

Safe Church Training

Foundations

Participant's Guide

Learning Objectives

- The definitions of child abuse and neglect
- Recognising indicators of abuse, neglect and boundary violations
- Your role in responding to abuse and neglect

This course is part two of our Safe Church training suite and builds on the knowledge you gained in the Safe Church Introduction module.

By completing this course, you will gain an understanding of:

- **The definitions of child abuse and neglect**
- **Recognising indicators of abuse, neglect and boundary violations, and**
- **Your role in responding to abuse and neglect.**

WARNING!

It is important that you are safe and seek support if you need it by speaking with someone you trust, your ministry agent, or presbytery minister.

In this learning material, you will be exploring topics that talk about abuse, child sexual abuse and exploitation. You may find some of the information unsettling, challenging, confronting or distressing.

- It may trigger stories and events for you.
- It may cause memory flashbacks.
- It may make you revisit memories.
- It may remind you of things that you, your family or friends have experienced.
- It is recognised that you may have your own story.

It is important that you are safe and seek support if you need it by speaking with someone you trust, your ministry agent, or presbytery minister.



Abuse and harm

Abuse and Harm



Abuse = Action

- Physical
- Emotional
- Sexual
- Neglect



Harm = Impact

- Physical
- Emotional
- Psychological

Let's clarify the relationship between abuse and harm.

For the purpose of this training, we will use the definition of abusive action, which is: **an incident of abuse that results in harm to a young or vulnerable person.**

- Abuse is the action taking place.
- Harm is the resulting impact of that action.

Abuse could include:

- Physical Abuse – such as hitting or punching
- Emotional abuse – such as rejection; hostility or witnessing violence
- Sexual abuse can include penetration; sexual exploitation or exposure to pornography; and
- Neglect could be failure to attend to medical needs; poor hygiene; poor nutrition or inadequate supervision

Harm is the resulting impact of the action, which could be:

- Physical – such as bruising; fractures or other injuries
- Emotional – depression; poor self-esteem; self-harm or anxiety; or
- Psychological – developmental delays; disorganised attachment or neurological changes.



Types of abuse and neglect

The term abuse refers to acts or omissions which puts the health, welfare or safety of a young or vulnerable person at risk. It may be perpetrated against children by adults or by other children.

Abuse can take many different forms, and often falls into multiple categories:

- **Physical abuse** is the non-accidental use of physical force against another individual which results in harm. Intention to harm is not relevant (e.g. physical punishment resulting in bruising would be considered physical abuse).
- **Emotional abuse** refers to a pattern of behaviour that intentionally undermines, manipulates, or controls another person's emotions, thoughts, beliefs, or actions. It involves a sustained and systematic use of tactics to diminish an individual's sense of self-worth, autonomy, and well-being, often causing significant emotional distress.
- **Neglect** is the failure by a parent or caregiver to provide a young or vulnerable person with the conditions that are culturally accepted in a society as being essential for physical and emotional development and wellbeing. Neglect includes the non-provision of therapeutic intervention; for example, speech therapy, occupational therapy or counselling.

- **Financial abuse** refers to a form of domestic or interpersonal abuse where one individual exerts control over another person's financial resources, assets, or financial decision-making to gain power and control over them.
- **Sexual abuse** refers to any form of unwanted or non-consensual sexual activity or behaviour that is forced upon an individual against their will or without their consent.

In the case of children, sexual abuse is:

*"Any act which exposes a child to, or involves a child in, sexual processes beyond his or her understanding or contrary to accepted community standards. Sexually abusive behaviours can include the fondling of genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger or other object, fondling of breasts, voyeurism, exhibitionism, and exposing the child to pornography or involving the child in child sexual abuse material (child pornography). It includes child grooming, which refers to actions 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 a child."*³

In the circumstance where a young person is between 16 and 18 and above the age of consent, it remains sexually abusive for a person in a position of authority, such as a ministry agent or church council member to commence a sexual or romantic relationship with the young person.

- **Social abuse** refers to a deliberate act of isolating an individual or group of individuals from social interactions and relationships as a form of mistreatment or harm. It involves intentionally cutting off someone's access to social support networks, limiting their opportunities for connection, and depriving them of meaningful human interaction.
- **Spiritual abuse** refers to the misuse or manipulation of religious or spiritual beliefs, practices, or teachings to control, manipulate, or harm individuals or groups. It occurs when someone in a position of power, such as a religious leader, uses their authority to exploit and exert control over others, often in the name of spirituality or religious doctrine.

Spiritual abuse can take many forms:

- Through enforcing one theological position or interpretation of scripture and denying all others.

- By gagging debate and questions or alternatively, engaging in persistent debate.
- Through excessively labelling images of sin and evil rather than focusing on the freedom and good news of Jesus Christ.
- By focusing on fear and guilt instead of love and forgiveness.
- Any kind of behaviour management that misuses scripture, prayer, ritual or any other spiritual activity.
- Misusing scripture to facilitate or justify subjecting a person to physical, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect.
- Using a position of authority as a representative of the church to coerce another person to act or behave in a way which gratifies or otherwise meets the needs of the person in authority.

The behavioural expectations or boundaries that accompany safe church act to enhance a young or vulnerable person's positive relationship with God as a God of grace, love, acceptance, trust and forgiveness.

These boundaries require us to avoid language and actions which create fear, ongoing guilt and self-loathing or self-blame.

As an example, Sunday School teachings should align with the theology of the church and should be approved by the church council.

- **Domestic and family violence** occurs when a family member, partner or ex-partner, or other household member attempts to physically or psychologically dominate the other. It often relates to physical and / or emotional abuse of children.

Domestic and family violence can include:

- ongoing patterns of behaviour aimed at controlling another household member.
- behavioural tactics that exercise power and control over another individual.

Domestic and family violence:

- can be criminal and non-criminal.
- can involve physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse.
- can involve threats to harm pets or to harm themselves.
- does not need to contain an element of physical violence or aggression to be considered domestic and family violence.

Pause and reflect



- What might you notice about the behaviour or appearance of someone who's been abused that would raise concern?

Indicators of abuse



Children that are being sexually abused may not directly disclose the abuse to another adult. Children may not even identify the behaviour as being abusive.

Instead, behaviour displayed by the child, comments made by the child or other factors may indicate the child is being exposed to sexual abuse.

We know from research that in the overwhelming majority of cases, children do not lie or exaggerate about their experiences of sexual abuse. In fact, children are more likely to minimise their history of abuse to protect the perpetrator as this will often be someone close to them.

Grooming



Grooming refers to actions deliberately undertaken with the aim of befriending and establishing an emotional connection with a young or vulnerable person, to lower their inhibitions in preparation for sexual activity with a young or vulnerable person. Parents and other adults are also groomed by the perpetrator to create a situation where they can sexually offend against the young or vulnerable person.

Grooming is a criminal offence in Queensland!

Sometimes people may make errors in judgment, forget themselves, become too familiar and cross boundaries without intending to do harm to others. At other times people are well-practiced at crossing boundaries in order to exploit other people. Both types of crossing boundaries are not acceptable here.

Indicators of Grooming:

Grooming behaviour is deceptive in its nature. It is designed to be difficult to detect or distinguish from other types of behaviour. Identifying grooming behaviour is made more difficult by the fact that individual acts of grooming may not be illegal on their own. This is why adhering to the expected standards of conduct is so important. It is more likely that the individual acts of grooming will be a breach of the conduct we expect or a boundary violation.

Examples of grooming behaviour by the perpetrator may include:

- Persistent breaking of 'minor' rules about conduct and interaction
- Persistent and excessing physical contact with children
- Encouraging others to breach conduct
- Singling individual children out for gifts or rewards
- Having an obvious 'favourite' child who receives preferential treatment
- Becoming too involved with specific families beyond what is reasonable

Examples of possible indicators in children may include:

- Reluctance to be near a particular adult
- Fear, dislike or discomfort towards a particular adult
- Having unexplained gifts, particularly gifts of high value
- Frequent vague or implausible health complaints e.g. headaches and tummy aches
- Displaying harmful or problematic sexual behaviour

The examples include potential warning signs that a child is being groomed for sexual abuse. However, abuse cannot be assumed solely based on the presence of one or even several of these signs as there can be other reasons for the presence of these indicators, such as a change in the home environment, moving to a new house or the passing of a family member. So, you should be observant of these indicators and act on your concerns, but you do not need to make judgement that the child is experiencing abuse.

Historical context of sexual abuse in churches



The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has provided indisputable evidence of abuse in agencies, schools, congregations and associated activities of the Uniting Church in Australia and over 3400 other institutions. This information was not wholly unknown up until that point though. There have been other Commissions and Inquiries which have found this evidence before.

It is important for us to stop and reflect on the shortcomings of the Church and individuals within the Church that knew about or were told about abuse and did not act in the best interests of the children and young people that were being harmed. By doing this, we can recognise that environments such as ours contain inherent risks and we are only able to mitigate the risks which we have first recognised as being present.

In response to these facts, then Assembly President Stuart McMillan, apologised for these events and made a commitment to prevent other people from experiencing the same abuse. He said:

“On behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia I sincerely apologise to all children in our care who suffered sexual abuse, of any kind, in our church, whether it happened since union of 1977 or before that in our predecessor churches.

We are, and I am, deeply sorry that we didn't protect and care in accordance with our Christian values for those children.

I want to acknowledge the impact that it's had in the lives of those young people and to say I am truly sorry.

Our commitment to you is that we will seek to make amends and to ensure that others don't suffer in the same way you have.

As church leaders we pledge that we will continue to understand and to implement the lessons that we've learnt through this Royal Commission and remain open to the insights of survivors and professionals.

We pledge to continuously seek improvement, to regularly renew our policies and our practices in all parts of our church, and to ensure that they reflect the best quality for care, service and support of children.

This is our commitment to you.”



Acceptable behaviours

Maintaining boundaries



We have previously looked at the [Statement of Personal Commitment](#), which is essentially a list of acceptable behaviours, or boundaries that guide how we interact with each other and an outline of what is acceptable and what is not. We've decided that these boundaries are necessary because there are people in society that, given the chance, would intentionally cause harm to young and vulnerable people. Our environments provide those people with access to young and vulnerable people, and we prevent these people from causing harm through adherence to our culture and our rules. These boundaries make the Church, its members, and its young and vulnerable people less vulnerable to abuse and empowers each member to safeguard the boundaries of safe church and to enable shared guardianship.

It is important to acknowledge that there is a power imbalance in relationships between adults and young or vulnerable people, and in relationships with Ministry Agents or other Church members. This imbalance can make it seem difficult or impossible for a young or vulnerable person to speak up about being exposed to behaviour which is not acceptable and why shared guardianship is important.

A **boundary violation** is inappropriate behaviour which falls outside the stated accepted behaviours outlined in the [Statement of Personal Commitment](#). Safe Church provides the basis for boundary violations to be interrupted by anyone who observes them. All instances of boundary violations must be interrupted immediately by an appropriate adult so that people can interact in a safe way.



Physical boundaries

Being aware of the imbalance of power that exists in relationships between adults and young or vulnerable people is part of building appropriate, transparent and accountable relationships. That awareness leads to the expectation that appropriate physical contact would be maintained by everyone. Our ['Safe Church Policy'](#) tells us that physical contact is ok if it is: **appropriate, initiated by the young or vulnerable person, and in full view.**

Maintaining the boundaries of safe church means that we would refrain from the use of physical restraint unless in circumstances where a participant is in danger and it is deemed reasonable and necessary in order to prevent an accident or injury or stop a fight or bullying behaviour. Leadership ratios are another protection, both to the participant and the leaders. We must ensure a minimum of two leaders for all activities with children – including transportation. This allows one leader to deal with any incident that may arise while the other leader can continue supervision of the rest of the group. Where groups are mixed gender, it is important that the leadership is also mixed gender. More detail about leadership ratios, and planning requirements is given in the process documents and tools.

Emotional boundaries

We want people to learn about God and grow in their faith; if they don't feel safe this won't happen. Maintaining safe emotional environments is a big part of this. Courtesies such as using people's name show respect and value for the individual.

Group rules are helpful to let members know what is and is not acceptable. This can be done in a respectful way and is a great opportunity to include young and vulnerable people in decision making that affects them by having them set the group rules and only providing guidance and prompts if they are needed.

Rewarding the behaviour you want to see repeated, or praise and encouragement are helpful ways to reinforce positive behaviour and diversions can help when young and vulnerable people are displaying negative behaviour.

Sometimes, it may be necessary to revisit the group rules, or introduce new rules if a problem emerges. Know your group and the participants in the group, respect their rights and cater to their abilities allowing self-paced participation. Avoid activities that may cause embarrassment, show disrespect or cause isolation.

Spiritual boundaries

Earlier in this module, we defined and spoke about spiritual abuse. We said that "Spiritual abuse refers to a situation in which a person misuses their power, leadership or influence to control, coerce or manipulate a young or vulnerable person for seemingly religious purposes. It includes intentional and unwitting abuse in both formal and casual situations. Spiritual abuse includes enticements, threats of rejection, evoking fear, emotional appeals, accusations of demon possession and involving a young or vulnerable person in spiritual activity against their will." (Scripture Union, New Zealand, 2005).

The boundaries that are put in place when creating a safe church act to enhance a young or vulnerable person's positive relationship with God as a God of grace, love, acceptance, trust and forgiveness. These boundaries require us to avoid language and actions which create fear, ongoing guilt, and self-loathing or self-blame. When involved in a teaching role (e.g. Sunday

School), we are to adhere to the use of teaching materials which have been approved by the church council and remain within the theology of the church. On matters concerning spiritual abuse, seek guidance from your minister, key pastoral leader or presbytery minister.

Behavioural boundaries

Our actions as leaders and helpers impact on the impressions other people particularly children – develop about Christianity. When children see that we can work together, follow the rules, and show respect, they are more likely to feel safe to participate in activities, and learn about God.

The behavioural boundaries in our policy outline that helpers and leaders should:

- Be sober, and refrain from consumption of harmful drugs, alcohol and cigarettes while working with children
- Maintain group behaviour through positive strategies such as re-stating behavioural expectations and consequences, use of diversion techniques, supervised time-out, and providing opportunities to discuss issues and problems
- Refrain from using any type of technology in a way which is inappropriate or explicit such as pornographic material or to harass, bully or exploit other people
- Take, store and use images of children ONLY as outlined in the written permissions given by parents and NEVER for personal use
- If communicating directly with children and young people about Church programs, parents should be included in that communication.

Pause and reflect



Can you think of some examples of:

- Appropriate touch
- Violations of spiritual boundaries
- How you might respond if you witnessed a boundary violation

Take a few minutes to reflect on the boundaries we have just listed.

Can you think of some examples of:

- Appropriate touch
- Violations of spiritual boundaries
- How you might respond if you witnessed a boundary violation

How to respond to boundary violations



- Stop! We don't do that here, please don't do it again
- It's the policy of the church
- Report

A boundary violation is defined as inappropriate behaviour which falls outside the stated accepted behaviours outlined in the ['Safe Church Policy'](#). The policy provides the process for boundary violations to be interrupted by anyone who observes them. All instances of boundary violations must be interrupted immediately so that people can interact in a safe way.

There should be no inference or assumption made about the motives of the individual who has violated a boundary. Any person observing a boundary violation committed by any person of any age, gender or status should:

- Instruct the boundary violator to stop and ask them not to engage in the behaviour again: **"Stop! We don't do that here, please don't do it again"**
- If challenged, the observer should refer to the policy, and that the behaviour is not within the acceptable behaviours of safe church **"it's the policy of the church"**
- If you become aware of any kind of concerning behaviour, raise it with your ministry agent (or someone else within the church that you are comfortable talking to) as soon as possible

When three boundary violations have occurred, grooming behaviour is suspected. Grooming behaviour, by its definition is difficult to distinguish from normal behaviours of everyday people. When grooming occurs, normal behaviours are hijacked. So interrupting a boundary violation must be done without assuming the motives of the person.

Interrupting someone to ask them to stop what they are doing can be confronting. However, challenging problematic behaviour needs to be normalised. It is not a reflection of judgement on the person and should not be taken as offence.

Pause and reflect



- What might you say to someone who is violating a boundary?
- Is there anything you need to change to maintain boundaries?

Take a moment to think about these questions:

- What might you say to someone who is violating a boundary?
- Is there anything that you recognise that you might need to change about your own behaviour to maintain appropriate boundaries?

How to respond to a disclosure



When people receive information about child abuse, they are most likely feeling unprepared, and it may come as a shock.

This situation could be overwhelming, and your brain may trigger the fight, flight or freeze responses.

Take a moment to think about what might be going through your mind if you've just become aware of child abuse...

We've used the acronym B.C.A.L.M. to help in the immediacy of a disclosure. This acronym also forms part of the ['Mandatory Reporting Process for Lay Workers'](#).

Breathe

Using a quick calming technique can help you engage your thinking brain. Suggest the person 'take a deep breath' and count for them as they breathe in and out a few times.

Calm

the person It's important that you stay focused on the person and their story. It might be a child, or it may be an adult telling you about abuse that is currently happening or may have happened to them when they were a child. Sometimes people live with this trauma for many years before telling. The words you use will have a profound and lasting impact on the person.

Use words like:

- You've done the right thing by telling me.
- I'm glad you told me.
- I believe you.
- It wasn't your fault.

Assess whether there is any immediate or imminent danger

If there is, **call 000** and ask for police to attend. It may take a little time to decide whether there is immediate danger but try to do this as soon as you can. You may also need to seek support from another leader or your ministry agent to ensure the physical safety of yourself and the person making the disclosure.

What are some words you might use early in the conversation to help assess this?

Let the person know what your obligations are

Explain that you have a responsibility to report child abuse concerns and allegations.

With a child, you could use words like:

- I will need to tell someone about this so that we can get some help for you.
- I'm going to have to make a report.

With an adult, you might say something like:

- I just want to let you know that I have obligations to report child abuse if I know about it.

If you think an adult survivor is about to disclose abuse, they suffered as a child, you might say something like:

- I'm not sure if I'm on track or not, but I just want to let you know that if you're about to tell me about child abuse, I'd encourage you to report it to the authorities, and you should know that I have reporting obligations.

Can you think of words you would use to gently and tactfully interrupt them as soon as you suspect the conversation is heading in that direction? Maybe write some down and practice with a trusted colleague.

Make a report

Make a report immediately. Make a note of your concerns and report them to your ministry agent straight away, respecting the privacy and dignity of all parties. You may be required to make a report to the statutory authorities in some cases. Keep a copy of your notes and who you've spoken with in a secure location. If the concern is about your ministry agent or their family member, report your concern to your presbytery chairperson. If your concern is about your presbytery chairperson or their family member, report your concern to the Synod. You may also report your concerns online.

Mandatory reporting




In a culture of shared guardianship, adults and people in positions of responsibility should feel comfortable and capable of raising concerns about the wellbeing of young and vulnerable people.

This is precisely what Safe Church aims to achieve.

The [‘Mandatory Reporting Process for Lay Workers’](#) provides you with information to meet your obligations to report your concerns about boundary violations, knowledge or suspicion of grooming or abuse to the Ministry Agent.

Lay Workers are expected to:

- Always put safety first - **call 000** and ask for police to attend if you feel there is immediate danger of a life-threatening situation.
- Always report to your church council chair if you have suspicions of knowledge that a young or vulnerable person is being or has been neglected, or physically, emotionally or sexually abused or groomed for sexual abuse.
- Always report concerns to your Presbytery Chair if you suspect a ministry agent or church council member has engaged in:
 - Spiritual abuse
 - Boundary violations
 - Bullying
 - Criminal misconduct



Always **call 000** if someone is in
immediate danger or life-threatening
danger!



Assessment

Please complete the assessment sheet provided for each participant. You will need to keep these with your records to show that participants completed the assessment requirements.



Congratulations, you have now completed the Safe Church Foundations training.

Please take a minute to provide some feedback on this training (*Use the Quick Feedback facilitator guide for this activity*)