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Safeguarding Definitions and Terminology



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Unless otherwise stated, all definitions throughout this Appendix have been developed with reference to, and are informed by, Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children, relevant guidance and practice resources published by Tusla, and safeguarding principles and practice guidance promoted by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI), ensuring consistency with contemporary safeguarding policy and practice across the island of Ireland.

Child Safeguarding: Child safeguarding is the collective responsibility of organisations, communities and individuals to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm. It includes policies, procedures and practices designed to prevent abuse, respond appropriately to concerns, and create safe environments in which children can participate and develop.

Abuse: Child abuse occurs when a child is harmed, neglected, exploited or not provided with appropriate care, protection and support. Children may be abused in a family, institutional, community or faith setting; by a parent, guardian, caregiver, family member, peer, or other person known to them; or, less commonly, by a stranger. Abuse may occur in person or through digital and online technologies. Children may experience one or more forms of abuse, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect or exploitation. Abuse can be a single act or omission, or a series of acts or omissions that result in actual or potential harm to a child's health, development, dignity or wellbeing.

Physical abuse: physical abuse of a child is that which results in actual or potential physical harm from an interaction, or lack of interaction, that is reasonably within the control of a parent or person in a position of responsibility, power or trust. There may be single or repeated incidents.

Physical abuse can involve:

- severe physical punishment;
- beating, slapping, hitting or kicking;
- pushing, shaking or throwing;
- pinching, biting, choking or hair-pulling;
- terrorizing with threats;
- observing violence;
- use of excessive force in handling;
- deliberate poisoning;
- suffocation;
- fabricated/induced illness
- allowing or creating a substantial risk of significant harm to a child.

Sexual abuse involves forcing, manipulating or enticing a child to take part in any form of

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sexual activity. Sexual abuse is often combined with exploitation, whereby the perpetrator utilises an imbalance of power to exercise control over their victim. Sexual abuse may include:

- exposure of the sexual organs, or any sexual act intentionally performed in the presence of the child;
- intentional touching or molesting of the body of a child, whether by a person or object, for the purpose of sexual arousal or gratification;
- masturbation in the presence of the child, or the involvement of the child in an act of masturbation;
- sexual intercourse with the child, whether oral, vaginal or anal;
- sexual exploitation of a child, which includes inciting, encouraging, propositioning, requiring or permitting a child to solicit for, or to engage in, prostitution or other sexual acts. Sexual exploitation also occurs when a child is involved in the exhibition, modelling or posing for the purpose of sexual arousal, gratification or a sexual act, including its recording (on film, video tape or other media) or the manipulation, for those purposes, of the image by computer or other means. It may also include showing sexually explicit material to children, which is often a feature of the ‘grooming’ process by perpetrators of abuse;
- consensual sexual activity involving an adult and an underage person. In relation to child sexual abuse, it should be noted that, for the purposes of the criminal law, the age of consent to sexual intercourse is seventeen years for both boys and girls. An Garda Síochána will deal with the criminal aspects of the case under the relevant legislation.

Emotional abuse is the emotional ill treatment of a child, which may cause severe and/or persistent adverse effects on the child’s emotional development. It may involve conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person. It may involve frequently causing a child to feel frightened or in danger. Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill treatment of a child, though emotional abuse may also occur on its own. Examples of emotional abuse:

- the imposition of negative attributes on a child, expressed by persistent criticism, sarcasm, hostility or blaming;
- conditional parenting, in which the level of care shown to a child is made contingent on their behaviours or actions;
- emotional unavailability of the child’s parent/guardian;
- unresponsiveness of the parent/guardian and/or inconsistent or inappropriate expectations of the child;
- premature imposition of responsibility on the child;
- unrealistic or inappropriate expectations of the child’s capacity to understand something or to behave or control themselves in a certain way;
- under-protection or over-protection of the child;
- failure to show interest in, or provide age-appropriate opportunities for, the child’s

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cognitive and emotional development;

- use of unreasonable or overly harsh disciplinary measures;
- exposure to domestic violence;
- exposure to inappropriate or abusive material through technology.

Exploitation is the intentional ill-treatment, manipulation or abuse of power and control over a child or young person. It involves taking selfish or unfair advantage of a child, young person or situation for personal gain. It may manifest in many forms, including child labour, slavery, servitude, trafficking, sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, financial exploitation or online exploitation. It extends to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation may occur in person or through digital technologies and can involve grooming, coercion, control, deception, threats or violence. A child may be exploited even when the activity appears consensual. Exploitation can include sexual activity, criminal activity, the creation or sharing of sexual images, financial gain, or other activities carried out for the benefit of another person or group.

Neglect is the failure to meet a child's physical, emotional and/or psychological needs. It can be characterised by the absence of proactive steps to protect and promote the welfare of It may involve a parent or guardian failing to provide adequate food, shelter and clothing; failing to protect a child from harm; failing to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment. Neglect generally becomes apparent in different ways over a period of time, rather than at one specific point. For example, a child who suffers a series of minor injuries may not be having their needs met in terms of necessary supervision and safety. A child whose height or weight is significantly below average may be being deprived of adequate nutrition. A child who consistently misses school may be being deprived of intellectual stimulation.

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) (historically referred to in legislation as child pornography.) Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), historically referred to in legislation as child pornography, is subject to strict criminal sanctions. In Northern Ireland, the Protection of Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, as amended, together with the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008, makes it an offence to take, make, permit to be taken, possess, show, distribute or publish an indecent image of a child, including digital and computer-generated images. The creation, possession, access, storage, transmission or distribution of CSAM constitutes a serious criminal offence and a grave violation of the dignity and rights of children. In addition, within the Catholic Church in Ireland, canon law recognises the acquisition, possession or distribution of pornographic images of minors, including the downloading of such material from the internet, as a grave delict (serious canonical offence) that may result in ecclesiastical sanctions and penalties¹

Peer Abuse (also referred to as Child-on-Child Abuse or Peer-on-Peer Abuse)

Peer abuse occurs when a child or young person is harmed by another child or young person. It can occur between children of the same age or developmental stage, or where there is an imbalance of power based on age, status, ability, gender, influence or other factors. Peer abuse can occur in person, online, or through a combination of both.

Peer abuse may include:

¹See *Normae de Delictis Reservatis* (2021), Article 6 §1, 2°, concerning the **acquisition, possession, exhibition or distribution of pornographic images of minors as a reserved delict**.

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- Bullying, including cyberbullying
- Sexual harassment
- Sexual violence
- Harmful sexual behaviour
- Coercive and controlling behaviour
- Emotional abuse
- Exploitation within peer groups

Children and young people who display harmful behaviour towards others may themselves be vulnerable, have experienced trauma, abuse or exploitation, and may require assessment, support and intervention. However, safeguarding responses must maintain a clear focus on the safety, wellbeing and protection of those who have been harmed.

The terms peer abuse, peer-on-peer abuse and child-on-child abuse are often used interchangeably within safeguarding guidance and practice. Regardless of terminology, the underlying principle is that children and young people can experience abuse from their peers, and such behaviour should be recognised and addressed within safeguarding frameworks.

Online-Facilitated Abuse and Exploitation

Online grooming: Building a relationship with a child through digital communication with the intention of exploiting, abusing or manipulating them.

Live-streamed abuse: the real-time broadcasting of the sexual abuse, exploitation or humiliation of a child via digital technology.

Sextortion: The use of threats, coercion or blackmail to obtain sexual images, sexual activity, money or other benefits from a child.

Coerced self-generated sexual images: Sexual images or videos a child is manipulated, pressured or threatened into creating and sharing.

Online solicitation: Any attempt to persuade, entice, encourage or arrange for a child to engage in sexual activity or other forms of exploitation through digital communication.

Abuse through gaming platforms and social media: The use of online games, social networking sites or messaging services to groom, exploit, harass, manipulate or abuse a child.

AI-generated sexually explicit images involving children: Real, altered or artificially generated sexualised images depicting a child or representing a child for exploitative purposes. Distribution of CSAM through messaging applications: The sharing, forwarding, storing, receiving or transmitting of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) using messaging or digital communication platforms.

Children First safeguarding guidance specifically recognises online safety as part of child

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safeguarding responsibilities.

Image-Based Abuse: includes creating, sharing, threatening to share, or possessing sexualised images of a child without lawful reason and may occur online or offline.

Technology-Assisted Abuse Across All Categories: It is important to recognise abuse may occur both in person and online. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, may be used to facilitate grooming, exploitation, impersonation, image manipulation along with the creation or distribution of child sexual abuse material. Digital technologies may be used to facilitate many types of abuse: physical, sexual, emotional or exploitative abuse.

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)

Northern Ireland formally adopted a definition of Child Criminal Exploitation in 2024 and recognises it as child abuse. Child criminal exploitation is a form of child abuse where a child is coerced, controlled, manipulated or deceived into criminal activity for the benefit of another person or group. Examples: drug distribution, county lines activity, theft, violence, weapons storage, financial crime.

Harm can be defined as the ill treatment or impairment of the health or development of a child. Whether it is significant is determined by the child's health and development, as compared to that which could reasonably be expected of a child of a similar age².

Neglect generally becomes apparent in different ways over a period of time, rather than at one specific point. For example, a child who suffers a series of minor injuries may not be having their needs met in terms of necessary supervision and safety. A child whose height or weight is significantly below average may be being deprived of adequate nutrition. A child who consistently misses school may be being deprived of intellectual stimulation.

The threshold of significant harm is reached when the child's needs are neglected to the extent that their well-being and/or development are severely affected

Child sexual abuse material (CSAM), historically referred to in legislation as “child pornography”, is subject to strict criminal sanctions across the island of Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland, the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998, as amended by the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) (Amendment) Act 2007 and subsequent legislation, makes it an offence to possess, produce, distribute, print, publish, import, export, sell, show or advertise child pornography. In Northern Ireland, offences relating to indecent images of children are principally governed by the Protection of Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, as amended, which criminalises the taking, making, distribution, showing and certain forms of possession of indecent photographs and pseudo-photographs of children, including digital images. Additionally, legislation in the United Kingdom has extended criminal liability to the possession of prohibited non-photographic images of children. Across the Catholic Church in Ireland, canon law categorises the acquisition, possession or distribution of pornographic images of minors, including downloading such material from the internet, as a grave delict subject to ecclesiastical penalties.

² Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2024), sections relating to neglect and significant harm; and Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, definitions of harm and significant harm

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Trauma-Informed Practice: A trauma-informed approach recognises that children and young people may be affected by adverse childhood experiences, trauma, abuse, neglect or exploitation. It seeks to understand how these experiences may influence behaviour, wellbeing, relationships and vulnerability, and promotes responses that are supportive, respectful, child-centred and sensitive to the impact of trauma. Safeguarding practice should seek to avoid re-traumatisation and support recovery, resilience and positive outcomes for children and young people.

Contextual safeguarding is an approach that recognises that harm, abuse and exploitation can occur in locations and relationships beyond the family home. Safeguarding concerns may arise within peer groups, schools, faith settings, leisure environments, communities and digital spaces. Effective safeguarding requires consideration of the wider social, environmental and contextual factors that may influence a child's safety, wellbeing and vulnerability, alongside assessment of their family circumstances.

Multi-Agency Working: Safeguarding children and young people require effective collaboration between organisations, agencies and professionals. This includes the timely sharing of relevant information, appropriate referral of concerns, coordinated assessment and intervention, and partnership working to promote children's welfare and protect them from harm. Multi-agency working is underpinned by the principles of child-centred practice, cooperation, accountability and shared responsibility for safeguarding outcomes.

Adult Retrospective Disclosures

Adults disclosing childhood abuse may provide information indicating that a child is currently at risk. Such disclosures should be managed in accordance with current Children First guidance and reporting obligations.

Mandated Person: A mandated person is an individual whose profession or role is listed in Schedule 2 of the Children First Act 2015 (ROI) and who has a legal obligation to report certain child protection concerns to Tusla where the thresholds set out in the Act are met.

Designated Liaison Person (DLP): The person appointed by an organisation to receive child protection and welfare concerns, provide guidance on reporting procedures, and act as the primary liaison with statutory authorities in relation to child safeguarding matters.

Relevant Person: The individual appointed by a provider of a relevant service (within ROI) to be the first point of contact regarding the organisation's Child Safeguarding Statement and its implementation.

Safeguarding Risk Assessment: A systematic process of identifying circumstances, activities, environments or practices that may present a risk of harm to children and determining the measures required to eliminate, reduce or manage those risks. Risk assessment is a key requirement of Children First and reflects safeguarding best practice promoted by SBNI.

Child Participation: The involvement of children and young people in decisions that affect them, including safeguarding policies, practices and procedures, in a manner appropriate to their age, maturity and capacity.

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Online Safety: Measures taken to protect children from harm when using digital technologies, including social media, messaging services, gaming platforms, artificial intelligence applications, websites and online communities.

Safeguarding Governance: The leadership, oversight, accountability and quality-assurance arrangements that ensure an organisation fulfils its child safeguarding responsibilities and continuously improves safeguarding practice.

Reference Websites

Northern Ireland

Department of Health Northern Ireland

Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland

Primary source for many safeguarding definitions used across Northern Ireland.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/co-operating-safeguard-children-and-young-people-northern-ireland>

Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI)

Safeguarding policies, procedures, guidance, and definitions aligned with Northern Ireland legislation and practice.

<https://www.safeguardingni.org>

SBNI Procedures Manual

Detailed operational definitions and procedures relating to safeguarding and child protection.

<https://www.safeguardingni.org/procedures>

Education Authority Northern Ireland

School safeguarding guidance and links to statutory safeguarding definitions and policies.

<https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/safeguarding-and-child-protection>

Public Health Agency (Northern Ireland)

Safeguarding policies and explanatory definitions used within health services.

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net>

Republic of Ireland

Tusla Child and Family Agency

National child protection and welfare authority.

Contains guidance, definitions, reporting information, and links to Children First.

<https://www.tusla.ie>

Children First National Office

Dedicated Children First guidance, training, and terminology.

<https://www.childrenfirst.ie>

Department of Children, Disability and Equality Publishes the statutory Children First:

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National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children and related legislation.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-children-disability-and-equality>

Irish Statute Book

Legal definitions contained within Irish child protection legislation, including the Children First Act 2015.

<https://www.irishstatutebook.ie>

HSE Safeguarding

Health service safeguarding information, policies, and guidance relevant to children and vulnerable groups.

<https://www.hse.ie>