




Wise up  
to sexual abuse

.....  
A guide for parents  
and carers.



This booklet contains some sexually explicit material not appropriate for reading by young children.

**Child Wise is a charity protecting children's futures.**

**The Wise Up program aims to educate Australians to become aware of the signs of child sexual abuse in order to:**

- **Identify risky situations**
- **Know how to respond to children's disclosures**
- **Know who to report concerns to**

The definition of a child as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is anyone under the age of 18. Child Wise uses this definition as the only consistent definition able to be applied to any child anywhere in the world.

# “Child abuse is a basic lack of respect for children.”

*The Hon Alistair Nicholson A.O, R.D.F, Q.C, 2005*

## Physical abuse

Physical abuse is the intentional or careless causing of physical harm including punching, beating, shaking, biting, burning or otherwise physically hurting a child.

This lack of care can negatively impact upon a child's overall development.

## Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse involves continuing behaviour by adults towards children, which includes verbal attacks, threats, rejection, isolation, belittling or name calling which erodes social competence or self-esteem over time.

## Domestic Violence

Domestic violence occurs when a family member, partner or ex partner, attempts to physically or psychologically dominate the other.

This is not always physical. The other forms of abuse can be just as painful and can include: emotional abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, threats of violence and revenge, property damage or social isolation.

Exposure to chaotic, controlling or violent environments (including family violence) is also an indicator of emotional abuse.

## Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse occurs when someone uses their power, force or authority to involve a child in sexual activity. There are many forms of child sexual abuse and these are described in more detail in this booklet.

## Neglect

Neglect is the failure to provide for a child's basic needs for food, shelter, supervision and physical and emotional care.

# What is child sexual abuse?

When confronted with a clear-cut case of child abuse or neglect, less than 50% of adults surveyed would take definite action to protect the child.

*(NAPCAN, 2009)*

31% of adults surveyed stated that they would not believe children's stories about being abused.

*(Australian Childhood Foundation 2006)*

**Child sexual abuse is always a crime. It is never the child's fault and the person abusing the child is ALWAYS 100% responsible.**

Types of child sexual abuse may include:

- Verbal/suggestive sexual comments
- Exhibitionism, e.g. 'flashing'
- Touching a child's genitals
- Involving or exposing a child to masturbation
- Oral sex
- Any form of penetration
- Showing a child pornographic images
- Taking photographs of a child for sexual purposes
- The viewing or downloading of sexualised images of children

**1 in 5 children will be subject to some form of unwanted sexual act/activity.**

*(Australian Institute of Criminology, 2000)*

**Some studies show that 1 in every 15 children will experience severe forms of sexual abuse involving penetration.**

*('Childhood Sexual Abuse: An Evidence Based Perspective' by David M. Fergusson and Paul Mullin: 1999 p.28.)*

## What are the impacts on children?

Child sexual abuse harms a child's ability to develop healthily, learn, enjoy feeling safe and reach their full potential.

Child sexual abuse has short, medium, and long term effects on the child's development, their relationships and future.

### Some of these impacts include feelings of:

- Isolation
- Self-loathing leading to self-harm
- Fear and anxiety
- Guilt and blame
- Lacking trust in self as well as others

## Why we need to prevent child sexual abuse

We know that the harm caused by child abuse is minimised when intervention takes place as early as possible. It is vital that those caring for children know how to recognise the signs of abuse, talk to children about their safety and know how to report abuse.

Children who are victims of sexual abuse may become vulnerable to repeated sexual abuse in the future.

# What to look for

**Children don't often immediately tell an adult they are being abused. There can be behavioural (and more rarely, physical) signs that a child has been sexually abused.**

They are more likely to show confusion or distress through their behaviour and play. They may indicate what's happening through tentative comments such as, "I don't like going there," "he/she does funny things when we go there," and so on.

## **Possible signs of child sexual abuse include:**

### **Sophisticated or unusual sexual behaviour or knowledge**

Children who have been sexually abused may demonstrate sexual behaviours beyond their age-appropriate level.

Because they have not understood their abusive experiences, children play them out in an attempt to understand them. Children's sexual play is discussed in more detail later in this booklet.

### **Significant change in level of performance at school**

Children who have been sexually abused can either increase their school performance in an attempt to shift focus or 'block out' their abusive experiences; or decrease their performance, due to a reduced sense of self-worth and difficulties concentrating.

### **Personal disclosure**

Many children do not speak up about sexual abuse, and may keep secrets into adulthood. However, children may discuss with an adult whom they trust about the abuse, and also may give subtle verbal hints that there is abuse occurring.

It is important to listen and enquire if they suggest that they are feeling unsafe. Sometimes younger children may not know what is happening to them is wrong, and may 'disclose' that abuse has taken place without realising the serious nature of what they are saying.

### **Storytelling and lies**

Some children may be prone to telling stories known not to be true. This may be to get attention or signal that they have a problem.

### **Isolation and relationship problems**

Sexual abuse can make a child feel they are different, affecting their sense of belonging. Children who have been sexually abused may be reluctant to play with their friends and may isolate themselves.

Abusive relationships can involve trading sexual acts for gifts or protection, and this can create confusion for the child in other relationships.

### **Self-harm**

Children may demonstrate behaviour which causes harm to themselves or others. This could include self-mutilation, head-banging, physical aggression, engaging in high risk behaviour and substance abuse.

### **Physical signs**

Child abuse is a traumatic experience and directly impacts upon a child's general health. Physical signs resulting from this trauma can include continuous or regular headaches, abdominal pain, problems with sleeping, bed wetting and nightmares.

To reduce the chances of getting caught, offenders are often careful to ensure no physical signs are evident. Such signs can include urinary tract infections, rashes, genital redness or bleeding, pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted infections.

# Who are the offenders?

People who sexually abuse children do not look different. There is no stereotype. They may be parents themselves or may be important and respected people in the community. They often like to spend time with children and are good at relating to children.

- Up to 95% of child sex offenders are male. They can be married and have families of their own, or be single.
- Up to six percent of reported offences in Australia are committed by females.
- Up to a third of offences are committed by adolescents.
- Most sexual offences are committed by men between the ages of 25-40 years.

**95% of children are sexually abused by someone they know and trust.**

*(NAPCAN, 2009)*

## Child sex offenders use many strategies to get close to children (known as grooming).

They:

- **ALWAYS plan their sexual abuse of children.** They will plan who to target, how they will get close to them and how to prevent the child from telling.
- Work hard to be liked and accepted.
- Isolate children or groups of children.
- Create opportunities to work with or be alone with children.
- Target vulnerable communities and families.
- Have frequent job and address changes to avoid detection.
- Create 'special' relationships with children and their families or carers.
- May spend a lot of time with children outside of their jobs/roles.
- Can set a child up as 'having a reputation' for lying or other behaviours to discredit them should they disclose abuse.

This list needs to be carefully interpreted to avoid over- or under-reaction.

# Grooming

'Grooming' allows child sex offenders to form 'special' or 'power-based' relationships with children. It is also used to maintain secrecy so the child will not tell. Grooming can take place over days, weeks or even years.

This process is designed to build the trust of the child and their family. It also creates opportunities for the abuse to occur.

## Some grooming techniques include:

- Buying children and adolescents things of value that they appreciate. These may include lollies, music devices or games, or alcohol and cigarettes.
- Paying special attention to a particular child and making the child feel 'special', or exploiting their vulnerabilities.

- Asking children to keep secrets from parents, siblings and friends. The secrets may not necessarily be sexual but may be used to 'test' a child to establish if they can keep a secret. Shared secrets help to build a child's feelings of 'being special'.

- Showing pornography to the child or sexualising the conversation.

- Touching. This may start as a game or appropriate physical touch and then gradually progress to sexualised touching and later to other forms of abuse.

This gradual progress to sexual touch can be used to 'test' the child's responses and make the child feel more comfortable.

- Using threats, bribes, emotional blackmail, and/or physical violence. Some common threats are to say that no one will believe them and that they will be removed from their family if they tell, or that people will blame them for the abuse.

# Concerning situations

- Where adults are involved with your child to a greater extent than you would expect in their role or relationship.
- Where your child is given gifts or taken on outings which are unexpected or unusual.
- Where an adult is interested in activities that allow for additional intimacy, i.e. overnight stays, swimming, time alone.
- Special relationships people form with your child that don't involve you and that you have limited knowledge of.
- Where your child may be keeping secrets or have built a relationship with a secret friend.
- Teachers and carers making contact with your child outside programs/school hours e.g. emails, mobile contact and Facebook.



**Always listen to your instincts. If an adult or situation that your child has come into contact with makes you feel uncomfortable, there may be a very good reason for you feeling this way.**

# Internet and Mobile Phone Safety

The Internet and mobile phones are used by child sex offenders to groom children by accessing information about them and their families; obtaining photos, and developing 'friendships' with children, with the intent of later facilitating sexual contact. These offenders could either be strangers to your child, or someone your child already knows.

So, be aware of your child's use of mobile phones and the Internet, and monitor:

- Who they are communicating with on the Internet.
- What details of their life they are describing and releasing to other people.
- New friendships or increasing secrecy about friends on the Internet.
- Prohibit the sending of photos that are sexualised/involving nudity or sexual acts of any kind, including to their peers.

## Grooming on the Internet

- Offenders pose as children and develop 'friendships' through the Internet and chatrooms. This can lead to invitations to meet them in person.
- Strategies used to groom online may include flattering the child, telling them they are mature, or engaging children in sexually explicit conversations.
- Offenders get children to send photographs or sexual images of themselves, or engage in sexual acts through the use of a webcam.

## Cyber-Bullying

Cyber-bullying is similar to other forms of bullying, however, occurs through the use of the Internet, email or mobile phones. It can be more damaging than other forms of bullying for the following reasons:

- It can be difficult to escape.
- It can occur 24/7, and even while the child is at home.
- Harmful and hurtful information can either be sent to or posted where other children can view the information instantaneously.
- Because the bully is hidden by the computer or phone, they often act in more extreme ways.
- Sometimes it can be difficult to identify who the bully is as they use false names and accounts.

## Sexting

Sexting refers to the act of sending sexually explicit messages, photos or videos, generally through the use of mobile phones. Sexting causes embarrassment both now and in the future, as these images cannot be controlled once they have been distributed either online or through mobile phones. These images can be spread rapidly and can also be used for bullying, stalking or sexual harassment. Young people may be committing a crime when taking,

receiving or forwarding sexual images of themselves or of other children/adolescents. Even if all participants are willing, these images can represent child pornography.

## How to protect your child online:

- Be familiar with the programs that your child is using online, and teach them how to 'block' and 'report' unwanted users and inappropriate content.
- Ensure your child knows how to make their details and photos private.
- Discuss openly with your child the risks associated with the Internet.
- Develop trusting relationships. Keep the lines of communication open so your child feels comfortable talking to you if something is worrying them.
- Install a content-filtering program
- Monitor Internet use, consider the location of the home computer and introduce time limits.
- When troubles arise, it is not necessarily advised to remove the phone or computer as this may prevent your child from discussing their concerns.

**For further resources on 'Internet and Mobile Phone Safety' see page 22 of this booklet.**

# Talking to Children about Personal Safety

**Talking to children about safety, their bodies and how to protect themselves from an early age is an important part of keeping them safe. Children who are confident, have good support networks and assertiveness skills are less likely to be targeted by child sex offenders. It is important to educate children from an early age about simple safety messages.**



Child Wise delivers a personal safety program called Wise Child, which teaches children about general safety and wellbeing, and abuse prevention skills. Wise Child teaches the following principles:

## 1

### **Listen to our bodies:**

Talk to children about their 'body signals' – also known as their 'early warning signs' – which let them know when they feel unsafe. These signs could include:

- Butterflies in their tummy
- Jelly legs
- Sweaty palms
- Goose bumps on their skin

Children have their own way of describing these body signals. It is their instincts telling them something may be unsafe in the situation they are in. They may require help to find the language to tell other people that they don't feel safe.

## 2

### **Touch and Assertiveness**

Teach your child that their body is their own, and that they can say 'no' to touch that makes them feel unsafe. Research shows that sex offenders are less likely to offend against a child that is assertive and says no to inappropriate touch.

## 3

### **Private Zones**

Children need to learn that parts of their bodies are private and need to be protected. For example, private parts are our mouths, and the ones that our bathers cover (bikinis for girls, underpants for boys)\*. Parents/carers need to explain to their children who may have permission to touch their body, including their private parts. This is done according to the child's age and developmental level. Children who know the correct names for their body parts are less likely to be tricked into sexual games, and are more easily able to raise concerns with a trusting adult.

## 4

### **Networks**

Discuss with your child who they might talk to if they don't feel safe. Help them identify at least five people inside and outside of the family. This is called a 'safety network' and should generally be led by your child's selection of people. Regularly review these people with your child and let this selection of people know that they are in your child's network.

Recognise that your child might not tell you at first when they feel unsafe. Generally, children try to protect their parents from distress and will sound out to other adults first. They may feel guilty or be scared of getting into trouble, which can be a result of the grooming process. The important message is for them to tell SOMEONE.

**For further information on Personal Safety, visit our website at [childwise.net](http://childwise.net)**

\*Adapted from [protectingkids.com.au](http://protectingkids.com.au)



## Sexual development in children

Sexual development is part of human development. All children will show a gradually increasing curiosity and interest in their and others' bodies and body functions, as a part of their overall sexual development.

### A child may wish to explore their sexual development by:

- Holding genitals/occasional masturbation.
- Playing games (e.g. mum and dad, doctor and nurse); enjoying 'being rude'.
- Kissing, cuddling or holding hands with peers.
- Engaging in sexual conversations/ jokes with peers.

These activities are normal and play an important part in children's development. It is expected that these behaviours occur in the context of safe, playful, peer-aged relationships. The behaviour is always mutual and forms a small part of a child's overall interests.

Children have the right to learn how to protect and respect their bodies. It is easier to talk to children about their bodies if you start at an early age, making sure to teach them the

names of all body parts, including the correct names for their penis, vagina, breasts and bottom.

Responding to a child's questions and talking to children about sex does not make them more interested in sex or more likely to engage in sexual behaviours. Children only retain information on a 'need to know' basis.

Child sex offenders generally do not target children who are confident, knowledgeable and assertive when it comes to protecting their bodies.

### Problematic sexual behaviour

Sexual play should be like any other experimental play. Therefore, it should always take place within the child's own peer group, i.e. those close in age and of similar intellectual ability. Sexual play outside of a child's peer group, such as with older or younger children, or children that the child does not normally play with, could be of concern.

- Generally there should never be more than a two-year age gap between children engaging in sexual play.
- Sexual play between children should be fun. Therefore, any forced, coerced or bribed play is concerning. This can be play that involves verbal or physical aggression, play that causes physical/emotional harm, or play associated with shame or guilt.

- Sexual activity with animals is highly concerning. This behaviour must be addressed immediately and may require professional intervention.

The following table highlights a sample of problematic sexual behaviours which, if witnessed, need to be responded to by seeking professional advice immediately.

Pre School: 0-4	Young School Age: 5-7	Latency/Preadolescence: 8-12
Preoccupation with sexual behaviour	Sophisticated sexual knowledge	Constant peeping/exposure of genitals
Constant rubbing of genitals	Constant touching or rubbing of genitals	Preoccupation with masturbation
Simulating sexual activity	Forcing/bribing children to play sexual games	Overly interested in pornography
Highly sexualised language/ behaviour	Preoccupation with sexual jokes and/or conversations	Using technology to put themselves or others at risk e.g. disclosing personal details online
Public masturbation	Chronic and/or public masturbation	Simulated/attempted sexual activity with peers
Touching/grabbing others' genitals	Forced exposure of others' genitals	Simulated/attempted sexual activity with siblings
Attempting oral sex	Threats/violence associated with sexual activity	Explicit threats, texts and/or violence associated with sexual activity
Inserting objects in genitals, anus of self and/or others	Inserting objects in genitals, anus of self and/or others	Involving much younger children in sexual activity
Involving animals in sexual activity	Involving animals in sexual activity	Penetration of others; children/animals

**Remember:** Do not over or under react to children's sexual behaviour. Any response or intervention to children's sexual behaviour should avoid punishment and blame.

You can seek assistance from Child Wise, your local sexual assault centre or children's hospital, if you need help to determine the appropriateness of sexual play.

# Responding to children's disclosures

Child sex offenders keep children silent by making them feel responsible for the sexual abuse. Children often believe they will 'be in trouble' or not be believed if they tell someone about sexual abuse.

Depending on the types of tricks or threats used to silence a child, they may be feeling:

- **Scared** about getting the offending person into trouble.
- **Guilty** that they are to blame for the abuse.
- **Ashamed** that they have been abused.
- **Angry** that they have been abused and not protected.
- **Powerless** to change their situation.
- **Confused** about the consequences of telling.

## Show your care and concern:

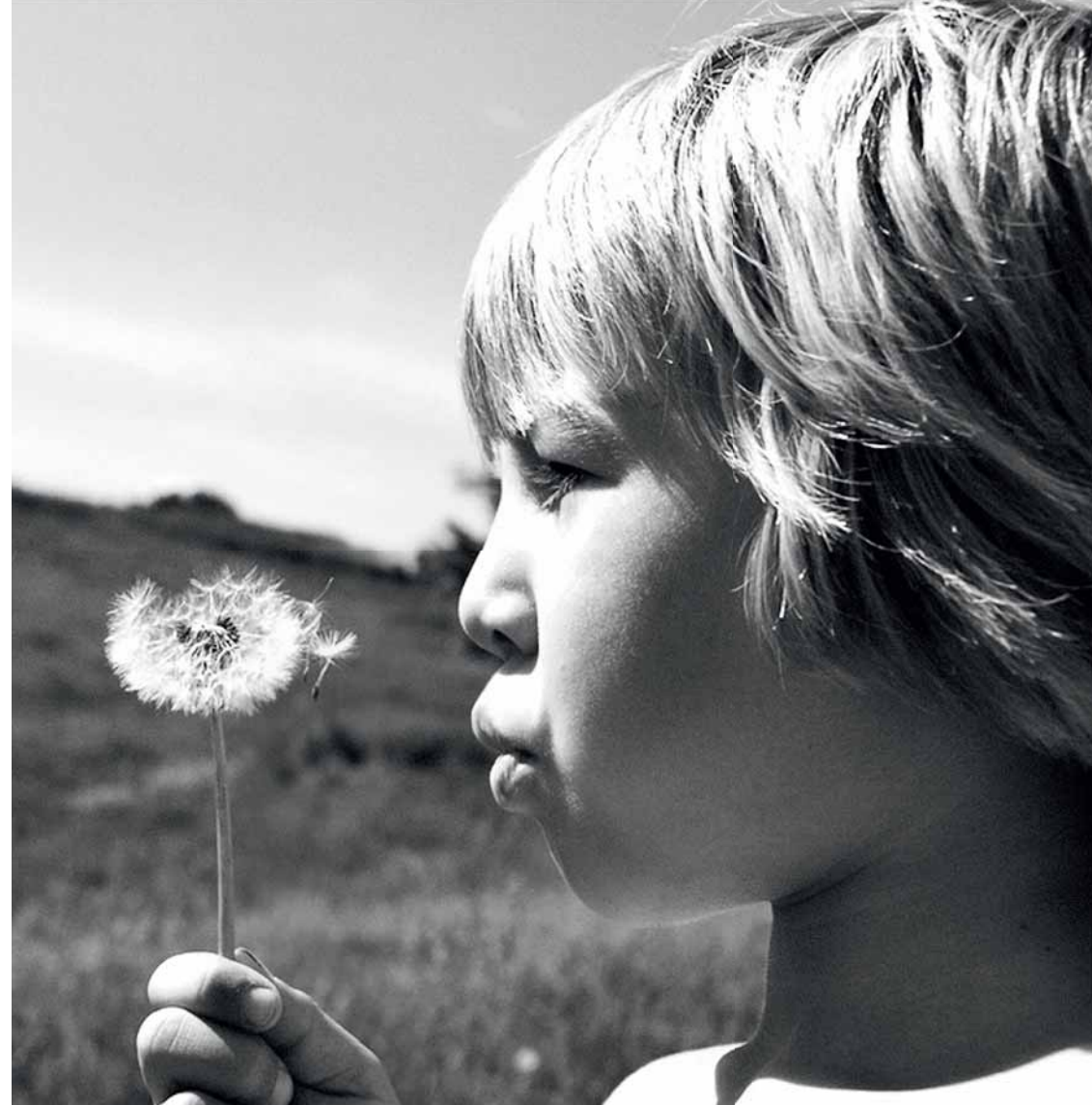
How we respond to children telling us about sexual abuse can be an important factor in how much they are affected by the abuse in the long term. The following actions by adults are known to be helpful for children in these situations:

### Do:

- Stay calm and in control of your feelings.
- Listen to the child. Let them tell you in their own words.
- Tell the child you believe them.
- Tell the child it is not their fault and that they are not responsible for their abuse.
- Tell the child they did the right thing by telling you.
- Let the child know what will happen next.

### Do not:

- Make promises you cannot keep, such as promising the child that you won't tell anyone. To make sure they are safe, you will most certainly have to involve other people.
- Make predictions about outcomes.
- Show overt anger towards the perpetrator or family members.
- Become overly emotional or anxious.
- Push the child into giving you details of the abuse.



# Who to report concerns to

**You need to speak to a professional about your concerns, but first ask yourself the following questions:**

1. Is the child safe now?
2. Do they need immediate medical attention?

Child sexual abuse involving the child's parents or caregivers needs to be reported to the child protection and/or police service in your State or Territory, so that an investigation is undertaken and a safety plan is constructed for the child.

For the relevant child protection service in your state, refer to our Self Help Guide at [childwise.net](http://childwise.net)

If the sexual abuse involves a person outside of the family home, the parents will need to be informed immediately. For further support and referral information, you can contact Child Wise anonymously if you prefer, on **1800 99 10 99** for the appropriate services in your area.

If you work in an organisation responsible for children, ensure you are familiar with your Child Protection Policy and/or reporting procedures.

# Keeping children safe when they are not with you

When choosing childcare providers (including babysitters and sport coaches) it is important that your child remains safe from all forms of danger and harm. Childcare organisations need to be equipped to be able to provide a child-safe environment.

A child-safe environment is one in which an organisation or service takes steps to meet the highest standards of child-safe practices for children in their care. These organisations have a moral and legal 'duty of care' to take action against any form of child abuse, neglect or bullying whilst the child is under their supervision.

## **A child-safe organisation will:**

- Be preventative rather than reacting to incidents after they occur.
- Have clear boundaries and guidelines set for the behaviour of all staff and children.
- Be open to people outside the organisation raising questions, comments and concerns.
- Have adequate staff supervision and training, including an awareness of child protection.

Feeling 'safe' is unique to each child. When inspecting an organisation it is important that both you and your child feel comfortable and safe in the environment. Encourage children to express their feelings, tell you when they feel safe or unsafe, and where possible, why.

Children need to feel cared for and valued both within and outside of the home environment through:

- How they are treated.
- How they are encouraged to find and use their voice, and reach their potential.

The safer children feel emotionally, physically and psychologically, the greater the chance they will tell you if they feel uncomfortable or if they are being mistreated at the organisation or at home.

**For more information regarding child-safe organisations, refer to the Child Wise "Keeping Your Children Safe" publication available to download at: [childwise.net/resources/online\\_publications.php](http://childwise.net/resources/online_publications.php)**

# Child Wise National Child Abuse Helpline

If you need advice on how to keep your child safe, have concerns that a child is being abused, or have noticed suspicious behaviours of an adult, contact Child Wise's confidential and anonymous toll-free National Child Abuse Helpline.

You can also contact us about incidences of child pornography and travelling child sex offenders.

Child Wise also provides advice for parents who are seeking child-safe facilities or hotels while they are travelling.

You can also contact us to discuss the content and themes of this booklet in more detail anonymously if you prefer.

The following short list of contacts can assist you:

## **Australian Federal Police**

02 6223 3000  
afp.gov.au

## **Kids Helpline**

1800 551 800  
kidshelp.com.au

## **Life Line**

13 11 14

## **Parentline**

13 22 89

## **Child Protection Crisis Line**

13 12 78

**Contact our Helpline on  
1800 99 10 99 or email  
helpline@childwise.net**

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Creative by [helloimvenus.com](http://helloimvenus.com)

## Where to go for help on Internet and Mobile Phone Safety:

### **Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA)**

acma.gov.au

### **Cybersmart Online Help**

cybersmart.gov.au or  
cybersafety@acma.gov.au  
Tel: 1800 880 176

### **AFP Child Protection Operations Team – Online Child Sex Exploitation**

afp.gov.au/policing /  
child-protection-operations.aspx

### **Think U Know**

thinkuknow.org.au

If there is a threat to your child's safety, contact your local police on 000.



## Who is Child Wise

Child Wise is Australia's leading international child protection charity. At Child Wise, we know that the biggest threat to children's futures is abuse. It destroys lives. This is why we are dedicated to protecting children from abuse and exploitation in Australia, Asia and the Pacific.

Our programs seek to prevent child abuse by providing greater awareness and understanding, as well as providing the tools and strategies for individuals, organisations and communities to address these issues.

We need help so we can continue to provide direct support to victims and families of child abuse. Through counselling, advocacy, community education, research and training, we can prevent child abuse. Make a tax deductible donation now at **[childwise.net](http://childwise.net)** or phone **1800 99 10 99** and help us protect children's futures.