



Early Childhood

Preventing and responding to child sexual abuse

Expert advice available for parents and carers about having body safety conversations with children, identifying the signs of child sexual abuse and grooming, and raising concerns.

Safety in early childhood services

High-quality and safe early childhood education and care is important for children's development and wellbeing.

Early childhood services must have safe learning environments where children are protected from harm and abuse and concerns about abuse are reported. These legal requirements are set out in [national laws](#) and the [Child Safe Standards](#).

Early childhood services, including long day care and kindergarten services, are assessed and rated against [7 National Quality Standards](#). This includes one focused on children's health and safety.

You can check the quality ratings and compliance history of any long day care or kindergarten service in Australia at startingblocks.gov.au.

Parents and carers know their child best and are likely to be the first to notice if something is wrong.

Resources developed by child safety experts can help you to:

- have age-appropriate conversations about body safety with your child
- know the signs of [child sexual abuse](#) and grooming
- raise concerns if something doesn't feel right.

Age-appropriate conversations with children about body safety

Talking about body safety from an early age helps children to recognise when they may be unsafe and say no when something doesn't feel right.

When children understand that it's not okay for someone to touch or see their body, it can help them tell someone they trust if this happens.

Child safety experts say it's important to use simple words that children understand, teach the correct names for body parts, and explain what private parts are.

You can introduce body safety messages in ways that suit your child and their age. This may be through everyday conversations or using books, pictures or play.

- **Raising Children Network** has information about [how to talk to children about sexual abuse](#) and [how to help autistic children recognise sexually abusive behaviour](#).
- **National Office for Child Safety** has 'One Talk at a Time' resources, including [conversation toolkits](#), [resources to teach body safety](#), [co-created resources with First Nations families](#), and [translated resources and videos](#) in different languages.
- **Children and Young People with Disability Australia** has [resources on child safety and prevention of abuse](#).

Signs of grooming

Grooming is a process that is used to build trust and an emotional connection with a child, or their parent or carer, with the aim of child sexual abuse.

It can be hard to tell when a child is being groomed, because it can look like 'normal' caring behaviour.

Professional practice in early childhood education and care is based on warm and responsive relationships with children. These relationships support children's learning, development and wellbeing.

Grooming is a pattern of manipulative behaviours that misuses trust to harm a child.

Examples of possible grooming behaviours at early childhood services

Grooming behaviours towards a **child** may include:

- making repeated, close, inappropriate physical contact – e.g., hugging, tickling, wrestling, having the child sit on their lap, lying beside the child during rest time
- developing an unusually strong friendship and making the child feel favoured – e.g., giving extra attention, gifts or special privileges.

Grooming behaviours towards a **parent or carer** may include:

- developing an unusually close relationship with the family
- offering to babysit or help outside of professional hours – e.g., taking the child to sport or events.

See the websites below for expert advice about how to recognise signs of grooming.

- **Raising Children Network** has advice about [how to recognise child grooming signs](#).
- **National Office for Child Safety** has information about [behaviours involved in grooming](#).

Signs a child may have been sexually abused

Children may not tell you they've been sexually abused.

Child safety experts say some children may show subtle signs, and others may not show any signs at all. Signs can also change over time as a child develops.

Behavioural signs may include changes in sleeping patterns, loss of interest in activities once enjoyed and stomach pains and headaches.

Emotional signs may include crying a lot or not at all, getting angry for no apparent reason and fear of a particular person or place.

Physical signs may include bruises and swelling, bleeding, urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted infections and discomfort when urinating.

These are examples of possible signs, there may be others. Child safety experts say while these signs don't necessarily mean a child has been sexually abused, it's important to consider the possibility, especially if there are multiple signs.

See the websites below for expert advice about the signs of sexual abuse in children.

- **Raising Children Network** has advice about [signs of sexual abuse in children](#) and [signs of sexual abuse in autistic children](#).
- **Better Health Channel** has information about [signs of sexual abuse](#).
- **Kids Helpline** has advice about [understanding child sexual abuse](#).

What to do if your child discloses sexual abuse

If your child tells you they have been sexually abused, child safety experts say to believe them and help your child feel safe.

It can be helpful to stay as calm as possible and let your child talk in their own words, without interrupting them. See the websites below for advice about what to say to your child if they disclose sexual abuse, and what to do next.

- **Raising Children Network** has advice about [what to do if a child tells you about sexual abuse](#).
- **National Office for Child Safety** has advice about [responding to child sexual abuse disclosures](#).

How to raise a concern or make a complaint

If you have a concern about child sexual abuse or grooming behaviours at an early childhood service, it is important to speak up.

If you believe a crime may have been committed, call 000 to report it or contact your [local police station](#) to speak with a police officer.

You can also raise a concern or make a complaint with:

- the early childhood service directly. Services must have clear processes for making a complaint and who to speak to
- the Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority (VECRA), the independent regulator for early childhood education and care. Call **1300 307 415** or [submit an online complaint](#).

By sharing information about your concern, authorities can investigate and respond appropriately.

You should be informed of any investigation and the outcome, no matter who you raise your concern or make a complaint with.

Your family should feel respected and protected at all times.

If you have a concern, even if it seems small, it is worth raising

You could talk to your service and say, for example: "I've noticed something that I'm not sure about and I'd like to talk it through".

If you do not feel comfortable speaking directly to the service, you can [contact VECRA](#) or visit the [complaints webpage](#) for more information.

You can remain anonymous if you'd prefer but sharing the service details, your name and contact information can help VECRA staff to make further enquiries.

- **Victoria Police** has information about making a report and resources about [sexual offences and child abuse](#).
- **VECRA** has information about [making a complaint about an early childhood service](#).

Where to reach out for more information or support

If you need support or are concerned about your child in any way, trusted professionals can help.

A good place to start is contacting a local sexual assault service – see [Centres Against Sexual Assault \(CASAs\)](#) to find one in your area.

You can also talk to your family doctor or local [Maternal and Child Health service](#).

- [Sexual Assault Services Victoria](#) has information, recovery resources and links to specialist support.
- [Sexual assault support services - DFFH Services](#) has information about where to find 24-hour crisis support in Victoria. You can also call **1800 806 292**.
- [13YARN](#) has information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Crisis Supporters. You can also call **13 92 76**.