



Uniting Church in Australia  
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

## Guide on the prevention of sexual grooming in the Church



Culture of Safety

<http://victas.uca.org.au/culture-of-safety>



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The Uniting Church in Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania is committed to providing safe places where people are cared for, nurtured and sustained. We seek to ensure a safe environment for children to encounter God, develop relationships as part of a community and grow in faith (*A Safe Place for Children*, Uniting Church Press, 1999).

The Synod has developed a policy on the prevention of abuse of children and vulnerable adults because it has moral and legal responsibilities to ensure all people are safe. This guide should be read in conjunction with the *Policy on creating a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults*, available from <http://victas.uca.org.au/culture-of-safety>

## What is sexual grooming?

This is the process of preparing a person—usually a child or other vulnerable person—for sexual assault. It includes establishing a ‘special’ friendship with the child or vulnerable adult. Sexual grooming can include the conditioning of parents, other adults and church leaders to consider the relationship with the child to be ‘normal’.

## Signs of sexual grooming

Indicators of this behaviour include an adult or, sometimes, an older adolescent/youth doing things such as:

- Giving extra praise and attention to a child
- Making a child feel special through gifts and treats
- Sending text, voice, email, or online messages to a child on a regular basis
- Asking the child for personal information
- Spending time alone with a child
- Talking about sex and sexuality with a child
- Sharing secrets with a child.

## Impacts of sexual grooming

- People may trust the person who is grooming
- The child might like the person who is sexually grooming them, or like certain aspects of the interaction
- Over time, the child can become isolated from peers and siblings and become dependent upon the sexual groomer

Once sexual assault has occurred, the child may feel confused, ashamed and partly-to-blame. They might be afraid to speak out due to a fear of not being believed or due to the range of possible consequences upon themselves or the abuser. Some children, due to their developmental stage, might not understand the nature of the abuse or have the language to describe it. It is not uncommon for a range of adverse impacts to take days, months and even years to emerge as the child grows and develops.

## What can I do if I suspect sexual grooming?

While most people have normal interactions with children, parents, congregation members and leaders should be aware of sexual grooming.

If an adult feels a sense of unease or concern about a person’s interaction with a child, they should discuss this with a qualified person. This could be someone they know such as the Minister or Layperson Leader, the Safe Church Concerns Person or Safe Church Educator.

If a child reports a concern about a person’s interaction with them, or with another child, it is important that adults listen and take the concerns seriously.

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## A healthy response in a local church

The local church should have the following safeguards in place:

- Implementation of the recommendations made in the Synod's *Creating a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults in our Church* policies
- A requirement that disclosures and suspicions of child abuse are reported to church, government and community-based services
- A screening process for all children's workers consistent with the Safe Leaders Guide
- Attending Safe Church Training and adopting the Synod Safe Church policies in your congregation

## Why should the church be aware?

- Sexual assault of children occurs across all areas of society including churches and other faith communities
- Within church (and other community organisations) settings, there is an abundance of opportunity for adults to form special relationships with children. These have the potential to become exploitative
- Although children, parents and the church should be aware of 'stranger danger', most people who sexually abuse children are known to the victim through family, friends, school, sports groups, church and other community-based activities
- There is no clear 'profile' of a likely sex offender. They could be a friend, someone who is married with children or grand children, or a person who is well liked and educated. They could be male or female
- Sexual grooming often begins with what appears to be a legitimate, condoned relationship with a child. Initially, conduct might appear to be innocent—even commendable—but it progresses over time and escalates

## Want more information?

Synod resources:

- Consult the Culture of Safety Website <http://victas.uca.org.au/culture-of-safety>
- Discuss concerns with the Safe Church Educator (03) 9340 8810 or [josh.woollett@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:josh.woollett@victas.uca.org.au)
- Attend Safe Church Training
- Become familiar with the Synod's *Creating a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults in our Church* policies

Statutory Resources:

- Tasmania – Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Child Protection Intake – 1300 737 639
- Victoria – Department of Human Services 1300650 172 or 131278 (afterhours)