

Indicators of abuse

Child Safe Standards toolkit: Resource 4B

OFFICIAL

The Child Safe Standards require organisations that provide services or facilities for children to have processes for responding to and reporting suspected child abuse. Your organisation may have existing processes. This resource is designed to assist staff and volunteers in organisations to recognise the physical and/or behavioural signs of child abuse.

Identifying child abuse

Physical violence

Physical violence occurs when a child suffers or is likely to suffer harm from a non-accidental injury or injuries inflicted by another person. Physical violence can be inflicted in many ways, including beating, shaking, burning or use of objects.

Physical indicators include (but are not limited to):

- unexplained bruises, burns or welts
- fractured bones, sprains or dislocation
- cuts, grazes or scratches
- ligature or bite marks
- bald patches or hair missing in tufts
- missing or loosened teeth
- poisoning or medication overdose.

Behavioural indicators include (but are not limited to):

- inconsistent, vague or unlikely explanations of an injury
- wariness, fear or distrust of adults
- avoidance of physical contact
- disproportionate reactions or limited emotion displayed when hurt or threatened
- wearing clothing that is unsuitable for the weather conditions (to hide injuries)
- unexplained absences and decline in academic performance
- substance abuse, self-harm or suicide attempts.

Sexual offences

Sexual offences occur when a person involves a child in sexual activity, or deliberately puts the child in the presence of sexual behaviours that are exploitative or inappropriate to his/her age and development. Child sexual abuse can involve a range of sexual activity including fondling, masturbation, penetration, voyeurism

and exhibitionism. It can also include exposure to or exploitation through pornography or prostitution, as well as grooming behaviour.

Physical indicators include (but are not limited to):

- bruising, bleeding or discharge from the genital or rectal area
- signs of pain, itching or discomfort in the genital or rectal area
- presence of sexually transmitted diseases
- frequent urinary tract infections
- pregnancy (actual or suspected)
- self-mutilation.

Behavioural indicators include (but are not limited to):

- displaying age-inappropriate sexual behaviour or knowledge
- promiscuity or inappropriate expressions of affection
- sudden fears of specific places or particular adults
- obsessive and compulsive washing
- complaining of headaches, stomach pains or nausea
- sleeping difficulties
- poor self-care or personal hygiene
- regressive behaviours such as bedwetting and speech loss
- substance abuse, self-harm or suicide attempts.

Serious emotional or psychological abuse

Serious emotional or psychological abuse occurs when harm is inflicted on a child through repeated rejection, isolation or by threats of violence. It can include derogatory name-calling, put-downs or persistent and deliberate coldness from a person, to the extent where the child's behaviour is disturbed and/or their emotional development is at serious risk of being impaired. Serious emotional or psychological abuse could also result from conduct that exploits a child without necessarily being criminal, such as encouraging a child to engage in inappropriate or risky behaviours.

Physical indicators include (but are not limited to):

- delays in emotional, mental or physical development
- speech impairments such as stuttering or being selectively mute
- rocking, thumb-sucking or other infantile behaviours
- eating disorders.

Behavioural indicators include (but are not limited to):

- exhibiting high anxiety or symptoms of stress
- poor self-image or low self-esteem
- displaying aggressive, demanding or attention-seeking behaviour
- compulsive lying or stealing
- unexplained mood swings or depression
- poor social and interpersonal skills
- excessive neatness or cleanliness
- substance abuse, self-harm or suicide attempts.

Serious neglect

Serious neglect is the continued failure to provide a child with the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, medical attention or adequate supervision, to the extent that the child's health, safety and/or development is, or is likely to be, jeopardised. Serious neglect can also occur if an adult fails to adequately ensure the safety of a child where the child is exposed to extremely dangerous or life threatening situations.

Physical indicators include (but are not limited to):

- frequent hunger or signs of malnutrition
- poor personal hygiene
- appearing dirty and unwashed
- lack of adequate or suitable clothing
- unattended health problems
- appearing pale and weak
- inadequate shelter or unsanitary living conditions.

Behavioural indicators include (but are not limited to):

- stealing or begging for food
- aggressive or self-destructive behaviour
- involvement in criminal activity
- poor, irregular or non-attendance at school
- refusal or reluctance to go home
- limited positive interaction with parents, carers or guardians
- poor academic performance
- substance abuse.

Responding to suspected child abuse

When responding to an incident, disclosure or suspicion of child abuse, staff and volunteers should follow the steps provided in the [What to do when an allegation of child abuse is made factsheet](https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/what-do-when-allegation-child-abuse-made-word) <<https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/what-do-when-allegation-child-abuse-made-word>>. This includes:

- Action One – Responding to an emergency
- Action Two – Providing support to the child
- Action Three – Reporting
- Action Four – Contacting parents, carers or guardians
- Action Five – Providing ongoing support.

Further information

Further information about the [Child Safe Standards](https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/resources-child-safe-standards) <<https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/resources-child-safe-standards>> can be found on the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (the department) website.

This includes additional resources that have been designed for organisations that are funded and/or regulated by the department. In particular, an [overview of the Victoria Child Safe Standards](https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/overview-victorian-child-safe-standards-word) <<https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/overview-victorian-child-safe-standards-word>> has information to help organisations to understand the requirements of each of the Child Safe Standards.

All organisations may also refer to the information and resources available on the [Commission for Children and Young People website](https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safety/) <<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safety/>>.

Disclaimer

This resource provides general guidance only on the Child Safe Standards. The department does not guarantee that the examples provided in this document are sufficient for the purposes of an organisation's compliance with the Child Safe Standards.

To receive this document in another format, [email Child Safe Orgs](mailto:childdsafeorgs@dffh.vic.gov.au) <childdsafeorgs@dffh.vic.gov.au>.

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In this document, 'Aboriginal' refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 'Indigenous' or 'Koori/Koorie' is retained when part of the title of a report, program or quotation.

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Available at [Resources for Child Safe Standards](https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/resources-child-safe-standards) <<https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/resources-child-safe-standards>>