

What does prevention of child sexual abuse in schools mean?

There is an overlap between *preventing* child sexual abuse and *early intervention or responses to signs of child sexual abuse* but there are also important differences.

Most importantly, prevention is focused on stopping sexual abuse before it happens. This can be done by identifying and responding to risks for child sexual abuse and by creating an environment that makes sexual abuse more difficult.

Some key principles in prevention are:

- creating a child-centred environment that is physically and emotionally safe
- identifying individuals most at risk of perpetrating child sexual abuse (including using appropriate screening methods for people working or volunteering in schools as well as identifying and acting on concerns about potentially harmful sexual behaviours from peers, community members or students)
- the need for an approach shared by the whole school community.

What can schools do to prevent child sexual abuse?

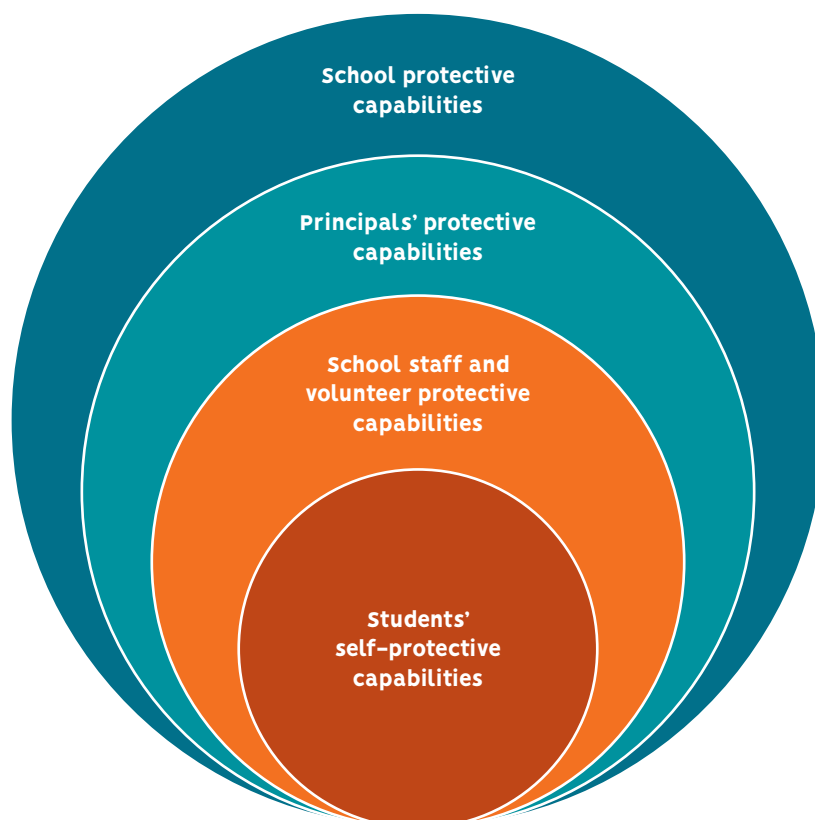
Primary prevention requires a whole-school approach in which schools identify and eliminate the risks or opportunities for child sexual abuse.

There are several overlapping ways in which schools, adults working in schools and students can act to prevent child sexual abuse. The core actions for schools include:

- creating a child-safe environment at school *and* in activities outside the school (such as excursions or school sports) as well as online
- creating, regularly updating and implementing school policies and practices that address risks to child safety (including explicitly addressing risks of child sexual abuse), and routinely referring to the policies in everyday school practice
- fostering a positive, child-centred school culture where all children are respected and listened to
- developing the protective capabilities of staff and students through education and training.

The whole school community plays a role in preventing child sexual abuse and providing a circle of protection around children. All parts of the school community can build the skills, knowledge, practices and attitudes that protect children against sexual abuse.





Build the school's ability to protect against child sexual abuse

Opportunities for child sexual abuse are reduced in environments where child safety and wellbeing are at the centre of policy and practice. Building a child-safe school environment can take time. It can be fostered by regularly reviewing and updating policies that explicitly aim to keep children safe and building a child-centred environment and culture. It can also be supported by comprehensive whole-school sex and sexuality education.

Some strategies for building the protective capabilities of the school, school staff, volunteers and students are outlined below. You can also use [this tool](#) for reflecting on how your school is building an environment and culture that protects against child sexual abuse.

Build on existing policies

School policies on the prevention of child sexual abuse do not have to be created from scratch. Policies to prevent child sexual abuse should build on existing school policies for responding to child sexual abuse (such as mandatory reporting responsibilities) and recognised frameworks, principles and tools for child safety and wellbeing. These include the following resources:

- [Australian Student Wellbeing Framework](#)
- [e-Safety Toolkit for schools](#)
- [National Principles for Child Safe Organisations](#)
- [Complaint Handling Guide](#)



School policies need to comply with state and territory requirements (such as state child safe standards) but when building a protective environment, it is important that school policies and procedures place child wellbeing and safety at the centre. Essential elements of school policies and practices to prevent child sexual abuse should cover:

- the school's physical environment (and the environment of any facilities used by the school)
- online safety and appropriate online activities
- staff and volunteer recruitment, training and expected behaviour
- policies for building an inclusive, child-centred, whole-school culture
- processes for reporting concerns
- processes for reviewing and auditing existing policies.

You can find some more specific suggestions for policies and processes that will help build a child-safe school environment and culture in [this resource](#) for reflecting on school actions to prevent child sexual abuse.

National Principles for Child Safe Organisations

- Child safety and wellbeing is embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture.
- Children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.
- Families and communities are informed and involved in promoting child safety and wellbeing.
- Equity is upheld and diverse needs respected in policy and practice.
- People working with children and young people are suitable and supported to reflect child safety and wellbeing values in practice.
- Processes for complaints and concerns are child focused.
- Staff and volunteers are equipped with the knowledge, skills and awareness to keep children and young people safe through ongoing education and training.
- Physical and online environments promote safety and wellbeing while minimising the opportunity for children and young people to be harmed.
- Implementation of the national child safe principles is regularly reviewed and improved.
- Policies and procedures document how the organisation is safe for children and young people.

Source: https://childsafef.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-02/National_Principles_for_Child_Safe_Organisations2019.pdf

Making policies fit for purpose

Policies and procedures should be regularly reviewed and updated.

It is important that schools make sure their policies and procedures remain fit for purpose. This can be done by formally and systematically assessing the risks of child sexual abuse in the school and in any facilities that the school uses. Ideally, this should be a whole-school assessment of child safety. This risk assessment can inform the creation of school policy and be used to assess the degree to which current policies and practices address these risks.

Risk assessments should include:

- the physical environment of the school and any facilities it uses
- the school's policies and procedures (including those about online safety)
- the school culture
- the characteristics of the school students and community.

Build the ability of all school staff and volunteers to prevent child sexual abuse

An important aspect of a child-safe environment is building the protective capability of all adults who work or volunteer in schools. Training and education can help school staff and principals build their own capabilities and foster a child-centred culture that makes child sexual abuse less likely.

As part of the effort to build staff and volunteers' protective capabilities, schools should clearly communicate to staff and volunteers what the expected and appropriate behaviours with children are as well as adult roles and responsibilities for [safeguarding](#) children. Regular discussion about expected behaviour, and how student welfare and safety can be ensured, contribute to a child-safe environment. Here are some strategies for doing this.

- Have enforceable staff and volunteer codes of conduct that set out appropriate and expected behaviour and communication with children. States and territories provide guidance on developing codes of conduct for school staff and volunteers (links to these can be found in the [list of state and territory guidance and training](#))
- Make expected behaviours part of regular school discussion. To create and maintain a child-safe school environment, codes of conduct and expected behaviours need to be regularly discussed and enforced. Compliance with codes of conduct can be part of formal performance and development reviews, made essential for volunteers' continued participation in school activities and part of regular conversations with school staff and the wider school community.
- Be clear about staff and volunteer responsibilities for keeping children safe (including their role in protecting against child sexual abuse)
- Be clear about staff and volunteer responsibilities for reporting concerns about child safety (including harmful sexual behaviour or abuse)
- Have accessible and transparent processes for reporting concerns about unsafe or harmful behaviours (including but not restricted to mandatory reporting obligations)
- Be clear about the need to take children's concerns or disclosures seriously
- Be clear about the need to give children a voice in decisions that affect them
- Be clear about how respecting and listening to children contributes to a school culture that keeps children safe
- Promote the value of comprehensive whole-school sex and sexuality education, including regular discussions about consent, for creating a culture that helps keep children safe
- Make it clear to all staff and volunteers that children are not to blame for their abuse or exploitation.

The school can also help staff understand what to do if:

- they witness behaviours indicating grooming
- they have concerns about child safety or about the behaviour of a school staff member, volunteer or family
- someone discloses abuse
- they witness sexually harmful behaviour from an adult or child.

School staff and volunteers have an essential role in whole-school efforts to build a child-safe organisation. This means including staff in efforts to assess risks of child sexual abuse and in policy development to address the risks.

Deliver prevention education and training for staff

School staff may already be required to undertake training in child protection and mandatory reporting, and this can include some elements of child sexual abuse prevention. When school staff have training in recognising the warning signs of child sexual abuse, and good processes for reporting it, it can help create a school culture that takes child safety seriously and may help deter child sexual abuse by making it more difficult to hide. Where possible, schools should also seek and support training for staff and volunteers that focus explicitly on some the key elements of the prevention of child sexual abuse. Training is usually most effective when it is delivered over multiple sessions.

Training for staff and volunteers can include:

- how to support or deliver comprehensive whole-school sex and sexuality education (including issues relating to consent)
- respectful relationships
- the needs of students from diverse backgrounds and students with disability
- [online safety](#)
- building a child-safe culture and environment.

Build students' knowledge and self-protective behaviours

All adults working in a school have a responsibility to help protect children against child sexual abuse and to be part of a healthy school culture. This can include teaching children about consent, appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and what to do when they encounter or experience uncomfortable situations or inappropriate sexual behaviour.

A healthy school culture is also one in which children feel comfortable and supported to seek help and report concerns about themselves or others. Children should feel safe speaking out about *any* concerns and seeking help. A safe school is one where everyone knows how to respond to disclosures.

The [Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education](#) content strand on personal, social and community health, and the [Personal and Social Capability](#) provide some anchor points for teaching content that can support students to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills that can help keep them safe.

Facilitate a child-safe environment

A child-safe environment is one where students have a voice and feel comfortable and supported to seek help when they feel unsafe. Actions to achieve this include the following.

- Student concerns are listened to and acted on. This is not restricted to concerns or reports about abusive or harmful sexual behaviour but should include *all* student concerns. When students see that their concerns are taken seriously, they are more likely to report instances of unsafe, harmful or abusive behaviour.
- Students are included in discussions about policies and processes that are meant to keep them safe.
- The school fosters a positive and safe school community.
- Students are aware of their rights.
- Students are involved in regular conversations about consent.



- The school promotes healthy attitudes against violence and sexual abuse.
- Students know how to report concerns about unsafe or harmful behaviours.
- Students know who they can talk to if they are worried or need help.
- Students have identified at least five adults that they feel comfortable speaking to and confiding in. The list of adults should include people outside the child's home and might include school staff, family or community members.

It is important to remember that not all children will be comfortable or safe when disclosing concerns or experiences of abuse to immediate family or their school staff. This may especially be the case when children come from different cultural backgrounds, are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, have lived experience of disability, or identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender and/or intersex (LGBTQI). Schools can help all students identify five or more adults they feel safe with and would confide in if they were worried, scared or in trouble. This might include members of their extended family or community members that they respect.

Educate children to be safe

Education content for children to build their self-protective abilities can include:

- comprehensive sex and sexuality education (including body ownership, sexual identity, consent and appropriate and inappropriate behaviours)
- knowledge of anatomically correct names for body parts
- respectful relationships
- online safety
- understanding consent, power and pressure
- safety and disclosure (such as safe and unsafe situations, who to tell when feeling unsafe or when something has happened)
- an understanding that child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and grooming is illegal
- an understanding that children are not to blame for their abuse or exploitation.

Engage with the school's parent and carer community

Schools can also work with the school's parent and carer community to create a child-safe culture and to build student knowledge and self-protective skills.

Strategies for doing this include:

- having a yearly communication plan for regularly sharing information about school policies and what the school is doing to keep children safe
- facilitating education for families and carers about sex and sexuality education, respectful relationships, and keeping children safe from abuse and exploitation
- role-modelling protective behaviours for families and carers
- linking families and carers to information and education about what they can do to keep children safe
- providing information and education about how families and carers can report concerns about child safety (including abusive or harmful behaviours offline and online)
- tailoring school communications so that they meet the needs of the whole school community
- working to make the school inclusive and culturally safe, which can help families and carers feel more comfortable receiving information from the school and reporting concerns to the school.