

What is child sexual abuse?

The [World Health Organization](#) (1999) has a widely used definition of child sexual abuse:

Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in a sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by this activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person.

Child sexual abuse can include a range of sexual behaviours – both physical and non-physical – and behaviour online as well as in the physical world. Behaviour that can be described as child sexual abuse includes:

- physical sexual contact with a child such as vaginal, anal or oral penetration, touching a child's genitals, forcing or encouraging a child to touch their own genitals, forcing or encouraging a child to touch another person's genitals
- non-physical activities such as talking to a child in a sexually explicit way (online or in person), sending sexually explicit messages, showing a child sexually explicit images (such as pornography), an individual showing their genitals to a child, or encouraging, forcing or bribing a child to send photos or videos of themselves or other children when partially dressed or naked
- grooming – when an individual or group tries to (and/or does) build a relationship of trust with a child or their family with the purpose of involving the child in sexual activity
- sexual exploitation – when an individual or group tries to (and/or does) coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person into physical or non-physical sexual activity in exchange for money, goods, accommodation, status or affection.

The Raising Children Network website provides a longer description of some behaviours that can be described as [child sexual abuse](#).

Children and young people's sexual behaviours

The descriptions of child sexual abuse above include abusive behaviour by other children or young people who have a position of power over another child due to their age or their stage of development. However, it should be remembered that although children and young people can engage in unwanted or harmful sexual behaviour against other children, there is also a wide range of appropriate child sexual behaviour. The full spectrum of child sexual behaviour needs to be understood to identify and distinguish what behaviour is developmentally appropriate, what is inappropriate and what is abusive. Especially important is understanding whether a behaviour is appropriate to a child or young person's age or stage of development and whether the behaviour is harmful or abusive.



Guidance on child sexual behaviours is beyond the scope of this resource but the [Continuum of Sexual Behaviours](#) is useful for understanding the range of child sexual behaviours. The [Traffic Lights Framework](#) also provides guidance on how educators can respond to the range of child sexual behaviours. State and territory governments may also provide training and resources to assist teachers and school staff to understand child sexual behaviour.

What is grooming?

Grooming is when a person or group tries to build a trusting relationship with a child and/or their family for the purpose of sexually abusing the child. Some of the strategies that groomers use to gain the trust of children and/or their families include giving children special attention, taking them on trips and buying them gifts. Online groomers may seek to establish trust by pretending to be children with shared interests.

The person doing the grooming uses the trust in them to physically and emotionally isolate the child and to make the relationship feel they are dependent. They will also use power and control tactics such as threatening to share private information or secrets that have been shared by the child. Testing a child's compliance or willingness to engage in sexual activities is also common.

Grooming can take place in person or online and can take place very quickly or over a period of years. The person doing the grooming can be known or unknown to the child and may be under or over the age of 18 years old. Any child is at risk of grooming, but the risk is higher for children who are vulnerable, isolated and/or have disability.

What are the signs of grooming?

Grooming is hard to identify because the adult-child relationships can appear healthy and caring. This can make the relationship hard to distinguish from genuinely safe and trustworthy relationships (State Government of Victoria, 2020). Signs in children that indicate something might be wrong with their relationship with an adult, or person in a position of power over them, include:

- sudden mood and behaviour changes
- being secretive about using technology, messages/calls they have received and what they are doing
- spending more time alone than usual and talking less to parents/carers about their feelings and thoughts
- school absenteeism
- having unexplained gifts or money
- having a secretive relationship with someone
- being in a relationship or spending a lot of time with someone much older
- alcohol and/or drug misuse
- developing sexual health problems.



Signs that someone in an organisation (such as a school) is potentially grooming a child or young person can include:

- being overly affectionate with a child
- giving a child special attention or preferential treatment
- spending excessive amounts of time alone with a child outside of the classroom
- regularly spending time with a child in private or isolated areas
- frequently taking a child to or from school, on trips or to other activities (such as sport)
- giving gifts or money to a child or their family
- befriending a child's family and visiting their home
- making suggestive or sexual remarks or comments around a child
- frequently communicating with a child online, by text or telephone (outside of necessary school communications).

Signs that someone is grooming a child or young person online can include:

- asking a lot of personal questions soon after meeting and contacting them frequently
- asking questions about who has access to their device
- using manipulative language and insisting on meeting
- not identifying themselves on camera when communicating online
- complimenting them on their appearance or body.

Further information

eSafety. (n.d.). *Unwanted contact and grooming*. Canberra: eSafety Commissioner. www.esafety.gov.au/parents/big-issues/unwanted-contact

Raising Children Network. (2020). *Grooming: Recognising the signs*. Melbourne: Raising children Network. raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/safety/online-safety/grooming-signs

National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). (2018). *Protecting children from grooming*. London: NSPCC. learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/briefings/grooming

Rigg, K., & Phippen, A. (2016). *Grooming within organisations: How to keep children safe*. London: Farrer & Co LLP. grooming-in-organisations---how-to-keep-children-safe.pdf (farrer.co.uk)

State Government of Victoria. (2020.) *Child sexual exploitation and grooming*. Melbourne: Department of Education and Training. www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/childprotection/Pages/expolitiationgrooming.aspx

