

Topic 9

Understanding vulnerability in childhood



The National Child Safety Training aims to enhance safety for children and strengthen child-safe culture across the education and care sector by introducing shared language, responsibilities, and understanding. The training was developed in partnership between Australian Centre for Child Protection (ACCP) and the Queensland Government on behalf of Australian governments.

The first level of training, Foundations of Child Safety, includes two eLearning courses:

- **Course 1:** Understanding Child Safety
- **Course 2:** Understanding and Identifying Child Abuse and Neglect

To complement the mandatory eLearning courses, a suite of non-mandatory Community of Practice resources has been developed to extend learning and support the application of knowledge in education and care settings. Whilst the Community of Practice are a voluntary component of the National Child Safety Training, they provide structured opportunities for discussion, reflection, and shared learning over time, helping staff build confidence and consistency in practice.

These resources contain prompts and suggested activities aligned with each course topic. They are designed to be flexible and may be selected, adapted, shortened, or revisited to suit different service types, team sizes, and meeting formats. The intention is to support practical conversations, not to prescribe a fixed program. There is no expectation that all topics and activities will be used and it is at your discretion how you use these resources.

Child safety is everyone's responsibility in places where children learn and grow. Harm can affect a child's wellbeing, learning, and development throughout childhood, and its impacts can continue into adulthood. When child safe practices are not in place, children are more at risk of harm.

By completing the mandatory eLearning training alongside some non-mandatory Community of Practice activities, you can strengthen your understanding of your role in protecting children, responding to concerns, and supporting a child safe environment in your service.



Australian
Centre for
Child Protection



Queensland
Government

Understanding vulnerability in childhood

Children's vulnerability is shaped by the balance between risk and protection in a child's life. Vulnerability increases when risk factors outweigh protective factors, and is reduced when safe, stable relationships and supportive environments are strengthened.

Children may be vulnerable to harm for many reasons. Children experience vulnerability due to factors related to:

- The child themselves (e.g., age and developmental ability experiences of trauma).
- Their relationships (e.g., caregiver capacity and stress, family and domestic violence, lack of social support networks).
- Their environment (e.g., housing instability, unsafe practices in services, digital environment and risks).
- Broader societal and systemic influences (e.g., discrimination, socio-economic disadvantage, intergenerational and collective trauma).

These factors often overlap. Importantly, they do not cause harm on their own. Vulnerability increases when adults, environments, or systems do not provide safety, stability, or support. It is also essential to remember:

- Any child can be vulnerable at different times or within different contexts.
- Vulnerability to harm is complex.
- Children with many protective factors can still experience harm.

Understanding vulnerability helps education and care staff respond with curiosity rather than assumption. It's important not to make assumptions about children or their behaviour. What education and care staff see may be shaped by experiences they are not immediately aware of.



Reminder


You **do not** need to run all three activities.

Select, adapt, shorten, or spread activities across sessions to suit your group and available time.

Activities can also be adapted for one-on-one supervision, mentoring conversations, or team meetings. You may choose to use a single scenario, question, or reflective prompt to guide discussion.

These activities are designed to be flexible and responsive to your service context.



Activity 1: Layers of vulnerability to harm	
Objective	<p>This activity helps participants recognise that vulnerability to harm is complex and explores the different factors or layers that can increase a child’s vulnerability, including child, relational, environmental and societal and systemic factors. This activity supports participants to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify child, relational, environmental, and societal and systemic factors that can increase or decrease a child’s vulnerability to harm. • Understand how these different factors intersect and shift over time.
Time	45-60 minutes
Format	 <p>The illustration is divided into two circular sections. The left section, titled 'Pair Work', shows two people sitting at a table with a pen and paper, with speech bubbles above them. The right section, titled 'Whole Group Activity', shows five diverse people sitting in a circle on the floor, with speech bubbles above them.</p>
Materials needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scenario cards • Butcher’s paper • Pens and markers



Activity plan

Facilitator preamble

“Vulnerability in childhood changes overtime. It’s shaped by the child’s individual characteristics, quality of their relationships, surroundings and environment and the wider community and society they live in. This activity helps to recognise the layers and different factors that increase or reduce vulnerability and why a child may be more vulnerable at different times or within different contexts.”

Remind participants

- Keep discussion and examples general and de-identified.
- Vulnerability can change over time and in different situations.
- It’s okay to feel unsure, this is a complex topic.
- Take a break if needed.

Step 1: Individual card sorting (10 minutes)

- Split the group into pairs.
- Provide each pair with a piece of butcher’s paper, writing material, and sticky notes.
- Ask participants to pick 4-6 vulnerability cards.
- Explain that each card represents a factor that may increase or reduce vulnerability depending on context.

Step 2: Build the four layers (15-20 minutes)

- Ask pairs to draw four concentric circles (like a target):
 - Inner circle: Child factors
 - Second circle: Relational factors
 - Third circle: Environmental factors

- Outer circle: Societal and systemic factors
- Ask pairs to place each vulnerability card into the circle it belongs to.
- Encourage discussion about why each factor fits where it does. Use prompts such as:
 - *What patterns do you notice as cards are placed in the different circles?*
 - *Can you think of specific examples of how these layers or factors shape vulnerability?*
 - *What surprised you when you looked at the layers or factors together?*
 - *How does seeing these factors shift your understanding of vulnerability?*

Step 3: Whole-group reflection (10-15 minutes)

- Bring the group back together to discuss:
 - *Which vulnerabilities felt most influential or complex?*
 - *Which layers seems hardest to shift and why?*
 - *Where does your role sit within these layers or factors?*
 - *Where do we have the most opportunity to strengthen safety?*



Facilitator tips

- Keep language strengths-based and child-focused.
- Remind participants that vulnerability is shaped by context.
- Gently redirect away from speculation about causes of vulnerabilities.



Online adaptation (MS Teams or Zoom)

This activity can be delivered online using breakout rooms and a shared visual space such as a digital whiteboard (e.g., Zoom Whiteboard, Miro, Microsoft Whiteboard) or shared slide template. The purpose remains the same: to help participants recognise that vulnerability to harm is complex and explore the different factors and layers of vulnerability that increase a child's vulnerability to harm.

Platform preparation (before the session)

- Upload digital vulnerability cards onto a shared whiteboard or slide deck.
- Prepare a slide with four concentric circles already drawn or create a template each group can access.
- Enable breakout rooms and ensure participants know how to access the shared workspace.

Step 1: Create psychological safety

- Being with the facilitator preamble.
- Provide a wellbeing reminder.
- Participants can step away from the computer if needed.
- Encourage cameras on or off based on comfort.
- Reinforce that this is a reflective exercise, it's okay to feel unsure, and that this is a complex topic.
- Remind participants support pathways are available (e.g., EAP, supervision etc.).

Step 2: Digital card selection

- Place participants into breakout rooms in pairs.
- Provide access to the shared whiteboard or slide template.
- Ask each pair to select 4-6 vulnerability cards from the shared set.
- Explain that each card represents a factor that may increase or reduce vulnerability depending on context.
- Encourage pairs to briefly discuss why they selected those cards before sorting them.

Step 3: Build the four layers

- Direct pairs to the four concentric circles on their shared template:
 - Inner circle: Child factors
 - Second circle: Relational factors
 - Third circle: Environmental factors
 - Outer circle: Societal and systemic factors
- Ask pairs to drag and place each vulnerability card into the circle they believe it best fits.
- Encourage discussion while placing cards.
- Offer guiding prompts in the chat or verbally before sending groups into breakout rooms:
 - *What patterns do you notice as cards are placed in the different circles?*
 - *Can you think of specific examples of how these layers or factors shape vulnerability?*
 - *What surprised you when you looked at the layers or factors together?*
 - *How does seeing these factors shift your understanding of vulnerability?*

Step 4: Whole-group reflection

- Bring everyone back to the main room.
- Share one group's whiteboard on screen or invite each pair to briefly describe one placement they decided or debated.
- Facilitate discussion using prompts such as:
 - *Which vulnerabilities felt most influential or complex?*
 - *Which layers seem hardest to shift and why?*
 - *Where does your role sit within these layers or factors?*
 - *Where do we have the most opportunity to strengthen safety in our own context?*
- Highlight key themes by reflecting aloud, typing them into the chat or onto a shared slide.

Step 5: Closing reflection

- Close by reinforcing that vulnerability to harm is complex, and any child can be vulnerable at different times or within different settings.
- Vulnerability to harm is shaped by different factors or layers (i.e., child, relational, environmental, and societal and systemic), and supportive relationships, culturally respectful practice, and child-safe environments help to reduce risk and strengthen safety and wellbeing.



Scenario cards: Layers of vulnerability to harm

These scenario cards should be printed before the activity. These cards are provided as examples for use in this activity. They are not an exhaustive list. Facilitators are encouraged to adapt these cards or develop their own vulnerability cards that reflect their service, context, or community, while ensuring all examples remain de-identified.

Age and developmental ability

What a child can understand, manage, and do at their stage of development - emotionally, socially, cognitively, and physically.

Gender

Gender stereotypes and inequalities, including assumptions about toughness, compliance, and sexualisation, can affect who is harmed, how harm occurs, and whether children are believed or protected.

Temperament and personality

Children have different temperaments and personality traits. Some children may be judged, overlooked, or misunderstood because of the way they act or communicate, which can affect how well they are protected.

Identity and cultural connection

When a child's language, traditions, or cultural background are ignored, misunderstood, or devalued, they may feel excluded, unsafe, or less likely to ask for help, increasing their vulnerability.

Experiences of trauma

Trauma from abuse, neglect, family violence, loss, discrimination or racism, accidents, medical procedures, natural disasters, conflict or displacement, impacts of colonisation, forced removals, the Stolen Generations, and intergenerational or collective trauma can affect how children see themselves, others, and the world.

Changes

Big changes like moving house, starting a new school or education and care service, or welcoming a new sibling can disrupt routines, relationships, and lead to the child feeling unsettled.

Lack of personal safety

Without education about topics like abuse, consent, safe and unsafe behaviour, personal boundaries and healthy relationships, children may not recognise when something is wrong or know how to get help.

Caregiver capacity

Children rely on their caregivers to meet their emotional, physical, and safety needs. When caregivers face big pressures, it can be harder to provide children with consistent routines, emotional support and safe care.

Parenting practices

The way parents and caregivers care for and respond to children's needs and behaviours is heavily influenced by their own experiences of being cared for as children and shapes how safe children feel.

Family and domestic violence

When caregivers fight or harm each other, or damage things in the home, children can feel frightened and unsure about the safety of the adults they rely on for care and protection.

Cultural connection

Connection to family, community, culture, and Country are powerful protective factors for children's wellbeing and safety. When these connections are disrupted, vulnerability can increase.

Social support networks

There are different types of social support networks that families may have access to, including extended family, kin, cultural groups, neighbours, and community organisations; and the amount of social support differs across families.

Child and peer relationships

Experiences like exclusion, conflict or bullying can increase isolation, stress and vulnerability to harm.

Care stability and transitions

Frequent changes, including caregivers, moving between homes, entering out of home care or kinship care, can disrupt a child's attachment to caregivers and routines.

Housing safety and stability

Vulnerability can increase when a child's housing is unstable, overcrowded, frequently changing, or far away from community and cultural networks.

Neighbourhood safety and resources

Crime, violence, or community stress can limit safe places to play, activities, and access to culturally familiar services which can increase stress for families.

Access to local services

When the neighbourhood or community has limited services, it can be harder for children and families to get help early.

School and education and care services

Factors such as unpredictable environments, not inclusive of children's individual needs, inconsistent supervision, high staff turnover, bullying, exclusion, or limited cultural safety and accessibility can reduce how safe children feel.

Digital Environment

Unsafe content, messages or cyberbullying can be harmful and low adult supervision can increase risk of harm in the digital environment.

Environmental stressors

Events like floods, fires, cyclones, heatwaves, or pandemics can disrupt daily life, make it hard to maintain community or cultural obligations and children may feel unsafe or worried about the future.

Intergenerational and collective trauma

Harmful events experienced by families or communities in the past, such as abuse, neglect, family and domestic violence, colonisation, racism and discrimination, war, or forced removal, can continue to affect children today.

Access to and coordination of services

High costs, long waitlists, limited places, limited public transport, poor internet or mobile access, poor coordination and communication between services can all reduce access to and coordination of services like healthcare, education and care, and other support services.

Socio-economic disadvantage

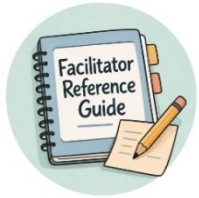
Limited access to money and resources can increase pressure on families and affect children's wellbeing, access to food, healthcare, early learning, and safe environments.

Discrimination

Unfair treatment, exclusion, or reduced opportunities based on race, identity, disability, gender, or religion affect a child's sense of safety, belonging, confidence and emotional wellbeing.

Migrants and refugees

Moving to a new country or being forced to leave home can disrupt stability, relationships, and access to support.



Facilitator reference guide: Layers of vulnerability to harm


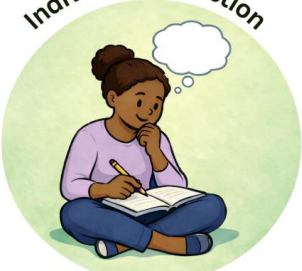
This reference guide is designed to support facilitators in preparing for discussion and building confidence in leading conversations. Participants will bring their own professional experience, knowledge, and insights to the discussion. Participants will bring their own professional experience, knowledge, and insights to the discussion. These contributions should be welcomed and explored, and the richness of the discussion from diverse perspectives in the room should be valued.

Facilitators are encouraged to use this guide as a support tool to guide understanding and discussion of the different factors and layers that can increase a child's vulnerability to harm. It also provides a guide to support the placement of the vulnerability cards under each factor. The table below provides an overview of the different factors that can affect vulnerability along with a description and specific examples.

Factors that can impact vulnerability	Description of factor	Examples
Child factors	Some factors that influence vulnerability relate to the child's individual circumstances and characteristics. These factors do not cause harm or abuse. Instead, vulnerability can increase when children rely on adults for care and protection, or when their needs are misunderstood or unsupported in unsafe environments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age and developmental ability • Gender • Temperament and personality • Identity and cultural connection • Experiences of trauma

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes • Lack of personal safety
Relational factors	<p>Children’s safety and wellbeing are shaped by the quality of the relationships around them. When adults provide consistent, caring, and reliable relationships, children are more likely to feel safe, supported, and protected and ask for help when they need it. When relationships are fractured, inconsistent or affected by stress, children may feel less secure and can be more vulnerable to harm.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caregiver capacity • Parenting practices • Family and domestic violence • Cultural connection • Social support networks • Child and peer relationships • Care stability and transitions
Environmental factors	<p>Environmental factors are the immediate surroundings that affect a child’s safety and wellbeing. This includes a child’s home, neighbourhood, school and education and care services, and even online spaces. Safe spaces, good quality care, and easy access to local services help children and families feel secure and supported. These factors are close to the child and can change quickly depending on where they live and learn.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing safety and stability • Neighbourhood safety and resources • Access to local services • Education and care services • Digital environment • Environmental stressors

<p>Societal and systemic factors</p>	<p>Societal and systemic factors are the bigger influences that shape how communities and services work. These include policies and laws, the economy, discrimination, and events like colonisation that still affect children and families today. These factors are outside the child’s immediate surroundings but have a big impact on things like housing, healthcare, education, cultural safety and the child feeling included. They create the conditions that can support or limit a child’s opportunities to thrive.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intergenerational and collective trauma • Access to and coordination of services • Socio-economic disadvantage • Discrimination • Migrants and refugees
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Activity 2: A reflective practice circle	
Objective	<p>This activity supports participants to reflect on how children’s vulnerability to harm can be shaped by a range of different factors, which often overlap. Vulnerability to harm can occur from a range of circumstances, stressors, and inequalities, many of which are outside of the control of the child or their family.</p> <p>This activity supports participants to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise how vulnerability to harm can occur for any child at different times or within different contexts, without making assumptions. • Identify the role of safe, stable and predictable relationships in strengthening safety and wellbeing for children who are vulnerable to harm.
Time	30-50 minutes
Format	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Whole Group Activity</p>  </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Individual Reflection</p>  </div> </div>
Materials needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open floor space • Chairs arranged in a circle (or you can sit on the floor) • Optional: a small object to pass around the circle (e.g. stone, soft toy, leaf) • Optional: paper and pens for quiet notetaking



Activity plan

Facilitator preamble

“The factors that increase a child’s vulnerability to harm are complex and often overlap and are shaped by different circumstances. This activity is about understanding how vulnerability to harm can affect any child, and that many of these circumstances that increase vulnerability are often outside the child and their family’s control.”

Remind participants

- You do not need to share personal stories, and to keep examples de-identified.
- You can keep reflections general or practice based.
- Be curious and listen when others are speaking.
- It’s okay to pass and sharing is voluntary.

Step 1: Grounding and settling (5 minutes)

- Invite participants to sit in a circle.
- Begin with mindfulness, a brief pause or deep breath: *“Before we start, let’s take a moment to arrive and settle in. Feel your feet on the floor. Take a deep breath in, and a slow breath out.”*
- Explain that the object (if used) will be passed around to indicate whose turn it is to speak, and that people may pass.

Step 2: Reflective prompts - “Understanding vulnerability” (15-25 minutes)

- Introduce one prompt at a time.
- After each prompt, allow quiet reflection, then invite sharing around the circle.
- Suggested prompts (choose 2–3 only):

- *“What helps me stay curious rather than making assumptions or jumping to conclusions about a child’s behaviour or family’s situation?”*
- *“How can I remind myself that vulnerability to harm is complex and shaped by different factors, which are often outside of the control of the child or their family?”*
- *“What helps me notice that a child may need extra support, even when everything might appear ‘fine’ on the surface?”*
- *“How do I ensure my responses are grounded in understanding and compassion rather than assumptions or judgement?”*
- *“What helps me keep in mind that any child or family can be vulnerable at different times, depending on what they are experiencing and whether they have supports in place?”*

Step 3: Collective reflection and meaning making (5-10 minutes)

- Facilitate a short whole-group reflection by drawing out themes you heard.
- Prompt with:
 - “What do our reflections show about how any child or family can be vulnerable at different times or within different contexts?”
 - “How can we develop strong supportive relationships with children to help reduce risk and strengthen safety and wellbeing?”
 - “How do our everyday interactions contribute to a child’s sense safety?”
 - “Which of these supportive actions are already part of our daily practice?”

Step 4: Practice anchor- “One thing I’ll keep doing” (5 minutes)

- Invite participants to silently reflect and complete this sentence (written or thought): *“One thing I will keep doing, because it strengthens children’s sense of safety, is...”*
- Optionally invite a few volunteers to share.

**Facilitator tips**

- Keep the pace slow and unhurried.
- Allow silence - it supports reflection.
- Gently redirect away from graphic detail or personal disclosure.
- Reinforce that small, consistent actions matter.
- Reinforce the importance of safe, stable, and strong relationships to support child safety.
- Normalise and validate emotion without amplifying distress.



Online adaptation (MS Teams or Zoom)

This activity can be delivered online using gallery view, chat, breakout rooms, and simple verbal reflection. The purpose remains the same: to help participants reflect on how vulnerability to harm can be shaped by a range of different factors, many of which often overlap and are outside the control of the child or their family. Rather than a physical circle, the group creates a shared reflective space online through intentional pacing, listening, and optional participation.

Platform preparation (before the session)

- Ensure gallery view is enabled so participants can see each other.
- Have the reflection prompts prepared on a slide or ready to paste into the chat one at a time.
- Decide whether you will invite verbal sharing, chat responses, or a combination of both.

Step 1: Create psychological safety

- Begin with the facilitator preamble.
- Provide a wellbeing reminder.
- Invite participants to turn cameras on if comfortable, while reinforcing that this is optional.
- Acknowledge that this is a reflective conversation and sharing is voluntary.
- Encourage participants to mute when not speaking and use the “raise hand” function if helpful.
- Remind participants support pathways are available (e.g., EAP, supervision etc.).

Step 2: Set the tone

- Invite participants to sit comfortably at their desk (or wherever they are located) and turn their attention to the screen.
- Guide a brief mindfulness moment and pause: *“Before we start, let’s take a moment to arrive and settle in. Feel your feet on the floor. Take a deep breath in, and a slow breath out.”*
- Explain how turn-taking will work online. For example, you may invite participants to speak in order of their screen layout, use the raise hand function, or share in the chat.
- Remind participants that sharing is voluntary and they may pass at any time.

Step 3: Reflective prompts



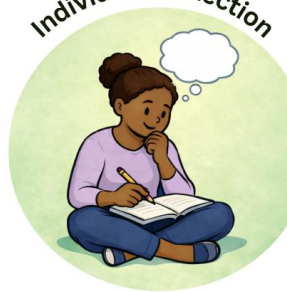
- Display one prompt on screen at a time.
- After sharing the prompt, allow 30–60 seconds of quiet reflection before inviting responses.
- Participants may respond verbally, type into the chat, or simply listen.
- Encourage short, practical reflections rather than long and detailed answers.
- Suggested prompts (choose 2–3 only):
 - *“What helps me stay curious rather than making assumptions and jumping to conclusions about a child’s behaviour or family’s situation?”*
 - *“How can I remind myself that vulnerability to harm is complex and shaped by different factors, which are often outside of the control of the child or their family?”*
 - *“What helps me notice that a child may need extra support, even when everything might appear ‘fine’ on the surface?”*
 - *“How do I ensure my responses are grounded in understanding and compassion rather than assumptions or judgement?”*
 - *“What helps me keep in mind that any child or family can be vulnerable at different times, depending on what they are experiencing and whether they have supports in place?”*
- If helpful, invite participants to add one key word in the chat that captures their reflection before moving to the next prompt.

Step 4: Collective reflection and meaning making

- Facilitate a whole-group reflection by summarising and reflecting themes you heard from responses (e.g., verbal, chat).
- You may type key themes onto a shared slide or whiteboard as they emerge.
- Guide discussion with prompts such as:
 - *What do our reflections show about how any child or family can be vulnerable at different times or within different contexts?"*
 - *"How can we develop strong supportive relationships with children to help reduce risk and strengthen safety and wellbeing?"*
 - *"How do our everyday interactions contribute to a child's sense of safety?"*
 - *"Which of these supportive actions are already part of our daily practice?"*

Step 5: Practice anchor

- Invite participants to complete silently or type into the chat: *"One thing I will keep doing, because it strengthens children's sense of safety, is..."*
- Allow a brief pause for reflection.
- Optionally invite a few volunteers to share verbally before closing the session.

Activity 3: Strengthening safety through everyday practice	
Objective	<p>This activity helps participants explore how education and care staff can respond to children who are vulnerable to harm in ways that can strengthen safety.</p> <p>This activity will support participants to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise how vulnerability to harm can change at different times and depending on context, relationships, and the environment the child is in. • Identify different factors that can increase vulnerability to harm. • Explore responses that can strengthen child safety. • Reflect on how small but planned and consistent actions can strengthen safety without needing to know every detail about a child’s history.
Time	40-55 minutes
Format	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p><i>Small Group Activity</i></p>  </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p><i>Whole Group Activity</i></p>  </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p><i>Individual Reflection</i></p>  </div> </div>
Materials needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Printed scenario cards reflecting the different factors that can increase vulnerability to harm • Optional role cards: Staff member / Child / Observer



Activity plan

Facilitator preamble

“We’re going to explore some everyday scenarios that highlight how children who are vulnerable to harm may present and how adults can respond in ways that strengthen a child’s sense of safety.”

Remind participants

- No one is required to act in the role play - observing is a valid role.
- Focus on adult responses to strengthen safety, not judging children or families.
- Keep scenes simple, brief, and non-graphic.
- Anyone may step out or take a break if needed.

Step 1: Form groups and choose a scenario (5-10 minutes)

- Divide participants into groups of 3.
- Each group chooses one everyday scenario in education and care settings.
- Within each group, participants decide who will:
 - Take the role of the education and care staff member.
 - Take the role of the child (if comfortable) or describe the child’s responses verbally.
 - Act as observer and take notes.
- Some scenarios may be difficult to role play. For these cards, participants can choose to instead describe the situation from the perspective of the staff member, child, or parent rather than acting it out.

Step 2: Role play (10 minutes)

- Groups act out a brief scene showing:
 - A child where factors increasing vulnerability to harm are present.
- An adult responding in a typical way or a way that does not necessarily strengthen child safety. Keep the scene to 1–2 minutes in length.
- Observers record brief notes focusing on:
 - Tone, pace, and language.
 - Body language or facial expression (if visible).
 - Which vulnerability factors may be present (child, relational, environmental, societal or systemic).
 - How the child might experience the response.

Step 3: Supportive response (10-15 minutes)

- Groups revisit the same scenario and practise a response that focuses on strengthening the child's sense of safety.
- Encourage:
 - Calm and gentle communication.
 - Emotional validation and supporting regulation.
 - Respectful and professional boundaries.
 - Actions and responses that strengthen safety and connection.
- Emphasise small changes to the response rather than perfect responses.
- Observers again note what feels different in tone, language, and likely child experience.

Step 4: Group reflection (10-15 minutes)

- Invite one group to demonstrate or describe both versions.
- Guide discussion using prompts such as:
 - *What vulnerability factors were present in the scenario?*
 - *How did the supportive response strengthen safety?*
 - *What felt, looked, and sounded different between the two responses?*

- *How might the child feel and experience each response?*
- *Which responses feels more realistic in everyday practice?*

Step 5: Closing reflection (2 minutes)

- Invite participants to reflect quietly on:
 - How they can build strong relationships with children and strengthen safety through everyday interactions.
 - What they might continue, adjust, or be more mindful of in their practice when a child experiences factors that may increase their vulnerability to harm.



Facilitator tips

- Normalise nervousness in the role play task.
- Step in if content becomes too intense.
- Redirect from “fixing” and “perfect” responses to understanding vulnerability to harm and supporting responses to strengthen safety.



Online adaptation (MS Teams or Zoom)

This activity can be delivered online using breakout rooms, shared scenario slides, and optional chat or whiteboard reflections. The focus remains on exploring how education and care staff can respond to children who are vulnerable to harm in ways that can strengthen their sense of safety.

Platform preparation (before the session)

- Upload digital scenario cards to a shared slide deck or document.
- Prepare optional digital role labels (Staff Member / Child / Observer) or ask groups to assign roles verbally.
- Set up breakout rooms for groups of three.
- Decide how observers will record notes (shared document, private notes, or chat to facilitator).

Step 1: Create psychological safety

- Begin with the facilitator preamble.
- Provide a wellbeing reminder.
- Remind participants that role play is optional and they may choose to describe the scenario rather than act it out.
- Focus on adult responses to strengthen safety, not judging children or families.
- Keep scenes simple, brief, and non-graphic.
- Reinforce that the activity focuses on practice, not performance.
- Encourage cameras on if comfortable but allow flexibility.
- Remind participants support pathways are available (e.g., EAP, supervision etc.).

Step 2: Form breakout groups and choose a scenario

- Place participants into groups of 3 and into breakout rooms.
- Display or share the digital scenario cards and ask each group to choose one everyday education and care scenario.
- Within each group, participants decide who will:
 - Take the role of the education and care staff member.
 - Take the role of the child (if comfortable) or describe the child's responses verbally.
 - Act as observer and take notes.
- Explain that roles can rotate if time allows.
- Some scenarios may be difficult to role play. For these cards, participants can choose to instead describe the situation from the perspective of the staff member, child, or parent rather than acting it out.

Step 3: First response – Typical reaction

- In breakout rooms, groups enact or describe a brief 1–2 minute scene showing:
 - A child where factors increasing vulnerability to harm are present.
 - An adult responding in a typical way or a way that does not necessarily strengthen the child's sense of safety.
- Observers record brief notes focusing on:
 - Tone, pace, and language.
 - Body language or facial expression (if visible).
 - Which vulnerability factors may be present (child, relational, environmental, societal or systemic).
 - How the child might experience the response.
- If acting feels uncomfortable online, groups may narrate the interaction instead.

Step 4: Supportive response – Strengthening safety

- Groups revisit the same scenario, and this time, they practise or describe a response that focuses on strengthening the child’s sense of safety.
- Encourage:
 - Calm and gentle communication.
 - Emotional validation and supporting regulation.
 - Respectful and professional boundaries.
 - Actions and responses that strengthen safety and connection.
- Emphasise small changes to the response rather than perfect responses.
- Observers again note what feels different in tone, language, and likely child experience.

Step 4: Whole-group reflection

- Bring participants back to the main room.
- Invite one group to demonstrate or describe both versions of their scenario.
- Guide discussion using prompts such as:
 - *What vulnerability factors were present in the scenario?*
 - *How did the supportive response strengthen safety?*
 - *What felt, looked, and sounded different between the two responses?*
 - *How might the child feel and experience each response?*
 - *Which responses feel more realistic in everyday practice?*
- Capture and reflect key themes in chat or on a shared whiteboard if helpful.

Step 5: Closing reflection

- Invite participants to type in the chat or reflect silently on:
 - How they can build strong relationships with children and strengthen safety through everyday interactions.
 - What they might continue, adjust, or be more mindful of in their practice when a child experiences factors that may increase their vulnerability to harm.
- Reinforce that small, consistent changes in adult responses can significantly influence a child's sense of safety, wellbeing, and belonging.



Scenario cards: Strengthening safety through everyday practice

The below scenario cards are intended to be printed. These scenarios are designed to reflect common, everyday situations where you may be aware of factors impacting a child's vulnerability to harm.

For each scenario, an example of a response that may strengthen safety and a response that may not strengthen safety are provided. Provide one card to each group as the basis for the role play, discussion and reflection.

Facilitators are encouraged to adapt these scenario cards or develop their own scenario cards that reflect their service, context, or community, while ensuring all examples remain de-identified.

Scenario Card 1

A 3-year-old with limited language skills becomes easily overwhelmed during group time and hits peers when frustrated.

Scenario Card 2

A 4-year-old from a culturally and linguistically diverse background refuses to speak at the service and avoids activities because she feels different from peers.

Scenario Card 3

A parent juggling shift work frequently drops off their 2-year-old late, visibly stressed, and forgets essential items like nappies or lunch.

Scenario Card 4

A 5-year-old who recently moved services struggles to make friends and spends most of the day alone.

Scenario Card 5

A child living in temporary accommodation attends the service irregularly. When present, they are tired, often expresses they are hungry, and struggles to participate.

Scenario Card 6

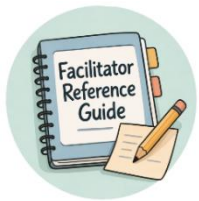
A 9-year-old arrives at outside of school hours care exhausted after staying up late using a tablet unsupervised. He imitates inappropriate content viewed online during play.

Scenario Card 7

A child from a low-income family attends a service in an area with limited transport and few supports. The family struggles to afford excursions or special events.

Scenario Card 8

A child whose family have recently migrated to Australia becomes distressed when there are loud noises and during emergency drills, and other children make comments about his accent.



Facilitator reference guide: Strengthening safety through everyday practice

This reference guide is provided to support facilitator preparation with leading this activity. The purpose of this guide is to help facilitators anticipate possible themes and responses, strengthen their own understanding of the content, and feel prepared to guide the activity in a reflective and strengths-based way. It is not intended to be shared with participants in advance, nor does it represent a single or “correct” set of answers. These responses are intended as prompts rather than a complete list. Participants may suggest alternative responses based on their experience and knowledge, and these should be acknowledged and explored. Facilitators may also add responses relevant to their own organisation, service, and context.

Scenario Card	Responses that may not strengthen safety	Responses that may strengthen safety
Scenario Card 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child is excluded from group time without support. • The behaviour is described as “attention seeking.” • “If you can’t behave, you can’t sit with the group. Go over there until you stop hitting.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with the child’s family to access early intervention support. • Visual cues, small group alternatives, and co-regulation strategies. • <i>“I can see you’re feeling big feelings. Let’s sit together and take some deep breaths.”</i>

<p>Scenario Card 2:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff insist that other languages spoken at home shouldn't be incorporated and avoid adapting programs. • Cultural identity is not acknowledged in planning or interactions. • "You need to speak English here. That's the only way you'll fit in." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate activities and resources that show cultural diversity and different lived experiences, to help the child feel seen and understood. • A bilingual support worker is engaged to help foster engagement and build confidence. • <i>"Your home language is important here too. Would you like to teach me how to say hello the way your family says it?"</i>
<p>Scenario Card 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff criticise the parent in front of others and threaten to charge additional fees. • No effort is made to understand or support the family's circumstances. • <i>"You're late again and you keep forgetting things. This really isn't acceptable."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff check in gently, offer practical supports (spare supplies, flexible routines), and link the parent with community services. • The service documents any concerns and maintains open communication. • <i>"It looks like it's been a tough morning. Don't worry, we've got spare nappies today. How can we support you right now?"</i>
<p>Scenario Card 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff assume the child prefers to play alone. • No targeted support is provided or efforts to check-in despite ongoing isolation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff scaffold peer interactions and create 'buddy' systems. • A collaborative approach is taken, and the family is invited to share information about the child's interests to support connection and development of peer relationships.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"If you want friends, you need to try harder. Go and play with the others."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"I noticed you like building. Would you like me to introduce you to some friends who also love building towers?"</i>
Scenario Card 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service labels the child as "unreliable" and stops engaging with the family. • Staff express frustration but do not explore the underlying housing issues. • <i>"You're always late and tired. Your mum needs to get you here on time."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service offers breakfast, rest opportunities, and works with the family to maintain consistent attendance. • Staff liaise with support agencies (with consent) to offer more wrap-around supports and help stabilise the child's routine. • <i>"I'm glad you're here today. Let's get you some breakfast and a quiet place to rest if you need it."</i>
Scenario Card 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff make judgements and shame the family about not supervising the child properly. • The behaviour is dismissed as "just kids being silly." • <i>"You shouldn't be letting them watch that stuff. No wonder they act like this."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff have open conversations with family in a sensitive and gentle manner, asking about digital routines within the home environment and provide guidance on age-appropriate use, protective practices, and any risks and concerns. • The service incorporates digital safety education into the program. • <i>"We've noticed some behaviours that might be linked to online content. I'm wondering if we could we chat about ways to support safe screen use together?"</i>
Scenario Card 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child is excluded from activities requiring payment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service supports the child to attend and connects the family with financial supports.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff make comments implying the family is “not committed enough.” • <i>“If you can’t pay, your child will have to miss out and stay back at the centre.”</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff maintain compassion and understanding and avoid judgements singling the child out. • <i>“We want everyone to be included in this activity and can work with you to look at how we can achieve this.”</i>
<p>Scenario Card 8</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff tell the child to “get used to it” and ignore peer comments. • No adjustments are made to help the child feel safe or show their culture is valued and respected. • <i>“You need to get used to it. And just ignore what the other kids say.”</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff prepare the child for emergency drills and address comments through inclusive teaching. Staff reinforce consistent messages related to respecting and valuing cultural diversity. • A cultural liaison worker supports communication with the family. • <i>“Loud noises can feel scary, so I’ll stay with you. In our room, we speak kindly to everyone, let’s talk about how we include each other.”</i>