Recognising Signs of Child Abuse

SUPPORTING MATERIAL
Background

Children may not always disclose that they are being abused. Everyone in a responsible role in an organisation must be able to recognise signs of abuse and when perpetrators are manipulating or exploiting children.

This guide is designed to assist staff to identify signs that might indicate a child is experiencing abuse. Departmental staff and contracted service providers who have a suspicion about someone at risk or want to report alleged child abuse should refer to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection’s (the Department) Reporting Child-related Incidents Policy for further information.

Who can use this guide?

This guide is intended to support all departmental staff and contracted service providers involved in the support, care and welfare of children and their families in Australia’s immigration programmes.

Child abuse

Child abuse can be defined as all forms of abuse involving a child including physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, exploitation and exposure to family violence. These forms of abuse and their associated warning signs are set out below. It is important to note that children may suffer from one or more types of abuse. If you have a suspicion about a child at risk, you do not need to accurately define the form of abuse you suspect. Departmental staff and contracted service providers should report all concerns in line with the Department's Reporting Child-Related Incidents Policy.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is the use of physical force against a child that results in harm to the child. Physically abusive behaviour includes shoving, hitting, slapping, shaking, throwing, punching, kicking, biting, burning, strangling and poisoning. Behaviour which constitutes reasonable parental discipline, as defined by current legislation, is not child abuse.

Possible indicators that a child is experiencing physical abuse:

- broken bones or unexplained bruises, burns, or welts in various stages of healing
- a child or young person can’t explain an injury, or the explanation is inconsistent, vague or unlikely
- parents saying that they’re worried that they might harm their child
- family history of violence
- female genital mutilation
- a delay between being injured and getting medical help
- parents who show little concern about their child, the injury or the treatment
- frequent visits to health services with repeated injuries, illnesses or other complaints
- a child or young person seems frightened of a parent or carer, or seems afraid to go home

1 Fact Sheet No. 12 What is child abuse and neglect? National Children’s Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies

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a child or young person reports intentional injury by their parent or carer
arms and legs are kept covered by clothing in hot weather
ingestion of poisonous substances including alcohol or drugs
a child or young person avoids physical contact (particularly with a parent or carer).

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse refers to 'the use of a child for sexual gratification by an adult or significantly older child/adolescent'\(^2\), or 'any act which exposes a child to, or involves a child in, sexual processes beyond his or her understanding or contrary to accepted community standards'\(^3\).

Children demonstrate a range of sexualised behaviours which is a part of the curiosity of growing up. When considering the indicators of sexual abuse below, it is important to consider the distinction between normal behaviours, and behaviours which fall outside developmental norms.

**Possible indicators that a child is experiencing sexual abuse:**

- inappropriate sexual behaviour for their age and developmental level (such as sexually touching other children and themselves)
- inappropriate knowledge about sex for their age
- disclosure of abuse either directly, or indirectly through drawings, play or writing
- pain or bleeding in the anal or genital area accompanied by redness or swelling
- fear of being alone with a particular person
- a child or young person implies that they have to keep secrets
- presence of sexually transmitted infection
- sudden unexplained fears
- regression in behaviours to an earlier developmental stage
- reverting to bed wetting and soiling.

Exploitation

Child exploitation is the use of a child (usually by an adult or significantly older person), for their own personal benefit or interest.

**Behaviours indicative of child exploitation include:**

- possession, control and distribution of child pornography material
- coercion of a child to perform an inappropriate act
- commission of abuse against a child
- grooming of a child for future abuse
- trafficking of a child for the purposes of slavery or prostitution.


Grooming

Grooming generally refers to behaviour that makes it easier for a perpetrator to procure a child for sexual activity. For example, a perpetrator might build a relationship of trust with the child, and then seek to sexualise that relationship (for example, by encouraging romantic feelings or exposing the child to sexual concepts through pornography).

Grooming is a subtle and gradual process used by perpetrators, who could be adults or children themselves. Perpetrators exploit vulnerabilities in children such as poor self-esteem, children with disabilities, children from single parent families, orphans and children who are emotionally 'needy'. Perpetrators may also exploit vulnerabilities in parents. They may, for example, build up a relationship of trust with the parents that allows them to spend more time, particularly alone, with the child.

Online grooming

Online grooming occurs when adults make contact with children and adolescents online, with the intention of building a trusting relationship for the purpose of sexually abusing or exploiting them. Due to the anonymity of the communication, the grooming phase can be much shorter with the perpetrator quickly moving to requests to meet up or requests for sex.

Possible indicators that a child is victim of exploitation/grooming:
• undue attention paid to a child by an adult — including gifts or special outings together
• inappropriate touching such as tickling and back rubbing
• inappropriate joke telling, sexual in nature
• emotional or behavioural changes – including the abrupt onset of mood swings, secretive behaviour or withdrawal.

Possible indicators that an adolescent is a victim of exploitation/grooming:
• gifts or special privileges given by the perpetrator
• perpetrator allows or encourages rule breaking such as smoking, drinking, staying out late
• perpetrator identifies with the adolescent and appears to be someone who ‘understands’
• perpetrator communicates with adolescent outside normal role (i.e. coach or teacher).

The effects of grooming can often be mistaken for normal ‘teenage’ behaviour such as aggressive or secretive behaviour, unexplained gifts or money, a marked change in behaviour and increased permissiveness.

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse refers to inappropriate verbal or symbolic acts toward a child or a pattern of behaviour over time that fails to provide a child with adequate nurturance and emotional availability. Such acts have a high probability of damaging a child’s self-esteem or social competence.

Possible indicators that a child is experiencing emotional abuse:
• a parent or carer constantly criticises, insults and puts down, threatens, or rejects the child or young person
• a parent or carer shows little or no love, support or guidance
• a child or young person shows extremes in behaviour from aggressive to passive
• physically, emotionally and/or intellectually behind others of the same age
• compulsive lying and stealing
• highly anxious
• lack of trust
• feeling worthless
• eating hungrily or hardly at all
• uncharacteristic seeking of attention or affection
• reluctant to go home
• rocking, sucking thumb or self-harming behaviour
• fearful when approached by someone they know.

Neglect

Neglect is when children do not receive adequate food or shelter, medical treatment, supervision, care or nurturance to such an extent that their development is damaged or they are injured. Neglect may be acute, episodic or chronic.

Possible indicators that a child is experiencing neglect:
• signs of malnutrition, begging, stealing or hoarding food
• poor hygiene: matted hair, dirty skin or body odour
• untreated medical problems
• a child or young person says that no one is home to look after them
• a child or young person always seems tired
• frequently late or absent from school
• clothing not appropriate for the weather
• alcohol and/or drug abuse in the home
• frequent illness, minor infections or sores
• hunger.

Exposure to family violence

Exposure to family violence is broadly defined as ‘a child being present (hearing or seeing) while a parent or sibling is subjected to physical abuse, sexual abuse or psychological maltreatment, or is visually exposed to the damage caused to persons or property by a family member’s violent behaviour’.

Recent research indicates that the effects of exposure to family violence may be amplified in culturally and linguistically diverse children who have come to Australia as asylum seekers.

Possible indicators that a child is exposed to family violence include:
• impaired cognitive functioning
• behavioural problems
• poorer academic outcomes
• externalising behaviours

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- aggression
- lack of emotional control
- disobedience
- destructiveness
- internalising behaviours
  - anxiety
  - social inhibition
  - sadness
  - withdrawal
- learning difficulties
- depression and poor mental wellbeing
- low self-esteem
- low school attendance
- bullying (both as victim and perpetrator)
- poor coping mechanisms
- suicidal thoughts
- eating disorders
- self-harm
- substance abuse
- physical symptoms such as chronic pain
- distorted sense of identity
- mistrust and inability to relate to others.

When reflecting on someone’s behaviour, consider the following:

- Does this seem strange?
- Does this make me feel uncomfortable or concerned for the child?
- Does this happen too often?
- Has anyone else noticed or commented? What should I do if I suspect a child is at risk?
What should I do if I suspect a child is at risk?

Do not approach the child directly unless you believe they are in immediate danger. Talking to the child about your concerns may further traumatise them. The Department’s supporting material Responding to Disclosures of Child Abuse provides further guidance regarding interacting with a child who discloses to you.

If you believe on reasonable grounds that a child has been harmed or is at risk of significant harm, the Department requires you to report the incident to the relevant state or territory child welfare agency, consistent with the Department’s Reporting Child-related Incidents Policy.

Further information

For any questions or further information, please contact REDACTED You may also wish to contact the relevant state or territory child welfare authorities:

- **ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support**
  - Phone: 13 22 81
  - Mandated Reporters Phone: 1300 556 728
  - Email: childprotection@act.gov.au
  - General Public Phone: 1300 556 729

- **NSW Department of Family and Community Services**
  - Phone: 02 9716 2222
  - Mandated Reporters Phone: 13 21 11
  - Email: facsinfo@facs.nsw.gov.au
  - General Public Phone: 02 9377 6000

- **NT Department of Children and Families**
  - Child Protection Hotline Phone: 1800 700 250

- **Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services**
  - Phone: 07 3235 9999
  - Child Safety Services Phone: 13 QGOV (13 74 68)
  - Child Safety After Hours Services Phone: 1800 177 135
  - Email: info@childsafety.qld.gov.au
  - Queensland Regional Intake Services
    - Brisbane: 1300 682 254
    - Central Queensland: 1300 703 762
    - Far North Queensland: 1300 684 062
    - North Coast: 1300 703 921
    - North Queensland: 1300 706 147
    - South East: 1300 679 849
    - South West: 1300 683 390
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- **SA Department of Education and Child Development**
  - Phone: 08 8226 1000
  - Reporting Line Phone: 13 14 78
  - E-Reporting may be made here.
  - After Hours Phone: 13 16 11

- **Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services**
  - Phone: 1300 135 513
  - Reporting Line Phone: 1300 737 639
  - E-Reporting may be made here.

- **Victorian Department of Health & Human Services**
  - Phone: 03 9096 0000
  - Reporting Line Phone: 13 12 78

- **WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support**
  - Phone: 08 9222 2555
  - Reporting Line Phone: 1800 622 258
  - After Hours Phone: 08 9223 1111 or 1800 199 008
  - Mandatory Reporter Phone: 1800 708 704
  - Email: mrs@dcp.wa.gov.au

### References

Information used in this guide came from the following sources:

**Australian Institute of Family Studies**, *Domestic violence as a form of child abuse: Identification and prevention.*

**Australian Institute of Family Studies**, *What is child abuse and neglect?*


**Government of Western Australia Department for Child Protection and Family Support**, *How do I recognise when a child is at risk of abuse or neglect?*