

Topic 3

Child abuse and neglect in the Australian context



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.



Child abuse and neglect in the Australian context

Topic 3 builds a shared understanding of how common child abuse and neglect is in Australia, who is most affected, and what this means for education and care settings.

This topic explores:

- National information about incidence (reports to child protection services) and prevalence (lifetime experiences)
- Why child abuse and neglect are often under-reported
- How systems, inequality, and access to support shape what we see in data
- What we know (and don't know) about abuse and neglect in education and care services
- Why educators play a critical role in noticing concerns early and responding safely

The content may challenge assumptions and can feel confronting at times. Participants are encouraged to pause, take breaks, and prioritise their wellbeing throughout.




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: What the numbers tells us	
Objective	<p>This activity helps participants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the difference between incidence and prevalence • Reflect on why official figures never show the full picture • Consider how data shapes (and sometimes distorts) our understanding of harm
Time	30-50 minutes
Format	
Materials needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key data points from Topic 3 (on slides, handout, or read aloud) • Paper or notebook (optional) • Pens



Activity plan

Facilitator preamble

“We often hear statistics about child abuse and neglect, but numbers don’t tell the whole story. This activity is about understanding what the data can show us, what it can’t, and why education and care settings matter so much.”

Remind participants

- You don’t need to be good with numbers.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- This is about reflection, not analysis.
- You can step out if the discussion feels heavy.

Step 1: Individual reflection (5–10 minutes)

- Display and read aloud key data points from Topic 3.
- Invite participants to quietly consider:
 - *What surprised you about the information?*
 - *What confirmed what you already knew?*
 - *What questions did the data raise for you?*
- Participants can write notes or reflect silently.

Step 2: Small-group discussion (10-20 minutes)

- Divide participants into small groups and ask them to discuss:
 - *Why do you think so much abuse and neglect is never reported?*
 - *What might make it harder for young children to be noticed or heard?*
 - *How might systems and access to services influence what gets recorded?*
- Encourage participants to jot down their ideas.

Step 3: Whole group discussion (10-20 minutes)

- Bring the group together and ask them to reflect on what they shared within their group.

Step 4: Closing reflection (2 minutes)

- Close with: *"If the data only shows part of the picture, what does that mean for our role?"*

**Facilitator tips**

- Avoid debating statistics.
- Keep the focus on meaning and practice.
- Normalise uncertainty and emotional reactions.





Online adaptation (MS Teams or Zoom)

This activity can be delivered online using shared slides or a short handout with key data points, along with chat responses and breakout rooms. The purpose remains the same: to help participants understand child abuse and neglect in the Australian context, reflect on what data does and does not show, and connect this information to their role in education and care.

Platform Preparation (before the session)

- Prepare 4-6 key data points on separate slides.
- Prepare a slide with clear reflection prompts (e.g., “What stands out?” “What might this data not show?”) so participants can refer to them during discussion.
- Set up breakout rooms in advance (3-4 participants per group).
- Prepare one slide that gently acknowledges cultural and systemic context (e.g., under-reporting, barriers to disclosure, over-representation of some communities in statutory systems) to support culturally safe discussion.
- Decide in advance how participants will respond after each data point (chat, emoji reactions, brief verbal responses, or silent pause).
- Have the links ready before the session begins.

Step 1: Create psychological safety

- Begin with the facilitator preamble
- Provide a wellbeing reminder
- Remind participants they can step away from the computer if needed
- Encourage cameras on or off, based on comfort
- Remind participants support pathways are available (e.g., EAP, supervision etc.)

Step 2: Set the context

- Briefly explain to participants:
 - The difference between incidence (reported cases) and prevalence (lifetime experience)
 - That data helps us understand patterns, but never tells the full story
- Suggested facilitator preamble: *“These numbers help us see the size of the problem, but they don’t tell us everything. Today we’re focusing on what the data helps us notice, and what it might miss.”*

Step 3: Share key data points

- Share 4-6 key data points one at a time using:
 - Slides
 - Screen share
- After each data point, pause and invite brief reactions using:
 - Chat responses (one word or short sentence)
 - Verbal response (1-2 participants only)
 - Emoji reactions (thumbs up, surprised, thinking face)
 - Or silent reflection (10-15 second pause)
- Example prompts:
 - *“What stands out to you?”*
 - *“Is this surprising, or does it reflect what you’ve seen in practice?”*
 - *“What emotions come up when you see this?”*

Step 4: Small-group reflection

- Place participants into breakout rooms (3-4 people)
- Share 2-3 reflection prompts in the chat, such as:
 - *“What do these numbers do not show us about children’s experiences?”*
 - *“Why might abuse and neglect go unnoticed or unreported in education and care settings?”*
 - *“What makes noticing harm harder with very young children?”*
- Ask participants to write down their reflections.

Step 5: Whole-group consolidation

- Bring participants back to the main room.
- Invite each group to share:
 - One key insight, or
 - One question the data raised for them.
- As facilitator, reflect themes rather than correcting.

Step 6: Closing reflection

- Close with a short reflective question, inviting responses via chat or verbally:
 - *“How does this information shape the way you think about your role in keeping children safe?”*
 - *“What is one thing this reinforces about noticing concerns early?”*
- Reassure participants: *“Your role is to notice, record, consult, and act within your responsibilities.”*





Information cards: Key data points – child abuse and neglect in the Australian context

The key data points below are provided as a facilitator reference to support discussion about child abuse and neglect in the Australian context. They are written in plain language so they can be read aloud, shared on slides, or used as a handout, without overwhelming participants with statistics or technical detail. These data points are not intended to be memorised or used as evidence in isolation. Their purpose is to support shared understanding, challenge assumptions, and prompt reflection about what data can, and cannot, tell us about children's experiences.

Note. Information about child abuse and neglect is based on the best available data at the time of writing. Over time, reporting practices, research methods, and population factors may change, which can affect how data is collected and interpreted.

Facilitators are encouraged to stay up to date with the most current national and state or territory data when using this guide over time, and to check relevant government or regulatory sources if delivering this activity in future years. Using current data helps ensure discussions remain accurate, relevant, and responsive to the broader context in which services operate.

National incidence (reports to Child Protection services)

- More than 1 in 20 children in Australia are reported to Child Protection services each year for suspected child abuse or neglect.
- In 2023-2024, around 307,000 children were reported to Child Protection services.
- Of these, 121,000 children were investigated.
 - Approximately 1 in 137 children had abuse or neglect substantiated.
 - Some children are reported more than once in a year, often because:
 - They experience multiple incidents, or
 - More than one type of abuse or neglect is occurring.

Key message: Incidence data only captures what is reported. It does not show the full picture of harm in the community.

Why incidence data is incomplete

- Many children never disclose abuse or neglect.
- Young children may not have the language to explain what is happening.
- Even when concerns are reported:
 - They may not be investigated
 - They may not be substantiated
- Fear, uncertainty, and system barriers can prevent reporting.

Key message: Low reporting does not mean low harm.

Lifetime prevalence (Australian Child Maltreatment Study, 2024)

- 2 in 3 Australians report experiencing at least one form of child abuse or neglect before the age of 18.
- Many people experienced more than one type of abuse or neglect.
- 1 in 4 people who experienced abuse experienced three or more types.

Key message: Prevalence data shows abuse and neglect are far more common than reports suggest.

How common each type of abuse is (lifetime prevalence) (ACMS, 2024)

- Family and domestic violence exposure: 39.6%
- Physical abuse: 32%
- Emotional abuse: 30.9%
- Sexual abuse: 28.5%
- Neglect: 8.9%

Key message: Emotional harm and exposure to violence are as significant as physical harm.

Differences across groups (ACMS, 2024)

- Females report higher rates of:
 - Sexual abuse
 - Emotional abuse
 - Neglect
- Younger Australians (16–24 years):
 - Around 1 in 4 report experiencing child sexual abuse
 - Over half of these experiences were caused by other children or young people
 - Abuse by peers and abuse in online spaces has increased for younger generations.

Key message: Harm often occurs within peer relationships and familiar environments.

Children who appear more often in child protection data





- Infants under 1 year of age
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- Children living in very remote areas
- Children from lower socioeconomic areas

Important context: These patterns reflect systems, inequality, historical harm, and access to services, not higher inherent risk in families or communities.

Abuse and neglect in education and care services

- Education and care services are institutional settings where harm can occur.
- Data is limited, but available information shows:
 - Reports and notifications in education and care settings are increasing
 - Abuse is likely under-reported due to:
 - Children's young age
 - Fear of consequences
 - Reputation concerns
 - Workplace cultures of silence
- Across Australia, hundreds of reportable conduct notifications involving education and care services have been recorded in recent years, including:
 - Physical violence
 - Significant neglect
 - Sexual misconduct and offences

Key message: Harm can and does occur in education and care settings, even if it is difficult to detect.

Activity 2: Why harm goes unnoticed	
Objective	This activity supports participants to explore why harm can go unnoticed or undetected, with a specific focus on education and care settings.
Time	30 - 60 minutes
Format	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p><i>Individual Work</i></p>  </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p><i>Pair Work</i></p>  </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p><i>Whole Group Activity</i></p>  </div> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;"> <p><i>Individual Reflection</i></p>  </div>
Materials needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whiteboard or butcher’s paper • Whiteboard or Marker Pens • Paper / notebooks • Pens



Activity plan

Facilitator preamble

“Most people who work with children and young people genuinely want to protect them and do the right thing. Yet abuse and neglect can still go undetected. There are many reasons this can happen, and this activity is designed to explore those reasons.”

Remind participants

- Keep examples general and de-identified.
- Focus on general reasons why harm can go undetected in education and care services.
- Avoid discussing specific services or people.

Step 1: Brainstorming the barriers (10–15 minutes)

- Part A: Ask participants to quietly reflect and write down:
 - *“What do you think can make it hard for harm to be noticed in education and care services?”*
 - Examples might include things such as young age of children attending the service, children who are non-verbal or have limited language abilities making it hard for children to disclose etc.
 - Other examples might include things like busy environments and high staff turnover mean signs may get missed.
- Participants can write privately.
- The quiet start allows honest thinking before group influence.

Part B: Invite participants to share responses:

- Record responses under broad headings such as:
 - Age
 - Limited language skills
 - Difficulty of children to disclose
 - Abuse often happens in private
 - Criminal nature/deliberately hidden
 - Children may not be believed

Step 2: Pair reflection (10-20 minutes)

- Place participants into pairs.
- Ask them to discuss: *“Why do you think official statistics may not represent the true picture of how many children in Australia have experienced abuse or neglect?”*
 - Examples might include:
 - “Adults might not know or recognise the signs”
 - “Children often never disclose”
 - “Hidden nature of abuse”
 - “Children might not be believed”
 - “Concerns might be minimised”
 - “Staff might be reluctant to report”
 - “Not all reports will be investigated”
 - “Not all investigations will lead to substantiations”
 - “Might be limited evidence to prove it happened”
 - “What is counted as abuse in one jurisdiction may not be counted in another”.
- Bring the group back together and invite 2-3 pairs to briefly share their insights.

Step 3: Practice connection (10-20 minutes)

- Bring the group back together and ask: *“What strengthens safety and helps early identification of harm?”*
 - Examples might include:
 - “Staff being educated on the types and signs of abuse”
 - “Children being taught about protective behaviours education and body safety skills”
 - “Close relationships with children”
 - “Always believing children’s disclosures”
 - “Staff noticing changes and being curious”
 - “Staff raising concerns early”

Step 4: Closing reflection (2 minutes)

- Invite participants to consider one action they can take in their role to strengthen their understanding of prevalence data and improve their ability to recognise and respond to possible signs of abuse or neglect.

**Facilitator tips**

- Gently redirect if conversation becomes personal
- Reinforce that noticing, being curious and speaking up is protective



Online adaptation (MS Teams or Zoom)

This activity can be delivered online using shared prompts, chat responses, digital whiteboards, or breakout rooms. The purpose remains the same: to help participants reflect on why abuse and neglect often go unnoticed or unreported, and how organisational culture and systems influence silence.

Platform Preparation (before the session)

- Prepare one slide outlining the purpose of the activity and the key reflection questions:
 - *“What makes harm hard to notice?”*
 - *“What makes it hard for people to speak up?”*
 - *“What do you think can make it hard for harm to be noticed in education and care services?”*
- Set up 1-2 simple anonymous polls for the temperature check (e.g., “Speaking up about concerns in this service feels...”).
- Prepare a shared slide or whiteboard with headings ready for capturing responses (e.g., Age, Limited language skills, Hidden Nature of Abuse)
- Set up breakout rooms in advance (3-4 participants per group).
- Have the links ready before the session begins.

Step 1: Create psychological safety

- Begin with the facilitator preamble and a wellbeing reminder
- Remind participants that sharing is optional
- Reflection can remain private
- Participants can step away from the computer if needed
- Encourage cameras on or off, based on comfort
- Remind participants support pathways are available (e.g., EAP, supervision etc.)

Step 2: Whole-group digital brainstorm

- Share the key question verbally and/or on a slide:
 - *What do you think can make it hard for harm to be noticed in education and care services?*
- Invite participant responses using:
 - Chat flood (where everyone types and presses enter at the same time)
 - Reaction icons / emojis
 - By unmuting and speaking
 - Mentimeter word cloud
- Organise responses under shared headings, such as:
 - Age
 - Hidden nature of abuse
 - Lack of staff knowledge

Step 3: Breakout room reflection

- Place participants into breakout rooms (3-4 people)
- Post prompt into the chat before allocating the breakout rooms:
 - *Why do you think official statistics may not represent the true picture of how many children in Australia have experienced abuse or neglect?*
- Encourage groups to keep discussion:
 - De-identified
 - Practice-focused
 - Grounded in systems rather than individual behaviour

Step 4: Whole-group practice connection

- Bring everyone back to the main room.
- Invite groups to share:
 - One thing that emerged from their discussion about official statistics.
 - One thing that they think strengthens safety and helps early identification of harm.
- If discussion becomes abstract, gently bring it back to: *“What does this look like in day-to-day practice?”*

Step 5: Closing reflection

- Invite participants to complete in chat or privately:
 - *“What is one action you can take in your role to strengthen your understanding of prevalence data, and improve your ability to recognise and respond to possible signs of abuse or neglect?”*



Activity 3: Understanding visibility and over-representation	
Objective	<p>This activity supports participants to explore how child abuse and neglect data in Australia is shaped by systems, visibility, and context, rather than inherent risk within particular children, families, or communities.</p> <p>It helps participants to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the difference between incidence, prevalence, and visibility • Recognise how inequality, access to services, and history influence reporting • Challenge deficit-based assumptions about families and communities • Reflect on their role in noticing and responding fairly and respectfully
Time	30-50 minutes
Format	<p>The format section contains three circular icons. The first, labeled 'Individual Work', shows a man sitting at a desk writing. The second, labeled 'Small Group Activity', shows three people (two women and one man) sitting on the floor and talking. The third, labeled 'Whole Group Activity', shows a larger group of five people (three women and two men) sitting in a circle and talking.</p>
Materials needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Butcher's paper or large sheets (1 per small group) • Markers • Prepared heading cards or written prompts (optional): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "Who appears most often in the data?" ○ "Why might this be?" ○ "What does not show up in the data?"



Activity plan

Facilitator preamble

"We often hear statistics about who appears most often in child protection data. This activity is about slowing down and asking why. It's not about blaming families or communities. It's about understanding how systems, visibility, and access to support shape what gets noticed and reported."

Remind participants

- Focus on systems and context, not judgement of families
- Keep examples de-identified
- Different views are okay - respectful discussion is expected
- You can step out or take a break if needed

Step 1: Introduce the concept of visibility (5 minutes)

- Briefly explain:
 - Incidence data shows what has been reported to systems
 - Prevalence data shows what people report experiencing across their lifetime
 - Not all harm is reported or investigated
 - Data reflects who comes into contact with the system, not the full picture of harm in the community
- Name the groups that are often over-represented in child protection data:
 - Infants under 1 year
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
 - Children and young people in very remote areas
 - Children and young people from lower socioeconomic areas
- Pause and say: *"Over-representation does not mean higher inherent risk. It reflects history, inequality, service access, reporting pathways, and systemic factors."*

**Facilitator tip**

Emphasise that this reflects systems and context, not higher inherent risk.

Step 2: Small-group mapping - “Why might this be?”

- Divide participants into small groups (3-5 people)
- Give each group one over-represented group to focus on
- Ask groups to write the over-represented group name in the centre of their paper.
- Around the group name, ask participants to map possible contributing factors that increase visibility to systems.
- Ask groups to consider factors that increase visibility to systems, such as:
 - Greater contact with services
 - Mandatory reporters involved early
 - Poverty, housing stress, or transport barriers
 - Historical harm and mistrust of systems
 - Uneven access to culturally safe early support
- Prompt groups with:
 - *“What increases contact with authorities?”*
 - *“What makes harm more likely to be noticed or reported?”*
 - *“What barriers exist to early support?”*
 - *“How does geographic location and service availability shape data?”*
- Encourage groups to think about:
 - Systems
 - Structures
 - Access
 - Policy
 - History
 - Inequality

Step 4: Whole group debrief

- Invite each group to share one key insight.
- Reflect themes aloud, such as:
 - Patterns in child protection data such as visibility reflect how systems operate, not the inherent qualities of children, families or communities.

- Data reflects reporting pathways, not the full picture.
- Inequality and access matter.
- Gently challenge misconceptions if they arise:
 - *“Let’s bring this back to systems and context rather than individual families.”*

Step 5: Closing reflection (5-10 minutes)

- Ask groups to add a section to their page: *“What harm might not show up in the data?”*
- Examples may include:
 - Abuse that is never disclosed
 - Situations where families avoid services
 - Children too young to explain experiences
 - Institutional or peer-to-peer harm that is minimised



Online adaptation (MS Teams or Zoom)

This activity can be delivered online using shared slides or a short handout, breakout rooms, and chat-based reflection. The purpose remains the same: to help participants think critically about how child abuse and neglect data is shaped by systems, visibility, and context, not by inherent risk within particular groups of children or families.

Platform Preparation (before the session)

- Prepare one slide with the framing statement about visibility and systems.
- Prepare one slide listing the groups commonly overrepresented in data.
- Prepare one slide with the individual reflection questions so participants can refer to them during quiet thinking time.
- Prepare one slide with breakout discussion prompts focused on system and structural factors.
- Set up breakout rooms in advance (3-4 participants per group).
- Prepare a shared slide or whiteboard with a simple heading such as “System Factors That Shape Visibility” to capture whole-group insights.

Have the links ready before the session begins.

Step 1: Create psychological safety

- Begin with the facilitator preamble and a wellbeing reminder
 - Remind participants that sharing is optional
 - Reflection can remain private
 - Participants can step away from the computer if needed
 - Encourage cameras on or off, based on comfort
- Remind participants support pathways are available (e.g., EAP, supervision etc.)

Step 2: Framing statement

- Display slide and read slowly:
 - *“Some children appear more often in child protection data. This doesn’t mean they experience more harm. It often reflects who is more*

visible to systems, who has more contact with services, and where barriers to early support exist.”

- Allow 10-15 seconds of quiet after reading.

Step 3: Introduce groups commonly overrepresented

- Briefly list the groups commonly overrepresented in data:
 - Infants under 1 year
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
 - Children and young people in very remote areas
 - Children and young people from lower socioeconomic areas
- Avoid commentary, let participants absorb.

Step 4: Individual reflection

- Invite participants to reflect quietly or write privately.
- Post the following reflection questions in the chat.
 - *“What explanations have you heard before for why some children appear more often in child protection data?”*
 - *“Which explanations focus on families?”*
 - *“Which explanations focus on systems?”*
- Keep microphones muter during this time.
- Soft background music is optional.

Step 5: Breakout room discussion

- Place participants into breakout rooms (3-4 people).
- Before opening the rooms, say: *“In your groups, focus on system factors. Avoid deficit language about families or communities. Stay grounded in context.”*
- Share reflection prompts in the chat or on a slide:
 - *“What system factors might increase visibility for some children?”*
 - *“How do poverty, housing stress, access to services, or historical harm affect reporting?”*
 - *“What might stop concerns from being noticed or supported earlier?”*
- Provide clear breakout instructions
 - Nominate one timekeeper
 - Nominate one person to capture 1 key insight
 - Focus on systems and structures
 - Return ready to share 1 takeaway only
- Set timer visibly (if platform allows).
- Send 1-minute warning broadcast before closing rooms.

**Facilitator tip**

Encourage groups to avoid deficit-based language and keep discussion grounded in context and systems.

Step 6: Whole-group consolidation

- Bring participants back to the main room.
- Invite each group to share:
 - One system factor they discussed, or
 - One misconception they noticed and challenged.
- Capture the responses live on shared whiteboard or slides.

Step 7: Closing reflection

- Close with a reflective prompt, inviting responses via chat:
 - *“How does this change the way you think about noticing concerns in your role?”*