

Fact sheet 8: Risk factors for children and young people

Adapted from Victorian Government MARAM practice guides, *foundation knowledge guide: guidance for professionals working with child or adult victim-survivors, and adults using family violence*, pp. 33–35.

Risk factors specific to children caused by perpetrator behaviours. These are in addition to the risk factors for adult or child victims in [Fact sheet 5: ACT Key Risk Factors](#).

Exposure to family violence	<p>Children are impacted, both directly and indirectly, by family violence, including the effects of family violence on the physical environment or the control of other adult or child family members. Risk of harm may be higher if the perpetrator is targeting certain children, particularly non-biological children in the family. Children’s exposure to violence may also be direct, include the perpetrator’s use of control and coercion over the child, or physical violence. The effects on children experiencing family violence include impacts on development, social and emotional wellbeing, and possible cumulative harm.</p>
Sexualised behaviours towards a child by the perpetrator	<p>There is a strong link between family violence and sexual abuse. Perpetrators who demonstrate sexualised behaviours towards a child are also more likely to use other forms of violence against them, such as:¹⁶⁵</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • talking to a child in a sexually explicit way • sending sexual messages or emails to a child • exposing a child to sexual acts (including showing pornography to a child) • having a child pose or perform in a sexual manner (including child sexual exploitation). <p>Child sexual abuse also includes circumstances where a child may be manipulated into believing they have brought the abuse on themselves, or that the abuse is an expression of love, through a process of grooming.</p>
Child intervention in violence	<p>Children are more likely to be harmed by the perpetrator if they engage in protective behaviours for other family members or become physically or verbally involved in the violence. Additionally, where children use aggressive language and behaviour, this may indicate they are being exposed to or experiencing family violence.</p>
Behaviour indicating non-return of child	<p>Perpetrator behaviours including threatening or failing to return a child can be used to harm the child and the affected parent.¹⁶⁶ This risk factor includes failure to adhere to, or the undermining of, agreed childcare arrangements (or threatening to do so), threatened or actual removal of children overseas, returning children late, or not responding to contact from the affected parent when children are in the perpetrator’s care. This risk arises from or is linked to entitlement-based attitudes and a perpetrator’s sense of ownership over children. The behaviour is used as a way to control the adult victim, but also poses a serious risk to the child’s psychological, developmental and emotional wellbeing.</p>

165 These examples of sexualised behaviour toward children are crimes

166 This refers to behaviours where this is used as a tactic of a perpetrator for power and control, not actions of a parent/carer to keep their child/children safe from a perpetrator.

Undermining the child–parent relationship	Perpetrators often engage in behaviours that cause damage to the relationship between the adult victim and their child/children. These can include tactics to undermine capacity and confidence in parenting and undermining the child–parent relationship, including manipulation of the child’s perception of the adult victim. This can have long-term impacts on the psychological, developmental and emotional wellbeing of the children, and it indicates the perpetrator’s willingness to involve children in their abuse.
Professional and statutory intervention	Involvement of Child Protection, counsellors, or other professionals indicates that the violence has escalated to a level where intervention is required and indicates a serious risk to a child’s psychological, developmental and emotional wellbeing.

There is evidence the following child circumstance factors may indicate the presence or escalation of family violence risk. If any of these are present, you should undertake an assessment of risk for children:

History of professional involvement and/or statutory intervention	A history of involvement of child protection, youth justice, mental health professionals, or other relevant professionals may indicate the presence of family violence risk, including that family violence has escalated to the level where the child requires intervention or other service support. ¹⁶⁷
Change in behaviour not explained by other causes	A change in the behaviour of a child that cannot be explained by other causes may indicate presence of family violence or an escalation of risk of harm from family violence for the child or other family members. Children may not always verbally communicate their concerns, but may change their behaviours to respond to and manage their own risk, which may include responses such as becoming hypervigilant, aggressive, withdrawn or overly compliant.
Child is a victim of other forms of harm	Children’s exposure to family violence may occur within an environment of polyvictimisation. Child victims of family violence are also particularly vulnerable to further harm from opportunistic perpetrators outside the family, such as harassment, grooming and physical or sexual assault. Conversely, children who have experienced these other forms of harm are more susceptible to recurrent victimisation over their lifetimes, including family violence, and are more likely to suffer significant cumulative effects. Therefore, if a child is a victim of other forms of harm, this may indicate an elevated family violence risk.

167 This is where family violence is established as present through risk assessment. In some instances, engagement with, for example, child protection, has been instigated as a controlling behaviour by one party over another.