

Practice guide

Understanding and responding to child sexual and criminal exploitation



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In this document, 'Aboriginal' refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 'Indigenous' or 'Koori/Koorie' is retained when part of the title of a report, program or quotation.

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Foreword

Child sexual (CSE) and criminal exploitation (CCE) are among the most complex and harmful forms of abuse we encounter. They are often hidden, misunderstood, and enabled by power imbalances that silence children and obscure accountability. We must challenge persistent myths that children choose exploitation, that compliance equals consent, or that harm is always visible. Exploitation is abuse. It is never the child's fault.

Children and young people known to Child Protection are disproportionately vulnerable to sexual and criminal exploitation. These forms of abuse are characterised by the misuse of power, coercion, control and dependency, and often occur in ways that are hidden from immediate view. Considering these forms of exploitation together enables us to better understand patterns of harm, avoid fragmented responses, and ensure that children are recognised as victims even when they appear to be involved in offending.

Online spaces, social media and emerging technologies have expanded the reach and methods of those who seek to harm children. As the contexts of exploitation evolve, our practice must be more adaptive, informed, and innovative. This includes strengthening intelligence-led approaches, enhancing cross-agency collaboration, and investing in prevention as much as response.

We have a responsibility to act on what we see, to remain curious and persistent, and to respond with care. Every child has the right to grow up safe, valued and free from harm. With the right knowledge, collaboration and care, we can intervene earlier, disrupt harm, and support children toward safety and healing.

This practice guide aims to equip practitioners with a shared understanding of indicators of risk, strengthen professional judgement, and support consistent, and effective responses. It is built on evidence, practice wisdom, and the understanding that a coordinated approach that places the child at the centre is the most effective.

Together, our actions can make a profound difference.

Office of Professional Practice

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Acknowledgements

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing acknowledges Victoria's Aboriginal communities and pays respect to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia's First Peoples and as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and waters on which we live and work.

We recognise and value the intergenerational consequences of colonisation, dispossession, child removal and other discriminatory government policies and acknowledge that the impacts and structures of colonisation still exist today.

The department is committed to addressing these impacts by embedding cultural safety and self-determination in all that we do so that Aboriginal Victorians have decision-making power and control to determine what is best for them.

Key terms

The following terms are used throughout this guide.

Caregiver: 'Caregiver' refers to a parent, foster or kin carer or residential care worker.

Child: 'Child' is used to capture children and young people aged under 18 years.

Person of interest: 'Person of interest' (POI) is used to refer to persons known or suspected to be sexually or criminally exploiting a child. This is because they may be directly exploiting (perpetrator), facilitating (e.g. recruiting peers) or enabling exploitation (e.g. providing location). In some instances, POIs can be influencing others to exploit children within a criminal network. Suspicions of POI involvement can be at various stages of substantiation, so POI is the most suitable term.

Chapter one: **Foundations of child exploitation**



Foundations of child exploitation

What is child exploitation?

Child sexual and criminal exploitation are deeply harmful forms of abuse that can cause profound impacts on a child's life into adulthood. Exploiting a child sexually or criminally is against the law in Victoria.

There are no consistent national or international definitions of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. The following definitions provide a shared understanding of these concepts so that we can prevent harm, detect and respond to these effectively.

Child sexual exploitation

A pattern of behaviours or events in which an adult/person of interest uses tactics of coercion or control to induce a child or young person into sexual (physical or non-physical) activities by providing them with something of perceived value to the child (Laird, et al, 2023).

Child criminal exploitation

A pattern of behaviours or events in which an adult/person of interest uses tactics of coercion or control to induce a child or young person in criminal activity by providing them with something of perceived value to the child. The nature of criminal exploitation places the child or young person in the role of 'offender', though they are victims (UK Home Office, 2018).

The intersections of child sexual and criminal exploitation

Although child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation are distinct forms of harm, they both share common characteristics. Some children may be subjected to both criminal and sexual exploitation.

Diagram 1: Child sexual and criminal exploitation



The victim is under 18 years



There is an exploiter
(POI may be extra or intra familiar)



The act/s is sexual or criminal in nature



The act/s is abusive
(power imbalance, coercion, control)



The act/s is exploitative
(induced into acts by giving something of value to the child)



It can occur without physical contact



People who exploit children

People who exploit children, sexually or criminally, are generally adults, who may or may not be related to the child. What they have in common is their ability and willingness to exert undue influence and abuse their authority over a child for their own gain (e.g. sexual, financial, commercial). They use grooming to manipulate the child into believing they are complicit or solely responsible for the behaviour, which helps them to maintain compliance and reduce the chances of disclosure by the child. In some instances, exploiters may be peers and a response in this instance will require careful assessment of the dynamics of the relationship. Sometimes a child is exploited and induced to introduce other children to the exploiter. In these circumstances we do not refer to a child as a recruiter or POI, but rather they are co-victims of exploitation.

Dynamics of exploitation

Persons of interest use a variety of common strategies to exploit children.

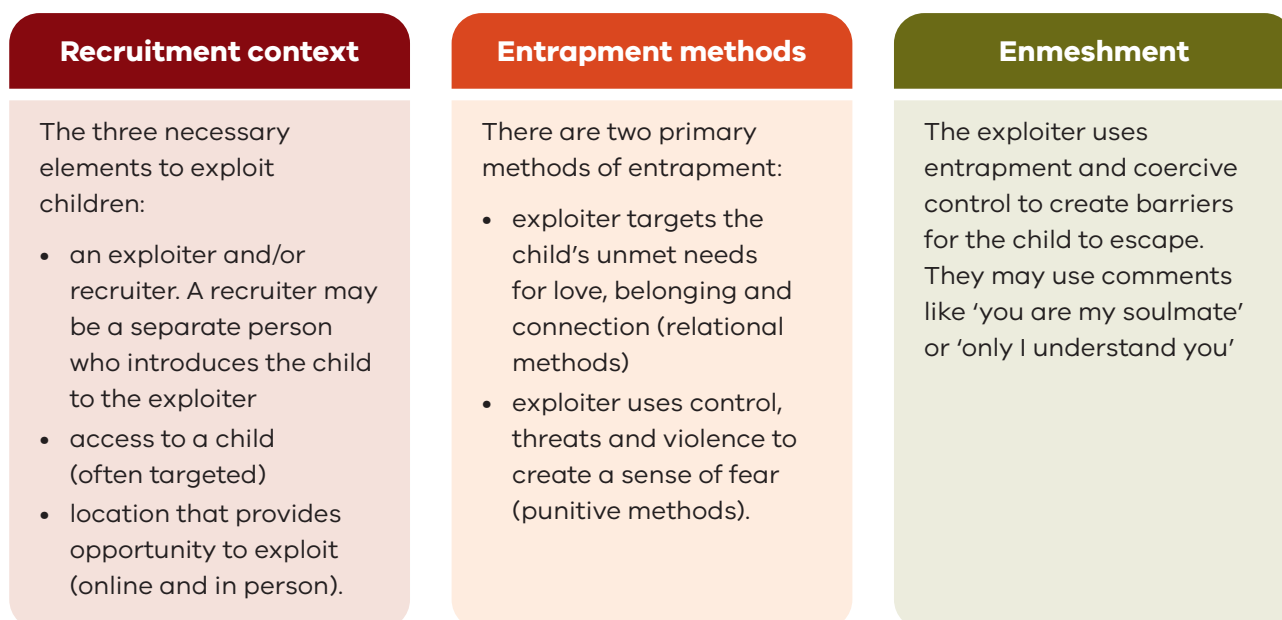
Exploitation strategies are carried out across a continuum

The 'exploitation continuum' is an evidence-based model for understanding the strategies used by exploiters. Its three components are set out below (Baird & Connolly, 2023).

Grooming tactics are used by the exploiter to recruit, entrap and enmesh

'Grooming' refers to behaviours used by a person(s) to recruit, entrap, enmesh and abuse a child by developing trust and using fear to distort the child's worldview, who they can trust, their perception of consent and their sense of

Diagram 2: Exploitation continuum



'normal'. Grooming commonly starts with acceptable, and often intentionally enjoyable interactions and shifts into abusive and inescapable interactions – over days, weeks, months or years (National Centre for Action on Child Abuse, 2024).

Page 11 displays a practice-oriented synthesis developed for this guide of common grooming strategies. Refer to [Practitioner toolkit 'Talking about grooming'](#) for more information.

Children are most vulnerable to being targeted when away from protective adults

Children may be pushed and/or pulled from their caregivers which may cause them to 'go missing' or be absent from their home (Suarez, 2017). Luring the child can form part of the exploitation strategy. Sometimes children are 'pushed' from their home (e.g. feeling bored, unsafe, disconnected) and land in situations where they are more likely to be targeted for exploitation. We have an essential role to protect the child from being 'pushed' and from being 'pulled'. This is explored further on [page 19](#).

Alcohol and other drug use and supply are used to exploit children

The use and supply of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) is a common tactic for both forms of child exploitation (Arnull, et al, 2025). There are five intersecting ways that AOD may relate to exploitation:

Targeting: The child may use AODs to cope with their pain, or to developmentally experiment- bringing them into contact with persons of interest who supply AOD.

Grooming: persons of interest may use the promise or supply of AOD to lure and entrap the child.

Intoxication: persons of interest use alcohol and other drugs to induce intoxication reducing the child or young person's ability to resist and/or report they were exploited during their reduced state of awareness.

Coerced criminal acts: The person of interest may induce the child into the distribution of illicit substances or to carry out other drug-related criminal activities.

Surviving: The child may use AOD to cope with the impact of their exploitation.



Practice tip

Any change of a child's behaviour could indicate that they are being groomed by a POI. Remember that their behaviour change may appear positive in the initial stages of the grooming process. It is common for POIs to begin grooming by making all engagements enjoyable to promote ongoing contact with the child and set a foundation for their grooming to continue.

Common grooming tactics

Targeting...

children who are vulnerable due to marginalisation, disability or those who have been subjected to other forms of harm.

Manipulating...

using fun, flattery, gifts, attention, confusion, sympathy or promises to manipulate the child's unmet needs or to appeal to them.

Eroding...

the child's trust in family, friends and professionals and others' trust in the child.

Posing...

or making the child believe, they have a 'special' relationship such as boyfriend, friend or chosen family.

Exposing...

the child to sexualised talk, touching, pornography, talking about or idealising crime culture etc.

Fear...

using coercion and control including threats, degradation, violence and intimidation.

Technology as a facilitator

Online contact (social media, online gaming and video streaming etc) can be primary facilitators for exploiting children. The child does not need to be away from home to be exploited, and they can be targeted across geographical global boundaries (Zeyzus Johns, et al, 2024). Children often spend lengthy periods on their devices which facilitates more intense contact with persons of interest, enabling them to entrap the child more rapidly. In fact, a recent Australian study found that the most common length of time between a POI making initial contact with the child and then making their first threat was between one to three hours (Wolbers, et al, 2025). The entrapment can feel completely inescapable for the child because the person of interest is ever-present.

Social media may also be the mechanism for the actual abuse (criminal or sexual). For example, Snapchat and Instagram can be used to sell/distribute substances, seek and share child sexual abuse material or to threaten the release images/video (sexual or financial extortion).

Children are made to believe they consented

Children under the age of 16 years cannot legally consent to sexual behaviour in Victoria. Persons of interest will deliberately confuse the child's perception of consent, whether this be sexual consent or consent to commit criminal acts. Exploited children may genuinely believe they consented, but this is often due to grooming by the person of interest (McKibbin & Humphreys, 2025).

Under Victorian law, a child cannot give sexual consent if:

- they are under the age of 12 years, including sexual touching, being shown sexually explicit images or performing sexual acts in front of others
- they are aged 12 to 15 (up to their 16th birthday) and the other person is more than 24 months older
- the person is in a caring or supervision role with the child or young person (including teachers and health professionals), including 16- and 17-year-olds.

No person can provide consent if:

- they are under the influence of alcohol or other drugs or, are not mentally able to decide or physically able to communicate the decision
- they have been deliberately deceived, coerced, entrapped and/or made to believe that refusal poses a significant threat to their safety.



Exploitation-informed practice considerations

This guide uses the term 'exploitation-informed practice'. This refers to practice that is informed by evidence-based knowledge, skills and attitudes that help to prevent, detect, respond to and disrupt child exploitation and to support the recovery of victimised children.

The following core practice considerations provide the foundation for child exploitation-informed practice:

- Trauma-informed and child-centred care
- The power of language
- Culturally informed practice
- Contextual safeguarding
- An intersectional lens
- The SAFER Children Framework

Trauma-informed and child-centred care

Child voice and choice

Centre the experience of the child and recognise them as the victims of exploitation rather than blaming or mutualising responsibility for acts that they are manipulated into.

Facilitate and empower the child's voice and agency to nurture trust and provide a different experience to the dynamics of control used by exploiters.

Connection and care

Prioritise the connection of children with a safe network of adults and peers as a central form of prevention, protection and recovery from exploitation.

Use a trauma-informed approach that emphasises that the child is treasured, important and cared about. Be reliable, trust-worthy, transparent and aim to provide and role model relational safety.

Curiosity

Use curiosity to explore and build an understanding of the child's experience, context and experiences including the exploitation itself.

See:

- [DFFH Framework for trauma-informed practice](#)

Culturally responsive practices

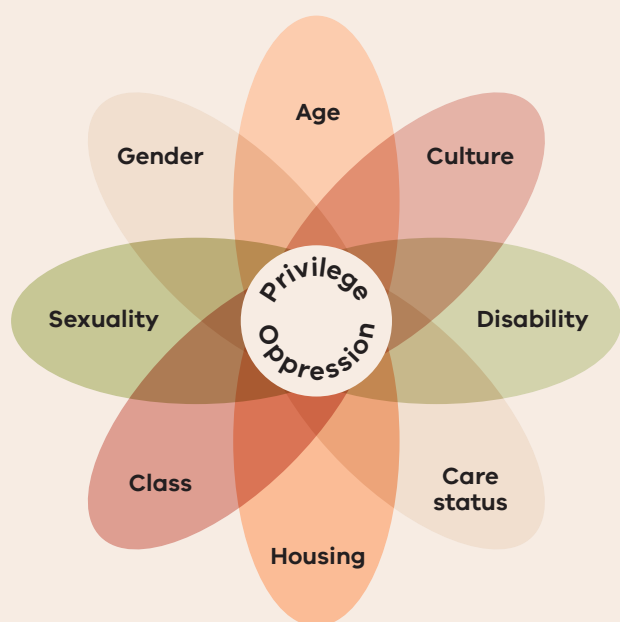
Draw on the innate strength and protection of cultures and community when preventing, responding to or disrupting child exploitation. Belonging in culture, community and Country can guard against and help to disentangle the entrapment of First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) children from persons of interest (Anderson, 2017).

Recognise that racial discrimination including poverty, criminalisation and prejudice, make First Nations and CALD children particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Exploitation may impact not only the individual child, but their family and community ([Victoria's anti-racism strategy 2024–2029](#)).

Engage in cultural consultation and explore the child's cultural connections, including family, to understand the exploitation context and opportunities for safety.

Refer to [Practitioner toolkit 'Culturally informed practice'](#) for more information.

Diagram 3: An intersectional lens



An intersectional lens

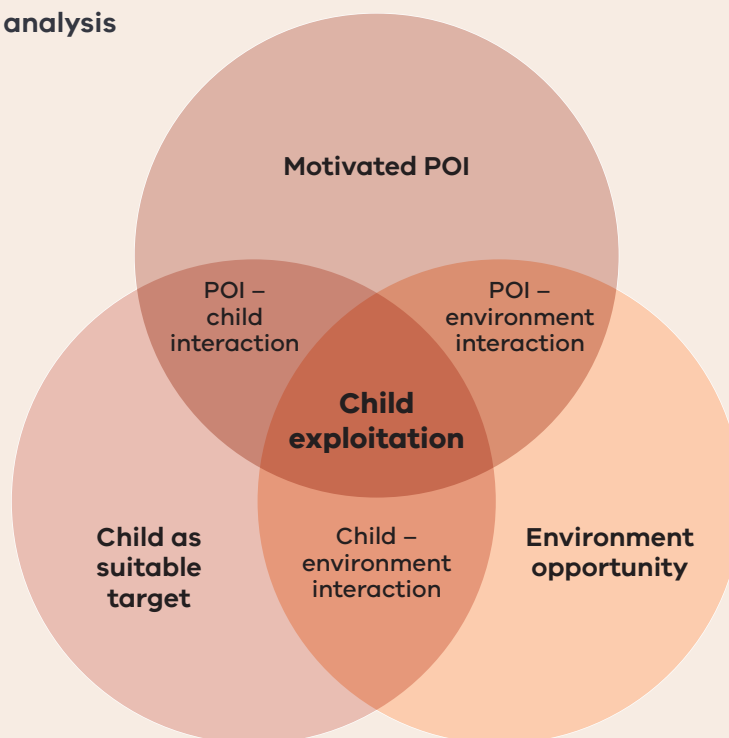
Use an intersectional lens to recognise that age, gender identity, sexuality, culture, disability, social and economic conditions all influence who is targeted based on how power and discrimination is used in society. The intersections of the child's identity and oppression influence how they are groomed, their access to supports to escape being exploited and the impacts of exploitation (Literature review, 2026, p.29). Consult with the child and relevant professionals to inform your analysis and interactions.

The power of language

Be conscious of the words you use. Children may feel blamed by the words used or your words may collude with exploiters (even unintentionally) by concealing or minimising accountability and harm; or they can remove mutualised accountability for harm and highlight the child's strength. This extends to how information is outlined within the essential information categories (EICs) and analysis in SAFER. Our words can help to create justice, safety and uphold dignity, and we need to keep this in mind throughout our engagement with children at risk of CSE and their families.

Moving from		Moving towards
Mary is engaging in x behaviour	>	Mary has been coerced/exploited to x
Mary is in a sexual relationship with X	>	X is sexually exploiting Mary
Mary is absconding from her placement	>	X is luring Mary away from her home Mary didn't return home as expected
Mary refuses to engage	>	We have not yet found a way to engage Mary
Mary is using drugs	>	Someone is supplying Mary with drugs
She isn't being exploited she is at the age of consent	>	She has been manipulated to believe she is consenting but his power over her is evident through...
Mark is a young offender / has a criminal history	>	X induced Mark to carry out criminal activities
Violent/abusive relationship	>	X is using violence towards Anne

Diagram 4: Circles of analysis



Barlow et. al. (2022)

Collaborative and contextual practice

Seek and share information and collaborate closely with the child, caregiver(s) community and professional network members. Use a strong team approach to protect the child, respond to the person of interest, and to reduce location-based opportunities for harm.

Recognise the importance of working with the full context of how children are exploited, comprised broadly of three interrelated systems:

- The child (and their caregiving context)
- The person of interest
- The environment that creates opportunity for, or protection from the person of interest.



The SAFER children framework

The SAFER children framework (SAFER) is a guided professional judgement approach used by the Victorian statutory child protection program to assess and manage risk to children and young people. Being a guided professional judgement approach means practitioners use their knowledge, skills, and experience within the framework's structure, which is a cyclical process of assessment (SA), planning and review (FER). The risks and harms related to exploitation form part of your comprehensive and ongoing risk assessments for the children and young people with whom you work. Therefore, consideration of exploitation harms and risks can and should be embedded across all phases of your work.

The core statutory test about whether a child is in need of protection is the same; whether the child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm, and parents have not protected or are

unlikely to protect them. However, in the context of child exploitation, using SAFER to conduct statutory risk assessment bridges the gap between external perpetration and parental protection capacity. The question is not "Are the parents abusive?" but "Can the parents realistically protect the child from this form of harm?" That is because in exploitation contexts:

- The source of harm is often external (peers, adults, networks, online actors, criminal groups)
- Parental intent may be protective, but parental capacity is constrained
- Risk is frequently hidden, coercive, relational, and cumulative.

For more information, please refer to [CP manual – SAFER children framework](#).



Chapter two: **Preventing exploitation**



Preventing exploitation

Preventing exploitation requires proactive efforts to stop children from being exploited before it occurs, intervening early and stopping the child being re-exploited.

Key messages

Preventing a child being exploited involves:

- reducing vulnerability to avoid exploitation completely and preventing further or ongoing exploitation
- building up factors of strength, safety and connection
- proactively reducing circumstances that push a child towards exploiters
- reducing opportunities for exploitation and access to children, interrupting the person of interests' ability to use 'pull' factors.

Understanding prevention

Prevention is an ongoing practice

Use a 'prevention lens' across all stages of your practice. Children involved with child protection are particularly vulnerable. If a child has, or is, being exploited, do not simply assess and protect them from the current exploitation but also proactively work to prevent further opportunities for them to be exploited again.

The practices that underpin the prevention of exploitation are key to what facilitates better outcomes for all children and young people:

- reducing their experiences of abuse and neglect
- equipping caregivers with knowledge and skills and,
- facilitating a child's experience of being genuinely loved, cared about and connected.



Noticing and responding to the push and pull factors

'Push and pull factors' are useful terms to describe the common dynamics that work together to increase the risk of a child being exploited sexually or criminally, while protective factors help to buffer this risk.

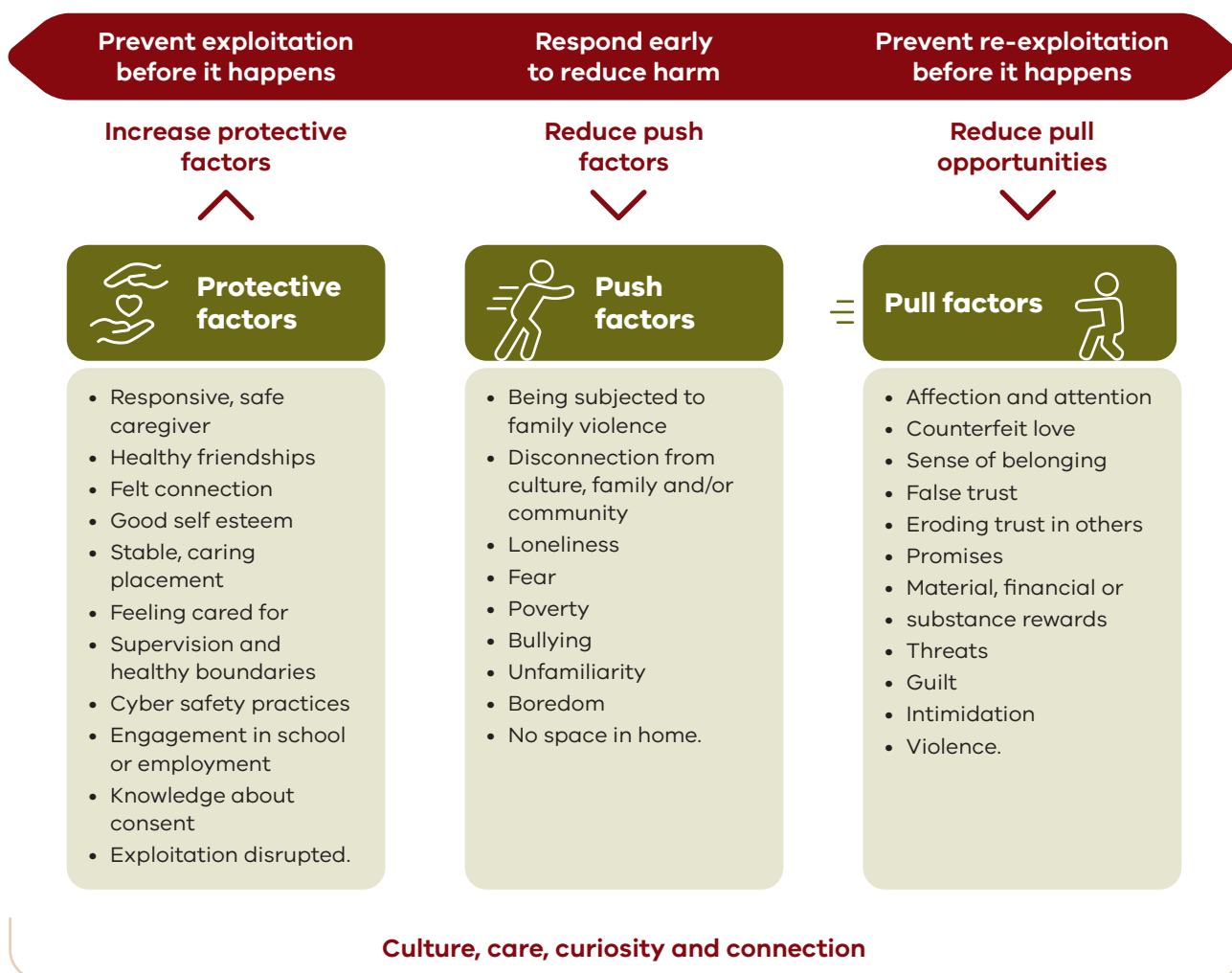
Push factors: circumstances that can create the need for a child to seek external connections away from their home (e.g. feeling unsafe, bored, unwanted).

Pull factors: tactics used by persons of interest to recruit and entrap the child in order to exploit them, enabled through grooming tactics and explicit targeting of unmet needs (e.g. offering inclusion, 'connection', fun, etc.).

Understanding 'push and pull' factors means that you can prevent exploitation by focussing on:

- increasing factors of strength, safety and protection
- reducing push factors
- interrupting and protecting the child from the exploiters' use of pull factors.

Diagram 5: Prevention, protection, push and pull



Facilitating prevention

Education as prevention

All children need continuous and supportive education about healthy relationships and safety, including online. Children who have experienced abuse, neglect or disrupted care may not have had the opportunity to learn about healthy relationships and safety – through conversations, lessons and modelling so taking every opportunity is key.

Education is a powerful tool to prevent child exploitation or re-exploitation. Encourage caregivers to educate children by having essential conversations, coaching and role modelling. Equipping children early with knowledge and skills guards against exploitation in childhood and sets up a safer foundation for their adult relationships.



Practice tip

Explore with each child their understanding of relationships, friendships, and safety. Offer information and resources that are tailored to the child's development, culture and communication needs.

Provide education to caregivers and/or children about the following life skills.

Relationships: romantic, sexual and friendships

- Healthy relationships and friendships including love, responsibility, trust, respect, care and equality (Plowright, 2024).
- Sexual development and safe sex.
- Consent–sexual consent as well as consent about choices, actions and behaviours and what can get in the way (coercion, entrapment, threat of negative consequences, etc.).
- Warning signs that they may be experiencing grooming or coercive control including, 'love bombing', praise, gifts, promises etc.

Cyber safety

- Importance of privacy and safety online and the need for regular discussion to understand the child's preferences, experiences and concerns.
- Cyber safety practices including supervision of internet use and parental controls.
- Awareness of online environments where children are at greater risk of being targeted.
- Common tactics for targeting/grooming children online (e.g. isolating on other platforms).
- What to do/who to tell if they are feeling unsafe online.

Understanding risk

- Awareness of dangerous locations or targeting strategies used by persons of interest (online or off-line).
- Behavioural signs of grooming or exploitation visible to the child's network.



Leadership tip

Make education of children and caregivers a core part of your team's practice culture. Ensure your team have the skills and confidence to deliver exploitation-informed guidance.

Factors of strength, safety and protection

- People and locations to seek connection and non-judgemental support.
- Access to safe, interesting and engaging environments.
- Age-appropriate supervision and accountability (e.g. curfew).
- Building the child's skills and strategies to implement relational boundaries.

Refer to [Practitioners toolkit](#).



Connection as prevention

Create and sustain the child's sense of connection and belonging as an essential exploitation-prevention strategy, particularly the child-caregiver connection and connection to culture and community. Loneliness, yearning for genuine and loving connection and lacking a sense of belonging may push the child from their home or peer group. These unmet needs can be used by persons of interest to groom and entrap the child.

Generate opportunities for the child to observe and participate in healthy expressions of love and non-exploitative relationships (O'Brien, 2018). Daily experiences of safe relationships constitute real-time coaching and education about safe relationships. They develop relationship skills and provide a 'reality check' or contrast to coercive experiences.

The overall aim is to:

- Generate and/or repair healthy child-caregiver relationships.
- Keep the child actively connected with their family and kin.
- Support the child's connection with their culture and community, particularly First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse children.

Some ways to achieve this in collaboration with the child, caregiver(s) and network:

- support the child to develop social skills and build healthy peer relationships including extracurricular, cultural or social connections that create healthy belonging
- fulfil responsibilities relating to Aboriginal family-led decision making and cultural plans
- help the child uncover/explore their interests and provide them with opportunities for positive learning and mastery experiences
- reduce harms that interrupt family connections such as a child's experience of family violence
- facilitate their active engagement in school and/or employment
- explore with the child who their important adults (are/have been) and support these connections (see Child Protection Practice Guidance on significant persons for more)
- build trust with the child and role model a safe relationship so they perceive you as a reliable source of support and non-judgemental safety
- facilitate the child's access to trauma-informed therapeutic interventions
- influence the way adults and services perceive and treat the child. If they have positive help-seeking experiences they may be more likely to seek help in the future.



Reflective prompt

How often do I talk about love with kids? How can I centre my practice on the child's lived experience of genuine belonging and love as a source of healing and safety?

Chapter three: **Exploitation detection**



Exploitation detection

Practitioners need to be adept at detecting warning signs or indicators associated with exploitation.

This chapter will support you to:

- know the warning signs to prompt you to seek and share information
- map information and evidence against evidence-based factors
- use the SAFER framework to assess, analyse and make decisions, inclusive of vulnerabilities and risks associated with exploitation.

Sound understanding of these warning signs enables practitioners to reflect all available information in the analysis and decision-making process of the SAFER framework assessments.

Key messages

Detecting if a child is at risk of or has been exploited by a person of interest involves:

- knowledge about the factors that increase vulnerability of a child being targeted, increase likelihood of being exploited
- connecting with the child and the people who know the child best to monitor and detect warning signs
- understanding factors that protect against exploitation
- seeking other information regarding persons of interest and environmental factors
- curiosity about the unique circumstances, indicators and experiences of the child.

Identify warning signs

Look out for (and educate caregivers about) the warning signs of exploitation.

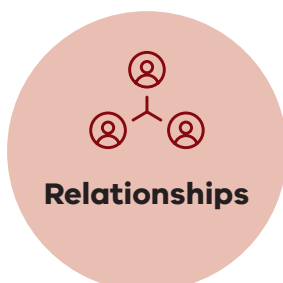
- Respond with curiosity and a non-judgemental stance to any signs identified.
- Balance asking essential questions and sharing your observations and worries without pushing too hard.
- Children will test to see if you are safe to tell and are likely to share information over time. See more about child disclosure on [page 45](#).

Understanding warning signs will enable you to recognise whether the child's behaviour, routines and associations point to them being manipulated or controlled by others for exploitation. These factors can then be appropriately considered in the context of the risk assessment and the formulation of the case plan.

Refer to Practitioner toolkit 'Early risk indicators of child exploitation' for further prompts.

Diagram 6: Warning signs of child exploitation

Warning signs that a child may be being exploited



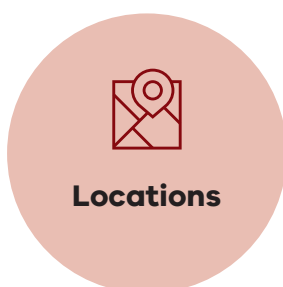
- Suspicious behaviour by POI e.g. avoidant, overly friendly, minimising concerns
- Older boyfriend or girlfriend
- New group of older friends
- Isolation from existing friends or network
- Associating with people who are known to exploit or who engage in sex work or crime.



- Significant changes in behaviour
- More secretive
- More time online
- Sexual or criminally suggestive posts or messages
- Use of alcohol or other substances
- Use of drug or gang related slang
- Sexualised behaviour or language
- School disengagement
- Someone else seems to be controlling their decisions.



- Receiving gifts
- New belongings
- New clothing including more revealing clothing
- Dressing older than expected
- New or extra phone
- Hair and nails done with unexplained funds
- Extra money
- Changes in hygiene.



- Currently or recently absent or missing
- Spending time at hotels, adults' homes or suspicious locations
- Staying at locations they cannot afford
- Accessing bars, pubs or clubs
- Use of encrypted messaging platforms
- Located in or near car with an adult
- Drugs located near or with child.



- Increase alcohol or other substances, or substance dependence
- Unexplained injuries
- Contracted a sexually transmitted infection
- Pregnancy
- Poorer mental health including anxiety, low mood
- Use of self harm to cope.

SAFER children framework

Risk assessment is a core statutory responsibility and due to its dynamic nature is ongoing. In the context of CSE or CCE detection, a SAFER assessment needs to be undertaken or reviewed as per usual. See *SAFER children framework guide: The five practice activities of risk assessment in child protection* for more information.

All risk assessments start with the S activity of the SAFER Children framework, seeking, sorting and sharing information.



Practice tip

Incident reports are useful to track patterns of behaviours or other indicators and can inform case management and care teams. Remain open to the possibility of sexual exploitation when analysing the content of incident reports.

The S practice activity in SAFER reinforces seeking, sharing, sorting and storing new information as a continuous activity. This is a core practice to detect exploitation – each member of the child’s network holds small pieces of the ever-changing exploitation context and risk dynamics. Seek information about the child from a range of sources including the child, caregivers, family, cultural networks and other professional services, their environment and any known persons of interest.

Each small piece of information builds a bigger picture

Each person and service who has contact with the child or the person of interest will be holding a variety of big or small pieces of information. Like a puzzle piece, one piece of information alone may seem insignificant, but when brought together alongside other pieces of information the picture begins to emerge.

Balance care and protection when seeking information from the child

Consider the least intrusive approach to collect this information while taking reasonable actions to ensure the safety of the child. See *DFFH Sexual Exploitation Advice* for more information.

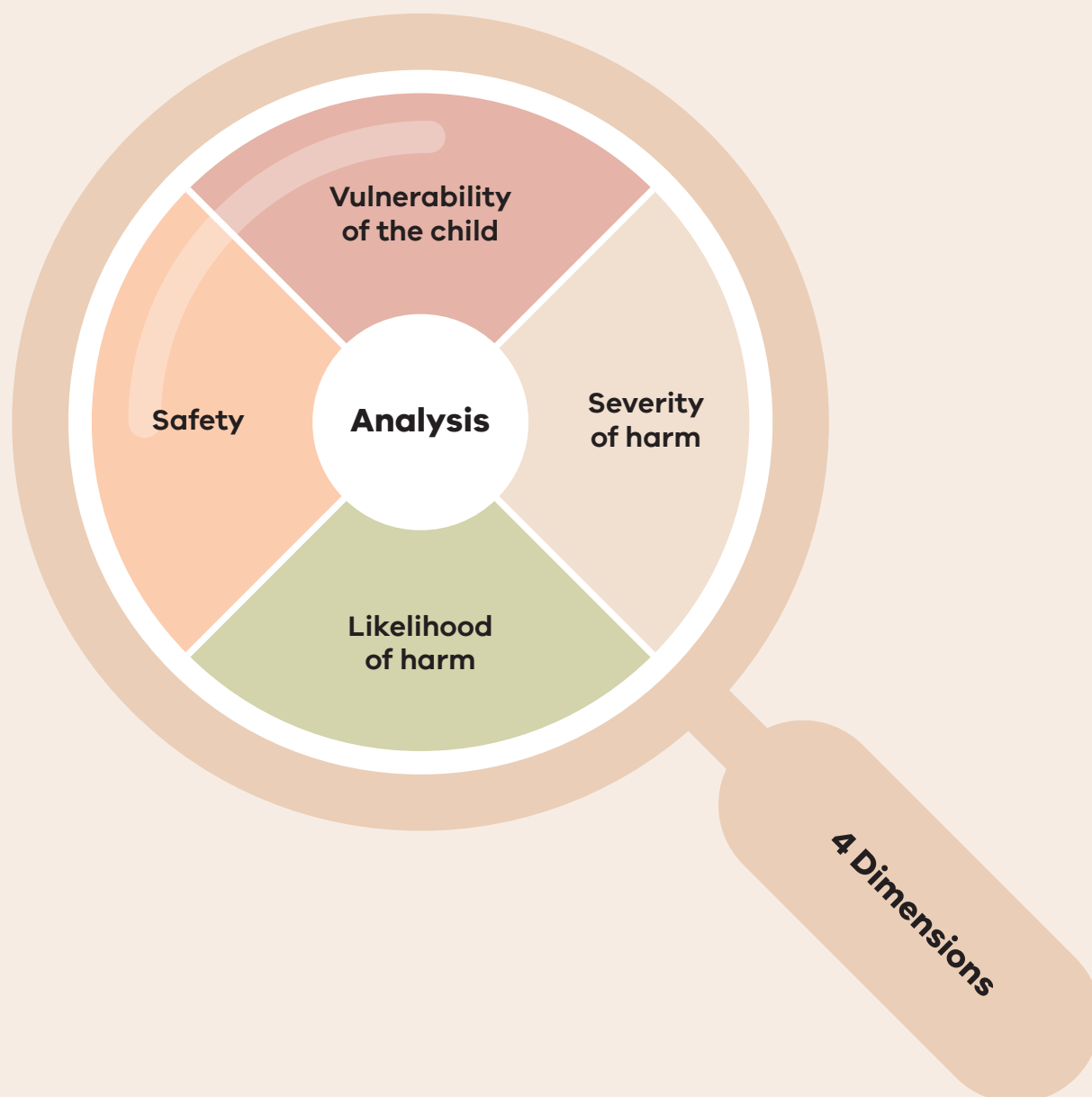
Every care team member is responsible

Each member of the care team is responsible for seeking, sharing and storing information and enacting plans. Make clear arrangements about who will be responsible for seeking information and from whom e.g. there may be network members who are not in the care team but may be observers or receivers of information.

Essential Information Categories (EICs)

When storing EICs relating to CCE and CSE use “other” option to ensure all relevant information is added. The standard EICs are options rather than an exhaustive list. EICs should be appropriately outlined in the subsequent analysis section and addressed in the case plan, being mindful of using language that appropriately captures the dynamics of CSE/ CCE (for instance, in relation to grooming).

Identify vulnerability and likelihood of child exploitation



Analysis

The A activity within the SAFER children framework relates to analysis of the evidence and information gathered. It helps to make sense of the information and evidence that has been gathered about child sexual and criminal exploitation through analysis, judgements about the consequences of harm and probability of harm occurring now and, in the future. These all inform decision making.

The analysis considers the evidence against four dimensions – vulnerability of the child, the severity of the harm, the likelihood of harm and any factors of safety.

Vulnerability factors are personal characteristics or circumstances that can increase the possibility that certain children will be targeted for child sexual exploitation or child criminal exploitation and increase its harmful impact.



Did you know?

Children who are absent or missing are 19 times more likely to be sexually exploited.

Children with intellectual disabilities and developmental delay are most identified in literature as being sexually exploited.

(2025 Literature review)

When analysing the vulnerability to child sexual and criminal exploitation, consider the unique vulnerabilities (e.g sexual abuse trauma, disability) and unmet needs which may include push and pull factors (Diagram 5). Also consider capacity of their parents/caregivers to meet their needs and protect them. In particular for CSE and CCE, are parents able to protect the child from risk outside the home?

Refer to [Practitioner toolkit 'SAFER dimension: Analysing vulnerability'](#) for a table outlining areas to consider when analysing information gathered about the vulnerability to the child and the capacity of their caregivers to meet their needs. It also identifies where information and evidence may be reflected in the SAFER Essential Information Categories (EICs).

When in doubt, reach out to specialist practitioners (i.e. sexual exploitation practice leaders) – they can provide useful tips on how to gather any additional relevant information and provide information directly.

Analysing severity of harm

In analysing severity of harm specifically resulting from CSE or CCE, you must consider the relationship between the specific vulnerabilities of the child and the degree, or severity, of harm. Analysis of severity relates entirely to the child's individual experience of CSE, CCE or both.

As outlined in the previous section, there are many complex vulnerabilities that often impact on children and young people targeted for CSE and CCE. Consideration of the severity of harm requires analysis of the extent to which the child's current experience of CSE/CCE contributes to cumulative and long-term harm.

The severe negative impacts of sexual abuse in the short and long term are well documented. Some of them include poor school attendance, reduced self-esteem, nightmares, sleep and eating disorders and potential long-term impacts of post-traumatic stress, AOD misuse, suicidal ideation, anxiety and depression.

In terms of CCE, criminalisation is associated with exposure to violence or injury, poor school attendance, criminalisation and for long term post-traumatic stress, fear, erosion of self, of safety and security, guilt etc.

This may point to the child having suffered or being likely to suffer harm that is significant in circumstances where the child's parents/ caregivers have not protected or are unlikely to protect them from CSE or CCE (as per s162 in *Children, Youth and Families Act, 2005*).

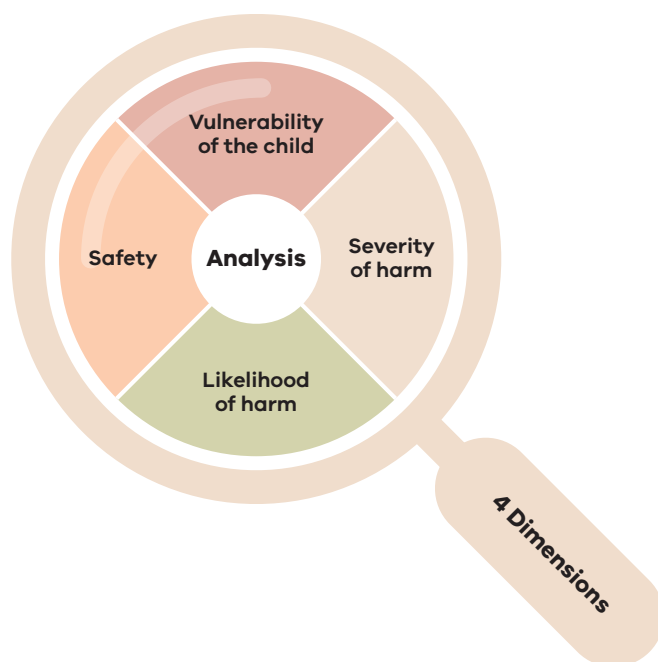
It is also important to consider that by the time children involved with CP are identified to be at risk of CSE/CCE, and enough indicators exist to require disruption activity, the abuse can include features of escalation, over several episodes (and multiple POIs) and in some instances appear chronic, as in cases where children are routinely lured from home (many missing episodes) for the purposes of exploitation. All these considerations contribute to the analysis of severity of harm.

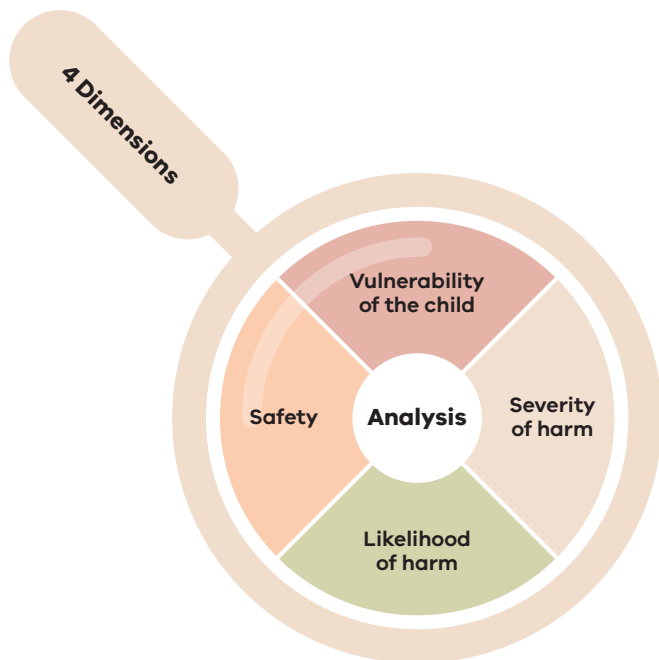
Analysing likelihood of harm

Factors that increase the likelihood of a child being exploited / or re-exploited:

- Prior pattern and behaviour towards the child.
- Attitudes and beliefs of the parent.
- Other contributing factors.

Refer to Practitioner toolkit 'SAFER dimension: Analysing likelihood of harm' for considerations and further guidance and on assessing likelihood.





Analysing safety

Draw on strengths

Strengths provide the building blocks for increasing a child's safety though they do not necessarily reduce the risk of harm. The positive aspects or attributes of the child, family, culture and community, can translate into protection, where they result in demonstrated actions that mitigate the risk of exploitation-harm. In turn, strengths demonstrated as protection over time lead to safety (Department of Human Services 1999).

Balance the full picture of the child's experience by identifying and weighing up factors that reduce the likelihood of the child being exploited.

Consider the multiple pathways to protection

The protection of a child from the POI's exploitation, requires two key pathways of protection:

- action is taken to interrupt the POI's exploitation of the child (see chapter 5)
- the caregiver is willing and able to reduce the POI's access to the child. The parent's/caregiver's ability to reduce access and harm to the child is key.

When the person of interest is known to the child

Sometimes the person of interest exploiting the child or facilitating exploitation is known to the child and may have held a position of trust. If the person of interest is:

- a parent: assess the risks to the child, the parents' ability and willingness to cease the exploitation, and their ability to protect the child from other persons of interest. In some circumstances this plan may involve bringing the child into care
- a carer or residential worker: alongside an assessment, and possible police investigation, reportable conduct investigation will also be required. An alternate safe caregiver is likely to be needed to care for the child
- other family or kin members: the child protection assessment should closely assess the protectiveness of the caregiver including their ability and willingness to cease or manage opportunities for the person of interest to access the child
- a friend/peer: consider your approach carefully by recognising that their peer may be a child or young person who is also being exploited and coerced and/or they are likely to need a care response.

See [CP Manual's Sexual exploitation page](#).

Potential examples of strengths



Connection and belonging

Helps to guard against the child being pulled from their significant persons (including parents, caregivers) or pulled through grooming by persons of interest.

Healthy self-esteem

Increased ability to detect manipulation and coercion, assertiveness and boundary setting and hold beliefs about self-worth and rights. Reduced reliance on external approval.

Knowledge about consent, sexual health and relationships

Increased ability to detect coercive, manipulative or exploitative behaviours.



Protective, responsive and stable caregiver(s)

Reduces isolation and external connection-seeking. Increased help seeking, early disclosure and prevention from further harm.

Appropriate supervision

Reduced opportunity for persons of interest to groom and exploit the child.

Basic needs met

Access to resources to provide for housing and financial needs of child.

Cyber safety practices

Reduced opportunity for persons of interest to groom and exploit the child.



Healthy peer connections

Reduced isolation and connection-seeking from unsafe people.

Engagement in school or employment

Reduced isolation and increased self-esteem, supports and supervision.

Access to safe physical and online environments

Reduced opportunity for persons of interest to groom and exploit the child when access is age-appropriate and supervised.

Social cohesion and inclusion

Reduced discrimination leading to improved connection, self-esteem, supports and resources.

Note: adapted from Literature review, 2026.

The child's voice: Connection and understanding

To detect exploitation of a child we need to connect with them with skill and genuine care.

Use an exploitation-informed approach

When planning for and interacting with the child, use exploitation-informed practices to create opportunities for the child to share, learn and seek support.

Refer to [Practitioner toolkit 'An exploitation-informed approach'](#) for a version of the diagram on [page 33](#) that you may consider sharing broadly with, parents, caregivers and care team.

Curiosity is key

- Remain constantly curious about the unique experiences and context of each child.
- Build a trusting relationship with the child and test any professional instincts that something doesn't feel 'quite right.'
- Do not make assumptions or minimise potential exploitation risks if the child's circumstances do not 'fit in the box' of the common exploitation factors.
- Draw on the people who know the child the best.

Prepare for common child responses

Children who are exploited may:

- not identify as victims or as being exploited
- not identify or report their abusers – which is a response to grooming, not necessarily being intentionally resistant
- feel shame, fear and pressure to be secretive – reassure the child that they are not in trouble or to blame
- express emotions by avoiding, using aggression, crying or using humour
- have gendered preferences about who to have conversations with based on cultural protocols, previous experiences of gendered violence or personal preferences.

Respectfully explore, ask, listen and ask again

Explore with the child broader themes in open and curious ways. For instance, visually map:

- connections – people who are important to them and why they are important – if they seem reluctant, say that they do not have to share names
- locations – places they enjoy, don't enjoy, feel safest, least safe, go to 'escape', have good/bad memories about
- relationship rules – what they've learnt from others about their own boundaries and rules. Ask what shaped these, if there are times these are not respected.



Practice tip

Be creative. Anchor your exploration in their interest. If they like music, develop a Spotify playlist together with songs that reflect different people in their life. If they are into a sport, ask them who in their life they would put on their team. Use art. Drive around town – often kids will share a memory or experience as they pass by a location and don't feel pressured.

See:

- [DFFH Missing Children and Young People Procedure](#)
- [DFFH Missing Children and Young People Advice](#)

Curiosity and care: an exploitation-informed approach

Use a non-judgemental stance.

Don't blame or shame.
View behaviours as coerced
and/or survival strategies.

Facilitate a reliable and trusting relationship.

Be transparent and consistent.
Notice their strengths and
engage their interests.

Give every opportunity for voice and choice.

Seek their participation in
decisions big and small.
Go to wherever they are.

Actively avoid power-over approaches.

Empower, show genuine
respect and provide
a contrast to the
POI's coercion.

Recognise they may be entrapped by the pull factors.

They may not feel like a victim.
They may feel conflicted,
trapped, scared about
getting in trouble.

Understand and care about their unmet needs.

Often their unmet needs have
been used against them.
Seek to have these needs
met safely.

Engaging caregivers

The child's caregivers are the ones most likely to see evidence of increasing risk and are central to understanding the child's context and possible exploitation. We need to engage them in meaningful partnership to protect the child from harm. To support the detection of child exploitation with caregivers, promote:

- open and ongoing communication
- safety from other forms of neglect and abuse in their care
- understanding of warning signs of child exploitation and its possible impacts on the child's behaviour and relationships
- non-blaming and shaming responses to the child
- expressions of care, love, unconditional and positive regard
- reinforcement of the child's strengths
- consistent, fair and reliable boundaries and supervision
- the caregivers' ongoing education of the child
- ways of planning and responding to the risk of exploitation – covered further on pages 37–48.

All children need to feel cherished. If a person of interest offers an uncomplicated message of love, this will be a sharp contrast for a child who is only offered a 'positive working relationship' by carers or workers. Exploitation is not love. But if it looks like it, sounds like it and feels like it, even momentarily, children can fall for this counterfeit version. Especially if there is no genuine example of love in their life to compare it with.



Leadership tip

Be flexible about who leads care conversations with the child. Their strongest connection may be with their caregiver rather than workers. Practitioners and/or carers can coach and support the main caregiver to be the child's source of safety and have essential conversations.



Multi-agency collaboration builds safety

The child's multi-agency network (alongside the child, their family, community and cultural network) creates pathways to safety if members are drawn on effectively and supported to be on the same page.

Engage all relevant systems and services such as Child Protection, CSOs, ACCOs, police, sexual assault services, the court system, family services, youth justice, health services, mental health services, therapeutic services and education.

The formulate practice activity in SAFER relates directly to the development of a targeted case plan that considers the individual child's needs and includes actions that each member of the care team will undertake to create pathways to safety. The aim of working collaboratively is to decrease risk and increase safety for the child from current and future sexual and criminal exploitation.



Did you know?

Children who had positive help-seeking experiences tended to demonstrate improved mental health outcomes and were more likely to seek help again in the future (O'Brien et al., 2024).



Tips for exploitation-informed multi-agency work

- Establish care teams (irrespective of the child's caregiving environment) that are proactive can strategically manage risks, and track protection and progress.
- Arrange frequent child centred case conferences. Invite members who hold expertise about the child's intersectional experiences and expertise in child exploitation responses.
- Decide on a primary member who will have key conversations with the child based on the child's trust and relationship.
- Agree on consistent practices about how to respond to the child – how the child will be treated by all professionals, wording used and how risk issues or behaviours will be handled.
- Establish clear communication pathways and rules.
- Provide relevant information and intelligence to police without delay to ensure that any law enforcement response is informed by the most up-to-date information available.



Chapter four: **Responding to exploitation**



Responding to exploitation

Effective responses to child exploitation involve working collaboratively as a team with the child and achieving short and long terms goals for positive outcomes. These responses work alongside disruption measures discussed in the next chapter.

Key messages

Responding to a child who is at risk of, or has been harmed by exploitation involves:

- meaningful collaboration that centres partnership with the child, their family, community, network and multi-agency professionals
- a connection planning approach to create safety from exploitation
- a focus on the lived experience of the child – treating the child as a whole human with unique needs, preferences and characteristics
- multiple strategies across the child's short, medium and long-term needs and goals.

Create a care response

A care response is the relational, community and practice-based approach for intervention which forms the basis of all our responses with the child. A care response should be reflected in the case plan as it occurs alongside any statutory response (described further in chapter 5).

An exploitation-informed care response is collaborative and adapted to the child.

- Focus both on safety and recovery.
- Be trauma informed – recognise behaviours as survival strategies/responses to violence.
- Learn how to best connect with the child by getting to know them beyond the problems they are facing.
- Explore what their culture means to the child and how it can be harnessed for safety from current and future exploitation.
- Adjust your language and approach in response to the child's developmental stage and communication needs/preferences.
- Strengthen the child's network.



Be culturally responsive

Understand Indigenous perspectives about social and emotional wellbeing, including the concept of 'self' as being intrinsically linked to others. Integrate in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework into connection planning (Gee et al, 2013 in Gee et al, 2014).

If the child is First Nations, ensure that you:

- consult the Team Leader about arranging an Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making (AFLDM) meeting for key decision making in consultation
- consult the Aboriginal cultural advisor responsible for the child's cultural support plan
- consult with Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Services (ACSASS)
- consider circuit-breaker activities that may involve a referral to a return to country program, connection with an Elder or other cultural support person, or respite with protective extended family or community members.

Diagram 7: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework

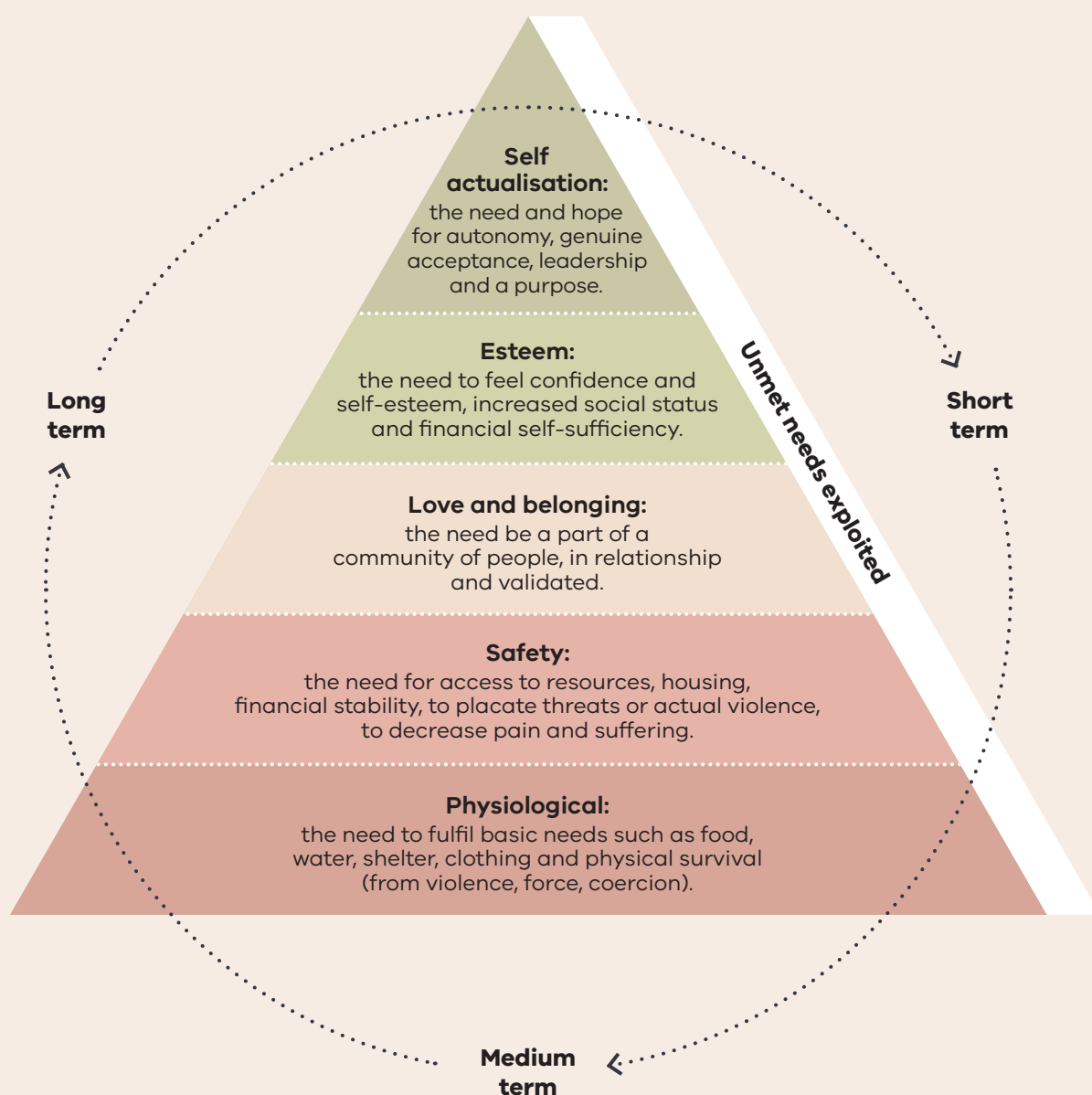


Shift from reacting to incidents to responding holistically

Responding to child exploitation is not simply about responding to specific or one-off incidents – the child needs us to attend to the push factors that affect their life more broadly. If a child has been exploited, they are at greater risk of re-exploitation unless the underlying push factors are addressed.

Also explore when they have felt safe and connected. This includes both their experience of **actual** safety and connection, and their **experience** of safety and connection.

Diagram 8: Unmet needs and the cycle of planning



Avoid replicating the exploiter's control

Be mindful not to unintentionally mirror perpetrator tactics or create conditions that make the child feel their only option is to resist to reclaim a sense of autonomy. For example, avoid:

- excessive rules
- surveillance that feels punitive or coercive
- restricting freedom without clear explanation
- telling a child what they 'must' do
- minimising their voice or autonomy
- minimising overt displays of authority.



Reflective prompt

Is my response adding to their sense of power and safety, or taking it away?

Balance participation and protection

It can be a challenge to balance protection and participation, particularly when the child is being harmed and the child's views and choices sustain the harm being done to them. Remember that what may appear as the child's choices is likely manipulation/coercion by the person of interest.

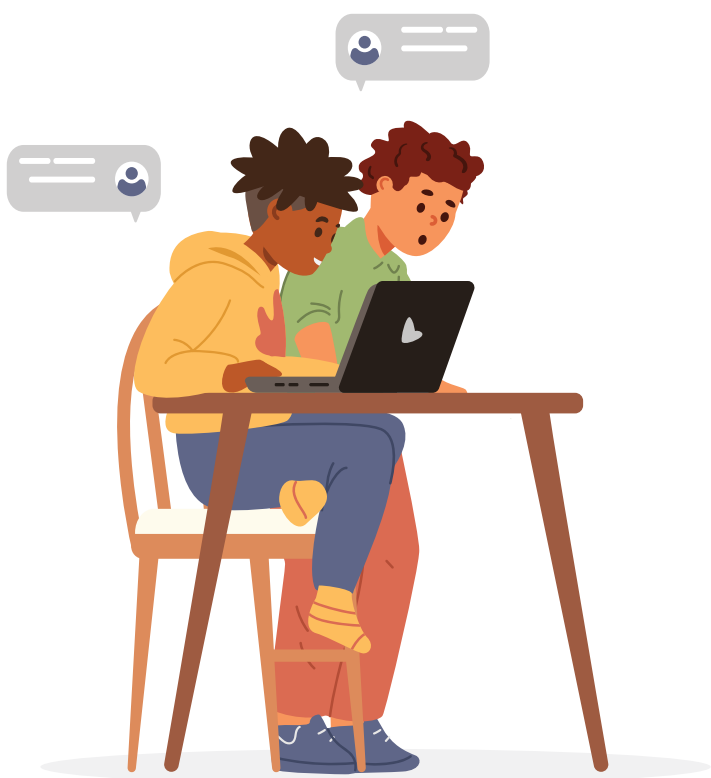
If we swing too far one way and prioritise protection and safety in relation to exploitation alone, this can backfire. It may strip their rights and potentially harm them in other ways (such as feeling silenced, disconnected and controlled). It could also alienate them and push them further away and, increase the likelihood of them being exploited (Lefevre et al, 2019).

However, if we swing too far the other way we are abandoning the child's needs for adults to hold the responsibility for protecting them from people who seek to harm them.



Reflective prompt

How does my emotional response – such as anxiety or frustration – influence my practice response to the child? Do I become more punitive, or can I stay balanced?



Draw on the child's lived experience

The child is the expert in their own experiences. Draw on their lived experiences to plan for their safety – moving from a 'doing to' the child to 'doing alongside'. The child will often have insights about their safety that can be surprising, creative and more reasonable than adults initially expect.

Prioritise their participation, take their voice seriously and allow them to express their views safely. Allow as many opportunities as possible for them to safely exercise choices. Provide 'recognition and incentives to encourage ongoing engagement' (Cody & Darcy, 2019).

Their active involvement is more likely to generate sustained safety as well as building their self-worth and mastery in healthy decision making.



Practice tip

A creative safety strategy suggested by young people in the 'In Our Own Words' report was the role pets can play to support their mental health and feel connected to their care environment. Pets can be a powerful motivator to stay in, or return to, their care environment.

Understand common reactions to exploitation

The child may not perceive their experiences as exploitation, and they may not identify as victims. They may refer to or identify perpetrators as their 'boyfriend or girlfriend', 'friend', or 'the only person who cares about me'.

The child may be distressed by efforts to protect them from the person of interest which can lead to other risks emerging (e.g. absent/missing from home). These risks need to be responded to simultaneously using curiosity, care and transparency about your worries.

Children may experience emotional pain, shame or feel blamed for the exploitation occurring. Shifting the child's perception (to help to build safety) requires more than simply educating or telling the child. Develop a trauma informed plan to explore and address these perceptions while upholding their dignity.

As described by Alderson et al (2022), due to a lack of warmth and care (in their life) *'child exploitation victim survivors may view themselves as defective or unwanted, they may experience difficulties in expressing thoughts and feelings and expect others to hurt or abuse them'* (Fedina et al., 2017).

Children's reactions to exploitation are survival responses, not signs of consent or wrongdoing. These reactions are normal and do not follow a neat sequence. These can include:

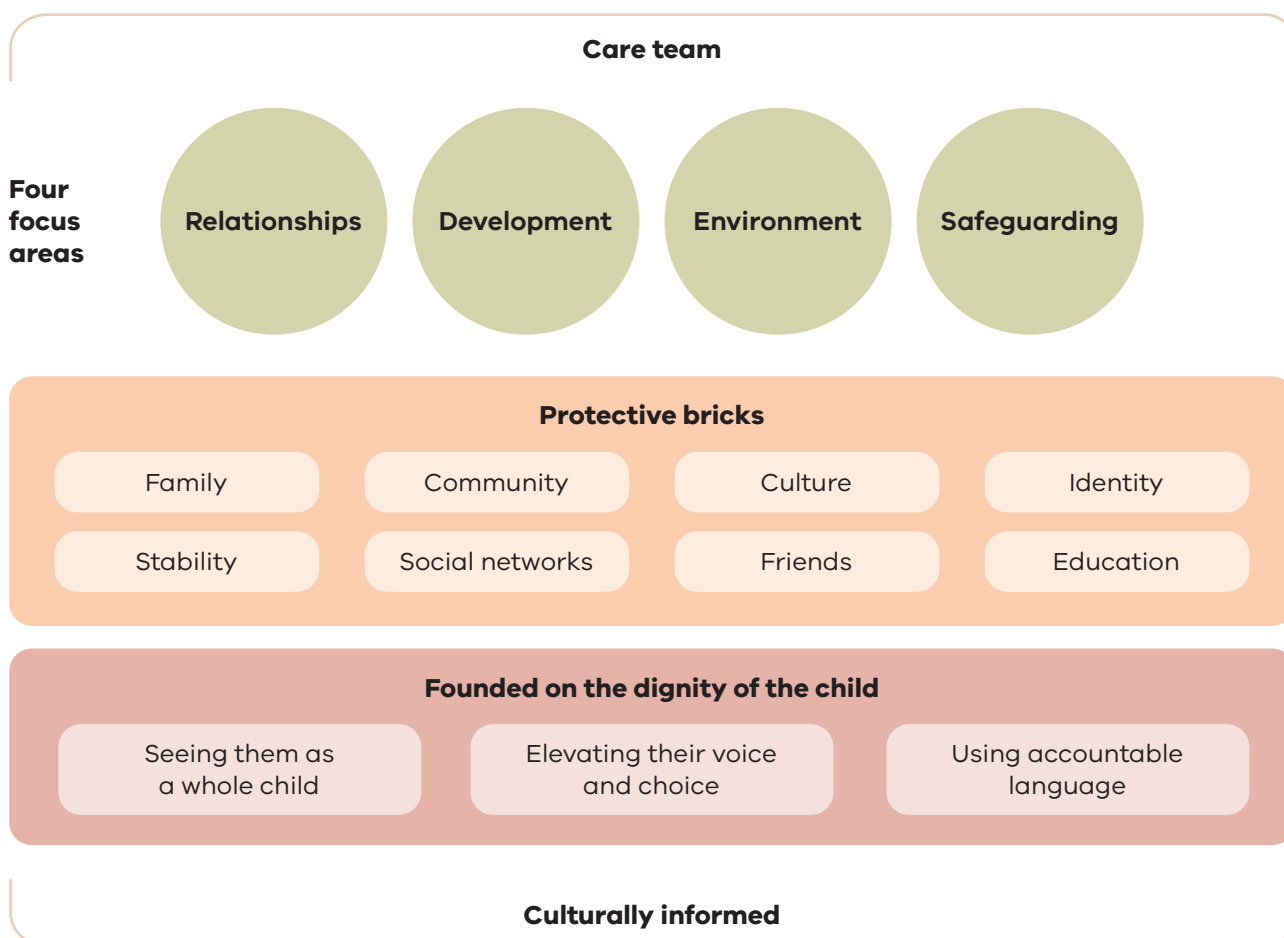
- Secrecy (due to threats, promises or eroded trust).
- Helplessness or dissociation.
- Feeling trapped and seemingly accommodating the situation.
- Delayed or conflicted disclosure.
- Retraction due to shame, fear or confusion (Summit, 1983).

SAFER case plans through connection planning

Connection planning forms part of care team planning that supports the child to be connected to safe people, places, routines, activities and boundaries. Connection planning provides the scaffold for all aspects of responding to exploitation, including safety planning, risk management and case planning goals that build protection, resilience and positive outcomes.

The SAFER children framework FE practice activities of Formulating and Enacting the case plan are undertaken to respond to child safety and risk concerns, including exploitation. The concepts within the F and E practice activities of Formulating and Enacting a case plan can include connection planning and should be included in the actions table in a child's case plan.

Diagram 9: Exploitation-informed connection planning



The care team

The care team is the most effective method for proactively mobilising plans and supports irrespective of the child's care arrangements. The care team should include the child, all professionals with responsibility for the child, and all people in the child's network/community who care about the child. Have the family around the table even if the child is in care.



Practice tip

'Mobility mapping' is a creative activity that engages a child in mapping out all the people and places they have had connection with over their life. Track down every person who does or could care about the child. Motivate them to step in to hold a role in the child's life so that the child has a network of people to rely on into their future.

The foundation of child dignity

The foundation outlines expectations about how the child is treated, understood and written and talked about. These expectations shape all other aspects of planning and responding to the child, their context and their experience of harm.

- See the child as a whole person outside of the risks they are facing. Be deeply interested in who they are – their interests, strengths, dreams and experiences.
- Seek their input in decisions and goal setting creatively rather than seeking their voice simply as a source of information.
- Use language that holds the people who harm accountable, adults responsible, and words that do not blame, pathologise or de-humanise the child.

Focus areas

The four focus areas shape where we place energy in responding to exploitation. These include:

Relationships

Act with urgency to explore, seek out, connect or reconnect all family, kin and community members who do or could care about the child.

Development

Provide age-appropriate opportunities for the child to develop skills, knowledge and experiences, be engaged, build mastery and confidence – through traditional options such as school or extracurricular activities, or everyday life and interest-based experiences.

Environment

Create an environment that demonstrates that the child is seen and cared about and that they would want to spend time in. Consider their sensory preferences and what regulates them.

Safeguarding

Work collaboratively with police to hold POIs accountable and disrupt or cease their exploitation. The child has the right to be able to live in a community where they are not harmed.



Leadership tip

Arrange weekly meetings if the risk to the child is acute and they need intense monitoring. Try to make it the same time each week to create consistency and momentum. Be tenacious – strategise creatively if progress isn't being made and seek additional perspectives and supports.

Protective bricks

These are the factors that should be built and sustained to make exploitation or re-exploitation more difficult and to support the child's wellbeing. If one of these bricks is weak or absent, then the risk of a person of interest exploiting the child increases quickly.

Responding to child disclosures

Reduce barriers to disclosure

There are a variety of factors that shape a child's help-seeking and choices to disclose including:

- Age: younger children are more likely to disclose than older children.
- Gendered beliefs: boys are less likely to seek help than girls, possibly due to stigma related to masculinity.
- Culture: racist systems responses; cultural beliefs and protocols; community shame.
- Entrapment and enmeshment: the person of interests will often erode the child's trust in others, make threats of retribution, induce loyalty and love, or create reliance of the child on them for essentials.
- Poor social responses: previously being treated with disrespect, not believed, blamed, shamed or having had adverse consequences from previous disclosures.
- Isolation: away from safe and supportive people or access to services and community.
- Fear: previous experience of criminalisation, or believing an unjust police response is likely.



Cultural tip

First Nations children may be particularly fearful of being criminalised. The rate of incarceration of First Nations people and continued numbers of deaths in custody make this a realistic fear. If the POI is First Nations, the child may be particularly protective and concerned about consequences in community.



Respond flexibly to the child's disclosure

When a child discloses experiences of exploitation, above all else, our focus is to support their safety, let them know that they are believed and help them to feel understood. If a child is stopped or redirected when sharing, it is unlikely they will disclose again (National Office for Child Safety, [n.d.]). Guide all members of the child's care team to know how to respond if the child discloses to them. Provide advice such as:

- Do not stop a child's disclosure – let the child continue sharing.
- Let them know you believe them and that they are not to blame or in trouble.
- Stay calm. Try not to have a big reaction or express shock, anger or distress.
- Use open questions wherever possible.
- Take the child's lead. Do not continue to push for more details if they seem uncomfortable.
- Reassure them that they have done the right thing. Let them know that some children feel worried later that they should not have shared, but you are proud of them.
- Ask if they are worried about anything happening to them because they have shared.
- Let them know what the next steps will be and when you will be in contact next.



Practice tip

Remember that some children may share information about being exploited without recognising it as harm – therefore they may not experience the sharing as 'a disclosure'. Keep a relaxed approach so that they feel safe sharing. Be transparent about what you might need to do with the information and what you are worried about.

Recognise that disclosure is a process

Children are most likely to disclose information about being exploited as a process over time. They will often test out if it is safe to tell and what to share. Create safety in telling – encouraging them to share more so that the care team can build a clearer picture to support their recovery and safety.

Exploitation is not a one-off event – it is often a complicated web of interactions. And some children are exploited by multiple persons of interest. It is common for children to share snippets of information about different activities, persons of interest and experiences as a part of disclosure of exploitation. Recording this information is important but not the focus of the conversation with the child. You may wish to establish with the child's care team how patterns of information will be captured and mapped over time, such as the use of a link chart.

Prepare the care team to be aware that it is common for children to retract disclosures due to fear, shame, loyalty or the facing the protective actions resulting from their disclosure. This needs to be understood by the network members rather than viewed with scepticism about the child's honesty.

Support the child's right to healing and recovery

Children heal in relationship – your role is to support this to happen in these interconnected ways.

Nurturing the caregiving relationship

Coach and support the caregiver to be attuned, responsive, safe and loving to the child; and to role- model healthy relationships and coping. Help the caregiver navigate continued risks and the aftermath of the child's exploitation.

Nurturing connection to important people

Support the child to build and sustain healthy relationships with people who are important to them and are safe and supportive of the child.

Engaging with therapeutic supports

Connect the child to trauma-informed, culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate therapeutic supports.



Practice tip

All members of the care team should be supported to continually reorient to the following key message in their conversations with the child – the exploitation is about the adult's behaviour, not the child's.

Draw on your relationship with the child

Utilise your relationship with the child to support recovery. Remember that you do not need to be a therapist to be therapeutic as your casework approach can support healing.

Healing through culture

Connection to culture is a primary pathway of healing. Seek consultation to inform options to support First Nations children's healing.

Move beyond generalist referrals and narrowly individualised healing strategies, toward approaches that recognise healing as relational, collective and culturally embedded (Gee et al., 2013 in Gee et al., 2014) – while still attending to each child's unique needs. Explore with the child, their network and cultural experts options for:

- Time on Country.
- Time with family, kin and mob.
- Engaging in cultural practices and ceremonies.
- Cultural programs.
- Culturally relevant ways of healing.

Connect the child to therapeutic supports

The timing of therapeutic supports is important. If the child is currently unsafe, therapeutic supports may be limited to strengthening coping strategies rather than processing or healing from the impacts of traumatic experiences.

Be thorough and thoughtful about who you refer the child to. Ensure that the practitioner has violence-informed attitudes and a strong understanding of the impacts of exploitative behaviours such as coercion, control, grooming and entrapment. If they are not the right fit, look elsewhere.

Consider with the child, what therapeutic supports would best meet their needs based on:

- the culture, age, gender and sexuality of the child, and if they have a disability (including being neurodivergent)
- evidence-base of therapeutic approach – interventions specifically evidenced for trauma should be prioritised
- the child's preferences and ability to engage in traditional talk therapy and whether trauma informed play therapy, ecotherapy, equine therapy or art therapy may connect with them more effectively
- co-occurring issues such as the use of AOD – often to survive and cope with suffering.



Chapter five: **Disrupting child exploitation**



Disrupting child exploitation

Disruption aims to create a break or interrupt the connection between the exploiter and the child, enabling a sustained sense of safety. These disruption strategies work alongside the therapeutic/healing responses discussed in the previous chapter.

Key messages

Disrupting a person of interest:

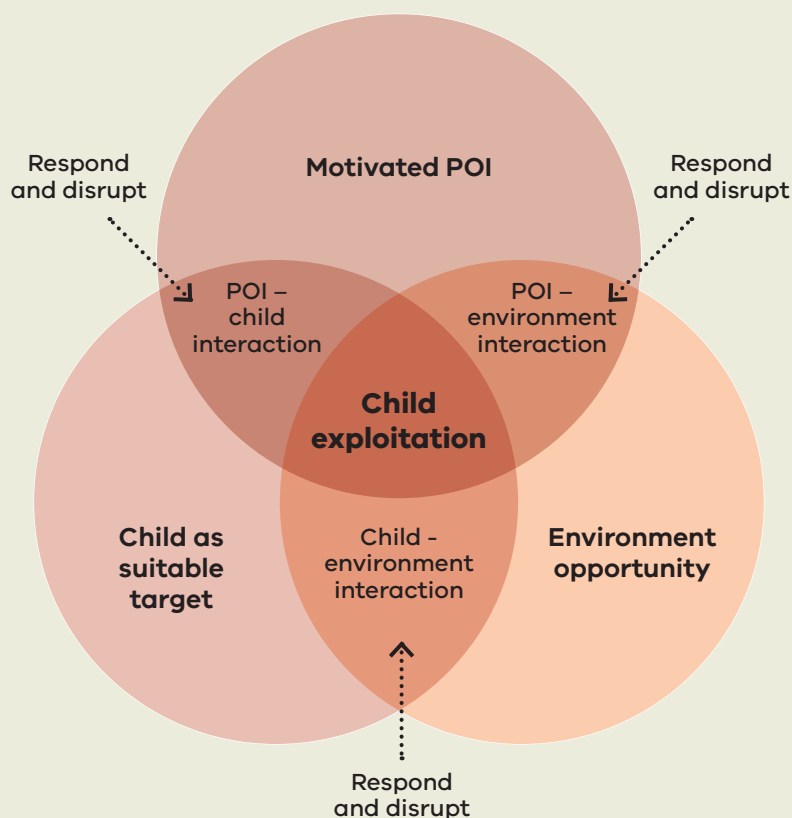
- involves a variety of care based and statutory strategies aimed at reducing the person of interest's access and opportunities to harm the child
- requires proactive and collaborative multi-agency information sharing, planning and responses
- shifts our practice from a focus on individuals to a community and location-based approach
- is supported by mapping patterns of information across people and places.

Disrupting three points of interaction

As explored earlier, it is useful to understand there being three systems of focus: the person of interest, the environment and the child and their caregiving context (Barlow et al., 2022).

Diagram 10 outlines the three points of interaction that need to be targeted for effective disruption. This chapter outlines both statutory and care-based response options (in addition to chapter 4).

Diagram 10: Circles of analysis



Connection and care are central to disruption

Enabling children to develop/maintain meaningful connections is pivotal to disruption. As outlined on page 43 safeguarding through disruption is one of the four focus areas of connection planning.

Although it is essential to identify and target POIs and their networks, engaging with victims will further build on disruption strategies to prevent exploitation or re-exploitation. This is because there is some evidence on child sexual exploitation that (Dixon, 2024):

- persons of interest may target interconnected peers/groups
- some children are induced by persons of interest to introduce them to peers.

Connecting a child to safe people, places, routines, activities and boundaries reduces potential **person of interest – child interactions** and **child – environment interactions** which disrupts access and opportunities for the person of interest to harm the child.

As described on page 43, this approach to disruption is coordinated by a care team who should provide a united approach to the child that prioritises culture, curiosity, connection (with and for the child) and an unwavering message that 'we care'.

Personal safety plans

Proactively responding to child exploitation involves safety planning to mitigate risk to the child, and an accompanying and complementary response to identify and disrupt the person of interest to prevent their contact with the child.

The child is central to safety planning, and they should be involved in all planning aspects. Plans should be nimble – continuously checked for progress and adjusted as required. This should occur weekly where the probability of harm is likely or very likely given the consequences of harm through CSE being significant or severe.

Refer to [Practitioner toolkit 'Safety planning'](#) for an outline of how the concept is applied in an exploitation-informed approach to safety plans.



Practice tip

It can be useful to ask 'if I were a fly on the wall observing a plan to create more safety for this child: what would I be seeing happening? hearing being said? who would be doing these things? Where and at what times?'



Statutory multi-agency collaboration and oversight

There is strong evidence that multi-agency work improves CSE responses. It supports the protection of children in ways that could not be achieved alone (Crawford & L'Hoiry, 2017) and it helps to challenge narratives about exploitation that are not useful to children (Abrams et al., 2020).

Support and advocate for a child-centred approach

Continuously focus efforts that centre the child as a protected person, rather than as a source of evidence in a criminal case (McVeigh & Heward-Belle, 2024). Evidence is clear that effective disruption requires professionals, including police to build trust and rapport with children and young people (Lefevre et al., 2017).



Practice tip

Draw on the potential that schools can play. They often have line of sight to detect warning signs; can be useful in gaining information through ongoing interactions with students; and have the opportunity to coordinate education and responsive supports to children and their network.

Coordinate a collaborative approach that assertively views the child as a victim of exploitation rather than as an offender or a problem. Advocating for these practices may be particularly important if the child:

- has been criminally exploited and therefore has been induced, or is suspected to have been induced to carry out criminal acts that police may otherwise charge the child with
- has been criminalised previously
- is from a family that is well known to police
- is frequently absent or missing
- may use aggressive behaviours in response to police contact due to fear, mistrust and/or previous poor experiences.

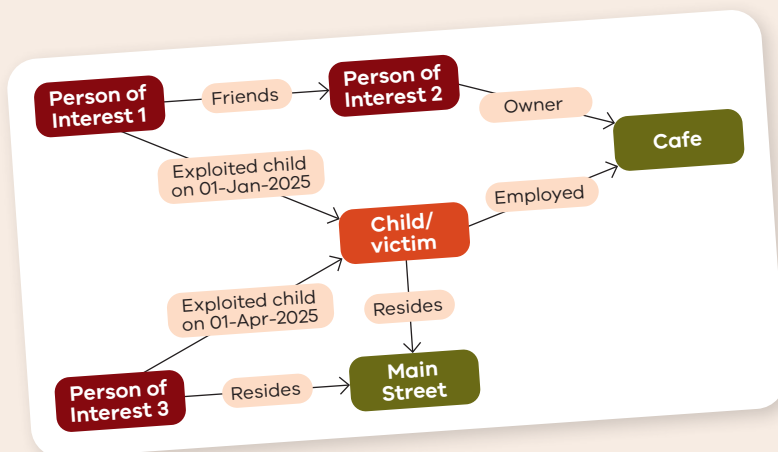
SAFER – Map patterns by ongoing seeking, sharing, sorting and analysing

Information will be ever evolving

Seeking, sharing, sorting and storing information is a constant process which may evolve from one day to the next. This is particularly important because exploitation is not a one-off event, it involves a series of interactions; children are likely to disclose information over time; and some children may be exploited by more than one person of interest (either at the same time or over time). Relevant information and intelligence should be provided to police without delay, to ensure that any law enforcement response is informed by the most contemporary information available.

Use a link chart to map and analyse emerging patterns

A sexual exploitation link chart provides a visual overview of sexual exploitation networks between children and person(s) of interest. The link chart can be created for an individual child or for groups of children by care or professional team members. Please seek advice as needed from the sexual exploitation practice leader and/or the Child Exploitation Response Team when creating a link chart.



Be informed about what information to seek, share and store

Support the care team to have a consistent understanding about what information is useful to capture, share and store for the purposes of disruption.

Information to seek, share and store to assist disruption

Child

- Direct and indirect disclosures.
- Warning signs that the child is being exploited (see page xx)

Persons of interest

Known or suspected:

- Names, nicknames or initials
- Physical descriptions
- Car make and model or licence plate
- Address or suburb
- Job or place of employment
- Phone number, social media handles or email address
- Other people they know/associate with

Connections

- Peers and/or adults the child is spending time with
- Peers and/or adults who are believed to access locations the child or POI frequent
- If any peers are known or suspected to being exploited and/or induced to recruit other children.

Locations

- Physical locations the child has been to/been taken to or frequents
- Physical locations the POI has been to or frequents
- Online environment the child or POI accesses (including handles)

Time

- Date and times the child has been absent or missing
- Date and times the child is believed or known to be at locations
- Date and times the POI is believed or known to be at locations

Modes of contact

- Ways the POI is suspected to be contacting the child

Modes of transportation

- Ways the child travels to POI
- Ways the POI transports/commissions transportation of the child
- Payment for transport (who and how)

Child exploitation template (CET)

Effective disruption relies on timely and accurate information collation and sharing that informs planned action. Once child sexual or criminal exploitation is suspected/detected, you must complete a CE template on CRIS. This enables appropriate collation of exploitation related information and activates a CSE alert on the system. Without this central repository of exploitation related information, it can be more difficult to keep track of evolving CSE and CCE dynamics, POIs, their activities and influence over children. A subset of the CE information, the Police Notification – Child Exploitation Risk (PNCER) is specifically designed to be shared with police, securely through CRIS (not through personal email). You should share this information without delay to ensure police have the latest information to inform their response.

Statutory options to disrupt the person of interest

Police and the multi-agency network have a variety of avenues to disrupt and prevent POIs from being present within the child's circle of influence. Clear messages need to be sent to persons of interest that their behaviour is unacceptable and to stay away from victims or potential victims.

Persons of interest identification

Where assistance is required in identifying POIs, their associates or networks, you can engage a Sexual Exploitation Practice Lead or the central Child Exploitation Response Team (CERT in the office of Professional Practice) who can provide practice or analytical support. They may also assist in situations involving multiple locations or persons of interest, where a link chart may be beneficial to map out what is known and identify any intelligence gaps. Developing a planned response also involves collaboration with key agency partners, like police, to establish time-limited and targeted actions to prevent further contact with the child.

Disruption using harbouring notices and personal safety intervention orders

Legal options to mitigate the risk of exploitation include options under the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic), the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic), and the *Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010* (Vic).

Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (sections 495 and 497):

- Harbouring notice, no contact letter or loitering letter.
- These notices are served on POIs who are 'harbouring' or concealing a child, or otherwise inducing a child to be absent from placement.
- The loitering letter is for POIs entering, lurking or loitering where a child is placed.



Family Violence Protection Act 2008 and Personal Safety Intervention Orders Act 2010:

- Family violence or personal safety intervention orders.
- These can be applied for on behalf of the child against the POI.
- The Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic) has a broad definition of family members that can be considered when lodging the application.

See:

- [DFFH Procedure: Application for a family violence or personal safety intervention order on behalf of a child](#)

Working with police

In line with a collaborative multi-agency approach, foster a close collaborative partnership with police. Contact your local SEPL or the CERT if you require support in liaising with police.

Inform police responses through sharing information

Along with planning meetings and collaborative conversations, carry out other important information sharing strategies (including PNCER template) to support police in their efforts to disrupt the exploitation of children.

While completing the CSET or PNCER template, you can provide critical and time-sensitive information to police via Crime Stoppers, even when incomplete (e.g. POI vehicle registration, unknown owner). This type of report should not be anonymous so that police or police intelligence analysts can contact you for more information.

Remember, relevant information and intelligence should be shared with police without delay, to ensure that any law enforcement response is informed by the most up-to-date information available.

The information provided to police can be collated and built on in the police system. It can then be given to the area or police team best suited to respond.

Area-based police responses to CSE and CCE may vary. For the current area-based response with Victoria Police, consult the SEPL or CERT at the Office of Professional Practice.

Note: If a crime is in progress or a child needs help in an emergency, you should always call Triple Zero (000).

See:

- Protecting children: Protocol between the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care providers and Victoria Police
- [DFFH Sexual exploitation advice web page](#)
- [DFFH Sexual exploitation procedure web page](#)
- [DFFH Missing children and young people advice web page](#)
- [DFFH Missing children and young people procedure web page](#)

Disruption using persistent presence

Visits from child protection or Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC) providers and Corrections Victoria (if the person of interest is on probation or parole) can be useful to convey to POIs that they are being 'constantly watched'. Correctional supervision also provides additional avenues for enforcement and crime disruption.

Police may also be involved in maintaining a persistent presence in the POI's life, through law enforcement and crime prevention/ disruption activities, particularly if they are suspected for being involved in other criminal activity.

Creating an atmosphere of persistent presence may include some or all the following options.

Disruption using exploitation-related criminal charges

An obvious statutory option is for the police to carry out a criminal investigation, which may lead to criminal charge and possible prosecution against the POI. Criminal prosecutions (that is, for child sex offences and so on) often fail to protect children in the short term because evidence against the POI is hard to obtain, and evidence thresholds are high, especially for sex crimes. The very nature of the entrapment and enmeshment tactics used by POIs also intentionally interferes with a child's ability to disclose, give a statement or share evidence.

Disruption using other criminal charges

Persons of interest are often involved in more than one type of crime. Police can leverage alternate laws/offences to stop their targeting of children for exploitation. Executing outstanding warrants, arrests and charges for new (e.g. traffic) and/or exploitation-related offences (e.g. supply drug of dependence) and pursuing breaches (e.g. intervention orders, parole, sex offender registration, etc.) can all have tangible impacts on disruption of the child-POI interaction.

Disruption using location-based strategies

Knowledge of locations frequented by persons of interest and/or child victim/peer networks is key to deploying additional disruption strategies.

Multi-agency efforts can dissuade POI presence and break down opportunities to physically access children. These may include strategies such as engaging the child's network to visit locations they frequent or liaising with local youth outreach, community or health organisations that maintain a regular presence. Where possible, regular police presence can also deter and interrupt the opportunities for POIs to engage children. Alternatively, environmental risk management options such as increased lighting can also have a deterrent effect.

Strategies for protecting children online, involve ongoing education and meaningful conversations about online behaviour, safe places for children and what they can do if they feel unsafe online (see eSafety Commission resources). In addition, disrupting persons of interest in online environments may involve collaboration between Victorian police, Federal police and other options such as the eSafety Commission.

SAFER – Continuously review and adapt

Review the risk assessment

Remember to continuously review the risk assessment to reflect new information or evidence as it arises and to appropriately update assessed levels of risk and mitigation plans.

Regular review and update also ensures that relevant actions to monitor, increase safety and decrease the risks of exploitation are enacted and recorded. Consequence and probability of harm judgements should inform all decisions, such as the need to initiate a protection application or to initiate an urgent review of the child.

Proactively prevent and manage risks to the child

Risk management is not simply about mitigating active risks but also looking further ahead and anticipating potential risks. Constantly orient back to the risk management strategies as context and dynamics change. Risk management strategies should increase protective factors (the protective bricks), reduce push factors and disrupt pull factors (see chapter 5).

You are not alone in this endeavour, and the next section outlines a range of specialists who can help throughout the process.

Specialist services and practitioners

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

Practice Leaders and Sexual exploitation practice leaders (SEPL)

Practice leaders are responsible for providing expert case advice and leadership, supporting and developing child protection practitioners in the integration of theory and practice while demonstrating expertise through case management. The role supports practitioners to develop plans to bring about the changes necessary to ensure the safety, stability and development of children and young people and promote the achievement of case plan objectives within specified timeframes. This role reports to the principal practitioner and includes a case carrying component commensurate with other responsibilities.

The SEPL role plays a critical role in the protection of children and young people from sexual exploitation. The role is responsible for providing expert practice advice and leadership, supporting and developing child protection practitioners and other key partners in the integration of theory and practice. The role demonstrates expertise through case management interventions, systems development and relationship building, and bringing about the changes necessary to ensure the safety, stability and development of children and young people. A key purpose of this role is to more effectively identify children at risk of exploitation, work with Victoria Police to prevent it, and support young people to recover. This role generally reports to the principal practitioner. The role includes a case carrying component commensurate with other responsibilities.

Principal Practitioners

Each departmental child protection division and statewide services employs Principal Practitioners. Along with the sexual exploitation practice leaders, Principal Practitioners provide expert advice, guidance and support to child protection practitioners in relation to children at risk of exploitation.

Office of Professional Practice (OPP)

The OPP is a branch of the department's Community Operations and Practice Leadership division. It works to guide and influence a consistent statewide approach to human services practice that upholds the safeguards and rights of vulnerable Victorians and is informed by contemporary evidence and leading practice.

The OPP adds value to service delivery and client outcomes through a team of human services specialists from varied disciplines.

Child Exploitation Response Team (CERT)

CERT is responsible for executing the department's enhanced response to CSE and CCE. It comprises specialist principal practice advisors and an intelligence team to support practitioners with the complexities of collating, analysing and responding to protect children at risk of exploitation.

For external stakeholders, the practitioner toolkit resources can be accessed via Child Exploitation Response Team or the Child Protection case manager.

Chief Practitioner and Statewide Principal Practitioners

The Chief Practitioner and Statewide Principal Practitioners lead the provision of specialist practice advice and consultation regarding child protection and service delivery by demonstrating evidence-informed practice development, leadership and influence.

Victoria Police

Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams (SOCITs)

SOCITs are comprised of qualified, experienced specialist detectives trained in responding to and investigating sexual offences and child abuse by perpetrators that are known to the victim, or who are readily identifiable. SOCITs work in partnership with other services to ensure an empathetic, professional and comprehensive response to victims of sexual offences and child abuse, and to implement risk management strategies.

Other police units

Area-based police responses to CSE and CCE may vary. Information sharing and coordination between the department, Victoria Police and ACAC providers is needed to inform responses.

For the current area-based response with Victoria Police, consult the SEPL or CERT at the Office of Professional Practice.

Further resources

Please refer to the [Child Exploitation SharePoint page](#) on the CP learning Hub for up-to-date resources and useful links.

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