



what is **child abuse**?

Child abuse is a very serious problem. Yet as serious as it is it is rarely discussed openly by governments or the community. Everyone cries foul over paedophiles. They do not want them living in their street, their town or on the planet. They want paedophiles outed, named yet child abuse is to be whispered or put into a closet. Paedophiles are in fact usually strangers whilst child abusers are much closer to home.

Child abuse is a family problem, a community problem and a political problem. Unless families and communities and governments are prepared to break the silences and acknowledge the extent of the problem little will continue to happen and more children and families and the communities will continue to suffer.

Child abuse is the misuse of power by adults or young people over children that endangers or impairs a child's physical or emotional health and development

The line to needs to be very clearly drawn on child abuse. Some have tended in the past to reflect that sometimes that there is not always clarity as to where to draw the line between child abuse and child rearing. But really there is a chasm between the two

There is currently a lot of debate in the community about physical punishment with some saying parents should not be able to give even a little slap on the hand or the bottom. There is a lot of debate about paedophilia, the taking of photos of children and being downloaded on computers by voyeurs and paedophiles. But the debates are one offs and disjointed. Rule makers are told that they must make rules parents are told that they must do better and take proper control. They should be parents they shouldn't be parents, they should go to work, they shouldn't go to work. Are you lost? Children are the one's who usually are. Gee I can't wait till I grow up.

- I can move away
- I won't need to be afraid anymore
- He/she can't hurt me anymore
- I can have my friends

So what exactly do we mean when we talk about child abuse?

Traditionally our kids were brought up in a safe, protected environment, where they were nurtured and cared for by both the immediate and extended families. In fact child abuse was non existent. Today, some children are deliberately harmed physically, emotionally or sexually by one or more of those family or extended family members who used to nurture, love and protect them.

Child abuse is the deliberate act of harming a child physically, emotionally or sexually. Child neglect reflects a situation when parents or carers fail to provide a child with the basic needs essential for the development of physical, emotional and general health and well being. Children may be harmed by a parent, sibling or other relative; a caregiver, acquaintance or a stranger.



Our child care practices are still culturally different to other Australians

Traditionally our children were brought up in safe, loving and nurtured environments. They were cared for by both immediate and extended family members according to Anne Hamilton (1981) during her residence with one Aboriginal community cited that childhood was characterized by a lack of demands and responsibilities with few restraints on emotion and anger. Learning was by observation and copying and the children had access to everyone in the community. Parenting was permissive and indulgent.

Physical punishment was rare and grandparents reinforced safety rules with games and threats associated with other worlds. Compared to mothers fathers did not give abuse or general instructions rather they shared instructive information with their children and only the father was allowed to give the rebuke of a stare. Fathers increasingly engaged the male children as they got older and including them in more and more and more male activities.

While the European presence has had a real and destructive influence on Aboriginal child rearing practices it has not altered the basic values and beliefs of the majority of Aboriginal people as they have had to come to terms with their ever changing circumstances. Aboriginal children are still the responsibility of the whole extended family and that family including elders will have a hand in their rearing. In many communities the family is biological and classificatory with "skin groups".

These days in urban areas whilst the majority live in household units their interaction with extended families is more often than not on a daily basis, including sleeping over at each others places. There are some though who do not have friends or family or who are excluded for some reason and they are isolated and find day to day living very stressful.

Community organizations often play an integral part of these people's lives representing the families they do not have and assisting those children whose families are having difficulties in caring for them.

In recognition of Aboriginal kinship and child rearing practices, SNAICC (1996) reported that:

An Aboriginal child is not isolated from the rest of the community. Aboriginal children are the responsibility of the whole extended family and the community. A child's Elders as well as all of their broader extended family will play a role in their rearing, including older siblings and cousins. In many communities the family is biological and classificatory with 'skin' groupings which define responsibilities and obligations.

While Aboriginal families tend to live in household units in urban areas, their interaction with other members of the family and friends is great, reflecting cultural forms of interaction. Nevertheless, there are many for whom living in urban areas is isolating and stressful.

The living circumstances of families naturally affect the ideal operation of this form of child-rearing. Families are spread across the country these days. Adults have problems: alcoholism, mental-illness and other illnesses. Some are in prison or



institutions. Many have not dealt with abuse in their own lives, past and present. Children are removed by Government authorities. Grandparents die young. Poverty affects the ability of some to care for additional children. Some families are isolated by geography, living in urban areas with poor access to transport and communications.

These challenging circumstances faced by Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities must be considered but never should they justify the abuse of a child, nor provide a reason for not acting on a child's behalf.

forms of child abuse

Child abuse covers a wide range of harmful acts and behaviours. These are commonly grouped into the following categories:

- Physical Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- Neglect
- Sexual Abuse

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse occurs when an adult or older person deliberately inflicts pain and injury on a child or young person. It is characterised by physical injury (for example bruising or fractures) that has resulted from acts such as:

- slapping
- kicking
- biting
- strangulation
- throwing a child
- punching
- flogging
- burning
- belting
- pinching

Sometimes the offender may not mean to inflict the degree of harm that occurs. The injury may have resulted from discipline that is too harsh; or physical punishment that is inappropriate to the child's age or condition. This includes incidents where babies are shaken vigorously by an angry person who doesn't realise the damage they are causing.

Physical injury can be caused by a single episode or repeated episodes of abuse. The severity of injury from physical abuse can range from minor bruising to death.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is sustained and repetitive behaviour by a parent, caregiver, sibling, relation or elder which damages a child's emotional well-being. A child's confidence, self esteem and social competence are continually attacked.

Emotional abuse is present in all forms of abuse and covers a range of behaviours that may cause psychological harm to a child which, over time, can result in serious emotional deprivation or trauma.

Even though emotional abuse leaves no physical signs like bruises and fractures, do not overlook the harm that this form of abuse can cause. Emotional abuse harms children in a deep, silent and equally painful way. (ECAV, 1998)

Emotional abuse includes a child or young person living in a situation of family violence.



Some examples of actions which can cause a child emotional abuse include:

- being witness to one or more forms of family violence
- constantly being told you are no good, useless, a waste or worthless
- being continually rejected or shown little or no affection
- repeatedly being subject to threats and verbal abuse such as name-calling, ridiculing and intimidation
- being isolated or locked up alone (often as punishment) or not being allowed to socialise or to have friends.

Emotional abuse on its own can cause just as much harm as other forms of abuse but can be harder to identify, because it does not leave any physical injuries. It is often not recognised until a child shows signs of emotional abuse (see indicators of emotional abuse).

Neglect

Neglect occurs when a child is harmed as a result of their carer's failure to meet their physical and emotional needs. (Unlike other forms of abuse it is an act of omission by those responsible for the welfare of a child). It is the failure to provide a child with the basic needs of life such as food, clothing, shelter and care to the extent that a child's health is placed at risk and their development impaired.

Child neglect may be an ongoing situation and can be caused by a repeated failure to meet the basic psychological needs of a child or young person. A child who is neglected may be at risk of injury or harm due to inadequate supervision.

Neglect of the basic physical needs of a child includes the failure to provide children with adequate:

- food, clothing, shelter
- medical care
- supervision or general care

Neglect of the basic psychological needs include:

- not providing a child appropriate levels of interaction, encouragement, nurturing, stimulation
- continually ignoring a child's distress, eg, pleas for help, comfort or acceptance

From an indigenous perspective, neglect also includes acts leading to the denial of the Aboriginality of a child



Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse or child sexual assault occurs when an adult or older person uses his or her power over a child to involve the child in sexual activity. It is different to other forms of child abuse in the way that it is usually premeditated. The abuser may trick, bribe, threaten or force a child to take part in sexual activity. Examples of child sexual abuse include:

- 'flashing'; appearing naked in front of; or inappropriately exposing 'private parts' of the body to a child or young person
- using suggestive behaviour or comments
- fondling genitals
- masturbation
- oral sex
- penetration of the vagina or anus by a finger, penis or any other object
- exposing a child or young person to pornography or using them for pornography
- obscene calls, remarks or emails to a child or young person
- voyeurism (getting sexual pleasure from looking at sexual acts or organs of children)
- kissing or holding in sexual manner

Refer to Section C on Child Sexual Assault for more information about the sexual abuse of children.



what are the effects of **child abuse & neglect?**

The susceptibility of children to abuse and its consequences for health may be determined by the child's age and stage of development. However, the long term impact of child abuse and neglect can not be easily predicted. There are many factors that must be considered, including:

- the degree and duration of abuse
- the perpetrator
- family structure and support
- the types and levels of intervention
- factors relating to the victim's resilience

Research has concluded that many children are unable to develop coping skills and be emotionally healthy in a chronically abusive or neglectful environment. The immediate effects of physical abuse can result in broken bones, brain damage and even death. The long term consequences of abuse can also be devastating, leaving emotional scars which can lead to an inability to form lasting relationships, psychiatric illness and even suicide.

The impact of abuse on a particular child will be influenced by:

- the severity of the harm
- the period of time over which the abuse happened
- the age, gender and personality of the child
- the existence of positive relationships within or outside the family
- the relationship of the perpetrator to the child
- the timing and quality of the intervention

Immediate effects of physical abuse can result in:

- death
- serious injury and trauma
- disability/permanent physical injury
- brain damage

Research has indicated that child abuse and neglect can impact on the victim's development in the following ways:

The younger the child, the more vulnerable they are to abuse and the more serious the consequences are likely to be





If harm to a child has been getting worse over time, it is likely that, without intervention, the abuse will continue to worsen and end up causing significant harm to the child.

A threat to harm a child may reflect non-coping and stress and may constitute emotional harm. The greater the stress for a carer, the greater the risk of future physical and emotional harm to the child.

(FYCCO 2000)

Personal

- slowed cognitive development
- poor understanding of 'self'
- poor language development
- lowered level of verbal skills
- psychiatric disorders
- lower self esteem
- poor concentration
- behavioural problems

Interpersonal

- inability to form meaningful relationships
- impeded social maturity
- fewer life coping skills

Increased likelihood of:

- general poor health
- eating disorders
- depression
- self-destructive behaviours
- homelessness
- abuse of own children
- future delinquency
- adult crime/violence
- substance abuse
- personality abnormalities
- youth suicide
- violence/aggressive behaviour
- sexual adjustment
- failure to thrive

These effects have a significant impact on a person's ability to function within society, specifically in their roles within education, employment, relationships and parenting.



how do we recognise child abuse and neglect?

In whatever form, child abuse is harmful to children. The sooner a case of child abuse is detected and addressed the better the outcome for the victim.

As family, workers, professionals, leaders, members of our community – as protectors of our people and culture – we need to be responsible for the recognition and appropriate response to all forms of child abuse, including family violence. Being aware of the warning signs and risk indicators of child abuse will help us to fulfil this responsibility. But that doesn't mean we should be making accusations of child abuse every time we see a bump or scratch on a young one.

It is very important to keep an open mind when we come across signs or symptoms of harm to a child and not to jump to conclusions or play the role of investigator. It is, however, also important to consider all signs.

One sign on its own may not suggest abuse. Each indicator needs to be considered in the context of other possible signs as well as the child's circumstances. If you are unsure about a potential child abuse situation it's better that you report your concern or to talk about it with a colleague rather than ignore it or wait for a more 'definite' sign.

The impact of poverty, colonisation and the widespread removal of children from our (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) communities has resulted in massive trauma for our people and families. This has created dislocation and disintegration of our culture and has had significant impacts on our family structures and parenting skills.

The following factors in the life circumstances of the parent or carer may be relevant when considering indicators of child neglect:

- The lifestyle of the parents or carers, dependency on alcohol or drugs, and not making arrangements for children to be looked after
- Parents who are constantly asking for help and but seem unwilling to meet their children's most basic needs of food, safety and shelter
- Parents who blame their children for most things
- Leaving children on their own, including very young children
- A high degree of stress around children
- Forgetting to feed their children

The following factors in the life circumstances of the child or young person may be relevant when considering indicators of abuse:

- history of previous harm to the child or young person
- social or geographic isolation of the child or family, including lack of access to extended family or supports
- abuse or neglect of a sibling
- family history of violence, including injury to children and young people
- family violence

The following factors need to be considered as indicators of significant risk:

- **The current injury/ condition is severe**
- **The current injury is located on the head or genital region**
- **The pattern of harm is continuing**
- **The pattern of harm is escalating**
- **The parent or caregiver has made a threat to cause serious harm to the child**
- **Sexual abuse is alleged and the perpetrator is continuing to have access to the child**

(FYCCO, 2000)



Head and face injuries have greater significance for children because of the potential for brain, eye and ear damage

General indicators of abuse or neglect in a child:

- when a child tells you that he/she has been abused
- when a child gives an unlikely explanation for an injury they have
- when a child mentions they know someone who has been abused (they may be referring to themselves)
- poor concentration
- sleeping problems, including nightmares and bed-wetting
- significant changes in mood or behaviour
- an increase in risk-taking behaviours, tantrums, aggressiveness, withdrawal
- complaint of stomachaches and headaches, with no physical signs of illness
- being wary or not trustful of adults
- self-destructive behaviour
- running away often or avoiding home
- being very passive and cooperative
- fear of returning home or of parents/carers being contacted
- low self-esteem, withdrawal, depression
- unrealistic expectations being placed on a child

Possible signs of physical abuse in children:

- bruises, burns, sprains, cuts, fractures, bites, lacerations, welts, scratches
- other bruising or marks which may show the outline of object that caused it (eg, belt buckle, handprint)
- multiple injuries or bruises
- ingestion of poisonous substances, alcohol, drugs or major trauma
- unlikely explanation given by the child as the reason for injury
- refusal to comment on, or discuss, injuries
- withdrawal from physical contact
- arms and legs kept covered by inappropriate clothing in warm conditions
- showing aggression towards others
- old and new bruises in combination on a child
- facial, head and neck bruising
- bruising in an infant

Possible signs of physical abuse of children in parents or carers:

- direct admissions by parents or carers that they are worried they might injure their child
- family history of violence, including previous harm to children and young people



The more severe an injury is from child abuse, the greater the chance of further and more harmful abuse



- history of their own maltreatment as a child or young person
- repeated presentations of the child to health services with injuries, ingestions or minor complaints
- marked delay between injury and getting medical assistance
- story of injury inconsistent with physical signs
- vague, bizarre or changing story for child's injury
- parents or caregivers who have seriously hurt their children may sometimes, show similar patterns in their response to what has happened including:
 - not acknowledging their part in the harm
 - being more worried about what might happen to themselves than the child
 - showing little or no concern about the welfare of the child or treatment and care of the injury

Indicators of emotional abuse in children:

- feelings of worthlessness about life and themselves
- less able to value others
- lack of trust in people and their expectations
- lack of interpersonal skills necessary for normal interaction
- extreme attention-seeking or risk taking behaviour
- behavioural disorders such as disruptiveness, aggressiveness, bullying
- compulsive lying and stealing
- destructive or violent behaviour
- rocking the body or sucking things
- being very withdrawn or depressed
- delays in physical, mental and emotional development
- high levels of anxiety
- extremely passive or in their 'own world'
- showing delayed speech or sudden speech disorder
- drug or alcohol abuse, sniffing petrol, glue or other substances
- inappropriate emotional responses to painful situations
- fear of new situations

Indicators that parents or carers may be abusive:

- constant criticism, teasing, 'downing' of a child or young person
- ignoring or withholding praise and affection
- placing excessive or unreasonable demands on a child
- persistent hostility and severe verbal abuse; rejecting and blaming

Emerging evidence suggests that cases where both family violence and child abuse occur represent the greatest risk to children and young people's safety and that large numbers of cases where children are killed have histories of family violence
(Laing in ECAV 2001)

There is a general understanding that in situations of Family Violence there is a much higher risk of physical and emotional damage to children and an increased risk that basic childhood needs, including protection, will not be met.



- belief that a particular child or young person is bad or evil
- using inappropriate physical or social isolation as punishment
- behaviour which places a child's safety, welfare and well-being at risk
- exposure to family violence

Indicators of Neglect in children or young people:

- frequent hunger
- seeming constantly tired or lacking life or energy
- low self-esteem
- poor personal hygiene (and signs of medical problems as a result) leading to social isolation
- scavenging or stealing food
- extended stays at school, public places, others homes
- extreme longing for adult affection
- a flat and superficial way of relating, lacking a sense of general interaction
- anxiety about being dropped off or abandoned
- self-comforting behaviour, eg, rocking, sucking
- looking generally run-down and sickly
- compulsive stealing
- poor or slowed physical and social development
- frequent lateness or truancy
- inappropriate clothing, eg, wearing inadequate clothing in winter
- untreated medical problems

Indicators of neglectful behaviour in parents or carers:

- failure to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, hygienic home conditions or leaving the child or young person inappropriately without supervision
- inability to respond emotionally to a child or young person
- leaving the child alone for long periods
- depriving the child of physical contact for prolonged periods
- failure to provide psychological nurturing – praise and encouragement
- one child or young person being treated differently to sibling(s)
- absence of social support from relatives, other adults or social networks
- denial of a child's cultural heritage/identity

Indicators of Sexual Abuse – see Child Sexual Assault Section



how should we respond if we suspect or know of a case of child abuse & neglect?

This sub-section of the handbook will cover information related to responses. For example, if a child or parent were to disclose abuse how should we react? Similarly, what steps should we take if we suspect a child is being abused?

For information about the reporting requirements and processes of child abuse and neglect refer to Section D - Reporting Child Abuse & Neglect.

A situation of child abuse or neglect may come directly to your attention from the victim. When a child discloses abuse or neglect:

- remain calm. Do not express shock, panic or disbelief (the child may take this as a sign they have done something wrong)
- believe the child. Reassure them. Let them know that telling was the right thing to do
- find a private place to talk
- use the child's vocabulary and encourage them to discuss – or draw – their feelings
- reassure the child that it is not his/her fault and that other children share similar problems
- do not push for details of the abuse/neglect. The child will face interviews after referral to the relevant protective service agency in your state/territory
- explain to the child that support and protection is available to them
- do not confront the parents or perpetrators
- do not make promises you cannot keep to the child
- seek expert advice
- inform the child of the action you will take and let them know what is likely to happen

A parent or carer may also disclose their abusive behaviour. Parents who admit that they have harmed a child are likely to feel ashamed and suffer low self esteem. It is important to get the message across to them that they are not alone in having these problems, that they have done the right thing in seeking help and that assistance is available.

CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT

If you are aware of a case of child sexual assault, refer to Section C: Child Sexual Assault



Child abuse rarely stops without intervention and the offer of help. You can help stop the cycle of abuse by notifying Protective Services when you believe that a child is being abused.

(Child Protection & Juvenile Justice Branch, DHS, Vic)

Important points to consider, in a case of child abuse & neglect:

- The highest priority must be given to the child. Children have the right to be physically and emotionally safe at all times. They are the most vulnerable members of our community. They do not have the power to stop abuse, and rely on us to do so
- The general responsibility for ensuring that our children are safe from abuse is shared between the family, the community and the Government. This includes people delivering services to children and families.
- Early detection and effective intervention may not only prevent further child abuse but can also reduce its initial and long term effects, as well as promote the recovery of the children and families concerned.
- Child protection workers aim to keep families together wherever possible. Their aim is to assist children and families, not to pass judgement or blame.
- Much of the prevention of child abuse and neglect in our community is due to the response of nurses, teachers, doctors, social workers, neighbours, relatives and volunteers, and the staff of community organisations.
- The timing and quality of intervention is very important in responding to the needs of victims and families. For this reason, follow these guidelines if you are aware of a possible case of abuse or neglect:
 1. Write down the signs you have noticed.
 2. Compare your observations with the identified indicators of child abuse and neglect (see page 37).
 3. Decide if there are reasonable grounds to your suspicion.
 4. If you need advice on a suspected case, contact your state/territory department responsible for child protection (contacts listed on page 89).
- Persons notifying a case of child abuse or neglect are not required to prove anything and their information is received in confidence. The identity of the person reporting should be strictly protected unless there are grounds for disclosure (see page 78).

Although we all share the responsibility of protecting our children from harm, many of us are actually required by law to report our knowledge of child abuse and neglect. These people are known as mandatory notifiers or mandated parties and the law and process is known as mandatory reporting.

Mandated parties and mandatory reporting varies between the different states and territories. These differences and the details of who mandatory notifiers are, when and what circumstances they are required by law to report, and to just who is covered in the Mandatory Reporting subsection (page 86).

child abuse



The purpose of making it a legal obligation for people to notify cases of child abuse and neglect is to expose serious hidden abuse. This enables:

- an investigation and assessment of the situation
- the protection of the child where necessary
- planning for long term help and protection of the child and their family.
- This may include liaison, joint decision-making and resource provision between the responsible department and other agencies including:
 - Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency (AICCA)
 - Health services
 - Family and children's services
 - Child care centres, kindergartens and schools
 - Police
 - Community based groups and others

Photo: Kenny Bedford



ONE LONELY NIGHT

One lonely night
Nights so were cold
People sittin round the fire
Babies crying all night long
Mother and Father they were drunk

Don't know what to do
Get the baby and take him inside

One lonely night
Nights were so cold
People sittin' round the fire
Babies crying all night long

Get the baby and take him inside

One lonely night

FRANK YAMMA



child abuse

Notifying the department responsible for child protection in your state is an important step in the general prevention of child abuse. Even if you are not a mandated party, reporting your belief of a suspected case of child abuse can be the first important step in stopping the abuse and protecting the young victim from further harm. Failure to notify child abuse may result in the continued abuse of a child.

Abused children may carry the trauma associated with their experiences into adulthood unless treatment, assistance and support are provided.

(Child Protection & Juvenile Justice Branch, Vic. DHS)