

# What is child sexual abuse?

**Child sexual abuse is when an adult, child or young person uses their age, size, authority, power, or position of trust to involve a child in sexual activity or behaviours.**

Sexual abuse occurs when a person uses power, force or authority to involve a child or young person or adult in any form of unwanted or illegal sexual activity. This can involve touching or no contact at all. This may take the form of taking sexual explicit photographs or videos of children, forcing children to watch or take part in sexual acts and forcing or coercing children to have sex or engage in sexual acts with other children or adults.

Sexually abusive behaviours can include the fondling of genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger or any other object, fondling of breasts, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and exposing the child to or involving the child in pornography.

## Adults with no familial relationship to the child

Any sexual behaviour between a child under the age of consent and an adult is abusive (the age of consent is 16 years in most Australian states). Therefore, in Australia, consensual sexual activity between a 18 year old and a 15 year old is considered abusive, while the same activity between a 20 year old and a 17 year old is not considered abusive.

## Family members of the child

Any sexual behaviour between a child and an adult family member is abusive. The concepts of consent, equality and coercion are inapplicable in instances of intra-familial abuse.

## Adults in a position of power or authority over the child

Sexual abuse occurs when there is any sexual behaviour between a child and an adult in a position of power or authority over them (e.g., a teacher). The age of consent laws are inapplicable in such instances due to the strong imbalance of power that exists between children and authority figure, as well as the breaching of both personal and public trust that occurs when professional boundaries are violated.

## Adolescent or child perpetrators

Sexual abuse is indicated when there is non-consensual sexual activity between a child and another child or adolescent who - due to their age or stage of development - is in a position of power, trust or responsibility over the victim. For example, any sexual activity between a 12 year old and a 15 year old would be considered abusive, as the age difference between the two children leads not only to marked developmental differences, but also disparities in their levels of power and responsibility within their relationship. Another example of abuse due to an imbalance of power would be sexual activity between two 15 year olds, where one suffers an intellectual disability that impairs their ability to understand the behaviours that they are engaging in. Normal sexual exploration between consenting adolescents at a similar developmental level is not considered sexual abuse.

## Support Services

If you require further information about child abuse, and what to do if you have concerns about a child, please call Child Wise's toll-free National Child Abuse Helpline on **1800 99 10 99**.

If a child discloses to you that they are being abused or you have concerns that a child is at risk, please contact your state Child Protection department. If a child is in life-threatening danger, call the Police immediately on **000**.