



Resource Sheet



What is Child Abuse?

Child abuse is a broad term that describes an act (or acts) that endanger the physical or emotional health or development of a child¹. Child abuse can occur as a single incident, but it is most likely to take place over time². Child abuse is frequently classified into four main categories:

1. **Physical abuse** occurs when a child suffers significant harm from an injury inflicted either intentionally or as a consequence of physical punishment³.
2. **Emotional/Psychological abuse** occurs when a person repeatedly rejects the child or uses threats to frighten a child into compliance. This may include: derogatory name calling; put-downs; verbal and physical threats⁴.
3. **Sexual abuse** occurs when an older person uses their power or authority (whether by force or not) over a child to involve the child in sexual activity that is for the older person's sexual gratification⁵. Sexual abuse may include: vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger, or any other object; oral sex; exposing the child to pornography; using the child for the purposes of pornography; using the child for the purposes of prostitution; fondling of the child's genitals; getting the child to fondle the perpetrators genitals; masturbation (with the child either as participant or observer); fondling of breasts; voyeurism (regular observation of the child); or exhibitionism⁶. [See Figure A for some important facts about child sexual abuse].
4. **Neglect** is the failure to provide a child with the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, medical attention or supervision, to the extent that it is likely to significantly harm the child's health or development⁷.

The classification of child abuse into these four categories does not mean that the categories are mutually exclusive; specifically children can be subjected to a combination of any of the categories of child abuse. There is "considerable overlap between physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and children who are subject to one form of abuse are significantly more likely to suffer other forms of abuse"⁸.

Figure A - Some Important Facts about Child Sexual Abuse

Children lack the necessary information and maturity to make an informed decision about sexual activities with an older person. They do not have adult knowledge of sex and sexual relationships, or the social meaning of sexuality and its potential consequences.

Sexual activity between a child and older person is inappropriate because children are never in a position to give informed consent to such activities.

Child sexual abuse is a criminal offence.

The perpetrator is always responsible for the abuse.

Child sexual abuse occurs in all types of families, regardless of income or education level.

Child sexual abuse occurs in all cultures.

Children of all ages – from babies to adolescents, may be sexually abused. Child sexual abuse may occur once or many times over a period of months or years.

Children rarely lie or imagine sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse happens to both boys and girls.

Children may be sexually abused by family members (incest), by acquaintances or by strangers. However children are most likely to be sexually abused by someone who is known to them, such as a father, stepfather, uncle, older sibling, grand parent, friend of the family or neighbour.

Over ninety percent of child sexual perpetrators are male.

Adolescent males who sexually abuse younger children are likely to continue to do so into adulthood without assessment and appropriate treatment.

All information in this figure was taken directly from Child Protection and Care. (2000). Child Sexual Abuse: Understanding and responding. Victorian Government Department of Human Services. VIC. P 8.

The effects of child abuse

Child abuse is extremely harmful to children. “Children may experience a range of emotional, psychological and physical problems and trauma as a result of being abused or neglected”⁹.

There is also a wide range of potential adverse adult outcomes that stem from childhood abuse¹⁰. The abuse of children “occurs during a period in life where complex and, hopefully, ordered changes are occurring in the child’s physical, psychological and social being. The state of flux leaves the child vulnerable to sustaining damage that will retard, pervert or prevent the normal developmental process”¹¹.

“Both its initial effects and long-term consequences impact on the individual, on their family and on the community”¹². In effect child abuse can victimise children twice – the way in which they were abused and the long term impacts of such abuse.

Initial impacts of child abuse may include:

- Medical problems such as sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy and physical injury¹³.
- Emotional problems, such as guilt, anger, hostility, anxiety, fear, shame, and lowered self-esteem¹⁴.
- Behavioural problems such as aggression, delinquency, nightmares, phobias, eating and sleeping disorders¹⁵.
- School problems and truancy¹⁶.

Long term impacts of child abuse may include:

- Sexual intimacy problems¹⁷.
- Inability to develop trust in others¹⁸.
- Low self-esteem¹⁹.
- Depression²⁰.
- Mental health problems, including: depressive symptoms; anxiety symptoms; substance abuse disorders; eating disorders; post traumatic stress disorders and multiple personality disorders²¹.
- Isolation²².
- Increased rates of relationship breakdown²³.
- Suicide²⁴.
- Promiscuity²⁵.
- Prostitution²⁶.

Obviously, programs that seek to prevent child abuse from occurring in the first place are the best way to prevent the initial and long term effects of child abuse²⁷. However, the early identification of children suffering from abuse and effective intervention where abuse has occurred can help to lessen the initial and long-term consequences of child abuse and promote the recovery of victims²⁸. Long term effects of child abuse will be minimised if the victim receives both counselling and support as soon as possible²⁹.

This is why the programs offered by the Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program and other community based organisations are essential for the prevention, early detection and appropriate interventions of child abuse - they prevent the occurrence of abuse and minimise the impact that child abuse will have on the victims.

The prevalence of child abuse

It is extremely difficult to know the extent of child abuse in Australia. Statistics from Government collection agencies can only yield figures from reported notifications, investigations and substantiations of child abuse.

It is widely accepted that many occurrences of child abuse go unreported. It is considered that a large number of cases go unreported because of factors such as: coercion being used by perpetrators to frighten their victims; the secrecy and shame surrounding sexual abuse; criminal sanctions against abuse; the young age and dependant status of the child³⁰. A study of 710 women randomly selected from the Australian federal electoral rolls can help to demonstrate this: it was found that 35% of the women had experienced child sexual abuse or unwanted sexual experiences during childhood and that only 10% of child sexual abuse experiences were ever reported to the police, a doctor, or a helping agency³¹.

In another randomly selected community based sample of Australian women it was found that 8.9% of the women had experienced physical abuse in childhood, 42.3% had experienced non-contact sexual abuse in childhood, and 35.7% had experienced contact sexual abuse in childhood³².

For the reported notifications, investigations and substantiations the levels of child abuse are still alarming and increasing.

“Over the last 5 years, the number of child protection notifications in Australia has almost doubled from 137,938 in 2001-02 to 266,745 in 2005-2006. From 2004-05 to 2005-06 the number of notifications increased in most jurisdictions”³³.

The total number of substantiated cases of child abuse in Australia for 2005-06 was 55,921³⁴. The number of substantiations also showed an increase in 2005-06 of almost 9,800 over the previous year³⁵.

There have been some alarming trends regarding the substantiated cases of child abuse too. “Compared with the distribution of family types in the Australian population, a relatively high proportion of substantiations involved children living in lone mother families and in two parent step families or blended families, whereas a relatively low proportion of substantiations involved children living in two-parent intact families”³⁶.

Other studies have also found that children from single mother families are more likely to be subjected to childhood abuse. For example, in the electoral roll study identified earlier, it was found that “children who grew up without any father were the most likely to have experience child sexual abuse”³⁷.

Substantiated cases of child abuse, by type of abuse, states and territories, 2005–06

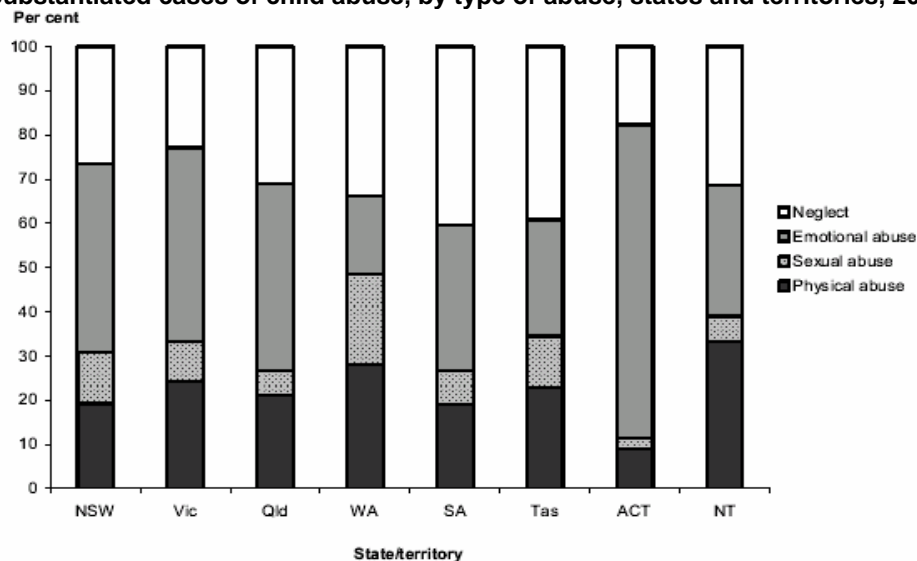


Table taken from:
 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2007. *Child protection Australia 2005-2006*.
 Child Welfare Series no. 40. AIHW Cat. No. CWS 28. AIHW. Canberra, p 23.

Endnotes

¹ Office for Children. (2006). *What is child abuse*. State Government of Victoria. Available online at www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Department of Human Services. (2002). *Responding to child abuse*. Victorian Government Publishing Service. Vic. P 7.

⁵ Child Protection and Care. (2000). *Child sexual abuse: Understanding and responding*. Victorian Government Department of Human Services. Vic. P 7.

⁶ Ibid. P 7.

⁷ Office for Children. Op Cit.

⁸ Mullen, P. & Fleming, J. (1998). *Long term effects of child sexual abuse*. Issues in Child Abuse Prevention. No 9. National Child Protection Clearinghouse. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Canberra. P 3.

⁹ Office for Children. Op Cit.

¹⁰ Mullen, P. & Fleming, J. Op Cit. P 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 13.

¹³ Ibid. P 13-14.

¹⁴ Ibid. Vic. P 13-14.

¹⁵ Ibid. Vic. P 13-14.

¹⁶ Ibid. P 13-14.

¹⁷ Mullen, P. & Fleming, J. Op Cit. P 3.

¹⁸ Ibid. P 3.

¹⁹ Ibid. P 3..

²⁰ Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 13-14.

²¹ Mullen, P. & Fleming, J. Op Cit. P 3.

²² Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 13-14.

²³ Mullen, P. & Fleming, J. Op Cit. P 3.

²⁴ Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. Vic. P 13-14.

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- ²⁵ Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 13-14.
- ²⁶ Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 13-14.
- ²⁷ Mullen, P. & Fleming, J. Op Cit. P 12.
- ²⁸ Child Protection and Care. Op Cit. P 14.
- ²⁹ Ibid. P 20.
- ³⁰ Fleming, J. (1997). 'Prevalence of childhood sexual abuse in a community sample of Australian women'. *Medical Journal Australia*. 166: 65-69.
- ³¹ Ibid, p 65-69.
- ³² Mazza, D., Dennerstein, L., et al. (2001). 'The physical, sexual and emotional violence history of middle-aged women: a community based prevalence study'. *Medical Journal Australia*. 175: 199-206.
- ³³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2007. *Child protection Australia 2005-2006*. Child Welfare Series no. 40. AIHW Cat. No. CWS 28. AIHW. Canberra, p x.
- ³⁴ Ibid, p 22.
- ³⁵ Ibid, p 20.
- ³⁶ Ibid, p 30.
- ³⁷ Fleming, J. Op Cit. P 65-69.