

Yarning Up

About Child Sexual Abuse



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A Guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parents and Carers.

This booklet has been written to help Aboriginal parents and carers of Aboriginal children protect and help them keep children within their care safe. Before colonisation, Aboriginal people had sophisticated childrearing practices which meant that there was a shared responsibility across the Aboriginal community for children who were generally safe and happy. Communities where children learned the customs passed on by generations of their people; they learnt of their lore; of men's business or of women's business. The passing on of this knowledge and skills meant that when they became parents, they too would know how to protect their children and made sure that their children grew up safe.

'There is also an introduced culture of sexual abuse of children with sophisticated ways of preying on the most vulnerable.'

Invasion and the last two hundred years of colonisation have changed that and now too often our children may be growing up unsafe and unhappy. Think about your own time as a child growing up. Chances are you had times of not feeling safe or of not being happy. For many of our Aboriginal families the pattern of safety and happiness that was so much a part of how our ancestors lived has now been replaced by a learned culture of abuse and sadness. There is also an introduced culture of sexual abuse of children with sophisticated ways of preying on the most vulnerable. While not all our children are at risk of abuse nor are they all exposed to perpetrators of abuse, it is important that we, prevent abuse before it happens. Also, if abuse has occurred that we as parents and carers, are informed about some of the signs of abuse, so we can help make sure that Aboriginal children are safe and take steps to stop any abuse that is happening to children in our community.



Artwork by: Emma Bamblett

Clan: Yorta Yorta/ Wemba Wemba

Description of artwork: This painting represents the importance of community protecting children and keeping them safe. The red lines represent the strength and resilience of the community against abuse towards children. The blue water represents the voice of the community and knowledge of culture passing through families and community. The children within the yellow streams represent the unity and connectedness with each other and their culture. The footprints within the purple sands represents each child's journey through healing and building strength within.

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There are four different forms of child abuse:

We know we can't go back to how things were before colonisation, but we can learn more about the impact of child abuse on our children and how to protect them from all forms of child abuse.



Physical Abuse:

Where a person means to hurt a child by punching, beating, flogging, shaking, biting or burning them. Sometimes a child is hurt more than the person intends, for example when a parent is really angry and hits a child harder than they mean to and leaves bruises or welts on the child. Parents sometimes shake their baby in frustration when they won't stop crying, not realising the damage they may do to the baby. This can seriously hurt a baby, and could cause brain damage or even kill the baby.

Emotional Abuse

Where adults say things to children that make them feel bad, mad or sad, feel threatened, feel rejected and cause the child to have low self esteem. Some examples of emotional abuse are: being told you're no good, useless or worthless; not being given love or affection; being left on your own or locked up alone (often as punishment), not being allowed to have friends; seeing or hearing parents or adults in the home fighting or arguing (family violence).

Neglect:

Where a child is hurt because their parent or carer doesn't give them what they need in the way of food, nurturing, a home, physical and emotional care. Some examples of neglect are: not taking the child to the doctor or hospital when they are sick or hurt, ignoring a child when they are upset and needing a hug or telling them they are loved and cared about, not sending children to school, children often going without breakfast or lunch.

Sexual Abuse:

Where an adult or older child does sexual things to a child or gets a child to do sexual things to them or someone else or expose them to explicit sexual activity or images.

We know that talking about this topic is hard and many people often feel ashamed when they do. In this booklet we will be giving you information about sexual abuse and how to get help if you think a child in your community is at risk of being abused or is being abused.

You might have heard about the idea of a “Shame Mat”, which is when we need to talk about hard stuff that makes us feel shame, we leave our shame on the mat at the door, so we are able to talk about these important things. We want to invite you all to leave your shame at the door and read on and learn about how you as parents or carers can protect our children. We know that this can be a scary thing to talk about because of what it might mean for you, your child and your family. As you leave your shame at the door, we ask you to find the courage and strength you have within to talk about this and protect your child and the children in your community.

Before we get into this, it’s important to think about how this information can make us feel. Some of us may have been sexually abused ourselves when we were children, and many of those who were abused still haven’t told anyone. That might be because it was so long ago; or we worry that no one will believe us; or that in some way, what happened might have been our fault or that it was a close relative and parents and/or carers and as a child you would not be believed. Another big fear we might have is that the punishment of the abuser might be more than we can handle. As children we just want the abuse to stop, we often have mixed feelings about the abuser. We might love this relative or friend of the family, but don’t like what the relative or family friend does to us when alone. Many of us were not sexually abused as children, but talking about it is still uncomfortable and hard to do. Knowing how the information might help us in understanding why we feel the way we do, will help us to read on and be able to use the information if we ever need to.

The most important thing to know about child sexual abuse is that sexual abuse of children is NEVER the child’s fault. It is ALWAYS the adult who is responsible.

Sexual abuse of children happens too often and most of the time, the adult doing the abusing is well known to the child. It can be an uncle, grandfather, stepfather, father, brother or cousin or a friend of the family. While we know men are more often the abusers, it is important to realise that women have also sexually abused children. If your child tells you they are not feeling ok when they are with Aunty or Nanny or their female cousins, LISTEN to them and do not assume everything is ok.



Words and Meanings

It is important that you can understand the meanings of the words that are used when we talk about sexual abuse. Some of these are:

Sexually Explicit: things that are obviously sexual can be words or pictures such as: nice knockers; hows about a bit; nice arse; or pornographic pictures – pictures of people having sex.

Genitals - private parts, Aboriginal words for private parts include: Penis, Pipi, Boobles. Vagina, Fanny, Bardie, Moocha.

Anus - Bottom or Backside, Moom, where kooni comes from.

Perpetrator - person who is doing the abusing. This word is used more often than offender, because using offender can be difficult if the person hasn’t gone to court etc.

Masturbation - tickling/exciting the private parts of a male or a female.

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Penetration - putting a penis, finger or other object into another person's vagina or anus. Oral penetration is where the penis is put into a person's mouth.

Pornography - sexually explicit pictures – people having sex

Ways children are sexually abused include:

- sexually explicit or suggestive comments
- exposing the genitals (flashing)
- exposing or involving a child in masturbation
- any form of penetration
- showing a child pornography
- taking photos of a child for sexual purposes (child pornography)
- looking at or downloading sexualised pictures of children on the computer.

How does sexual abuse hurt children?

There are lots of ways sexual abuse hurts children, probably the most damaging being the way it can make a child feel about themselves. They are often sad or angry and have a lot of trouble telling someone because they feel shame and they worry they will not be believed or will be blamed for the abuse and may be in trouble. This is especially the case when the abuser is a family member like a grandfather, uncle or father, or someone who is well known by the family like a teacher, mentor, coach or family friend. Children who are sexually abused often grow up not trusting adults and this can have long lasting effects on the relationships they make as adults. Too often, a child who has been abused in their childhood will form a relationship with an abusive partner who will go on and abuse the children in that person's life.

How will I know if it's happening to a child in my family or community?

There are signs you can be aware of that children may show. There are also things you can look for in the way an abuser will behave. This booklet has information about the possible signs children might show and information about how abusers behave to help you to know if this is happening to a child in your family or community. This can be quite tricky as there are no definite signs or behaviours that a child will show. Please remember that even if some of the signs listed here are being shown by a child you know it doesn't mean a child has been sexually abused. It is important not to panic or freak out but remain calm and find out more and maybe get someone who can help you and your child with this.

Possible signs of sexual abuse:

It's impossible to list all possible signs as children behave differently. However, some things to look out for include:

- Children who have more sexual knowledge or understanding than you would expect them to have at their age.
- Children involved in sexual play that shows detailed knowledge and acting out of sexually explicit behavior- if a child has been abused they will sometimes act out the abuse. This is often their way of trying to understand what has happened to them and sometimes they will do this with other children. We know children playing mummies and daddies is a normal childhood game, but if it involves obvious sexual activity between the children this should be something to talk with the child about. Remember some sexual play between children is normal.
- Children who are generally loud and overly active who become quiet, shy and withdrawn or children who are generally quiet and well behaved who become aggressive and always trying to get attention. Look for changes in how a child normally acts. Sometimes children will start bedwetting again, or they will want to have lots of baths because they might feel dirty from the abuse.
- If a child complains of a sore bottom or sore or itchy genitals, it is very important to take the child to a doctor to be checked out as this could be a sign of sexual abuse. Most children do not have physical signs, but if a child has blood on their underpants, they should be taken to the doctor for a checkup.

Information about Perpetrators:

Perpetrators of sexual abuse come from all walks of life, all cultures, and all socio economic and educational backgrounds. While there are differences in what they do and how they do it, all abusers follow the same pattern. By understanding this pattern you may be able to identify a perpetrator in your family or community.

Today parents and carers also need to be aware of internet and mobile phone safety. Abusers will use both the internet and mobile phones to get in contact with a child, learn about them, what they like and who is close to them in their family, and how the abuser can reach that child. Abusers often pretend to be the same age as the child and gain the child's trust because they think they are getting to know a new friend. They will easily tell the abuser things they would not tell them if they knew they were an adult.

It is important that you talk to your child and know what they are doing on the internet. Don't let your child use "their right to privacy" as a way to shut you out. Your job as a parent or carer to protect your child outweighs their right to privacy. This gets harder as your child gets older, but trust your gut feelings and work with your child to develop an open honest relationship.

How do I begin yarning with my child about safety?

This can feel weird at first, but it is important that we have these yarns and remember, there is help out there if you need it. A program that has been developed to help kids learn about general safety and wellbeing and learn about abuse prevention skills is the Protective Behaviours Program. This program has been adapted for Koories and the information below is from the "Hear Me Now" booklet - Strengthening Young Koories.

When yarning to kids about safety, it is helpful to talk about culture and feeling strong in their identity and culture. Teaching children about their culture and feeling strong and proud about it helps them to build a positive self image and learn how they can feel safe and what to do when they feel unsafe. Two key messages to make sure your children know are:

- We all have the right to feel safe all the time
- There is nothing so awful that we can't talk about it with someone.



Listen to your child. Listen to what your child is and is not saying. Simple things like “I don’t want to stay at Grandpa’s or Uncle’s house” should be talked about further.

Body Signals

It is important that we teach our children to listen to their body signals.

Our bodies talk to us all the time, but we don’t always listen. Pain is the bodies way of telling us that something is very wrong and we need to listen as it might be that we are sick and need to see a doctor, or that we have just cut ourselves with a knife or we are touching something burning hot and we need to do something to protect or heal our bodies. Just think if the body didn’t tell us when something was wrong, we could die.

Pain isn’t the only way our body talks to us. When we are really excited, our heart thumps in our chest, we might feel like there are butterflies in our tummy, or we might need to go to the toilet all the time. Talk to your child about listening to their body signals, you could make it a game. Like the “I Spy with my little eye....” you could play the game “when I feel happy I know because my body.....when I feel sad I know because my body when I feel scared I know because my body.....”

When we are talking to children, it’s important to help children think about how their body is talking to them. For example, talk to the child about how when we feel UNSAFE our body tells us something is not OK. We might get butterflies in our tummy, our heart can start to race in our chest, we might get jelly legs or sweaty palms. We need to do this as a way of helping children think about what is happening that is making them feel like this and to know that they need to take action like telling mum.

Children need to know that we understand that sometimes it is really hard to listen to our bodies as we don’t know what is really going on, or what we should do. Making sure your child knows that they can talk to someone and that nothing is ever so bad that they can’t tell someone. This is really important.

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Help your child think of five people they can talk to if they are feeling unsafe, or just feeling unsure about something. These should be people the child can trust and it’s a good idea to help them think of people from different places, so for example, a family member, a community member, an Elder, a teacher, or an Aboriginal school liaison officer.

Another way we as parents can protect our young ones is by teaching them about “private parts” and who can and can’t touch their private parts. It’s a good idea to teach this to kids at the same time you teach them the names of other parts of their body, like head, shoulders, hands etc. It is also a good idea to teach kids that their genitals are a private part and they shouldn’t let anyone touch them in these places unless there is something wrong and their mum might need to check in case they need to see a doctor. Children who know the correct names of their private parts are less likely to be tricked into sexual games. So teach your kids both the English name for penis and vagina and your language name for these parts. Make sure children also know that being kissed or having something put in their mouths that makes them feel uncomfortable is something that should be talked about with an adult that makes them feel safe.

Talking with children about family rules and boundaries is also important. Teaching your children to respect everyone’s right to privacy in dressing, bathing and sleeping but taking into account what is normal in your community which may include everyone sleeping in the same room or space.

Listen to your child. Listen to what your child is and is not saying. Simple things like “I don’t want to stay at Grandpa’s or Uncle’s house” should be talked about further. It may mean that something bad is happening to the child when they are there. This can be very hard for a parent to hear, especially if it is your dad, brother or partner who your child does not want to spend time with. As hard as this is, it is your job to protect your child and make sure they are safe and not put in situations they don’t feel OK about. There’s not much point in teaching your child to listen to their body signals and then not listening to them when they try to let you know something is not really OK.

Yarn with your child about who they might talk to if they don’t feel safe and teach your child to know the difference between a good secret and a bad secret. If your child knows that there is nothing so bad that they can’t tell anyone, then even if they don’t want to tell you as their mum, dad or carer, they can tell someone. Children often want to protect their parents and so may not tell you first. This is especially if the abuser is another family member, uncle, grandfather, partner, cousin etc. Help them to work out who they can talk to, and help them to yarn about this with their social supports.

Normal Sexual Development in Children

As you probably know, kids develop;

- **physically** - learning to sit, crawl, walk etc;
- **cognitively** - (intellectually), learning language, concepts etc,
- **emotionally** - learning to share, think about others etc,
- **socially** - learning to dress themselves, feed themselves and interacting with the world around them;
- **and they develop sexually** - exploring their body parts and developing an interest in other children’s body parts.

The table shows normal sexual development in children and is what we would think is ok for our kids to be doing.

0 – 4 year olds	4 years 11 years	Adolescents
Touches/ rubs own genitals when being changed, when tense, going to sleep	Asks about genitals, breast, babies, intercourse. Kisses familiar adults and children and allows kisses by them	Masturbation in private
Asks about genitals, breast, babies, intercourse	Interested in watching/ peeking at people in the bathroom	Mutual kissing
Likes to be rude, may show others their genitals, interested in own poo	Plays doctor inspecting others bodies	Sexual arousal
Plays doctor inspecting others bodies	Interested in urination and defecation	Sexual attraction to others
Puts fingers in the genitals or rectum of self and others for curiosity/ exploration	Touches, rubs own genitals when going to sleep, tense, excited or afraid	Consensual touching of others genitals
Plays house, acting out role of mummy and daddy	Plays games with same age children related to sex and sexuality	Consensual oral sex

Problem Sexual Behaviours

Unlike the table on the previous page, the table below shows problem sexual behaviours in children. If you think your child's behaviour or a child you know behaviour fits into the table below it is really important that you don't freak out and punish the child. It is important that you find someone to yarn with who will assist you to get help for the child involved. It is also important that you don't ignore the behaviour and do nothing about it. Children can be helped when they develop problem sexual behaviours. They will need you to help and trust them and they will need someone who knows a lot about how this pattern of behaviour works to help them and you as the parent or carer to stop the behaviour. At the end of this booklet is a list of places you can go to for help.

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
Attempted 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

As parents knowing how to talk with your children about sexual abuse and problem sexual behaviours is really tough. One reason it's so hard is because we have had it drummed into us for a few generations now that this is shame job and we shouldn't talk in this way. Remember that this came about as part of colonisation and the influence of the church and we don't really know how the ancestors used to deal with these topics. We can have a guess that children learned what they needed to from their Elders as part of men's business and women's business, and in order to make sure our young ones are now safe, we need to find ways to have these yarns and teach our children the important things they need to know to make sure they enjoy a safe and happy childhood.

Sibling Abuse

It is really hard to deal with hearing that your child has been sexually abused. It is especially hard, if the abuser is part of your kin or someone who is close to your family. Our natural instinct is to think, "No this can't be true" and "There must be some mistake". Parents often don't believe their child at first and this can be very damaging to the child who has been sexually abused. Please believe your child and get help to work through how you are feeling and how you can help to stop the abuse and help your child to recover from the abuse.

It is also really hard to deal with learning that your child has problem sexual behaviours. Again the first reaction is to not believe it is that bad, and to think that someone is making a mistake, after all it is normal for children to be curious about sex and play sexual games. It is really important for your child and other children that you don't disbelieve or under react to learning that your child needs help. Children respond really well to having this behaviour addressed and as they are still developing on lots of levels, the problem sexual behaviours can be stopped. This takes time and professional help, but it is really important that children get this help because without it, the behaviour will not stop and they could grow up into adults that abuse children.

Probably the hardest thing for a parent to learn is that one of their children is being sexually abused by one of their other children. This is called sibling abuse, and is a really hard thing for a parent to accept and come to terms with. You will have so many competing feelings about this you might feel a bit like you are going mad!

You will have lots of questions like:

- **Why didn't I know?**
- **How do I stop it?**
- **How can I make sure it doesn't happen again?**
- **How will this affect the child who was abused?**
- **How will this affect the child who did the abusing?**
- **What can I do about my child's behaviour?**
- **What will happen to the abusive child?**

If you are a parent who is worried about this happening in your family, please don't ignore it. Both the children need help and the resources at the end of this booklet will give you some ideas of where to get that help. You will feel like you're in a bit of a nightmare for a while, but with the right help and support, your family can and will be able to move on from this. It is really important if this happens to never take the side of the abusing sibling by not believing or blaming the other child. You need to be supportive to both of your children and to do this you have to believe the child who has been abused. Remember if you side with the abusing child you are teaching them that it's ok to sexually abuse and they may continue with this behavior into adulthood.



Responding to your child telling you they have been sexually abused

Remember that children find it really hard to tell about sexual abuse because the abuser has made them believe that either no one will believe them, or that it is their fault too and they will be in trouble. Children will often have a whole lot of different feelings about being sexually abused. They may feel:

- **scared** - that they will be in trouble, or that the abuser will be in trouble, especially when the abuser is a family member;
- **guilty** - that they are to blame for the abuse
- **shame job** - that they have been abused and this is not something they can talk about.
- **angry** - that the abuse has happened and that they weren't protected.
- **powerless to change what has been happening to them**
- **confused about what will happen if they tell.**

Abusers may have begged the child not to tell, because the abuser will be sent to jail, and we know that going to jail for Aboriginal people can mean we might never see the person again. Our people are still dying in custody and this would make telling very hard for our kids. It will also make it hard for you to know what to do; when your child tells you that the abuser is one of our people and a person who you are close to and have trouble accepting would have done this to any child far less your child. Family, friends and the community can put pressure on you not to believe the child, but in our culture protecting children is the number one rule so even though its hard, action has to be taken to stop the abuse.

Abusers need help and they need counselling to stop the behaviour. They will not stop or change their behaviour without professional help, and while you might be able to protect your child by not allowing the abuser to have anything to do with the child again, he will find another child to abuse. As a community we need to stop protecting abusers and focus on protecting our kids as was our way before colonisation. If we want this cycle of abuse that many of us have been victims of to stop, we really need to stand up for our kids and do something now.

We need to think about who is around our children when we are having a party and there is lots of grog, or yarndi being used. Our children are not safe when we as parents are drunk and not watching out for the kids. It's ok to have a drink or have a party, but we should make sure when this is happening that our children are in a safe place where there is no grog, yarndi or punch ons as these are damaging for our children and leave them at risk.

When a child tells you they have been sexually abused it is important that you:

DO:

Stay as calm as you can

Listen to everything the child wants to tell you

Tell the child you believe them

Tell the child they are brave to tell you and you are proud of them for telling someone.

Tell the child you will get someone to help you make sure the abuse will stop and they won't have to be scared of this again.

DON'T:

Make promises to the child that you can't keep, like you won't tell anyone else.

Threaten to kill or hurt the person who abused them (even though you may want to)

Ignore what the child has told you or tell the child to grow up and get over it.

Who should you talk to next?

Depending on your relationship with the child and whether the child will be at risk if they go home you might need to report the abuse to the police or child protection straight away. This can be really tough for our people as we don't have a lot of trust of authorities given how we have been treated in the past. If you don't feel safe to talk to the police or your local child protection service, then talk with your local Aboriginal Child Care Agency or Aboriginal Medical Service.

A child may need to see a doctor to make sure they are physically OK. If the child who has told you and it is not your child, you will need to tell their mum or dad (as long as they are not the person who is abusing the child). This can be really hard to do because the first question the person will have is why they told you and not me. Remember reassure the parent that this is common and you are there to help.



Resources

If you are worried about the safety of your child or a child in your community the numbers below should help you.

Australian Capital Territory

Billabong Aboriginal Development Corporation

158 Stockdill Dve
HOLT 2165
Ph: (02) 6278 4799

Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation

Grattan Court
WANNIASSA 2903
Ph: (02) 6231 9555

Office for Children, Youth and Family Support

Ph: 1300 556 729

NSW

Aboriginal Child Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec)

104 Bathurst St
SYDNEY 1235
Ph: (02) 9264 0088

The Office of Children, Families and Parenting:

Ph: 132 111 (24 hours)

Northern Territory

Department of Health and Families

PO Box 40596
CASUARINA NT 0811

To report instances of child abuse (24 hours)

Ph: 1800 700 250

Queensland

Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC)

PO Box 8200
WOOLONGABBA 4102
Ph: (07) 3255 3604

Department of Communities Department of Child Safety

PO Box 806 Brisbane QLD 4002
Ph: (07) 3224 8045
Freecall: 1800 811 810

To report instances of child abuse:

Business hours: 1800 811 810
After hours: 1800 177 135

South Australia

Aboriginal Family Support Services (AFSS)

134 Waymouth st
ADELAIDE 5000
Ph: (08) 8212 1112

Families SA Department for Families & Communities

GPO Box 292 Adelaide SA 5001
Phone: (08) 8226 8800

To report instances of child abuse:
24 hours: 131 478

Tasmania

Tasmania Aboriginal Centre (TAC)

198 Elizabeth St
HOBART 7001
Ph: (03) 6234 8311

To report instances of child abuse:

Child and Family Services: 1300 737 639
(24 hours)

References

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Association Limited 2002.

Shame Left at the Door

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Sibling Sexual Abuse

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Marcia Bourke (2005)

Through Young Black Eyes

A handbook to protect children from the
impact of family violence and child abuse.
2007 Update. Published by Secretariat of
Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

Violence in Aboriginal Australia:

Colonisation and its impact on gender

Refractory Girl, no 36 pp21-24.
Atkinson J (1990)

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A guide for parents and carers.
Child Wise 2010.
www.childwise.net

Victoria

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)

139 Nicholson St
EAST BRUNSWICK 3057
Ph: (03) 8388 1855

Department of Human Services Children, Youth and Families

To report instances of child abuse

Child Protection Crisis Service:
131 278 (24 hours)

Child Wise National Helpline

Ph: 1800 99 10 99

Western Australia

Yorganop Association Inc

1320 Hay Street
West Perth 6005
Ph: (08) 9321 9090

Indigenous Child Sexual Abuse Response Service

Ngunga Women's Resource Centre
Loch St
DERBY 6728
Ph: (08) 9193 1455

Department for Child Protection Central Office

PO Box 6334 East Perth WA 6892
Ph: (08) 9222 2555 TTY: (08) 9325 1232

To report instances of child abuse:

Ph (08) 9222 2555 or 1800 199 008
After hours: (08) 9223 1111

