



I'm worried about my child

A guide for parents and carers who are worried something might not be right. This booklet helps you recognise warning signs, understand grooming, hear disclosures, and know what to do when you need help.

A JOINT INITIATIVE OF

Body Safety

Australia

GENWEST

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About the authors

Body Safety Australia promotes childhoods free from violence where children enjoy equitable and respectful relationships.

We deliver evidence-based programs to children, young people, families and communities to help prevent violence towards children in the home and school environments, offline and online.

Find out more at www.bodysafetyaustralia.com.au

GenWest works to prevent and respond to family and gender based violence in Melbourne's west. We support people and communities to live safe and healthy lives through social and health education programs.

We also support adults and children experiencing family violence to stay safe and get the help they need.

Find out more at genwest.org.au



CHAPTER 1

Grooming

Grooming is when a person who abuses children builds trust with the child, and the people around them, so they can have access to that child over time. It does not always look obviously harmful at the start. It can happen through trust building and 'special' treatment. It can slowly cross boundaries in ways that are not safe. Children under five are especially vulnerable because they may not have words to explain what is happening. Grooming often happens in stages. Grooming can be stopped at any stage if adults notice and act early.



Stages of Grooming

Building trust and reputation

The person who abuses builds trust with the family and community. They may become known as helpful, charming and reliable. This trust can make it harder for concerns to be noticed or questioned later.



Finding vulnerabilities

They may seek out and target families or children who have more vulnerabilities. This might include children with disability who rely on others for care, or those who are more compliant by nature. It might include families who face language barriers, financial hardship, social isolation, or who are less likely to question services or authority.



Giving 'special' attention

The adult may give the child more attention than others. This can include extra time, gifts, praise or care.



Inappropriate behaviour

They may slowly cross safe boundaries. This can start with behaviours that seem small or harmless, such as unnecessary touching or being too physically close. These behaviours can slowly increase over time and become more unsafe.



Silencing

They may try to stop the child from telling anyone. This can include asking to keep secrets, using bribes, making threats, or making the child feel confused, responsible or afraid to disclose.

Warning signs in young children (under five)

Children under five may not be able to explain what was done to them. Changes in behaviour can be an important sign.

Parents can look for:

Sudden fear of a specific person, place or activity

Changes in sleep (nightmares or wetting the bed more than usual)

Changes in appetite (eating much less or more than usual)

Becoming unusually clingy to, or withdrawn from, loved ones

Regression in language or behaviour (acting younger than usual)

Sudden bursts of anger or sadness

Feelings of shame or guilt

Knowledge about sexual behaviour that is not age appropriate

Acting out roles or behaviours that seem too grown up for their age





Parent script: *"I have noticed some changes in my child's behaviour and I am concerned. Can you help me understand what might be happening?"*

Parent script: *"I am worried about something I have observed involving my child and another person. I would like to talk through what support you can give."*

Parent script: *"I notice you seem upset. Did something happen that made you feel uncomfortable or scared?"*

Parent script: *"You can talk to me about anything that makes you feel scared, even if it's a secret. I will listen to you. You are not in trouble."*





CHAPTER 2

Hearing disclosures

Hearing disclosures from children is difficult, but it is important that we respond calmly and take appropriate action. Many children will not have the language to explain exactly what has happened. They may not know that what has happened is not okay. They may show us through their behaviour, play, drawings, storytelling or in small comments. How you respond in these moments matters.

Do

- ✓ Stay calm and take a slow breath before responding
- ✓ Listen to your child without interrupting
- ✓ Believe your child and take them seriously
- ✓ Reassure your child that they are not in trouble or at fault
- ✓ Tell your child you are glad they told you
- ✓ Reach out for support

Don't

- ✗ Don't promise to keep it a secret
- ✗ Don't ask lots of questions or try to investigate
- ✗ Don't react with shock, anger or disbelief in front of the child
- ✗ Don't blame or shame your child for what has happened
- ✗ Don't suggest it is not serious or 'not a big deal'
- ✗ Don't make promises you cannot keep (like it will never happen again)



If a child tells you something directly

Parent script: *"You only have to say what you're ready to say. You are very brave for telling me. I'm listening."*

Parent script: *"I'm sorry that person chose to do that. That isn't okay. I believe you."*

If a child shows concerning behaviour

Parent script: *"I noticed something that made me feel worried about you. I am here. You can talk to me about anything"*

Reassuring the child

Parent script: *"Thank you for telling me this. I'm really glad you did. You've done the right thing by telling me."*

Explaining what will happen next

Parent script: *"There are people whose job it is to help in times like this, and I'm going to talk to them so they can help us."*



If your child cannot clearly explain what happened

Young children under five may not be able to describe events in words. This is especially important for pre-verbal,

non-verbal or alternative communication users. You may only get small pieces of information or changes in behaviour. Each one of these pieces by themselves might not mean anything but if they keep adding up it's important to reach out for help.

If this happens:

Trust what you have noticed

Write down what you saw or heard as soon as possible

Look for patterns or changes in behaviour

Do not pressure the child to explain

Seek professional advice or report concerns if needed

Focus on keeping your child safe and supported

You do not need to have all the information before asking for professional help.

Reporting your concerns means professionals can guide you on what to do next.





CHAPTER 3

Reporting and help-seeking pathways

It is understandable to feel scared about reporting. Many parents worry about what might happen to their child, their family or their community. You are not alone in feeling this way and support is available to help you through each step.

What mandatory reporting means



In Australia, some professionals must report serious concerns about a child's safety. This is called 'mandatory reporting.' This rule is about keeping children safe, not about punishing families. Mandatory reports go to child protection services so they can check on a child's safety and wellbeing. Families may also be offered support.

Common questions and answers

Is reporting anonymous?

Some services allow you to share information without giving your name. However, this depends on who you contact. You can ask before sharing details.

What will happen to my family?

Most reports lead to support. Services focus on understanding what is happening and what support is needed.

Will my child be taken away?

In most cases, children stay with their families. Removal only happens if there is serious and immediate risk to the child's safety.

What if I was wrong?

You will not get in trouble for asking for help or sharing a concern. It is always okay to seek advice if you are unsure.

Contact **Body Safety Australia** to have someone talk to your child's childcare, school, sports group or community about how to keep children safe.

SASH, Support After Sexual Harm

This service is for children aged 0 to 17 years and their families who have experienced sexual harm. It is part of the Royal Children's Hospital.

Phone: 9345 6391

Website: www.rch.org.au/sash

Locations: RCH Parkville, Werribee, and Melton. 24 hour crisis support available.

Note: If your child was in one of the affected early childhood education and care centres, you can call SASH. You are eligible and encouraged to access support.

SASH can help with:

- Understanding your child's safety needs.
- Counselling and support for you as a parent or carer.
- Talking to your child about what happened.
- Making a plan for support.



Local Support Services

WestCASA

This free, confidential service is for children aged 12 and over and their carers and families who have experienced sexual harm.

Phone: 9216 044

Website: westcasa.org.au

Location: Werribee, with support also available via Telehealth.

WestCASA can help with:

- Counselling and support, including group work.
- Referrals to other helpful services, including doctors.
- Advocacy, such as an overview of the process for reporting a sexual crime, if you want this. There is no requirement to report to police.
- Planning for your safety and wellbeing.

All support is trauma informed. You can access help whether the experience was recent or in the past.

Child Protection

Victorian Government child protection services investigate concerns about a child's safety. You can call them if you are worried about a child.

After hours: 13 12 78 (5pm to 9am weekdays, 24 hours weekends and public holidays)

During business hours: Contact your local Child Protection office. To find your local office, visit services.dffh.vic.gov.au/child-protection or call 1300 360 391.

Victoria Police: Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team (SOCIT)

SOCIT is a specialist Victoria Police team that investigates sexual offences and child abuse.

They are trained to support children and families through the process.

Phone: 000 in an emergency, or your local police station to be referred to SOCIT

Note: You do not have to make a formal report to talk to SOCIT. You can ask questions first



CHAPTER 4

Therapeutic responses

Therapeutic support is a safe space where children and families can get help after something harmful has happened. For young children, this often looks like play, drawing and simple activities rather than talking. The first appointment is usually about getting to know the child and the family and understanding what support is needed. It is not scary, and families can usually stay with their child during the process. Therapists should adapt support for each child, including children with disability or different communication needs.

What you can do at home while waiting for an appointment

- Keep daily routines as close to normal as possible
- Reassure your child often that they are safe and you are there to help them
- Use simple, reassuring words: *"You are safe with me."*
- Understand that they may be angry or withdrawn and need loving support in those times
- Let your child know what is happening and what to expect at any appointments
- Listen to your child's needs

Parent script: *"Can you tell me what will happen in the first session so we are prepared?"*



Local therapeutic services

The services in the previous chapter (SASH, WestCASA) also offer therapeutic support. The service below is specific to children who have experienced family violence.

GenWest

GenWest offers counselling and therapeutic groups to children and young people who have witnessed or experienced family violence. This service is available to people aged 0 to 18 years who live in Melbourne's west.

Phone: 1800 436 937

Website: genwest.org.au



GenWest and Body Safety Australia recognise that the land on which we work and provide our services always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We proudly acknowledge the First Nations communities across Naarm, Melbourne's west, the Wurundjeri and Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge their rich diversity, cultures, histories and knowledges, and the deep contribution they make to the life of this region.

We acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonisation, as well as the strength and resilience of First Nations people, and express solidarity with the ongoing struggle for land rights, self determination, sovereignty, and recognition of past injustices.