

Protecting children from sexual abuse

ParentLink

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Sexual abuse of children is a crime. It causes serious harm to children and their families. The effects can last a lifetime.

There are things that parents can do to help keep children safe. It is important children know when something is wrong and how to tell others about it.



What is child 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 or sexual acts, or involving them in prostitution. Threats or bribes may be used to keep the child silent.

Children may be scared that they will get into trouble or cause a lot of problems if

they tell. They often feel that no-one will believe them or that they are to blame. Some children might feel embarrassed or ashamed or think that what's happening is 'normal'.

Child sexual abuse can happen in families and communities of any income, culture or religion. It is against the law.



ACT
Government

A P A R E N T L I N K P A R E N T I N G G U I D E

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What parents can do

There are things that parents can do to help children recognise when something is wrong, and to tell others about it.

Make time to talk

Make time to talk with your child each day. Stop what you are doing and really listen. Talk about the good things that happen and the things that worry them. Let them know they can talk to you at any time and there is nothing so bad that they can't tell you about it. It is also important they know not to keep secrets about things that worry them.

Talk about safety

Start from an early age. Talk about what being safe means and what it feels like. Help children to know body signals that tell them when something is wrong or when they don't feel safe, e.g. shaky legs, sweaty palms and bad butterflies in the tummy. Teach them to name their feelings and to tell you when they feel confused or scared.

Teach children about their body

Teach children:

- noticing and respecting when children do not want physical contact. Some children will say 'No' and some might pull away from hugs or cuddles
 - not making them kiss someone if they don't want to. They might want to shake hands instead
 - giving them privacy in the toilet or shower as long as it's safe.
- Teach children:
- that their whole body is private. It is not OK for others to touch their private parts (those covered by their underwear), or for them to touch others' private parts
 - how to say 'No' or 'Stop' in a loud voice to any touching they do not like or want, and to tell you or someone they trust straight away. Unwanted touching should never be kept a secret
 - the correct names for parts of their body, including sexual parts so they are better able to talk about them
 - that adults are not always right. Teach them to trust their feelings and not to keep secrets.

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

Build strong boundaries

Have clear boundaries for personal privacy in your home so that children learn this is a normal part of life. This includes:

- noticing and respecting when children do not want physical contact. Some children will say 'No' and some might pull away from hugs or cuddles
- not making them kiss someone if they don't want to. They might want to shake hands instead
- giving them privacy in the toilet or shower as long as it's safe.

It can be harder for an abuser to harm a child who has good boundaries.

Create safety networks

Help your child to make a list of adults they feel safe with. They might have up to five people they can contact if they need to. Be led by who your child feels safe with. Review the list often and make sure your child knows how to contact them. Make sure people are happy to be on your child's safety network.

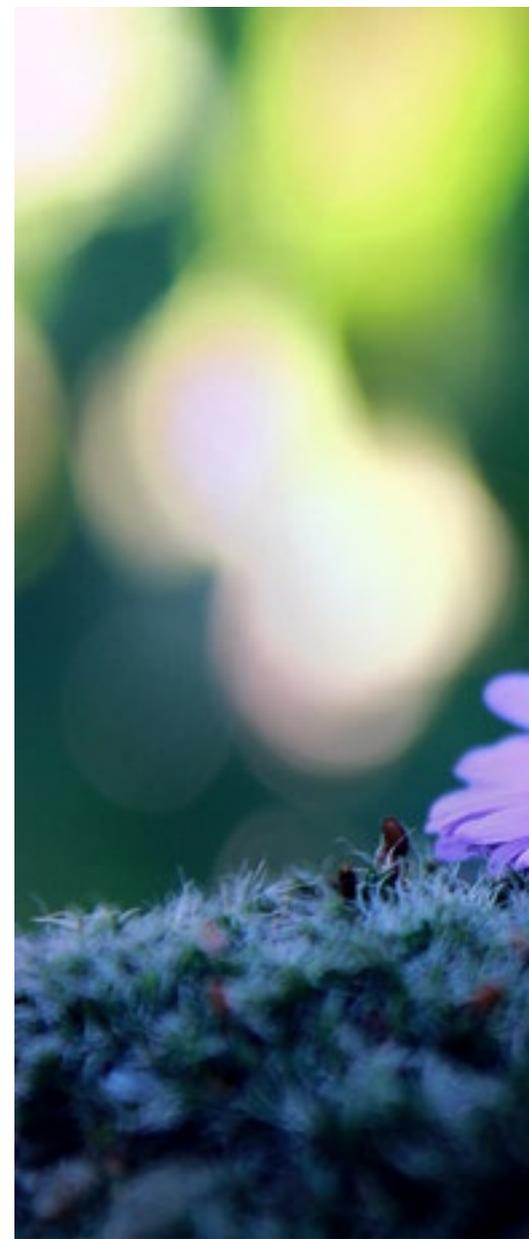
Safety in public places

Teach children to avoid risks away from home, including:

- not going off alone
- being alert to what's going on around them
- running to where you are, or to a group of people if a stranger approaches them.

If they walk to school make sure they:

- always walk with friends or where there are other people
- go into the nearest shop or front yard of a house if they are scared. If really scared, knock on the door and ask the person to call home but don't go inside.



Always make sure you can see your children when you are at a park or playground. Always go with them to the toilet.

Teach children about risky situations rather than dangerous people. An abuser might not seem scary or could be someone they know.

Safety online and with phones

The online world is risky for children.

Make sure they know how to use the internet and mobile phones safely, including:

- not sharing personal information
- understanding that people in chat rooms may not be who they seem



- telling you straight away if someone says or sends them something sexual or something that makes them feel uncomfortable, even if it is a friend
- not agreeing to meet new online friends without you
- not taking photos of themselves to share
- the risks of using webcams.

If they get phone calls or texts that make them confused or scared, make sure they don't respond. Keep the number so you can tell the Police if needed (see ParentLink Guide 'Cyber safety').

Be aware

Be concerned if an adult or older child:

- often wants to spend time with young children rather than adults or children their own age
- doesn't respect a child's personal space. They might ask sexual questions or ignore a child when they say 'No' to being kissed, touched or tickled
- talks about sex or tells sexual jokes in front of children
- shows sexual pictures to children
- talks about a child's developing body, makes fun of their private body parts or refers to children in sexual terms, e.g. 'sexy', 'seductive'
- often offers to look after a child in a private setting

- seeks a special friendship with a child, wants to be alone with them and tries to exclude you from their interactions
- tells children to keep secrets
- is too generous with affection or gifts
- shares alcohol or drugs with children.

Some abusers 'groom' children for sexual abuse and build the trust of families so they can access children. They may target vulnerable families by offering help and support. They might target isolated or lonely children who respond well to special attention.

Watch how children react to others and don't make them be around someone they are not comfortable with.

Children with a disability

Children with a disability are at higher risk of abuse as they may depend on adults for their care. Help your child to be as independent as possible in dressing, hygiene, toileting and eating. Some children may take longer to learn these things and to learn about staying safe.

Seek advice and support from professionals if you need it (see ParentLink Guide 'Children with a disability').

If a child tells you someone is harming them

Parents may think a child is lying if they talk about sexual abuse, especially if it involves someone the family trusts.

Children can make up stories about many things but they don't usually lie or make up stories about sexual matters.

If a child tells you someone is harming them:

- listen to them. Don't dismiss what they say. It takes a lot of courage for a child to tell about abuse. Reassure them that they are right to tell you and that you believe them. Thank them for telling you and say you know it can be hard to tell people
- stay calm. They may be afraid to say more if you show you are shocked or upset
- don't ask lots of questions. Let them tell you in their own words at their own pace
- make sure the child is safe and let them know you will do your best to stop them being harmed. Let them know that you will have to talk to someone else so you can keep them safe. Reassure them that they are not in trouble
- contact the Child, Youth Protection Services 1300 556 729. They can help you work out what to do. They are required to keep your details confidential.

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

Sexual abuse by other children

It is normal for children to be curious and want to learn about the sexual parts of their body. If children look at or touch others' bodies it does not mean the same for them as it does for adults (see ParentLink Guide 'Children and learning about sexuality').

There is usually nothing to worry about if this happens between children of about the same age who are friends, if they are easily re-directed and no child is upset by it. Remind children that everyone's body is private and touching is not OK.

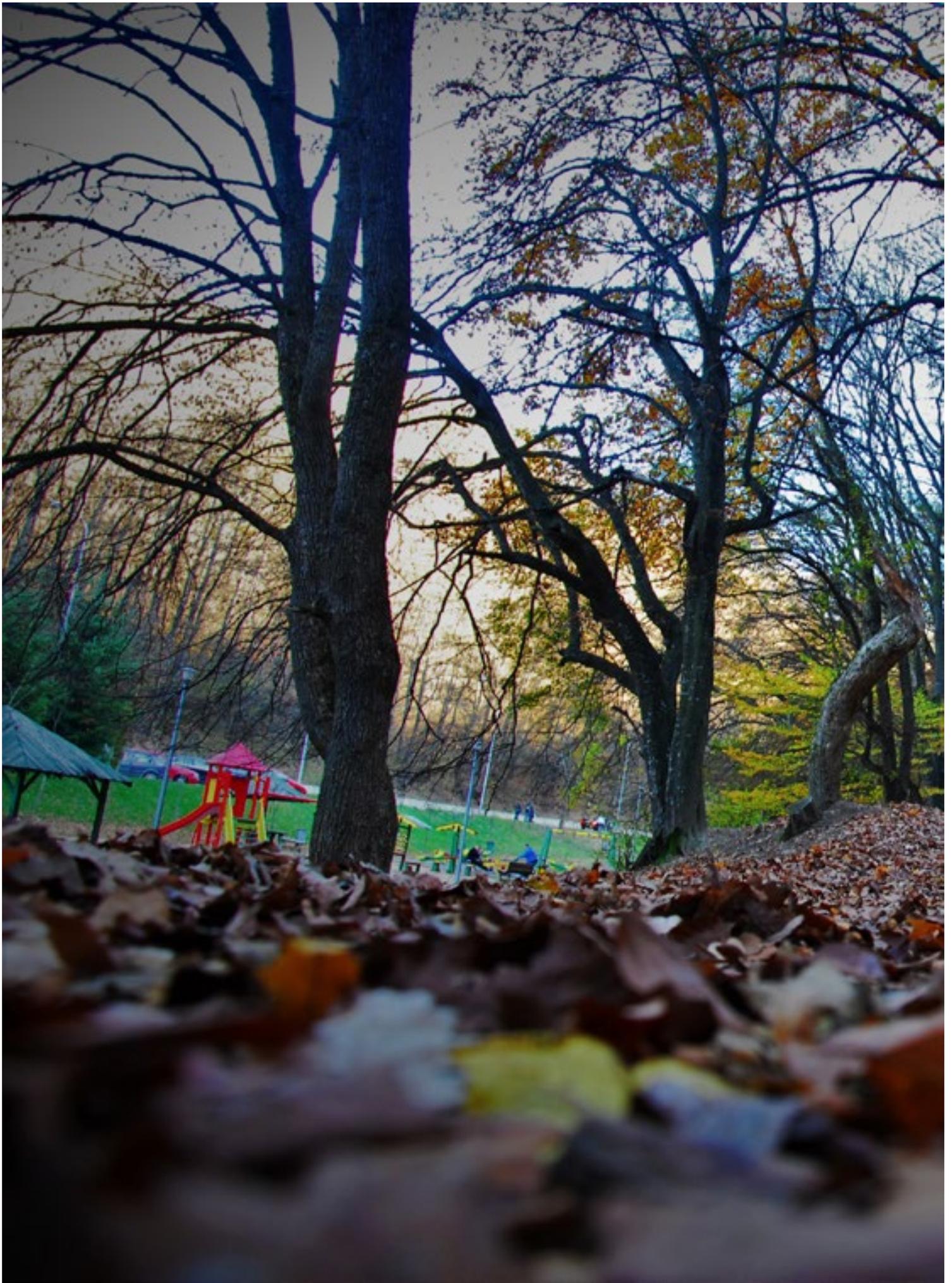
You could help them learn about bodies in other ways, such as finding a suitable book for them.

However, when there is a power imbalance and an older or stronger child persuades, tricks or forces a child into sexual activity, it becomes sexual abuse and is against the law and needs to be stopped.

The offending child can be a sibling or someone living with or known to the child. Some may be harming more than one child.

It is important that the abuse stops. Contact the Child, Youth Protection Services 1300 556 729 for advice on what to do. The victim needs to be safe and the offending child needs help to stop the behaviour.





Possible signs of sexual abuse

Children exposed to sexual attention often change how they behave. They may have physical signs or they may act in ways that are not usual for them. They might:

- seem to know more about sex than is usual for their age
- become more clingy, wet the bed or have sleep problems and nightmares

- do drawings which show sexual body parts or being hurt by others. They might also act this out with their toys
- get upset or scared when people talk about bodies or sex
- become withdrawn and compliant, or angry and destructive
- hurt themselves or take big risks
- show sexual behaviour towards younger or more vulnerable children
- start having problems at school or not want to go
- be red or sore around the mouth or genitals for no obvious reason.

Some of these behaviours can also be caused by other things in your child's life. For more information about children's sexual behaviour see ParentLink Guide 'Children and learning about sexuality'.

If your child is showing problem sexual behaviour you need to act straight away and seek help from professionals. Be careful not to shame your child. Say that these things are 'against the rules', or 'not OK' rather than 'naughty' or 'bad'.

Talk with your child often and don't ignore changes that seem out of character.

Effects of sexual abuse

Sexual abuse has a big impact on a child's ability to trust adults to keep them safe, and to relate to others. They can feel scared, angry or helpless because they can't control what is happening to them; and all alone because they can't tell anyone. They can feel embarrassed or ashamed by what has happened, or believe they are to blame.

Children may need help to deal with the effects of the abuse. As adolescents they may become sexually active at an earlier age, and take risks. As they become adults it can affect their intimate relationships and make them feel worthless, anxious and depressed.

Child protection is everyone's business

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

In the ACT, there are laws to protect children. They say that 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 may remove children who are at serious risk of harm 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 being harmed and help a family get support.

If you suspect a child is being abused, call the Child, Youth Protection Services on 1300 556 729. They can keep your details confidential.

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More information

Police

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

Child, Youth Protection Services

- 1300 556 729 — Mon–Fri 9am–5pm

Child Protection Helpline

- 13 21 11 — 24-hours
(where the child is in NSW)

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

Office of the eSafety Commissioner

- 1800 880 176

For online safety information and to report offensive or illegal content

www.esafety.gov.au

Australian Cybercrime Online Reporting Network (ACORN)

A national site for reporting cybercrime

www.acorn.gov.au

Crime Stoppers ACT

- 1800 333 000

act.crimestoppers.com.au/

ThinkUKnow

Online safety programs for parents and schools and to report concerns

www.thinkuknow.org.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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www.parentlink.act.gov.au

Child and Family Centres — for parenting information and support
www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres

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

