important to do this even if you think it is not your business or you don't want to get involved. You could stop a child from being harmed and help a family to get support.

If you suspect a child is being abused, call the Child Concern Report Line on 1300 556 729. They can keep your details confidential.

## If there is violence in your family

If there is violence in your family it is important to seek help. It doesn't usually stop by itself.

If you or your children are in immediate danger phone the Police on 000, or 131 444 for Police attendance. You can also call the Domestic Violence Gateway on 1800 800 098.



ParentLink — for other parenting guides, online parenting information  
[www.parentlink.act.gov.au](http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au)

Child and Family Centres — for parenting information and support  
[www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres)

Raising Children's Network — covering topics for parenting newborns to teens  
<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>