



Recommendations for supporting schools and school principals on the prevention of child sexual abuse

The working definition of child sexual abuse

Defining child sexual abuse is important because it helps school staff and principals to identify the main forms of sexual abuse and to be clear about how they are different to other forms of child maltreatment. The definitions below guided this project and form the basis of the draft guidance.

The draft guidance was developed using the definition of child sexual abuse developed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) in response to the Royal Commission's recommendations to develop nationally agreed key terms and definitions (Recommendations 12.1 and 12.15).

Child sexual abuse (Recommendation 12.1)

Any act by a person having the care of, power over, or association with a child under 18 years of age which exposes the child to, or involves the child in, contact or non-contact sexual activity that is illegal, results in harm, or is likely to result in harm to the child. Non-sexual activities, deliberately undertaken with the aim of befriending and establishing an emotional connection with a child, to lower the child's inhibitions in preparation for sexual activity with the child, also constitute a form of child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse can be perpetrated by an adult, another child or a group.

Child sexual exploitation (Recommendation 12.15)

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse that occurs when an individual or group attempts to or succeeds in coercing, manipulating or deceiving a child into contact or non-contact sexual acts:

- a) in exchange for something including, but not limited to, money, gifts or accommodation,
- b) or less tangible goods such as affection or status, and/or
- c) for the financial advantage, increased status or other reward for the person/people exploiting the child.

A child over the legal age of consent may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual act appears consensual.

Although this definition was designed for use in out-of-home-care settings, it enables us to explore the diverse experiences of child sexual abuse and of children from different backgrounds and circumstances.



This definition informed the development of the guidance; however, within the guidance itself, we have referenced the World Health Organization's definition of child sexual abuse (WHO, 1999). This is because this definition is easy to read and understand and is widely used. Additionally, its behavioural focus is consistent with the AIHW-developed guidelines (which are not yet widely available to the public). Due to the age of the WHO definition, it does not highlight online forms of abuse. However, this aspect of child sexual abuse (and online safety) has been included throughout the guidance.

It should be noted that these definitions include sexual abuse by another child (i.e. aged under 18 years) as well as by adults. The guidance provided with these resources focuses on the prevention of child sexual abuse, and the creation and maintenance of protective environments, rather than the identification of abuse or abusive behaviour by adults or children.

The identification of child sexual abuse by adults is already covered by other existing guidance on responses to child sexual abuse, including in institutional policies. The identification of problematic or harmful sexual behaviours in children and young people, by contrast, is a complex area that requires further specific training and education. Children and young people can engage in harmful or abusive sexual behaviours. Understanding when behaviour is or is not developmentally appropriate requires an understanding of the full spectrum of child sexual behaviour (see ANROWS, 2020; El Murr, 2017). Although information on this topic is beyond the scope of these resources, the guidance does refer to some commonly used resources that may be helpful.

Expert and stakeholder recommendations for supporting schools and school principals on the prevention of child sexual abuse

Stakeholders and experts identified several areas in which educational authorities can support schools to prevent child sexual abuse. These are listed below. Some of these topics have been covered in the guidance for schools and principals and can also be supported by education authorities.

Shorter-term actions

Stakeholders and experts suggested that in the shorter term, education authorities could:

- encourage schools to take stock of school culture using the information contained in this guidance
- compile high-quality resources about the prevention of child sexual abuse that could be useful in a school environment. Schools in all states and territories have access to a range of resources about prevention that could be useful in professional development for school staff and principals. These resources – along with access to emerging research into prevention – could be consolidated and made easily accessible to school staff.

Longer-term actions

Other stakeholder and expert recommendations would require DESE and/or other education departments to take longer-term actions. Suggested actions included:

Education and training for school staff

To supplement existing definitions, school staff and principals need education and training about preventing child sexual abuse. Understanding relationships of power, authority and trust – for example, the type of relationship between the person demonstrating abusive behaviour and the child experiencing the abuse – is also important to assessing whether a specific behaviour is appropriate or harmful.

Most states and territories already offer school staff training in the identification and reporting of child sexual abuse. School staff can also benefit from understanding the continuum of child sexual behaviours (when such training is not already offered). This would help teachers and school staff to identify when a child's behaviour may be appropriate, inappropriate or harmful and to be able to determine an appropriate response. Understanding child sexual behaviour is a distinct topic that must form part of prevention efforts; however, in-depth treatment of this specific topic was beyond the scope of this project. Helping school staff, and the broader school community, understand how to identify child sexual abuse by distinguishing appropriate child sexual behaviour from inappropriate or harmful behaviour can help build a preventative school culture.

Support schools to develop a child-centred school culture

Schools need support to take stock of how they promote the rights of children and young people and their compliance with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. State and territory governments already have policies and provide guidance on creating positive and safe school environments, and there are published tools for implementation of the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. However, DESE could be part of a national framework to ensure wide, consistent and ongoing implementation.

Whole-school engagement

Education authorities and school systems can support schools to ensure a shared understanding of what child sexual abuse prevention is (i.e. stopping it from happening in the first place), how it differs from responses to child sexual abuse (such as mandatory reporting requirements after child sexual abuse is suspected or known), and a whole-school approach. For example, schools can be encouraged to reflect on how they share knowledge about prevention across the whole school community.

Further research

Currently, we lack comprehensive whole-school models of prevention of child sexual abuse in schools. There is also limited information about how much school staff and principals know about child sexual abuse and how it can be prevented. Further research in this area could support education departments and schools in developing and adopting best practice approaches to the prevention of child sexual abuse.

A toolkit for schools on the prevention of child sexual abuse

In the longer term, the core guidance provided here could be accompanied by a 'toolkit' similar to the eSafety Toolkit published by the eSafety Commissioner. Such a toolkit could include the following elements:

- core guidance (as provided here)
- additional resources including definitions of each of the different elements of prevention
- examples of best practice or different scenarios in which preventative activities can or should be undertaken (including with different school cohorts and diverse communities). These could be in the form of vignettes or short media pieces that provide situational guidance to prevention: for example, 'if this happens, do this ...' There are currently few good examples of such resources, but these could be developed in the future and added to the toolkit.
- resources on topics such as:
 - what to do if you suspect grooming
 - building a child-safe culture
 - giving students a voice and enabling, hearing and responding to their complaints
 - how to help protect children who may be at higher risk for sexual abuse (including how to help children with disability to develop self-protective behaviour, and links to online safety education).



The resources

This suite of resources provides the draft guidance content. This guidance is based on consultation with stakeholders, discussions with the project advisory group and consideration of existing guidance. This guidance is intended as a starting point for a future, more comprehensive, set of resources on prevention (i.e. the 'toolkit' recommended by key experts). The current draft guidance includes:

- definitions of child sexual abuse, prevention of child sexual abuse and reasons why schools should act to prevent child sexual abuse
- considerations for school staff and principals on how to build a positive and safe school environment
- a tool for schools to use to reflect on their actions to date in building a school environment with capacity to prevent child sexual abuse
- prevention resources.

It is important to note that the resources listed here have been suggested as tools to inform the *prevention* of child sexual abuse and not an intervention. For that reason, we have not included tools from state and territory departments that inform school staff and principals about how to intervene or follow mandatory reporting policy except where these cover prevention or prevention-related topics. The existing [Complaint Handling Guide](#) developed by the NOCS provides nationally consistent guidance about how to *respond* to child sexual abuse.

