

2.2 RECOGNISING HARM AND ABUSE

Children, young people and vulnerable adults have a right to be safe in their own homes and in the community, and live without violence and abuse. It is therefore the responsibility of every Worker of the Diocese of Lismore to have some understanding of the indicators of harm and abuse in children, young people or vulnerable adults.

What is Child and Vulnerable Adult Abuse and Harm?

There are different legal and operational definitions of child and vulnerable adult abuse in Australia. Respective professional sectors tend to emphasise the facets of abuse that are most important to their own field.

However, all definitions refer to the physical or psychological damage caused to another person by the abusive behaviour of others, or the failure to protect victims. Commonly the categories of abuse include all forms of:

- sexual abuse (including grooming)
- neglect
- physical abuse
- emotional or psychological abuse.

These categories for the most part are reflected in the commonly Australian accepted definition of Elder Abuse as '*any act occurring within a relationship where there is an implication of trust, which results in harm to an older person. Abuse may be physical, sexual, financial, psychological, social and/or neglect*'¹

Family violence and the exposure to it, is also considered a form of abuse for both children and vulnerable adults.

The following tables set out different types of abuse and a non-exhaustive list of indicators. When forming a belief that child or vulnerable adult abuse might be occurring, consider the context of the behaviour you have observed, or information you have come across. A single indicator might not imply abuse.

Emotional (psychological) abuse

Serious psychological harm can occur where the behaviour of the parent or caregiver damages the confidence and self esteem of the child or vulnerable adult, resulting in serious emotional disturbance or psychological trauma.

Although it is possible for 'one off' incidents to cause serious harm, in general it is the frequency, persistence and duration of the parental or carer behaviour that is instrumental in defining the consequences for the child or vulnerable adult.

¹ Australian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse Working definition (1999)

Emotional (psychological) Abuse Signs

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| <i>Examples</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rejection • bullying • derogatory name-calling • insulting the person • threatening the person or threatening to take away something that is important to them • yelling or swearing at them • Isolating the person • Excluding them from meaningful events or activities |
| <i>Possible physical indicators</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • frequent psychosomatic complaints (eg. Headaches, nausea, abdominal pains) • prolonged vomiting or diarrhoea • delays in emotional, mental, or even physical development • physical signs of self-harming |
| <i>Possible behavioural indicators</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feelings of worthlessness or low self-esteem • extreme attention-seeking or risk-taking behaviour • self-harming, suicide attempts • obsession with pleasing or obeying adults • exposure to domestic violence • displaying aggressive or demanding behaviour • antisocial and destructive • lying or stealing • being withdrawn, passive and/or tearful, constant running away from home • anorexia or over-eating |
| <i>Signs in parents or caregivers</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant name calling, labelling or publicly humiliates the child or vulnerable adult • Continually threatens with physical harm or forces them to witness physical harm inflicted on a loved one • Has unrealistic expectations of the child or vulnerable adult |

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is a non-accidental injury or pattern of injuries to a child, young person or vulnerable adult, caused by a parent, caregiver or any other person.

Physical Abuse Signs

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| <i>Examples</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive discipline • Beating • Shaking • Burning • Attempted strangulation • Hitting a person around the head or neck • Using weapons (such as belts or sticks) |
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| <i>Possible physical indicators</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unexplained cuts, abrasions, bruising or swelling • unexplained burns or scalds (including cigarette burns) • rope burns or marks on arms, legs, neck, torso • unexplained fractures, strains or sprains; dislocation of limbs • bite marks • drowsiness, vomiting, fits or pooling of blood in the eyes, which may suggest a head injury • abdominal pain, which may be caused by ruptured internal organs • Frequent hospital visits |
| <i>Possible behavioural indicators</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wary of adults or of a particular individual • violent to animals or other children/individual • dressed inappropriately to hide bruises or other injuries • may be extremely aggressive or extremely withdrawn • cannot recall how the injuries occurred or gives inconsistent explanations • exposure to domestic violence • parents or caregivers use excessive or unreasonable discipline |
| <i>Signs in parents or caregivers</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explanation offered by the parent or caregiver is not consistent with the injury • may blame the accident on a sibling, friend, relative or the injured child or vulnerable adult • family history of violence • is aggressive towards a child or vulnerable adult in front of others • may delay in seeking medical attention for a child or vulnerable adult |

Neglect

Neglect is a significant failure – by a person with parental responsibility, or an authorised carer or an employee if the child or vulnerable is in the employee’s care – to provide adequate and proper food, supervision, nursing, clothing, medical aid or lodging for the child that causes or is likely to cause harm to the child.

Neglect can be an ongoing situation of repeated failure by a caregiver to meet physical or psychological needs, or a single significant accident where a caregiver fails to fulfil a duty or obligation, resulting in actual harm to child, or vulnerable, or where there is the potential for significant harm.

Signs of Neglect

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| <i>Possible physical indicators</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • malnourished, lacking food, inappropriate food or erratic feeding • inattention to basic hygiene • inappropriate clothing • chronic sickness/untreated physical problems • poor dental hygiene |
| <i>Possible behavioural indicators</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • constant tiredness • persistent hunger |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unexpectedly poor social/interpersonal skills • signs of loss of communication and other skills • staff member, service provider, carer or support person consistently fails to bring the person to appointments, events, activities • person is persistently denied opportunities to socialise with others in the community • aggressive behaviour • non-attendance at school |
| <i>Signs in parents or caregivers</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fails to provide basic needs, such as housing, nutrition, medical and psychological care • Fails to enrol a child in school or permits truancy • Leaves the child or vulnerable adult without appropriate supervision • Is overwhelmed with own problems and puts own needs ahead of the needs of child or vulnerable adult • Withholding physical contact or stimulation for prolonged periods • Unrealistic expectations of the child or vulnerable adult |

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a person to take part in sexual activity, or deliberately puts the person in the presence of sexual behaviours that are exploitative or inappropriate to his/her age development, whether or not that person is aware of what is happening.

Sexual abuse includes sexual behaviour involving a vulnerable person and another person in the following circumstances:

- The other person bribes, coerces, exploits, threatens or is violent toward the relevant person;
- The relevant person has less power than the other person;
- There is a significant disparity between the relevant person and the other person in intellectual capacity or maturity.

The activities may involve physical contact including penetrative (e.g. rape) or non-penetrative acts (oral sex).

It may include non-contact activities such as involving a child or a vulnerable person looking at or participating in the production of pornographic material, watching sexual activities or encouraging such persons to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.

Such behaviour is not confined to a particular working group, class or individual. The vulnerable can be sexually abused by a male and/or female or by any other adult and/or child.

Signs of Sexual Abuse

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| <i>Examples</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • kissing, masturbation, penetration, exhibitionism • inappropriate touching or fondling • exposure to, or exploitation through, pornography or prostitution • sexual harassment • sexual grooming |
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| <i>Possible physical indicators</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • direct or indirect disclosure of abuse or assault • trauma to the breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen or thighs • pain or itching in genital and/or anal area; bruising, bleeding or discharge • sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy • unexplained money or gifts |
| <i>Possible behavioural indicators</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sleep disturbances • changes in eating patterns • inappropriate or unusual sexual behaviour or knowledge • changes in social patterns • fear of certain places eg. Bedroom or bathroom • sudden or marked changes in behaviour or temperament • being withdrawn, running away, depression • self-destructive behaviour • refusal to attend usual places (e.g. work, school, respite) • showing wariness or distrust of adults, or fear of specific people • uses younger children in sexual acts |

Understanding grooming behaviour

Grooming is deliberate actions by which an offender befriends and establishes an emotional connection with a child, young person or vulnerable adult to lower their inhibitions in order to sexually abuse them. The relationship is usually maintained in secrecy.

The types of behaviours that may lead to such a conclusion include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Persuading a child, young person or vulnerable adult that they have a 'special' relationship, for example by:
 - spending inappropriate special time with them;
 - inappropriately giving gifts;
 - inappropriately showing special favours to them but not others;
 - inappropriately allowing them to overstep rules; and
 - asking to keep this relationship to themselves.
- Testing boundaries, for example by:
 - undressing in front of a child, young person or vulnerable adult;
 - encouraging inappropriate physical contact (even where it is not overtly sexual);
 - talking about sex; and
 - 'accidental' intimate touching.
- Inappropriately extending a relationship outside of work (except where it may be appropriate - for example where there was a pre-existing friendship with the child, young person or vulnerable adults' family or as part of normal social interactions in the community).
- Inappropriate personal communication (including emails, telephone calls, text messaging, social media and web forums) that explores sexual feelings or intimate personal feelings with a child, young person or vulnerable adult.

- An adult requesting that a child, young person or vulnerable adult keep any aspect of their relationship secret or using tactics to keep any aspect of the relationship secret, would generally increase the likelihood that grooming is occurring.

Grooming includes a range of behaviours and/or verbal or written communications with a child, young person or vulnerable adult. The intention of this communication is to make sexual contact, whilst maintaining the child, young person or vulnerable adults' silence. Grooming can take place over days, weeks or even years. It can be difficult to recognise because it is also often disguised as normal or legitimate behaviour. When challenged, offenders are likely to justify their behaviour to avoid suspicion.

Grooming may cause the victim to:

- feel as though they have an important and special relationship with the person who is harming them;
- experience confusion over the nature of their relationship;
- internalise the abuse as their fault, feeling responsibility for any harm experienced and fearing they will be blamed, punished or not believed;
- fear that they will be separated from their family of home if they speak out; and/or
- believe that disclosure will cause harm to someone or something they love and care for, such as family members of pets.

Individual incidents of the above behaviours may not be indicative of grooming if occurring in isolation, but if there is a pattern of behaviour occurring, this may be indicative of grooming.

Under the Crimes act 1900 (NSW), section 66EB, it's a serious criminal offence to groom or procure a child for unlawful sexual activity.