

Position statement

Child Sexual Abuse and Psychology

The harms that child sexual abuse can cause are a critical issue of concern for psychologists who play an important role in assisting and treating people who have experienced, committed or been exposed to child sexual abuse, and also members of their family who may also be adversely affected. Child sexual abuse occurs across society, including within families, organisations and institutions.

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is committed to supporting efforts to prevent child sexual abuse, working with people who have experienced child sexual abuse, working constructively with those who have committed or been charged with criminal offences, and increasing child safety. These efforts are central to the APS mission, values and ethics and involve applying knowledge from many areas of psychological research and practice.

Many psychologists have expertise and work in the areas of criminal justice and child protection systems as well as in public health and private practice areas. The APS strongly affirms the need for the highest quality evidence-based services to be provided and for members to uphold the highest level of professionalism and ethical standards.

The APS Position

The APS acknowledges a variety of harm that people can experience as a direct consequence of being victimised, including severe adverse effects on mental or physical health and wellbeing, and a possible increased vulnerability for self-harm or suicide.

Many APS members possess expert knowledge, skills and resources that can contribute to a better understanding of child sexual abuse, why it happens and, importantly, how to prevent it. All psychology trained professionals (including practitioners, academics and researchers) have a role to play in the development of effective approaches to the assessment and treatment of those who have experienced child sexual abuse, the treatment and management of those known to have committed acts of child sexual abuse, organisational and occupational strategies, and programmes and resources for community education to prevent and respond in a constructive manner.

All psychologists have a responsibility to promote community awareness of the issues, encourage help-seeking in those affected by or who have committed child sexual abuse and reduce stigmatisation.

The APS is aware of its responsibilities as an organisation to ensure that all of its members contribute to reducing the incidence and harms to persons affected by child sexual abuse.

The APS expects all members to practice ethically by:

- Implementing evidence-informed approaches in their work;
- Facilitating the availability of, or referral to, therapeutic support to those exposed to abuse and ensure their protection from future victimisation by engaging in professional and ethical interventions to mitigate future risk;
- Keeping up to date with the latest knowledge and guidelines about child sexual abuse relevant to their field of work; and
- Seeking supervision and professional advice in responding to allegations of child sexual abuse.

The APS will work to:

1. Strengthen the psychology profession's response to child sexual abuse by:

Working to ensure that psychologists at all levels, including students, can access high quality academic training, professional development and supervision that develops knowledge, competency and skills in responding to child sexual abuse (this may include working with regulatory and accreditation bodies);

Informing members of relevant advancements in the field of child sexual abuse, including changes to their ethical, legal and regulatory requirements;

- Advocating for, and working collaboratively with, regulators to uphold high standards of practice relevant to child sexual abuse;
- Supporting members to develop psychological practice in emerging areas related to child sexual abuse, such as the technology-facilitated abuse; and
- Collaborating with people with lived experience of child sexual abuse, and other key stakeholders, to ensure this work continues to be meaningful and relevant.

2. Strengthen community and government responses to child sexual abuse by:

- Collaborating with government to develop innovative programmes involving the production and distribution of educational media and advertising for community education in order to minimise harm and stigmatisation and support public health prevention efforts.
- Supporting service development in rural and remote regions to promote equity of access for people impacted by child sexual abuse;
- Collaborating with the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association to identify ways to promote equitable access to culturally appropriate treatment and support for individuals and families in relation to child sexual abuse;
- Collaborating with other professional and community groups to develop cross-disciplinary responses to the prevention of child sexual abuse;
- Advocating for well-informed evidence-based government policies that protect the most vulnerable from child sexual abuse;
- Advocating for more research to investigate the efficacy of specific assessment and treatment methods, and the development of professional practice guidelines; and
- Advocating for national standards for use by organisations and the media to communicate about child sexual abuse in ways that promote accurate and effective messaging, and uphold respect and dignity and minimise harms for people who have experienced child sexual abuse.