



If you have experienced a recent sexual assault or need after-hours help, please call the Sexual Assault Crisis Line on 1800 806 292. If you live outside of Victoria, call 1800Respect.

Grooming & Child Sexual Abuse

Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is any sexual act or sexual threat imposed on a child or young person, aged under 18 years, by an adult. It is an abuse of the authority held by the perpetrator and is never the fault of the child or young person. The recent Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) estimates that 3 in 10 (28.5%) Australians have experienced child sexual abuse.¹

In Victoria, a person under the age of 16 years cannot legally consent to any form of sexual activity with an adult. Those aged 16-17 years cannot legally consent to any form of sexual activity with anyone who is in a role of care, supervision or authority.

All forms of child sexual abuse are illegal and can have significant short-term and long-term impacts on children, families and communities.

Child sexual abuse is a broad term that includes a wide range of behaviours and situations.

It can include:

- contact sexual acts such as touching or fondling the genital area
- non-contact sexual acts such as exposing a child to pornography.

It can also:

- range from one-time occurrences to multiple experiences
- occur with or without the use of physical force or violence
- involve the use of technology – for example, creating child sexual abuse images or videos and sharing this content online.

The following are examples of child sexual abuse:

- any form of sexual behaviour, both penetrative and non-penetrative
- forcing a child or young person to strip or masturbate
- inappropriate touching of a child, whether clothed or unclothed
- engaging in any kind of sexual activity in front of a child, including watching pornography
- taking, downloading, viewing or distributing sexual images of children
- possessing images or videos of child sexual abuse
- encouraging a child to perform sexual acts in front of a webcam or any recording device.²

¹ Matthew B et al. (2023). [The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey](#). Med J Aust. 218. P6.

² Bravehearts. [What is child sexual abuse?](https://bravehearts.org.au/about-child-sexual-abuse/what-is-child-sexual-abuse/) <https://bravehearts.org.au/about-child-sexual-abuse/what-is-child-sexual-abuse/>. Bravehearts website.



Grooming

Grooming is the subtle, gradual and escalating process of building a connection of trust and comfort with a child, and/or their parents, caregivers, friends and community, with the intention of committing child sexual abuse.

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse are highly skilled at manipulating children and young people, as well as their family and friends, to believe that they are respectable and trustworthy. Grooming can involve a range of behaviours, with the aim to:

- gain access to the child or young person to perpetrate child sexual abuse
- gain the child or young person's trust or compliance
- instil fear and shame into the child or young person
- discourage the child or young person from telling others about the abuse
- avoid discovery of sexual abuse
- obtain sexual material of the child or young person
- make or instruct the child to make sexual material.

The Grooming Process

The grooming process often begins with behaviours that do not appear to be inappropriate or may create the impression that the perpetrator has a friendly, caring and honest approach when interacting with children and young people. Often children and young people are abused by people they know, and who are trusted by their family and community, rather than a stranger.

Perpetrators may groom children and young people for weeks, months or years before any sexual abuse takes place. Sometimes these behaviours can be hard to identify and may only be recognised after the abuse has occurred.

Grooming of a child or young person, in person or online, can include but is not limited to:

- building their trust, sometimes through special attention, gifts, or talking about shared interests
- treating them like an adult to make them feel different and special
- gaining the trust of their parents, siblings, family or carers
- isolating them from supportive and protective family and friends
- non-sexual touching or 'accidental' touching of the child or young person that develops into sexual behaviour over time
- coercing them, including through threats, stalking and asking them to keep secrets
- encouraging them to produce child sexual abuse images or videos or enticing them to participate in sexualised virtual chats
- using threats, coercion, bribes or the child or young person's fear, shame or guilt to manipulate them into secrecy.

How Perpetrators Groom Parents, Caregivers, Co-workers or other Adults

Often, the perpetrator will work hard to build a relationship with the adults around the child or young person that makes it seem that they are committed to a child or young person's wellbeing.



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Perpetrators can place themselves in positions of authority within a community or organisation to appear as someone who is respectful and would never harm a child or young person.

They can appear to be helpful and supportive in order to create opportunities to spend time alone with a child or young person. For example, driving them to activities, babysitting, putting them to bed at night or offering one-on-one lessons.

This may be done by:

- befriending the parents or other caregivers to gain access to children or young people
- developing romantic or sexual relationships with parents to gain access to children or young people
- grooming one or more siblings, and then manipulating them to recruit other children and young people, including their siblings
- offering to babysit children so parents or other caregivers can have a break.

Online Grooming & Child Sexual Abuse

Grooming and child sexual abuse can occur both in person and online. Increasingly, perpetrators use technology to facilitate communication to groom children online and make it easier to commit child sexual abuse, leading to in person meet ups and/or online child sexual exploitation. Grooming and child sexual abuse can be conducted through computers, phones, tablets, using social media, gaming platforms, live streams, chat and messaging apps and other technologies.

Perpetrators may impersonate a child, young person or peer in order to engage them online. To avoid detection, perpetrators may manipulate and encourage children and young people to use different online platforms with encrypted technologies that protect data from being viewed or accessed by other people or authorities.

Perpetrators are skilled at engaging children and young people in conversations over a long period of time. They may teach the child or young person to use code language so that parents and caregivers are unaware of what is being discussed. Perpetrators often focus on what a child or young person is upset about and act as a support person with the aim of isolating the child or young person and creating reliance on the perpetrator. For example, a common phrase perpetrators are known to say is "I am the only person in the world who cares about you."

Technology can be used by perpetrators to exploit the child or young person to create images or recordings of the sexual abuse, which is referred to as child sexual abuse material (CSAM). This can be used to:

- threaten or shame children and young people to reduce their likelihood of disclosing the abuse to others
- re-watch for sexual gratification
- exchange or sell to other child sexual abuse offenders.

For more information on technology facilitated grooming and child sexual abuse, please refer to the eSafety Commissioner at www.esafety.gov.au.



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If you learn that child sexual abuse material of a child or young person exists, you can report this to Victoria Police (contact details below) who can further investigate and support with removing the content.

What to Do if you Suspect Grooming or Child Sexual Abuse

Due to the nature of grooming and child sexual abuse, a child or young person may not realise that they have been abused or feel that they cannot talk about it. It is important to be aware of the signs of grooming and child sexual abuse and reach out for support if you notice changes in a child or young person's behaviour.

For more information on having conversations with children and young people about sexual abuse, refer to SASVic's information sheet *Child Sexual Abuse - Parents & Caregivers* at www.sasvic.org.au/csaresource2.

You may not always have clear evidence that grooming or child sexual abuse has occurred. You may see or hear something that is unsettling or has a sexual element to it, or sometimes a situation may make you feel uneasy or just not feel right.

If you or a child or young person are in immediate danger, call Triple Zero (000).

If you suspect a child or young person is being groomed or at risk of being groomed, or is being abused, including online, contact:

Victoria Police

To report child sexual abuse to police you contact them in three ways:

- Call your local Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigations Team (SOCIT)
- Call or visit your local police station
- Call Triple Zero (000).

For more information, visit Victoria Police's page on reporting sexual offences and child abuse at www.police.vic.gov.au/reporting-sexual-offences-child-abuse.

Victorian Government Child Protection Crisis Line

Call 131 278 (24 hours, 7 days a week)

To make a report to child protection, a person needs to have formed a reasonable belief that a child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm as a result of abuse or neglect, and that their parent or caregiver has not protected or is unlikely to protect the child from harm.

For more information, visit the Victorian Government's page on reporting child abuse at <https://services.dffh.vic.gov.au/child-protection-contacts>.

Specialist Sexual Assault Services

In Victoria, specialist sexual assault services work with children and their families after child sexual abuse to help them make sense of what happened to them, make decisions about what to do next and aid recovery in a safe and supportive environment. Specialist sexual assault counsellor advocates can provide free and confidential therapeutic support while also providing information that can inform decision-making and navigating potential legal processes.



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How to Access a Specialist Sexual Assault Service

Call the Sexual Assault Crisis line on 1800 806 292

This number operates after office hours, on weekends and public holidays, providing free, confidential counselling and crisis support. During office hours the number will divert to your local specialist sexual assault services, which you can find now by scanning the QR code below.

There are specialist services in every part of Victoria that can support children, young people and their families who have been impacted by child sexual abuse. They also provide support to adults who have experienced historic child sexual abuse.

You can self-refer to a specialist sexual assault service, meaning you don't need a referral letter from a GP. When a child or young person aged 15 or under is referred to a service, this must be with the consent of their parent or legal guardian. Third parties, for example a school welfare officer, cannot make a referral to a service without first discussing with the parent or legal guardian and the child or young person.

Find a specialist sexual assault service now by scanning the QR code.



For services outside of Victoria, please refer to the Australian Sexual Assault Services Directory at www.nasasv.org.au/support-directory.