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Knowledge-synthesis project to inform a review of Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017

October 2026

RESEARCH + EVALUATION



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Executive Summary

The 2017 Children First National Guidance provides details of definitions of abuse and thresholds for referral in relation to four categories of abuse. The Guidance provides targeted information about reporting and the responsibilities of members of the public, mandated persons, and organisations. In the years since the 2017 Guidance was issued, new learnings, evidence and understandings have emerged. This report aims to deliver key findings from the environmental scan that can inform updates to the Children First National Guidance regarding understanding of abuse and neglect, public concerns about child welfare, mandatory reporting, working across organisations and public awareness. Additionally, it will provide a broader contextual analysis to assist critical thinking and reflection about the purpose, underpinning assumptions and intentions of the updated Guidance and any associated training that will be developed based on this.

There is greater recognition of the complexity and multi-dimensionality of abuse and neglect across all categories. The new and emerging risks and challenges posed by technology-facilitated harm are highlighted. The importance of understanding the interconnected nature of online and offline harm and online and offline protection practices is emphasised. A strong rationale has also been provided for including exposure to domestic violence as a standalone category. Other new or more strongly recognised forms of abuse and neglect include child trafficking and peer-to-peer abuse. The range of risks that come within the 'extra-familial' context have also been highlighted including greater focus on protection of children from institutional and organisational harm.

Another important cross-cutting theme is that of cumulative and hidden harm, which requires a move away from incident-led responses to more holistic and comprehensive approaches. The importance of threshold and response guidance with both universal and differentiated considerations for different cohorts of children and young people, including children with disabilities, is evidenced. The importance of attention to other factors like gender, culture and socioeconomic status is also highlighted.

The review shows the need for more balance between guidance focused on parental capacity and the home, and guidance relating to a range of other extra-familial contexts. The need for more guidance relating to online and offline risks of harm across a range of contexts, institutions and organisations is evidenced. The centrality

of contextual safeguarding, which emphasises moving beyond individual-focused approaches to place- and situation-based prevention, is also emphasised. The literature repeatedly shows that effective safeguarding is multi-layered, involving formal agencies, schools, health, community actors, families and peers. Furthermore, while multi-agency collaboration is recognised as best practice, the literature acknowledges that there is a need for further practical guidance to enable such collaboration to succeed. In relation to communication and awareness about abuse and neglect, the importance of using clear and accessible terminology is highlighted. The review has identified positive messaging approaches to support prevention, awareness and collective responsibility through combined and separate strategies aimed at the public and at mandated professionals.

Section 1: Background Context, Research Questions and Methodology

1.1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of an environmental scan of existing knowledge commissioned to inform a review of Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017).

The environmental scan consolidates post-2017 evidence on conceptualisations, categorisations, prevalence, terminology, reporting thresholds and mechanisms, interagency approaches, and public and professional messaging related to child welfare and protection. Its dual purpose is to provide the Department with a robust evidence base to update the Guidance and to support critical reflection on its purpose, underpinning assumptions, and continuing relevance in light of emerging risks and evolving understandings of harm.

1.2 Background and Context

The Children First National Guidance 2017 sets out Ireland's statutory obligations and best-practice procedures for the protection and welfare of children. It defines the primary categories of abuse and neglect; clarifies reporting and safeguarding responsibilities for members of the public, mandated persons and organisations; and provides the foundation for more detailed procedures and training across Tusla and different sectors. It replaced the Children First National Guidance 2011 to take into account significant legislative, policy, practice and societal developments that had occurred nationally. This included the introduction of National Standards for Child Protection in 2012, Constitutional reform in relation to the Rights of the Child (2012), the establishment of Tusla as an independent lead agency responsible for child protection and welfare (2014), and new legislation including the Children First Act 2015 and the Children and Families Relationships Act 2015.

Since the publication of Children First National Guidance 2017, further significant legislative, policy, practice and societal changes have occurred. Targeted addendums to Children First 2017 were issued in 2019 (addressing online safety) and in 2025 (addressing adult retrospective disclosures of childhood abuse). More substantial reforms include the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2024 and ongoing evolution in the monitoring and review architecture for child protection and welfare services. Ireland's child protection system is handling more volume and complexity than a decade ago,

consistent with trends in many high-income countries that strengthened reporting mandates and awareness. Official data show rising volumes of referrals, shifting patterns in the predominance of different categories of concern (notably the growth in emotional abuse and welfare referrals), and heightened awareness of complex and intersecting risks.

For example, Figure 1 plots the rate of referrals per 1,000 children each year from 2017 to 2025. Table 1 provides a summary of referrals per year to Tusla. There have been increases in referrals across the four main categories of abuse and neglect between 2017 and 2025 as follows:

- Neglect: Increased from 4,810 in 2017 to 7,278 in 2025.
- Emotional Abuse: Increased from 7,615 in 2017 to 20,873 in 2025.
- Physical Abuse: Increased from 4,942 in 2017 to 11,927 in 2025.
- Child Sexual Abuse: Increased from 3,170 in 2017 to 6,287 in 2025.

Internationally, the period since 2017 has seen continued development of children's rights standards and comparative analyses of child protection systems. Relevant instruments include the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, and the 2023 Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in respect of Ireland, which emphasised the meaningful participation of children in the design and implementation of policies and programmes linked to the Sustainable Development Goals. Comparative scholarship (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2019; Furey & Canavan, 2019; Berrick et al., 2023) illuminates both common challenges and divergent orientations across child welfare systems worldwide, offering transferable insights for the Irish context.

There is increased awareness of issues of variances in conceptualisations of harm across nations, cultures and societies (Berrick et al., 2024). The growth is attributable to many factors including heightened public and professional awareness and improved detection, strengthened by the introduction of mandatory reporting in many contexts. Use of different instruments and definitions regarding prevalence of abuse and neglect make direct international comparison difficult. The WHO provides the following data in relation to experiences of abuse and neglect.

- 16% of adults experienced neglect as a child (WHO, 2022)
- 36% of adults experienced emotional abuse as a child (WHO, 2022)
- Nearly 25% of adults suffered physical abuse as a child (WHO, 2022)

- Globally, an estimated 12–13% of children experience sexual abuse, with prevalence rates of approximately 18% among girls and 8% among boys (Csorba & Elfrink, 2026; WHO, 2022)

Throughout the report, details of prevalence, reporting activity and threshold decision making will be discussed in relation to specific categories and selected international evidence. Overall, national and international developments underscore the need for guidance to take account of evidence especially in relation to emerging forms of abuse and neglect, evolving understandings of vulnerability (particularly for children with disabilities), impact of reporting activity, threshold decision making and shifts in public and professional expectations.

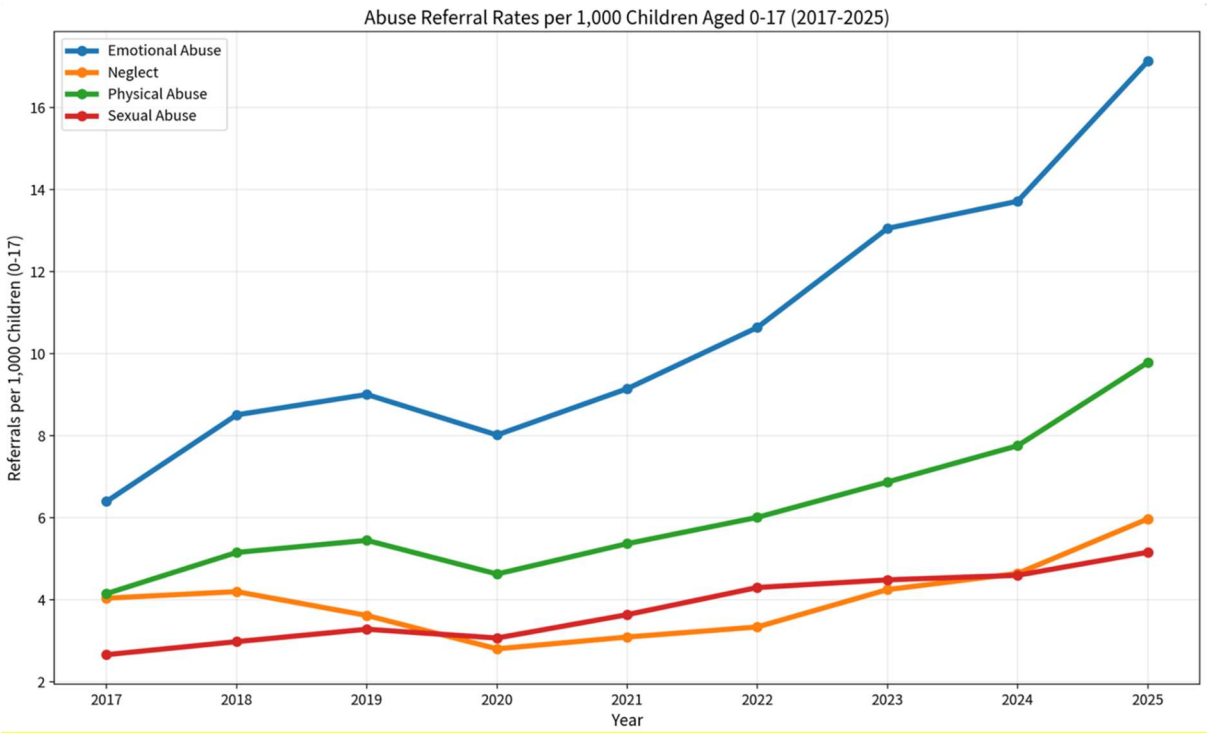


Figure 1: Referrals by Abuse/Neglect Category

Table 1: Tusla Statistics on Referrals by Category

Referrals x Abuse Type	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Welfare	33218	30321	31134	31024	37758	46,031	54,721
Emotional Abuse	7615	10130	10722	9546	10888	12,964	15,908
Neglect	4810	5000	4308	3340	3682	4,068	5,178
Physical Abuse	4942	6137	6488	5511	6391	7,324	8,375
Sexual Abuse	3170	3548	3909	3653	4331	5,240	5,467
Total 0-17 yrs population*	1,190,502	1,190,502	1,190,502	1,190,502	1,190,502	1,218,567	1,218,567

1.3 Research Objectives and Research Questions

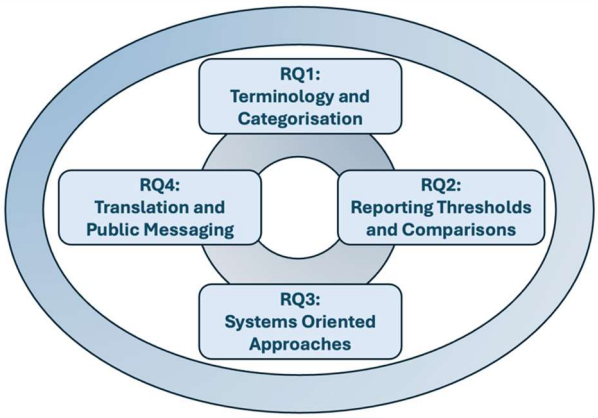
The purpose of this environmental scan was to synthesise post-2017 knowledge on child welfare and protection in order to inform a review and updating of Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017).

The scan has two complementary objectives:

- To consolidate recent evidence on conceptualisations, categorisations, prevalence, terminology, reporting thresholds and mechanisms, interagency collaboration and public messaging so that the updated Guidance can reflect current understandings of abuse, neglect and exploitation.
- To provide broader contextual analysis that supports critical reflection on the purpose, assumptions and intentions of the Guidance itself, ensuring it remains relevant to contemporary risks while continuing to be grounded in Ireland's legislative and organisational framework.

The scan was organised around four overarching research questions and a series of sub-questions:

Research Questions



RQ1: How have conceptualisations, categorisations, prevalence estimates and terminology relating to child abuse, neglect and exploitation evolved since 2017, particularly with respect to emerging risks and contexts?

a. What standardised, accessible, sensitive and inclusive terminology is currently recommended (or emerging) for describing child abuse, neglect, exploitation and associated risks across different audiences (professionals, mandated persons, parents/carers and the general public)?

b. Which newly recognised forms or contexts fall outside the 2017 neglect/emotional/ physical/sexual abuse framework (e.g. hidden harms, institutional harm, cumulative harm)?

c. How do mandated reporters in Ireland and comparable jurisdictions identify, distinguish and report the interconnected online and offline dimensions of abuse within family, community, education and care settings?

d. What reports of child protection failures (historical/recent systematic/organisational failures) have emerged since 2017, and what are the key learnings from these? e. What barriers prevent mandated reporters from reliably identifying signs of physical, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect in non-verbal children – and how can these barriers be addressed to better protect the most vulnerable cohorts (e.g. non-verbal)?
RQ2: What developments have occurred in reporting thresholds, mechanisms and processes since 2017, and how do these compare across jurisdictions and literature? a. What are the key indicators of abuse/neglect risks and the commonly accepted reporting thresholds in various contexts (familial, extra-familial, institutional, online, care settings, etc.), and in particular regarding children with disabilities, children of different genders, children from specific cultural or ethnic backgrounds, and children in care? b. What reporting mechanisms, thresholds and interagency approaches are recommended in the literature or implemented in comparable jurisdictions for extra-familial abuse (including settings in health, education, youth justice, social care and community sectors)? c. How have mandatory reporting thresholds and decision-making criteria evolved in international child protection systems since 2017, and what implications arise for Ireland? d. What record-management and information-sharing practices are evident in organisations outside statutory child protection agencies (e.g. schools, healthcare, youth services, sports organisations) in Ireland and selected comparator jurisdictions when concerns about abuse arise?
RQ3: What holistic, systems-oriented approaches and interagency structures are recommended in recent literature and international best practice to prevent, identify and respond to abuse and harm of children in general child welfare contexts, and specifically in organisational settings? a. What are the emergent risks (post-2017 updates included) that require consideration in future Children First Guidance, for example, identifying and mitigating risks of child trafficking, modern slavery and related exploitation in the Irish context? b. What best practices identified in recent literature (2017 to present) on the prevention of abuse can inform the guidance to organisations, agencies and government departments on risk assessment and mitigating procedures?
RQ4: How can emerging evidence and international learning be translated into clear, accessible public and professional messaging to strengthen awareness, prevention and collective safeguarding responsibility? a. What additional or revised messaging, communication strategies and public awareness approaches would most effectively enhance understanding of shared child protection responsibilities and promote proactive safeguarding behaviours across different sectors and population groups?

As there was some overlap in the sub-questions, especially in RQ1 and RQ2, it has been agreed to report thematically where relevant across these. For clarity, the questions are summarised as follows and are addressed from Section 2 to Section 7:

- What is the evidence regarding the evolution of conceptualisations and categorisations relating to child abuse, neglect and exploitation since 2017, with

particular attention to emergent and new categories of abuse and harm (Section 2).
- What are the main updates from literature in relation to reporting mechanisms, thresholds and processes especially in relation to online and offline dimensions and extra-familial harm? (Section 3).
- What are the main developments and learning in relation to differentiated responses for certain groups, including children with disabilities? (Section 4).
- What are the main messages from literature regarding learning from child protection failures and record-management processes? (Section 5).
- What are the holistic, systems-oriented approaches and interagency structures for prevention, identification and response, with a focus on extra-familial and organisational settings? (Section 6).
- How can emerging evidence can be translated into clear, accessible public and professional messaging to strengthen awareness and collective safeguarding responsibility including use of terminology? (Section 7).

1.4 Methodology

This environmental scan adopted a structured knowledge-synthesis approach. The methodological framework drew on the principles of environmental scanning (Nagel et al., 2025), combining systematic academic literature searches with policy, grey literature and official statistical sources. The process was organised to address the four research questions set out in Section 1.3 and to ensure findings remain directly relevant to the Irish policy and practice context.

Systematic searches were conducted in two major bibliographic databases: Web of Science and Scopus. Multiple targeted search strings were developed to capture literature on conceptualisations and categorisations of child abuse and neglect, emerging forms of harm (including technology-facilitated and extra-familial abuse), reporting thresholds and indicators, and related safeguarding themes. All searches were limited to the period 2017–2026 and to English-language publications. Examples of the search strings and the results they yielded are provided in Appendix 1. Across the search sets, a total of 2,150 documents were retrieved. After removal of duplicates, the final academic literature set comprised **1,623** unique sources. These formed the core evidence base for the thematic analysis aligned to the research questions. Further specific searches were also conducted throughout the project for additional sources.

In addition to the literature sources the scan incorporated:

- Official Irish statistics, principally Tusla Child and Family Agency performance and referral data (2017–2025).
- National policy and legislative documents, including the Children First Act 2015, subsequent amendments and related guidance.
- International policy instruments and guidance (including UN Committee on the Rights of the Child materials and comparator-jurisdiction safeguarding frameworks).

- Selected grey literature, including official reviews of system failures, practice guidance from other jurisdictions, and reports from organisations working in child protection and welfare, through use of Overton and related search instruments.

The analysis phase of this environmental scan follows the RADAR-ES methodological framework (Nagel et al., 2025). Once data have been assembled from academic literature, policy documents, grey literature and other secondary sources, a primarily deductive analytical approach is applied. Pre-agreed thematic headings – derived from the research questions and the structure of Children First 2017 (for example, definitions and categories of abuse, reporting thresholds, mandatory reporting mechanisms, extra-familial harm and interagency structures) – provided the initial organising framework.

Within this structure, data were systematically extracted, compared and synthesised with a pragmatic focus on generating clear, actionable key messages that directly informed the research questions. Scope remains for inductive refinement: emergent themes that fall outside the original categories are identified and incorporated where they offer significant new insight.

Where the literature yields consistent recommendations, these are collated; where findings are contested or limited, this is explicitly stated. The overall analytical orientation is knowledge synthesis rather than exhaustive systematic review, combining elements of thematic synthesis with the broader, multi-source logic of environmental scanning (Nagel et al., 2025; Charlton et al., 2021). This approach ensures that the final outputs remain both rigorous and directly usable for the revision of national guidance.

1.5 Scope, Limitations and Relevance to Ireland

This environmental scan examines post-2017 academic, policy and grey literature on child welfare and protection to inform the review and updating of Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017).

Several limitations must be acknowledged. Regarding the approach taken, an environmental scan ensured a broad range of sources were consulted. However, given that breadth, it limited the scope for more in-depth analysis of specific themes. We have sought to synthesise this literature as succinctly as possible, using tables and detailed supporting references extensively to support this. Regarding data drawn from different national and international studies, it is important to note that it is extremely difficult to make direct comparisons because of variations in definitions, measurement instruments, sampling frames and reporting practices. The figures used where relevant are illustrative and indicative of trends. Another limitation is that the scan is based exclusively on secondary sources; no new primary data collection (e.g. interviews with practitioners, children or families) was undertaken. However, two webinars were held with organisations represented on the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group, which includes all government departments as

well as Tusla, An Garda Síochána and the HSE. These webinars included excellent opportunities to provide and receive feedback on the emergent findings. Coverage of non-English-language literature and of certain non-Western or Indigenous knowledge systems was also a limitation of the search strategy due to language restrictions. Finally, while every effort was made to identify high-quality evidence, the rapidly evolving nature of the field of child protection and welfare and the volume of materials available mean that some very recent or emerging material may not have been captured.

1.6 Report Structure

The report is structured to respond to the thematic areas outlined in the research questions: Sections 2–5 address mostly the content set out in RQ1 and RQ2 above.

- Section 2 reports on the evidence regarding the evolution of conceptualisations and categorisations relating to child abuse, neglect and exploitation since 2017, with particular attention to emergent and new categories of abuse and harm.
- Section 3 explores the questions relating to reporting mechanisms, thresholds and processes. The specific areas covered, in line with the research questions, include online and offline dimensions and extra-familial abuse.
- Section 4 summarises main developments and learning in relation to differentiated responses, including a focus on children with disabilities.
- Section 5 addresses the additional specific research questions from RQ1 and RQ2 in relation to specific areas of concern, which include learning from child protection failures and record-management processes.

Sections 6 and 7 address mostly RQ3 and RQ4, although, for clarity, the question on terminology (RQ1) is addressed in Section 6 as it corresponds to public and professional awareness.

- Section 6 explores holistic, systems-oriented approaches and interagency structures for prevention, identification and response, with a focus on extra-familial and organisational settings.
- Section 7 considers how emerging evidence can be translated into clear, accessible public and professional messaging to strengthen awareness and collective safeguarding responsibility, including use of terminology.
- Section 8 provides a summary overview under the headings: Categories, Thresholds and Indicators for Abuse and Neglect, Mandated Reporting, Wider System Contexts and Public and Professional Awareness and Messaging.

Section 2: Conceptualisations and Categorisations of Child Abuse and Neglect

2.1 Introduction – Snapshot Key Evolutions Since 2017

Since the publication of the 2017 Children First National Guidance, conceptualisations of child abuse, neglect and exploitation have continued to evolve. Overall, the post-2017 literature reveals a clear shift toward more dynamic, multi-dimensional and context-sensitive understandings of harm.

Some key messages from the evidence are:

- The literature highlights many ongoing debates about subtypes, boundaries and additional or emergent forms of harm.
- Complexities relating to identifying and responding to child abuse and neglect suggest the need to go beyond the main categories of abuse and neglect commonly used.
- There can be overlap between different forms of abuse and neglect such as emotional abuse and emotional neglect. There are also cross-cutting themes like technology facilitated abuse.
- Overall, there is increased awareness of the wide range of complex factors that contribute to risk, expanding beyond more well-recognised parental and other factors including substance use, domestic violence and mental ill-health.
- There is more emphasis on harms to children from outside (extra-familial) as well as inside their family home or care setting.
- Multi-factor and intersectional themes such as socioeconomic deprivation, family structure, cumulative risks; and variations by child age/gender/ethnicity recur across the literature.
- There can be additional complexity in the form of cumulative, institutional or hidden harm. This reinforces the need for greater depth and clarity beyond more traditional categorisations, especially in relation to cross-cutting themes.

Section 2.2 provides updates from the evidence relating to the four main categories of abuse and neglect covered in Children First National Guidance. It also summarises the evidence to support a fifth category relating to exposure to domestic violence.

In Section 2.3 we have identified five cross-cutting themes from recent literature regarding new and emerging harms. This is not an exhaustive list. While some of these harms are relatively new – e.g. technology-facilitated harm has grown directly in line with the expansion of digital platforms in the past decade – others have featured in knowledge and practices in child protection but not sufficiently in child protection guidance and procedure – e.g. cumulative and hidden harm.

- Technology-Facilitated Harm.
- Peer-to-Peer abuse.
- Cumulative and Hidden Harm.
- Institutional and Organisational Abuse.

- Child Trafficking and Modern Slavery.

2.2 Updating Core Categorisations of Abuse and Neglect

2.2.1 Introduction

The core categorisations of abuse and neglect continue to be anchored around neglect, emotional abuse/neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse. While these are clearly articulated in the current Children First National Guidance 2017, understandings in relation to indicators and dimensions of each category continue to evolve. In addition, exposure to domestic violence has emerged as a standalone separate and additional category. This section provides a brief update on the most recent literature relating to categorisations of abuse and neglect. The challenge regarding definitions of these categories is highlighted, and significant variation exists in terms of how they are defined and specified. Table 2 provides a brief snapshot of the key messages to follow in relation to current themes regarding the main categories of abuse and neglect.

Table 2: Categorisations: Brief Overview of Key Messages from Post-2017 Literature Relating to Categories of Abuse and Neglect

Category	Key Messages from post-2017 literature
Neglect	Strongly correlates with cumulative harm. Children with disabilities are at higher risk of neglect and their unique needs can be overlooked. Important to recognise complexity of balance between individual characteristics of child, parental behaviour and circumstances, and wider social contexts like structural inequality. Emotional Neglect can also be included in emotional abuse categorisation.
Emotional/ Psychological Abuse	Can be difficult to define and many different terms are used. Strongly correlates with cumulative harm. New forms of risk posed with technological /digital related harm. Exposure to Domestic Violence is often referred under the category of emotional abuse.
Physical Abuse	Variations exist in both definitions and thresholds. Can co-occur with other forms of abuse, neglect and domestic violence. New forms of risk posed with Technology-facilitated physical abuse. There can be a risk of physical medical conditions being mistaken for physical abuse.
Sexual Abuse	New forms of risk posed with technological/digital related harm. Need to expand category of CSA to CSAE – Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. Retrospective reporting improves awareness and informs prevention. Increased awareness of multi-dimensional nature of extra-familiar risks and need for more explicit attention to this.
Exposure to domestic violence	Correlates with other forms of abuse and neglect. Often associated with emotional abuse in the absence of a separate 'category'. Evidence strongly supports separate category of exposure to domestic violence. Domestic violence can be a strong maintainer of Intergenerational patterns and transgenerational risks.

2.2.2 Neglect

Neglect relates to emotional and physical neglect. Emotional neglect can also be considered alongside emotional abuse (see next section). Physical neglect is described as chronic and structural rather than as isolated incidents. Neglect is not just the absence of care; when chronic, it takes on a 'quality of its own' causing persistent dysfunction, dysregulation, disadvantage and disconnection, reframing neglect as a distinct harm type (Bryce et al., 2023). Despite the prevalence of neglect, studies suggest it can be a lower priority for social work intervention compared to other forms of maltreatment especially emotional neglect and neglect of older children (Gibbs et al., 2024). Neglect remains an underexplored yet pervasive issue affecting children with disabilities. 'Despite the severity of neglect, evidence-based preventive strategies remain scarce, and existing child protection frameworks often fail to account for the unique needs of children with disabilities' (Makhoul Khoury et al., 2025, p. 1)

Neglect is frequently a proxy for material deprivation, not just parental failure, as it is heavily driven by poverty and structural inequality. Literature increasingly suggests that much of what is labelled 'neglect' is the result of poverty, inadequate housing, and/or food insecurity (Bywaters et al 2020). Bywaters et al (2020) refers to the 'Inverse Intervention Law' whereby in more affluent areas, services intervene more readily (higher rates of removal or protection plans), even when family circumstances are similar. This suggests that professional norms and resources influence whether neglect is 'seen' and acted upon. The CSRP (2026, 6) likewise describe neglect and poverty as 'deeply intertwined' and note that practitioners often struggle to 'differentiate between structural hardship and parental omission'.

Overall, there is a renewed appreciation for the fact that neglect is the form of maltreatment sometimes driven by structural factors (poverty, housing, service gaps), making individual responses inadequate. That said, it is important not to sideline individual factors contributing to abuse but embed them within a structural/inequalities perspective to understand and deal with them better. Advocacy for a shift from individual responsibility (blaming parents) to community, public health and systems responsibility recurs in the literature (Higgins et al., 2022; McLeigh et al., 2022; Kojan et al., 2019; Walsh, 2019).

Other themes relating to neglect discussed in recent literature indicate the need for more in-depth attention to:

- Neglect within a wider systemic perspective including the interconnections with needs for social support (Thompson, 2022, CSRP – Child Safeguarding Review Panel, 2026).
- The role of domestic violence in relation to neglect (Sudland and Neumann, 2021) including specific focus on the impact on parents with learning difficulties (Tarleton and Turney, 2020).
- Greater recognition that children with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, and sensory impairments face particularly high risk of being neglected (Makhoul Khoury et al., 2025; McDonnell et al., 2019).

- The wide-ranging impact of neglect, from individual factors like impact on brain development (Smyth, 2023, Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2022) through to cultural /contextual and societal factors (Tarshish, 2019, Amir-ud-Din et al., 2026).
- More explicit associations between neglect, cumulative trauma (de Leon Siantz et al., 2026) and complex trauma (Thain et al., 2024).

2.2.3 Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse/emotional neglect/psychological maltreatment show high prevalence, sometimes comparable to or exceeding other forms, depending on definitions used (Massullo et al., 2023). For example, presently in Ireland, it is the most commonly reported form of abuse. It is also one of the most common forms in self-reporting and community studies, yet under-identified in much official child welfare data due to its less 'visible' nature (Hanson et al., 2023). Emotional and psychological abuse are argued to be chronic and cumulative, making them more difficult to evidence and respond to than discrete incidents of physical abuse (Bryce et al., 2023; Bernard et al., 2023; Fox, 2022; Nohilly 2019). Compared to sexual and physical abuse approaches, it is argued that responses to emotional abuse are rarely as well-operationalised (Mathews et al., 2020). This is mainly due to the fact that: the signs of abuse are comparatively less visible and tangible; there is less definitional and cultural consensus; and there is a tendency to rely on subjective or self-reports. Hanson et al. (2023) provide a Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN) lexicon for healthcare professionals capturing 133 terms including many emotional abuse and neglect indicators (see also Mathews et al., 2020 for similar instruments used in prevalence studies).

Key messages from recent evidence include the following:

- Terminology relating to emotional abuse and neglect is varied and inconsistent. For example, some studies in their review posited that 'emotional maltreatment' is a preferred term as it includes both emotional abuse and emotional neglect. (Ness, 2023, see also Ness and Paulsen 2026).
- 'Psychological maltreatment' is used in the US whereas in England the term emotional abuse is more commonly used to encapsulate all the abusive and neglectful aspects of harm (North, 2019).
- Emotional abuse and neglect is associated with cumulative and low-level harm that can create compounding damage (Bryce et al., 2023; Carrera et al., 2021; Curtis et al., 2025).
- There is a strong association of emotional abuse with exposure to domestic violence and self-harm (Debelle et al., 2022).
- New forms of emotional/psychological abuse are emerging via digital means and technology-facilitated harm that can cause long-term psychological harm. These include cyberviolence, online bullying, sexual extortion, online stalking, shaming and grooming (Turner et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2024; Finkelhor et al, 2022; Rowse, 2023, Reed et al., 2025, Bae et al., 2024).
- The importance of preventative support (Bull et al., 2026) and help-seeking models (Bennett et al., 2022) in response to emotional abuse and neglect is emphasised.

- Emotional/psychological abuse clearly demonstrates how repeated low-level harm creates its own distinct, compounding damage (dysregulation, disconnection, negative self-image) (Bryce et al., 2023; Carrera et al., 2021; Curtis et al., 2025).
- Children with conduct disorder non-conduct psychological disorders, and speech/language difficulties have a higher likelihood of referral for emotional abuse (Legano et al., 2021).
- The prevalence of emotional abuse among disabled children reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) in the US accounts for 5.6% of maltreatment cases (Scurich, 2026).

2.2.4 Physical Abuse

Physical abuse There is a high heterogeneity across studies with regard to the definitions of physical abuse (Massullo et al., 2023), with results that are highly dependent on instruments used (Mathews et al., 2020). Low overall detection rates are reported but there are new and emerging potential for tools (e.g. NLP – natural language processing – and expanded lexicons to explore medical reports) to flag potential physical abuse signals (undetected injuries or explanations) earlier among paediatricians (Hanson et al., 2023). There is extensive literature on many dimensions of physical abuse. Key messages include:

- Children with disabilities are over two times more likely to experience violence compared to their non-disabled peers (Fang et al., 2022).
- There are strong links between physical abuse and domestic violence (Debelle et al., 2022).
- Physical abuse needs to be understood in the context of co-occurrence with other forms of maltreatment (Lebel et al., 2019, Bryce et al., 2023).
- Links have been established between physical abuse and negative long-term health and behavioural outcomes (He et al., 2025, Lawrence et al., 2023).
- Evidence of misdiagnosis and missing other health-related causes of child injury remains an ongoing challenge for identification and response (Dyba et al., 2025).
- Physical abuse (smacking, hitting) accumulates into a distinct harm type with long-term impacts (cumulative) (Bryce et al., 2023).
- Technology-facilitated physical abuse includes sharing of images, extortion through forced physical acts or self-harm (Turner et al., 2024; Rowse, 2023).
- Short intervals between births (under 18 months) increase the risk of physical abuse, independent of other factors like poverty or substance use. (Rybińska-Campbell et al., 2024).
- There have been calls for specific safeguarding in sports (particularly elite) settings to deal with physical abuse (over-training, corporal punishment) (Rhind et al., 2024; Villa et al., 2025).
- Parental power and privilege can lead to physical abuse being hidden or minimised (Bernard et al., 2023).

2.2.5 Sexual Abuse

Sexual Abuse

Existing categorisations of child sexual abuse (CSA) need to more explicitly capture the broad range of activities that include child sexual exploitation (CSE). This requires further differentiation of inter-familial and extra-familial harm, the latter being a major focus in recent literature. Laird and colleagues (2023) developed an expanded CSE definition and a CSE typology and decision tree to facilitate greater understanding and identification of the complexity of child sexual abuse. Overall, there is a need for clearer conceptualisation of child exploitation (Baidawi et al., 2020; Bloxsom et al., 2026).

The sexual exploitation of children occurs in a variety of forms including through prostitution, online, in travel and tourism, through child or forced marriage, and in the trafficking of children. While online sexual exploitation can affect any child anywhere, other forms of sexual exploitation appear to be associated with cohorts of children and young people whose life experiences make them more vulnerable including being in care, going 'missing' or running away from home or a care placement, intellectual disability, prior sexual abuse or neglect, alcohol and drug misuse, disengagement in education, low self-esteem, or peer introduction to exploitative older men (Canning et al., 2023, p. 2). These are intersectional adversities that combine to create a compounding effect and increase certain children's vulnerability.

Overall, trends since 2017 have seen the increase in technology leading to new forms of sexual abuse including the rise of non-contact and image-based abuse as fast growing categories (Finkelhor et al., 2022; Rowse, 2023; Savage, 2024) including self-produced child sexual abuse material (CSAM) often linked to grooming (Finkelhor et al., 2022) and deepfake/synthetic CSAM. Evidence shows the potential to utilise technology such as AI/big data in detection (predictive analytics, ethical challenges) and even in tracing financial transactions enabling exploitation (Kim & Yoon, 2026). Research shows that boys in particular use 'tech-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) to assert masculine dominance, gain peer approval and police gender norms, particularly by targeting girls' (Almanssori et al., 2025). Emotional/psychological components such as shaming and control are central in technology-facilitated cases (Turner et al., 2024).

Further key messages from literature include:

- Recognition of a shift from viewing CSA as primarily offline to understanding the technology-facilitated risks including self-generated content and peer-to-peer risks (Begum, 2026; Carlberg et al., 2024; Atabekova, 2019; Fang & Massetti, 2026).
- Greater recognition of cumulative harm and intersectional vulnerabilities (e.g. LGBTQ+ youth, minority youth) (Lorenzo-Dus & Mullineux-Morgan, 2026; Nopas, 2026; Pampanel et al., 2024).

- Recognition of 'child sexual exploitation and abuse' (CSEA) as distinct but overlapping with CSA where exploitation has an emphasis on exchange/coercion including non-monetary (Ghai et al., 2026).
- Retrospective reports from adults reveal previously under-recognised prevalence, highlighting how such data improve awareness and inform prevention (Finkelhor et al., 2022, Najman et al., 2020; Caffo et al., 2021).
- Association of CSEA with complex trauma (Duffy et al., 2021).
- Children with disabilities experience CSA two to four times more often than children without disabilities and can suffer longer and harsher abuse due to identification complications (Klebanov et al., 2024).
- Children with depression, PTSD or other anxieties are at heightened risk for sexual victimisation in middle childhood (5–11 years) and adolescence (12–17 years) (Vanderminden et al., 2023).

2.2.6 Exposure to Domestic Violence

Recent evidence shows that exposure to domestic violence (DV) is one of the most commonly investigated maltreatment concerns and often co-occurs with other abuse forms (Fallon et al., 2026, Lawrence et al., 2023, Harris, 2025). Such exposure poses significant risks to children's safety and wellbeing (Rebbe et al., 2025). It involves children witnessing assaults, threats, or property damage by a household member (Mathews et al., 2020). It has independent and cumulative effects, with chronic exposure linked to trauma responses (Hanson et al., 2023, Bryce et al., 2023). To date, it tends to be framed as emotional/psychological maltreatment (Caffrey, 2017; Debelle et al., 2022). However various national prevalence studies (including studies in USA, UK, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Taiwan; see Mathews et al, 2020) now include it as one of the five main forms of child maltreatment.

There is a strong evidence to support the inclusion of exposure to domestic violence as a standalone category in types of child maltreatment (Afifi et al., 2020; Mathews et al., 2020) This need for a standalone category for domestic violence is evidenced in studies from many jurisdictions including USA, UK, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Taiwan (Mathews et al. 2020; Afifi et al., 2020; Bhatia et al., 2026). Conceptualising exposure to domestic violence involves capturing information around four elements: relationship (to abuser); nature (of abuse); frequency; and severity (Mathews et al., 2020). It also involves recognising transgenerational risk as caregivers often have a history of adverse childhood experiences that can perpetuate a cycle of violence (Riva et al., 2026).

Further messaging from the literature is as follows:

- Exposure to domestic violence often occurs alongside other forms of harm including physical abuse (Debelle et al., 2022) and neglect (Sudland and Neumann, 2021).
- Early DV exposure increases the risk of later technology-facilitated abuse, dating violence, and exploitation (Markwick et al., 2019; Agnew and McAlinden, 2023).

- Intergenerational patterns and transgenerational risks are important. Maltreated parents may perpetuate or break cycles, but DV is a strong maintainer (McKenzie et al., 2024; Bryce et al., 2023, Riva et al., 2026).
- DV can co-occur with parental substance abuse (Lloyd, 2018; Chen et al., 2026; Kepple et al., 2022; Meinhofer et al., 2022).
- Early exposure has been found to increase risk of later technology-facilitated abuse, dating violence, and exploitation, highlighting its long-term impact (Markwick et al., 2019; Agnew and McAlinden, 2023).
- Exposure to DV is an example of 'hidden harm' that can be a less visible form of adversity for children (Mayock & Neary, 2025; Hood et al., 2021).

2.3 New and Emerging Forms of Harm

As discussed earlier, we have identified five cross-cutting themes from recent literature regarding new and emerging harms. This is not an exhaustive list. While some of these harms are relatively new – e.g. technology-facilitated harm – others have featured in knowledge and practices in child protection but not sufficiently in child protection guidance and procedure – e.g. cumulative and hidden harm.

- Technology-Facilitated Harm.
- Peer-to-Peer abuse.
- Cumulative and Hidden Harm.
- Institutional and Organisational Abuse.
- Child Trafficking and Modern Slavery.

2.3.1 Technology-Facilitated Harm

Technology-facilitated abuse involves the use of digital tools/devices to extend, enable or intensify abuse against children. It allows perpetrators to maintain control, monitor, intimidate, or exploit children across physical and digital spaces (eSafety, 2020, pp. 15–30). It encompasses a wide range of behaviours in which digital technologies are used to extend, enable or intensify abuse against children. Unlike many traditional forms of maltreatment, technology-facilitated abuse can occur at scale, with high degrees of anonymity and permanence, making the harm both pervasive and difficult to escape. Technology-facilitated harm has attracted far greater attention in the post-2017 literature as its prevalence and our understanding of it increases. It is recognised as growing rapidly, harder to escape, and often more damaging due to its persistent and public nature, which amplifies harm (Turner et al., 2024; Rowse, 2023; Finkelhor et al., 2022; Ortega-Barón et al., 2023; Bae, 2024).

Recent advancements in AI have introduced further risks such as generative CSAM, deepfakes, chatbots for grooming (Hamilton & Brennan, 2025). Technology lowers barriers (scale, anonymity, speed) for perpetrators and enables hybrid online–offline abuse (eSafety Commissioner, 2020; Hamilton & Brennan, 2025). Meanwhile, AI and algorithms accelerate risks (Hamilton & Brennan 2025).

Online harm cuts across all categories of abuse, though it can manifest differently. Emotional/psychological forms of online abuse include exclusion, shaming, and stalking

online (Bae, 2024). Technology-facilitated physical abuse includes sharing of images, extortion through forced physical acts or self-harm (Turner et al., 2024; Rowse, 2023). Child sexual exploitation, also referred to as Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse (TA-CSA) (Chauviré-Geib & Fegert, 2024) includes online grooming, image-based sexual abuse, sextortion, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, online harassment and shaming, deepfake or synthetic CSAM, and the coercion of children into producing sexual content (Finkelhor et al., 2022).

A defining feature of this form of abuse is its hybrid nature (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021). For example, technology is often used to initiate contact, maintain control, escalate coercion, or continue abuse after offline contact has ended (Ringenberg et al., 2022; Ghai et al., 2026). Online and offline dimensions of harm frequently intersect and reinforce one another rather than existing as separate phenomena (Jeglic & Winters, 2023; Turner et al., 2024). As cited in an Irish study (Canning at al., 2023) 'the experience of exploitation in one context (e.g. online) may increase a child's vulnerability to other forms of sexual exploitation (e.g. going on to experience exploitation in person)' (p. 10). One interviewee in the study described online contact as a 'stepping stone' to offline access to a child (p. 48).

Further key messages from research are:

- Effective identification and response require attention to the full continuum of a child's experiences across digital and physical environments.
- Early exposure to domestic violence or other forms of adversity has been linked to increased vulnerability to later online exploitation and technology-facilitated dating violence.
- Sexual and gender minority youth are at greater risk of technology-facilitated sexual violence and victimisation (Amadori & Brighi, 2025).
- Data privacy, digital education, and mandatory reporting are significant factors regarding protection of children from digitally perpetrated abuse (Gonzalez-Torres, 2026).
- There are unique complexities that substantially increase the risk of child maltreatment at the intersection of disability, internet use, and child protection (Flynn et al., 2024; Friedman-Hauser and Katz, 2025).
- Post-covid rates of technology-facilitated abuse show a sharp increase on pre-pandemic levels (Trinh, 2025), particularly emotional and psychological forms (Turner et al., 2024), as well as increases in grooming and image-based abuse (Finkelhor et al., 2022).
- TA-CSA frequently co-occurs with, or escalates into, contact abuse, yet many professionals continue to treat digital indicators as lower risk or struggle to assess the full continuum of a child's experiences (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021).

2.3.2 Peer-to-Peer Abuse

While not newly emerged, peer-to-peer (or child-on-child) abuse is a more substantial and recognised form of sexual harm. For example, recent data from England and Wales indicate that over 50% of recorded child sexual abuse and exploitation offences in

2024 were classified as peer-to-peer (Ekers, 2024; Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme, 2024). Broader analyses place prevalence estimates in the range of 33–50% (Karsna & Bromley, 2024; Kewley & Karsna, 2025). In Ireland, data from the 2022 CSO found that '73% of individuals aged 18–24 who experienced contact sexual violence as a child revealed that the perpetrator was a child (under 18 at the time)' (as cited in Hamilton & Brennan, 2025, p. 880). Likewise, a study conducted in the USA found that a 'majority of cases of child sexual abuse and assault are carried out by other minors, with these cases accounting for 76.7% for boys and 70.1% for girls' (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finkelhor, 2019 as cited in Hamilton & Brennan, 2025, p. 880) The most common age of alleged offenders is 14.

Current responses place a heavy burden on schools to prevent, identify and manage these cases, often with limited training and resources (Farrer & Co., 2024). Individualised interventions alone are insufficient; effective practice requires attention to the wider social and environmental contexts, such as peer groups, school cultures and online platforms, that enable the harm (Firmin, 2018a, 2018b). The evidence suggests that multi-agency information-sharing and contextual safeguarding approaches are essential if systems are to address the interconnected online and offline dimensions of peer-to-peer abuse.

Further key messages include:

- Peer-to-peer abuse interacts closely with the online–offline continuum. Technology frequently serves as both an enabler and an amplifier of peer-to-peer abuse (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024).
- Online spaces facilitate rapid grooming, non-consensual image sharing, coercion and sexual harassment among peers; these digital interactions often escalate into, or co-occur with, offline contact abuse (Setty, 2024; Livingstone & Smith, 2014).
- The hybrid nature of the harm means that incidents rarely remain confined to one domain: an image shared online can be used to blackmail or control a peer offline, while offline peer relationships can quickly migrate onto digital platforms where monitoring is more difficult.
- Because much of this activity occurs within friendship groups, schools and neighbourhoods, the traditional focus on adult–child power imbalances and individual victim–offender binaries is less helpful as it obscures the social dynamics involved (Rabe et al., 2026; Killean et al., 2022).Surveys such as Girlguiding (2025) show that 72% of girls aged 11–16 want more discussion of consent in schools, highlighting both the scale of the issue and gaps in preventative education. Safeguarding Ireland (2024) and HIQA detailed factors to consider when assessing peer-on-peer abuse as follows:
    - Impact on recipient (most important).
    - Frequency and pattern.
    - Severity and nature.
    - Power imbalance.
    - Intention and capacity of perpetrator.
    - Context and cumulative effect.
    - Long-term trauma.

2.3.3 Cumulative and Hidden Harm

Cumulative harm refers to 'the effects of an accumulation of adverse experiences in a child's life … and an understanding of cumulative harm and its integration into practice frameworks, legislation, policy and service delivery is hailed as an imperative of critical social concern' (Bryce et al., 2023). Cumulative harm applies to all forms of abuse and neglect (physical, emotional, sexual) and involves multiple factors (Bryce et al., 2026; Bhatia at al., 2026; Björkenstam et al., 2019; Bryce 2018; Bryce et al., 2023; Bryce & Collier, 2026; Collier & Bryce, 2021). Chronic, repeated harm is qualitatively different from single incidents (Bryce et al., 2023; Lawrence et al., 2023) and creates a different type of damage that is more than the sum of its parts (Rybińska-Campbell et al., 2024).

Studies posit there is a need to move from an episodic and incident-focused approach to assessing risk and harm toward an evaluation of an accumulation-focused approach to adversity and harm (Bryce et al., 2023, Smith et al., 2024, Collier & Bryce, 2021). Vial et al., (2020) suggest a synergistic effect between risk factors and describe a threshold at which the risk of child maltreatment increases exponentially. It is a subtle and pervasive harm type, which is often dismissed or ignored in child protection assessment and reporting practice (Bryce, 2018) despite its long-term impact (Fridell Lif et al., 2017). The four core qualities that make cumulative harm are:

- Persistent Dysfunction: Ongoing disruption in daily functioning (emotional regulation, relationships, learning).
- Dysregulation: Breakdown in the child's ability to manage emotions, behaviour, and stress responses (often linked to trauma's impact on brain development).
- Disadvantage: Cumulative harm creates and reinforces social and economic disadvantage that is hard to escape.
- Disconnection: Deepened sense of isolation from family, peers and community; a profound relational rupture (Bryce et al., 2023).

Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) such as abuse and neglect, that happen over sustained periods, lead to an accumulation of childhood adversity that can also be referred to as cumulative harm (Collier & Bryce, 2021). Childhood adversity is strongly associated with mental ill-health (Coughlan et al., 2025). It can also be a risk indicator for psychiatric morbidity (Björkenstam et al., 2019). This also connects with transgenerational risk where caregivers often have a history of adverse childhood experiences (Riva et al., 2026). Polyvictimisation is another way to articulate the impact of multiple harms and victimisation (Bhatia et al., 2026). There can be higher risks of polyvictimisation for children with disabilities and long-term illnesses (Seppälä et al., 2021; Vanderminden et al., 2023).

A practical model for assessing cumulative harm is set out in the Government of South Australia's Cumulative Harm Assessment and Analysis Practice Guide (Department of Human Services, 2025). Practitioners are guided to use a structured SEEK → SHARE → SORT → STORE process, whereby they gather comprehensive information about the child, family, networks and context; share it accurately to support collaboration;

sort it into structured categories; and record factual, objective case notes. Analysis is then organised across four dimensions:

- Dimension 1 – Vulnerability of the child: characteristics of child; capacity of parents; risk factors; complex needs.
- Dimension 2 – Severity of harm: type and degree of harm; whether escalating, chronic or episodic.
- Dimension 3 – Likelihood of harm: prior patterns as a predictor of future behaviour; recency of harm; family, community and environment.
- Dimension 4 – Safety (including verified protective factors): evidence of actions that stop or reduce exposure to harm e.g. plan for child to stay with grandparents; perpetrator attending counselling for DV.

Hidden harm intersects with cumulative harm. It refers to the often less visible forms of adversity experienced by children living with parental substance misuse, mental health difficulties, homelessness or domestic violence – situations in which the primary focus of concern may rest on the adult rather than the child (Mayock & Neary, 2025; Hood et al., 2021). Although these circumstances are frequently associated with emotional abuse or neglect, they can remain under-recognised within traditional incident-based frameworks because the harm is cumulative, relational, and not always marked by discrete acts of maltreatment. In a markedly different context, Bernard and colleagues' (2023) study of children in fee-paying schools found that parental power and privilege can lead to physical abuse being hidden or minimised. This study highlights that hidden harm can play out across many strata of society and should not be characterised as an issue confined to one particular demographic. Post-2017 literature underscores that children exposed to such environments may experience significant developmental, emotional, and behavioural impacts even in the absence of more visible forms of abuse (McKay et al., 2021). Greater recognition of hidden harms within guidance would support earlier identification, more holistic assessment, and responses that address both the child's immediate safety and the underlying family and structural factors contributing to their vulnerability.

2.3.4 Institutional and Organisational Harm

Institutional and organisational harm refers to abuse and neglect that occurs within, or is enabled by, the structures, cultures and practices of organisations responsible for the care, education, or supervision of children. Post-2017 literature and major inquiries have reinforced that such harm is rarely the result of isolated individual actions alone. Rather, it is frequently sustained by weak governance, inadequate safeguarding cultures, power imbalances, and failures of oversight (Elliott, 2020; Nicholson, 2021).

Institutional harm (or institutional abuse) traditionally refers to abuse and neglect that occurs inside large, often closed or residential institutions – such as children's homes, residential care settings, detention centres, religious institutions or historical institutions. It emphasises the systemic nature of the harm: the culture of the institution, power imbalances, isolation of children, and failures of oversight that allow

abuse to continue and remain hidden. (e.g. Australian Royal Commission, 2017; Irish institutional inquiries; UK residential care scandals).

Organisational harm is a broader and more contemporary term. It covers abuse and safeguarding failures that occur in, or are enabled by, any organisation that works with children – including schools, sports clubs, youth services, faith-based groups, charities and community organisations, as well as residential settings. The focus is on organisational culture, governance, leadership, power dynamics, recruitment practices, and the systems (or lack of systems) that either prevent or permit harm. Many recent reports and frameworks therefore use 'organisational harm' or 'organisational safeguarding failures' as the umbrella concept, with institutional harm treated as an important subset.

Further key messages include:

- The need for a shift beyond a primary focus on intra-familial risk toward clearer expectations of organisations. This relates to safe cultures, robust reporting pathways, independent oversight, and accountability when systems fail.
- Explicit attention to organisational harm would support mandated persons and organisations in identifying not only individual acts of maltreatment but also the broader environmental and cultural factors that enable or conceal abuse.

2.3.5 Child Trafficking and Modern Slavery

Child trafficking and modern slavery constitute severe forms of exploitation that violate fundamental child rights and represent a significant global public health concern (Greenbaum et al., 2017; Wood, 2020). These harms involve the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, or other forms of severe abuse (Greenbaum et al., 2017). They are characterised by elements of movement, control and organised or transactional dynamics that frequently intersect with online recruitment, poverty, migration and systemic vulnerabilities. Use of public health and primary prevention programmes, specialist training for recognition and intervention, and multidisciplinary collaboration with non-medical services are recommended as methods to identify and deter child trafficking and modern slavery (Greenbaum et al., 2017).

Trafficking and modern slavery-related exploitation of children constitute distinct harms but they also overlap with other forms of sexual and cumulative harm. They require explicit recognition in guidance, multi-agency protocols, and targeted protection for high-risk groups (including children in care, those who go missing, and unaccompanied minors), and sustained investment in professional training and interagency collaboration. The recognition of victims of slavery or trafficking can be extremely challenging as they present in diverse ways, and children's responses to threat, fear, manipulation, and abuse are complex. Professionals require clear understanding of the range of possible physical, behavioural, and developmental indicators (Wood, 2020). These can include victims presenting with infections, injuries,

post-traumatic stress, suicidality, or other physical and behavioural health conditions (Greenbaum et al., 2017).

A systematic review by Franchino-Olsen (2021) synthesises risk factors specifically associated with commercial sexual exploitation of children and child sex trafficking. Key vulnerabilities identified across the studies examined include:

- prior child abuse and maltreatment.
- caregiver strain.
- running away or being 'thrown away'.
- substance use.
- peer influence.
- witnessing family violence or criminality.
- poverty or material need.
- difficulties in school.
- conflict with parents.
- poor mental health or self-view.
- involvement with child protective services or juvenile justice.
- early substance use.
- prior sexual victimisation.

Martinho and colleagues (2020) conducted a systematic review of 17 studies to examine professional practices and the needs of child trafficking victims. They highlight that effective responses require attention to:

- the specific needs of victims.
- institutional and human-resource capacity.
- macro-societal factors.
- ongoing research.

Overall, addressing child trafficking is inherently complex and demands collaborative, multidisciplinary work across education, health, social care, protection and justice sectors. Professionals need specialised training and qualifications if they are to screen, assess needs, and respond in line with international recommendations (Martinho et al., 2020; Greenbaum et al., 2017; Wood, 2020). Table 3 provides further information regarding identifying and mitigating risks of child trafficking, modern slavery and related exploitation in Ireland.

Table 3: Identifying and Mitigating Risks of Child Trafficking, Modern Slavery and Related Exploitation in Ireland

Emergent Risk	Description & Key Features (Post-2017 Evidence)	Relevance to Irish Children First Updates/ Related Policies	Primary Sources
Child Criminal Exploitation	• Children coerced into organised criminality (drug supply, theft, etc.). • Victim-offender overlap: children appear agentic or "involved" but are controlled. • Binary victim/offender framing leads to criminalisation over protection.	• Expand recognition of exploitation beyond sexual/labour forms. • Strengthen non-punishment principles. • Trauma-informed identification to avoid criminalisation of exploited children.	Darby et al. (2026); Saker (2022); Cockbain & Olver (2019).
Lack of access to Mental Health Services	•Complex/developmental trauma; "system trauma" from repeated disclosures, immigration/asylum processes, and fragmented systems. • Barriers to mental health access (thresholds, waiting lists, age transitions).	• Require trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, victim-centred care. • Ensure timely mental health access. • Avoid re-traumatisation in assessments.	Darby et al. (2026); Rafferty (2018); Martinho et al. (2020); Skeels et al., 2024).
Service Gaps	• Insufficient training; stereotypical "ideal victim" assumptions. • Inconsistent application of referral mechanisms • Lack of survivor inclusion; reactive rather than preventative approaches.	• Strengthen multi-disciplinary training (including cultural competence & trauma-informed practice). • Promote survivor-informed/ survivor-led elements. • Early risk assessment & prevention focus. • Improve data/sharing.	Martinho et al. (2020); Saker (2022); Lannier (2026); Twis et al. (2022).
Transitional Care	• Support drops at 18. • Increased vulnerability to re-exploitation. • Liminal immigration status.	• Extend safeguards/support into early adulthood. • Plan transitions carefully.	Saker (2022); Skeels et al., (2024).

Section 3: Reporting Mechanisms, Thresholds and Processes

This section provides an update on the main developments in reporting mechanisms, thresholds and processes since 2017. This includes a commentary throughout on how developments in Ireland compare to other jurisdictions and pays particular attention to mandated reporting. In line with the research questions, particular emphasis is placed on online–offline dimensions of abuse and neglect and extra-familial harm.

Section 3.1 summarises the main evolutions in thresholds and decision-making since 2017.

Section 3.2 examines in more detail two comparator jurisdictions (England and New Zealand) in relation to reporting trends regarding the interconnected online and offline dimensions of abuse and neglect within family, community, education and care settings.

Section 3.3 focuses specifically on mandated reporters' practices regarding online and offline dimensions of abuse and neglect.

Section 3.4 focuses specifically on reporting in relation to extra-familial abuse concerns.

Key messages from this section are:

- Mandatory reporting has expanded across jurisdictions, though great variations exist in requirements. Practices also vary across sectors.
- Criteria regarding thresholds and decision-making continue to require attention to ensure that there is no under- or over-reporting.
- Effective protection is repeatedly shown to depend on robust multi-agency work, timely information-sharing, joint risk assessments, and specialist responses to organised exploitation.
- The international evidence points to the importance of monitoring substantiation rates and ensuring that families are not drawn into formal processes in relation to lower-level concerns without clear justification or adequate support.
- The need for training on reporting the interconnections of online and offline harm is highlighted in the context of the advancement of digital environments.
- While the practices of mandatory reporting apply across inter- and extra-familial contexts, there is greater emphasis in recent literature on the necessity for more distinct reporting mechanisms and stronger interagency coordination relating to extra-familial harms.

3.1 Evolutions in Thresholds and Decision-Making Criteria Since 2017

Since 2017, international child protection systems have continued to refine the thresholds, mechanisms and processes that govern when and how concerns about

abuse and neglect are reported and acted upon. These relate to both statutory thresholds applicable to mandated reporting and broader thresholds applicable to all reporters in relation to reasonable grounds for concern. International developments reflect both the expansion of mandatory reporting duties and growing recognition of the complexity of contemporary harm, including extra-familial, institutional, online and hybrid forms of abuse.

Systems also continue to face persistent challenges including vague or inconsistently applied thresholds, declining substantiation rates amid rising referral volumes, tensions between investigative and supportive approaches, and difficulties in sharing information across organisational boundaries.

Mandatory reporting thresholds and decision-making criteria have evolved unevenly across sectors in international child protection systems. While the formal legal standard, most commonly 'reasonable suspicion' or 'grounds to believe', has remained relatively stable, the scope of who must report and what forms of harm are explicitly covered has broadened in several jurisdictions.

As discussed earlier, some countries already include exposure to domestic violence as a standalone category (Mathews et al., 2020) and, increasingly, knowledge and understanding of technology-facilitated harm is leading to legislative changes and subsequent updates to mandatory reporting duties. At the same time, substantiation rates in some systems have declined markedly, suggesting that rising referral volumes include a higher proportion of lower-severity concerns, and processing practices within child welfare systems have themselves shifted (Rogeberg et al., 2026). These developments have played out differently across sectors:

- In education and health and social care, the expansion of mandated reporter groups and the growing recognition of less visible forms of harm have increased the volume and complexity of concerns reaching designated liaison leads and hospital safeguarding teams (Louras, 2024). Decision-making continues to rely heavily on professional judgement, particularly where guidance on emotional abuse, cumulative harm, or online indicators remains limited (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022).
- In social care and youth justice, where staff already work with children in situations of heightened vulnerability, thresholds have tended to be applied more readily in recent times, reflecting both the duty of care attached to institutional environments and lessons from inquiries into organisational abuse (Erooga et al., 2020; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017).
- Community and voluntary sector organisations have been drawn more firmly into formal reporting frameworks, while online platforms have acquired additional proactive detection and reporting responsibilities (OECD, 2025).

Overall, evidence from comparator jurisdictions shows the expansion of mandatory reporting and the challenges that accompany it. Occupational groups have developed diverging reporting practices, which is attributed to vague official guidelines combined with a lack of systematic training in identifying relevant cues of maltreatment

(Rogeberg et al., 2026, p. 550). The international evidence points to the importance of monitoring substantiation rates and ensuring that families are not drawn into formal processes in relation to lower-level concerns without clear justification or adequate support (Rogeberg et al., 2026; Mathews et al., 2020). In the United States, Edwards et al. (2023) found that rates of investigations arising from medical professionals' reports increased faster than those from other mandated reporters such as teachers and police, contributing to a doubling of infant investigations from 13.1 per 1,000 in 2010 to 27.1 per 1,000 in 2019 (p. 653). Racial inequalities also persisted, with absolute increases in investigation rates of 1.3 percentage points for White infants, 1.7 for Indigenous infants, and 3.1 for Black infants over the same period (Edwards et al., p. 653). These findings highlight the ongoing tension between broader reporting duties, system capacity, and equitable outcomes. Table 4 summarises further relevant international developments in reporting practices and notes their implications for Ireland.

Table 4: International Developments and Implications for Ireland

Aspect	Evolutions/Changes	Sample Evidence: Excerpt and Source	Implications for Ireland
Mandatory Reporting Laws & Scope	• Expansion of mandated reporters and types of maltreatment covered (e.g., emotional abuse, neglect, EDV). • Shift toward broader professional duties with clearer guidelines in some jurisdictions. • Substantiation rates declining over time due to increased low-severity referrals.	Rogeberg et al. (2026, p. 1–2): "As these laws were revised and extended, they also came to cover a broader set of professionals as well as additional forms of abuse and neglect… Mandated and nonmandated reporters have similar substantiation rates, but this shared probability declines by half across our data period (2014–2020)." Norway's Child Welfare Act requires reporting on "grounds to believe" mistreatment, neglect, etc.	Ireland's Children First Act (2015, updated) is already broad; further expansion would result in more lower threshold referrals.
Thresholds for Reporting	• "Reasonable suspicion" or "grounds to believe" standard (not requiring certainty or preponderance of evidence). • Vague definitions lead to interpretation variability. • Tension between preventive family services and investigative mandates.	Rogeberg et al. (2026, p. 2): Norwegian threshold: "Certain knowledge… is not needed, but… more than a vague suspicion… based on concrete circumstances" (Directorate of Health 2018). "Practical guidance is limited. 'The various forms of mistreatment are vaguely described…'"	**Threshold in Ireland is "reasonable grounds". It is vague which risks inconsistent application across professions however this scope aligns with other jurisdiction.**
Decision-Making Criteria	• Increased variation by profession/source. • Lack of training leads to biases. • Focus on perpetrator relationship, frequency, severity. • Rise in risk-of-harm (vs. actual harm) referrals.	Rogeberg et al. (2026, p. 2–3): Occupational groups evolved "diverging reporting practices as a consequence of vague official guidelines combined with a lack of systematic training." Decision-making continues to rely heavily on professional judgement, particularly where guidance on emotional abuse, cumulative harm, or online indicators remains limited (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022).	Professionals in Ireland (including teachers, GPs and others) may at times rely on professional judgement in the absence of clear guidance, which can contribute to variability in decision-making.
Interagency & System Impacts	• Increased referrals straining systems. • Push for better training, feedback loops, and preventive approaches. • Disparities and net-widening concerns.	Rogeberg et al. (2026, p. 1): Family-oriented systems (like Scandinavia/Ireland) face tension with mandates aimed at serious cases while emphasising voluntary prevention. Mathews et al. (2020, p. 2): Need for reliable prevalence data to evaluate interventions.	The Irish child protection system is already operating under significant pressure, further expansion of reporting without corresponding investment would increasing delays.
Overall Trends & Challenges	• More inclusive reporting but risks of over-reporting low-severity cases. • Calls for clearer protocols, training, and balancing investigation with support.	Rogeberg et al. (2026, p. 2): Declining substantiation rates highlight evolving practices post-mandates. International evidence notes need to monitor substantiation rates and ensure that families are not drawn into formal processes clear justification or adequate support (Mathews et al., 2020).	Improved data on substantiation rates, together with clearer guidance on thresholds, would help ensure that families are not unnecessarily drawn into formal processes in relation to lower-level concerns.

3.2 Jurisdictional Comparison with New Zealand and England Regarding Interconnected Online and Offline Dimensions of Abuse and Neglect

The decision to compare New Zealand and England with Ireland, as an illustration, was made because each country has a relatively recent legislative Act that is the foundation from which the guidance emerges. Also, the three jurisdictions focus on similar categories of abuse, and all have clear procedures on who such abuse should be reported to and by whom. Table 5 provides a snapshot jurisdictional comparison. Table 6 provides comparison of specific categories relating to online and extra-familial abuse.

Table 5: Snapshot Jurisdictional Comparison – Legal Basis, Abuse Categorisations, and Reporting (Ireland, New Zealand, and England)

Country	Ireland	New Zealand	England
Legal Basis	Children First Act 2015.	Children's Act 2014	Children Act 1989 & 2004; Children and Social Work Act 2017.
Core Frameworks & Guidance	Children First (2017 + 2019/2025 addendums).	Safer Organisations, Safer Children (updated June 2025).	Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023).
Applies to	Mandated persons (specific professionals by role) and all organisations providing services to children (must have a Child Safeguarding Statement).	All organisations working with or around children. (must have a written Child Protection Policy).	All organisations, agencies and practitioners with functions relating to children (led by the three statutory safeguarding partners).
Reporting to	To Tusla.	To Oranga Tamariki or Police.	To local authority children's social care (via Multi. Agency Safeguarding Hub) or Police.
Abuse Categories	Four categories with very detailed indicator lists. Strong focus on developmental impact and links to parental issues. Bullying (including cyber) treated as a distinct harm.	Four categories with practical signs + strong emphasis on cultural context (whakapapa/tikanga). Exposure to family/whānau violence explicitly counted as abuse. Neglect described as the most common form.	Four categories (plus fabricated/induced illness under physical). Abuse can be wholly online or tech-facilitated. Heavy emphasis on extra-familial harm, domestic abuse impact, and local threshold documents.
Features of Guidance	Indicator-based child abuse identification. practitioner-oriented lists of abuse indicators. Responsive approach (e.g providing updated addendums to guidance).	Strong cultural and holistic approach deep integration of Māori principles whānau (extended family)-centred framework mandated partnership with Māori , embedding indigenous knowledge into child protection practices.	Shared responsibility approach to child welfare and protection. Strong emphasis on multi-agency partnership modern and broad indicators (but compared to Ireland less itemised descriptions).

Table 6: Comparison of Specific Categories Relating to Online and Extra-Familial Abuse.

Additional Abuse Type	Ireland	New Zealand	England	Similarities Across All 3
Online/Tech-Facilitated Abuse* *Not considered a separate abuse type in any of the 3 countries approaches but is considered within sexual or emotional abuse categories*	Limited integration: Sexual abuse includes "exposing a child to inappropriate or abusive material through information and communication technology" and "showing sexually explicit material" as grooming. Bullying covers "non-contact bullying via mobile phones/ internet." 2019 addendum requires online safety in Child Safeguarding Statements. No "wholly online" concept; focuses on reporting to Tusla if thresholds met (e.g. serious impact on health/development).	No specific sections: Abuse definitions (physical/emotional/ sexual/neglect) do not mention online or tech-facilitated harms. General guidance on organizational risks (e.g., telecommunications with children) but no indicators or responses for digital contexts. Family violence focus dominates, with no substantive changes in 2025 update.	Most detailed: Defines harm as including "online abuse, exploitation, grooming" that can occur "wholly online or via social media/gaming"; technology facilitates offline abuse. Indicators: Behavioural changes, mental health issues, viewing inappropriate content, developing risky online relationships. Guidance: Assessments must consider online risks in extra-familial contexts; multi-agency info sharing for patterns; rapid reviews post-incidents involving tech. The 2023 update placed greater emphasis on extremism and radicalisation linked to online influences.	All 3 countries share foundational approaches to online and technology-facilitated abuse (e.g., grooming via apps, exposure to harmful content, cyberbullying, or tech-enabled exploitation). While the depth varies (England is most explicit, New Zealand least), they emphasize integration into broader safeguarding without creating a standalone "online abuse" category.
Extra-Familial Harms (UK) or Harm Outside the Home (Ire) or Org Child Abuse (NZ) *Not a standalone category but mapped to the four core types (e.g., peer exploitation or institutional abuse might fall under emotional/ sexual abuse)*	Addresses abuse "in the community or institutional setting" by strangers/adults/other children. Bullying (e.g., based on gender/ sexuality/race) as key harm; cultural practices (FGM, forced marriage, honour-based violence, radicalisation) as vulnerabilities. Indicators: Environmental factors like poverty/begging/bullying/ internet concerns. Guidance: Refer to Tusla/An Garda Síochána; anti-bullying policies in schools; risk assessments for community services. 2025 addendum clarifies mandated reporting for adult disclosures of past abuse (potentially extra-familial).	Organisational focus: Applies to services for children/adults where kids present (e.g., mental health). Family violence as extra-familial if involving siblings/non-parents. Indicators: Patterns in records; exposure to intimate partner violence as emotional abuse. Guidance: Refer to Oranga Tamariki/ Police; safer recruitment to prevent institutional harms; partnership with community services. Cultural lens (whakapapa/tikanga) for responses, but limited to family-centric harms.	Broadest scope: No legal definition but widely covers harms outside home (e.g., peer groups, schools, communities, online). Includes criminal exploitation (county lines: gangs using children for drugs via intimidation/violence/debt), serious violence, modern slavery/ trafficking, peer-on-peer abuse, teenage relationship abuse. Indicators: Frequent absences, associations with harmful groups, exploitation vulnerabilities. Guidance: "Contextual safeguarding" approach; multi-agency strategies; family/group decision-making to disrupt perpetrators.	Extra-familial harms (abuse or exploitation occurring outside the family home, such as in communities, institutions, peer groups, or public spaces) are addressed in all three countries' child protection guidance.
Extra-Familial	Vulnerabilities from community factors (e.g., children out of home, cultural norms not meeting Irish standards); early intervention outside family if needed. Addendums add specificity (2019: online in statements; 2025: retrospective disclosures). But core 2017 text is less systemic than England's.	Holistic but dated: Child-centred with family/whānau partnership; early intervention for wellbeing (non-statutory referrals). Progressive: Cultural integration, but no online/extra-familial depth; reviews every 3 years encouraged, but no 2025/2026 specifics in doc.	Most up-to-date: Emphasizes emerging threats (e.g., radicalisation, serious violence post-2023 Duty); child protection from prison/probation risks; whole-system multi-agency (safeguarding partners: local authority/ICP/police); info sharing for external patterns.	All prioritise cross agency partnerships (health, police, education) and focus on risk assessments. Differences include England leading in systemic integration (e.g. multiagency collaboration), NZ in targeted 2026 actions, and Ireland relying on pre-2026 frameworks.

Note: Need for recognition of intersecting vulnerabilities: Online harms worse for certain groups (e.g., Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, ethnic minorities)

3.3 Mandated Reporters' Practices: Identifying and Reporting Interconnected Online and Offline Abuse

One of the main changes to note in relation to mandated reporting is the growing interconnectedness of online and offline harm. This presents particular challenges for recognition and response. As already discussed in Section 2, online and offline harms are interconnected and need to be addressed holistically. For example, technology is frequently used to facilitate in-person access or to perpetuate harm through the ongoing circulation of images (Canning et al., 2023; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Jeglic & Winters, 2023). Grooming strategies overlap across online and offline contexts, but digital platforms increase accessibility, anonymity, and the potential for isolation (Ringenberg et al., 2022). This section examines the challenges and barriers mandated reporters face when identifying and reporting these hybrid forms of harm across family, community, education and care settings.

As already discussed in Section 2, professionals across sectors often have limited understanding of the full range of technology-assisted abuse. For example, in relation to child sexual abuse, digital indicators such as secrecy around devices, unexplained online contacts (including older 'friends'), changes in online behaviour, or involvement in sexting are frequently under-recognised or minimised without specific training (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021). Mental health providers, for example, report greater confidence in identifying in-person sexual abuse than in recognising grooming, luring, or child sexual abuse imagery (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022). Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021) found that organisations often prioritised offline abuse as higher risk, while Binford (2023) highlighted that many frontline professionals lack familiarity with children's digital environments even though hybrid cases are increasingly common.

Professionals also report challenges in interpreting victim agency, the persistence of digital harm, and the blurred boundaries between online and offline experiences. These difficulties play out differently across contexts (see Table 7 below for detailed examination of family, community, education and care settings).

Across all settings, organisational pathways for assessing and responding to technology-assisted and hybrid abuse are often unclear, which has implications for risk assessment and governance policies as well as workforce training and development. Barriers include insufficient training, limited confidence, time constraints, and a tendency to minimise online elements. The literature points to several priorities for strengthening mandated reporters' practice:

- targeted training on the dynamics of technology-assisted and hybrid abuse.
- adapted assessment tools that routinely include digital indicators.
- clear cross-setting reporting pathways that avoid minimising online harm.
- stronger multi-stakeholder approaches that recognise the interconnected nature of contemporary risk.

Table 7 provides further detail in relation to identification, distinguishing online and offline interconnected dimensions, reporting responses and on relevant themes in different settings.

Table 7: Interconnectedness of Online and Offline Abuse in Various Contexts

Aspect	Key Findings	Evidence and Sources
Identification	Professionals often have limited understanding of the wide range of technology-assisted CSA (TA-CSA), including grooming, luring, image distribution, and hybrid forms. They may miss digital indicators (e.g., secret online relationships, sexting, device use) or view them as lower risk. Mental health providers report more confidence identifying in-person sexual abuse than grooming/luring/child sexual abuse imagery. Signs like behavioural changes, secrecy around devices, or online contacts (e.g., older "friends") are key but under-recognised without training.	• Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021): Professionals demonstrated limited understanding; organizations prioritized offline as higher risk. • Dimitropoulos et al. (2022): 83% of mental health providers encountered cases, but more training/confidence for contact abuse vs. online elements. Vignettes used for identification. • Binford (2023): Frontline professionals lack familiarity with digital environments; hybrid cases common.
Distinguishing Online/Offline/ Interconnected Dimensions	Abuse is often hybrid (e.g., online grooming leading to offline meetings; technology in most contact CSA). Distinctions are blurred: online can facilitate in-person access or perpetuate harm via images/CSAM. Professionals struggle with dynamics like anonymity, persistence of digital abuse, and victim agency perceptions. Need to assess both environments together.	• Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021): TA-CSA vs. offline; impact often similar, but online seen as less serious; victims blamed as "active." Recommends term "technology-assisted abuse." • Jeglic & Winters (2023): Technology (texting, chats) common in in-person CSA, especially adolescents. • Ringenberg et al. (2022): Grooming strategies overlap but technology increases accessibility/isolation.
Reporting & Systemic Responses	Organisations rarely have clear assessment/intervention pathways for TA-CSA. Barriers include lack of training, confidence, time, and knowledge of digital risks. Mental health providers are key mandated reporters but under-report online elements. Recommendations: training, adapted tools, policies against minimisation.	• Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021): Limited pathways; risk of systemic failure. Calls for widespread training, adapted tools, policy review. • Dimitropoulos et al. (2022): More barriers for online vs. in-person. • Binford (2023): Needs include training, resources, terminology, legal modernisation, and provider supports.
Settings: Family	Assess secrecy around online contacts/devices within family dynamics. Family responses (e.g., blame, support) influence disclosure and reporting. Hybrid abuse often involves known adults (e.g., family friends).	• Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021): Family difficulties common; perceptions of blame. • Dimitropoulos et al. (2022): Vignettes involve family friends in grooming/luring scenarios.
Settings: Community	Community settings involve broader monitoring of online interactions, peer influences, and multi-stakeholder responses (e.g., with NGOs, law enforcement). Challenges with jurisdictional issues in online abuse.	• Binford (2023): Broader frontline efforts; borderless nature complicates community-level responses. General emphasis in prevention papers on community education.
Settings: Education	Schools monitor behavioural changes, device use, and social interactions. Online/offline interpersonal violence and abuse intersection common in adolescent dating contexts. Educators need training to identify and report.	• Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021): Education professionals included in survey. • Barter et al. (2017): School-based survey on online/offline experiences.

3.4 Extra-Familial Abuse: Reporting Mechanisms, Thresholds and Interagency Approaches

Extra-familial abuse refers to harm that occurs outside the family home in settings such as schools, healthcare, residential care, youth justice, community organisations and online environments. While the practices of mandatory reporting apply across inter- and extra-familial contexts, there is greater emphasis in recent literature on the necessity for more distinct reporting mechanisms and stronger interagency coordination.

Extra-familial and institutional contexts introduce additional layers of complexity. Here, indicators often centre on:

- the behaviour of authority figures (teachers, coaches, clergy, or care staff).
- grooming behaviours.
- unexplained injuries occurring in care or organisational settings.
- the presence of significant power imbalances.

Because institutions carry a heightened duty of care, the practical threshold for concern is frequently lower than in other community settings. Inquiries and research consistently show that institutional cultures, weak external oversight, and the capacity of powerful individuals to become 'impregnable' can enable abuse to continue undetected for extended periods (Erooga et al., 2020; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017; Council of Europe, 2020).

Across comparable jurisdictions, the formal threshold for reporting extra-familial harm remains one of reasonable suspicion or reasonable belief of harm (Piersiak et al. 2023). Professionals are expected to report rather than investigate (Kamke et al., 2024), and major inquiries repeatedly identify failures in information-sharing and multi-agency working as central to systemic breakdown (Feinstein et al., 2023; Jay et al., 2022; Casey, 2025). A range of practices across sectors are needed to capture the diversity of extra-familial harm:

- Multi-agency safeguarding hubs, school–police liaison, and joint education–social care protocols are widely recommended (Royal Commission, 2017; Council of Europe, 2020).
- Providers of foster and residential care operate under an elevated duty of care (HIQA, 2018). Any reasonable suspicion triggers immediate external referral; thresholds are effectively lower because of the heightened vulnerability of children in care and the documented risk of organisational abuse.
- In youth justice settings, staff are mandated reporters for peer violence, staff abuse or neglect of care, with immediate reporting required for sexual abuse. Multi-agency youth justice boards and independent inspection regimes reflect the elevated risks linked to confinement and power imbalances (Council of Europe, 2020; Casey, 2025).
- Community organisations are required to appoint designated safeguarding leads and to refer concerns to statutory services or policing authorities. Online

platforms carry additional proactive duties to detect and report child sexual abuse material and grooming (OECD, 2025; Erooga et al., 2020).
- Where organised exploitation, grooming networks, or trafficking is suspected, joint police–child protection reporting, specialist exploitation teams, and multi-agency taskforces are standard (Casey, 2025; Jay et al., 2022).
- Peer-to-peer abuse is treated with equivalent seriousness to adult-perpetrated harm, using multi-agency risk assessment tools and joint education–social care protocols (Council of Europe, 2020).

Table 8 summarises the principal reporting mechanisms, thresholds and interagency approaches across the main extra-familial settings. Overall, it surfaces a number of consistent, cross-cutting key messages:

- Reporting thresholds are almost universally based on 'reasonable suspicion' or 'reasonable belief' rather than definitive proof, with professionals expected to report concerns rather than investigate them themselves.
- Mandatory reporting duties are strongly emphasised for those working with children, particularly in institutional and extra-familial settings, while online platforms are assigned additional proactive responsibilities for detecting and reporting technology-facilitated abuse.
- Effective protection is repeatedly shown to depend on robust multi-agency working, timely information-sharing, joint risk assessments, and specialist responses to organised exploitation, areas in which inquiries such as the UK Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (Jay et al., 2022), the Australian Royal Commission Report (2017) and the Casey Audit (2025) have identified recurring coordination failures.
- At the same time, systems must contend with under-reporting driven by stigma, fear or normalisation of harm, the risk of over-surveillance of particular ethnic or cultural groups, and resource constraints that limit the quality of interagency responses.

Table 8: Reporting Mechanisms and Interagency Approaches for Extra-Familial Abuse

Setting / Context	Reporting Mechanisms	Commonly Accepted Thresholds	Interagency Approaches & Recommendations	Evidence: Excerpts and Source
Education	•School safeguarding lead/ designated person •Mandatory reporting by all staff •Internal concern forms leading to referral to children's social care or police.	Reasonable suspicion of any maltreatment (including peer-on-peer, staff grooming, or neglect). Immediate referral for sexual abuse or significant harm.	•Multi-agency safeguarding hubs. •School-police liaison. •Education-social care joint protocols. •Serious incident reviews.	Royal Commission (Australia, 2017): Schools have clear mandatory reporting duties (p.1-12). Council of Europe (2020): Educational settings key for early identification (p.1).
Health (hospitals, clinics, primary care, mental health)	•Healthcare professionals as mandated reporters •Safeguarding teams in hospitals •Referrals via child protection pathways.	Reasonable belief / suspicion of abuse or neglect, especially unexplained injuries, sexual abuse indicators, or fabricated illness. Lower threshold for children with disabilities or in care.	•Hospital safeguarding teams liaise with social care and police. •Multi-agency meetings. •Health-social care information sharing.	Njelesani (2019): Health professionals play critical role in identifying hidden abuse of disabled children (p.1, Abstract). OECD 2025: Health data used in broader CSEA detection.
Social Care (foster care, residential children's homes, leaving care services)	•Internal safeguarding leads •Mandatory reporting to external child protection authorities •Serious incident reporting.	Any reasonable suspicion triggers immediate external referral. Lower threshold due to in loco parentis duty of care and heightened vulnerability.	•Multi-agency reviews. •Independent oversight. •Joint protocols between residential providers and statutory social services.	Royal Commission (Australia, 2017): Institutional failures in social care settings led to systemic recommendations for mandatory external reporting Erooga et al. (2020): Organisational abuse in care settings requires robust interagency scrutiny.
Youth Justice (detention centres, youth offending teams, secure units)	•Youth justice staff as mandated reporters •Internal safeguarding teams •Notifications to social care and police.	Reasonable suspicion of maltreatment (including peer violence, staff abuse, or neglect of care). Immediate reporting for sexual abuse.	•Multi-agency youth justice boards. •Close liaison between justice, social care, and health. •Independent inspection regimes.	Council of Europe (2020): Children in justice settings at high risk due to confinement and power imbalances (p.1). Casey National Audit (2025): Group-based exploitation risks in justice-related environments.

Setting / Context	Reporting Mechanisms	Commonly Accepted Thresholds	Interagency Approaches & Recommendations	Evidence: Excerpts and Source
Community Sectors (youth clubs, sports, faith groups, voluntary organisations, online platforms)	•Designated safeguarding leads in organisations. •Referrals to statutory services or police. •Platform reporting to hotlines.	Reasonable suspicion of grooming, exploitation, or abuse. Platforms have additional proactive detection duties for CSAM/grooming.	•Community multi-agency safeguarding partnerships. •Voluntary sector protocols linked to statutory services. •Tech-social care-police collaboration.	OECD Transparency Reporting 2025: Community/online platforms must report suspected CSEA (grooming, CSAM sharing) (p.268). Erooga et al. (2020): Extra-familial abuse often occurs in community/ organisational settings.
Group-based / Organised Exploitation (grooming gangs, trafficking networks)	•Police and child protection joint reporting. •Specialist exploitation teams. •Public referrals via hotlines.	Reasonable suspicion of organised exploitation or grooming; evidence of multiple victims or patterns triggers major investigation.	•Multi-agency taskforces (police, social care, health, education). •Information sharing agreements. •Disruption strategies.	Casey, (2025): Emphasises joint working and early multi-agency intervention. Jay et al. (2022): Highlights failures in interagency response to organised networks. Savage (2024): Police-reported data shows extra-familial patterns requiring joined-up responses.
Online Grooming & Extra-familial Sexual Exploitation (non-family perpetrators)	•Platform reporting to hotlines. •Mandatory reporter obligations. •User and proactive AI detection.	Suspicion of grooming, solicitation, or CSAM sharing triggers immediate content removal and law enforcement report.	•Tech platforms and law enforcement & child protection & education agreements •Global hotlines..	OECD Transparency Reporting 2025: Platforms must report confirmed/ suspected CSEA p.268). Interpol & UNICEF guidelines: Reasonable suspicion sufficient for reporting.
Peer-to-Peer Abuse (schools,	•School/setting safeguarding leads report to child protection. •Police if serious (e.g., sexual violence).	Reasonable belief that a child is at risk or has been harmed by another child.	•Multi-agency risk assessments (e.g., using tools like AIM*.	Council of Europe (2020): Recognises peer and institutional risks; calls for robust reporting systems (p.1).

**AIM (Assessment, Intervention, Moving On). AIM Project UK-based project developed by a group of practitioners and researchers in England; it provides structured assessment and intervention models specifically for young people (usually 10–18) who display harmful sexual behaviour. AIM is commonly used alongside*

***Brook Traffic Lights Tool (TLT) in UK safeguarding practice. Traffic Lights helps with initial identification and categorisation (Green/Amber/Red), while AIM provides deeper assessment and intervention planning (see King-Hill 2023 for further discussion).*

Section 4: Further Examination of Differentiated Responses Required for Certain Groups, Including Children with Disabilities

While the legal threshold for reporting of reasonable suspicion or reasonable grounds applies equally to all children, the practical recognition of risk and the application of thresholds vary markedly for certain groups. This can apply, for example, to children with disabilities, children of different genders, and children from specific cultural or ethnic backgrounds or those experiencing socioeconomic deprivation. Effective guidance needs to equip mandated reporters with context-specific indicators while reinforcing that the underlying threshold for action remains the same: knowledge, belief or reasonable suspicion that a child is at risk of, or is experiencing, significant harm.

Throughout the report, the fact that risk indicators and the practical application of reporting thresholds vary considerably depending on the context in which concerns arise is already well established. In this section, more detailed attention is paid to themes arising in recent literature in relation to reporting and responses regarding children with disabilities (Section 4.1) and other contextual contexts with a focus on gender and culture as well as in response to socioeconomic disadvantage (Section 4.2). While these are not an exhaustive list of themes arising in the literature, they feature strongly in current discussions about reporting thresholds and responses.

Key Messages

- Difference in experiences of child protection by young people with disabilities requires particular attention and requires more visibility across all dimensions of child protection categories and procedures. This will drive greater awareness among mandated reporters and the general public.
- Other differentiating factors that impact on thresholds and responses include gender, ethnicity, culture and race, and children experiencing socioeconomic deprivation.
- Particular attention needs to be paid to different contexts especially in relation to the broad area of 'extra-familial' harm already discussed in Section 3.
- The cross-cutting themes, including exposure to technology-facilitated harms, recur and can be intensified for those considered most vulnerable or at risk.
- Additional training is required to increase capacity for responding and reporting in different contexts with a focus on pathways to address the barriers highlighted in this section.

4.1 Reporting and Responses Regarding Children with Disabilities

There is a need for enhanced awareness and acknowledgement of children with disabilities and the way in which abuse and neglect is recognised, experienced and reported by that cohort. The evidence shows that children with disabilities are at a

particularly high risk of abuse and neglect (Legano et al., 2021) though patterns vary by specific disability (Klebanov et al., 2024). While children with disabilities are included in all aspects discussed so far, it is important to also have specific reference to, and recognition of, the complexities in identifying and addressing the abuse and neglect experienced by children with disabilities. This will drive greater awareness among mandated reporters and the general public. It is also needed to address the disproportionately high rates of abuse experienced by children with disabilities.

Children with disabilities experience substantially elevated rates of all forms of maltreatment. Research consistently indicates that they are three to four times more likely to experience violence, abuse, or neglect than their non-disabled peers (Njelesani, 2019; Legano et al., 2021; Mathews et al., 2020). Despite this disproportionate vulnerability, a growing body of evidence suggests that higher practical thresholds are often applied before child protection intervention occurs (Flynn, 2021; Flynn & McGregor, 2017; Vanderminden et al., 2020).

Contributing factors include:

- Unmet medical and educational needs.
- Social marginalisation.
- Isolation.
- Stigma.
- Increased dependency on caregivers or institutional staff, which creates pronounced power imbalances and heightens the risk of exploitation.
- Communication barriers that frequently prevent disclosure.
- Diagnostic overshadowing that can lead to professionals attributing behavioural or emotional indicators of abuse to the disability itself rather than to possible maltreatment.
- In some cultural contexts, beliefs that link disability to witchcraft or curses further increase the risk of violence and concealment. Children may be hidden at home or placed in institutions 'for both their own and their family's safety', thereby reducing external oversight (Njelesani, 2019, pp. 3–4).
- Unbalanced power relations and isolation place children with disabilities at heightened risk of sexual violence (Council of Europe, 2020).
- Knowledge gaps and resource constraints (Legano et al., 2021).
- Stereotypes that portray disabled children as asexual, helpless, inherently tragic, or somehow less affected by abuse can lead practitioners to minimise signs of harm that would prompt action for non-disabled children (Flynn, 2020, 2021, 2024).
- 'Over-empathy with parents, higher thresholds, and lack of recognition of the capacity of disabled children to be abused' (Flynn, 2021a. b.).

These realities have led some commentators to argue for a lower practical threshold for intervention. However, others, notably Flynn and McGregor (2017, 2020, 2021a. b., 2024, 2025), caution against differentiated standards and instead advocate a rights-based, parity-focused approach that ensures disabled children receive equal protection without ableist assumptions that either minimise harm or over-pathologise the child.

Effective practice therefore requires disability-specific training, multi-modal assessment methods, and explicit attention to the elevated vulnerability of this group. Practical implications include:

- Training that explicitly addresses ableism and embeds a rights-based, parity-focused approach.
- Better recognition of disabled children's voices and capacity to experience abuse.
- A clearer separation of needs assessment from purely investigative pathways.
- Equal protection without either under-response rooted in pity or misunderstanding, or over-surveillance without appropriate support.
- Separating needs assessment from pure risk/investigative pathways (aligning with critiques in Bilson 2025).
- Rights-based practice that ensures parity in protection rather than differentiated (often lower) standards.

Specific attention to barriers to identifying abuse in non-verbal and other vulnerable children warrants further attention and was posed as a specific research sub-question. Mandated reporters face multiple interconnected barriers when trying to identify abuse and neglect in non-verbal children and other highly vulnerable cohorts. Barriers to identifying and responding to abuse include:

- Communication and disclosure gaps that are frequently misattributed to the disability itself rather than to possible maltreatment.
- Professional lack of confidence when dealing with less overt forms of harm and with children who have intellectual, developmental, or communication disabilities (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Vale et al., 2024; Raum et al., 2024).
- Diagnostic overshadowing that compounds the problem, as disability-related behaviours are routinely interpreted as inherent to the child's condition rather than as potential signs of abuse (Smith et al., 2024).
- Systemic and practical constraints including limited disability-specific training.
- Lack of knowledge of how disabilities intersect with hybrid online–offline risks (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021; Binford, 2023).
- Inadequate assessment tools that lack ecological validity for non-verbal or disabled children, combined with poor interagency coordination and capacity pressures, mean that concerns are often incompletely assessed or not escalated (Lätsch et al., 2021; Ciftci et al., 2026).

These barriers can be addressed through a combination of targeted measures:

- Mandatory training modules focused on non-verbal and disability-related indicators of abuse are recommended for all mandated reporters (Walsh, 2019; Brown & Clarke, 2023).
- Assessment tools adapted to incorporate multi-modal indicators and to account for the ecological realities of children with communication disabilities (Laurens et al., 2020; Lätsch et al., 2021).

- Disability-specific safeguarding policies, stronger multi-agency collaboration, and proactive rather than purely reactive screening approaches are also required (Raum et al., 2024; Higgins et al., 2019, 2022).
- Greater attention to the amplified online risks faced by these children – supported by improved digital literacy among professionals and, where appropriate, adapted monitoring tools – would help close a critical gap in current practice (Tabi et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2024).

Together, these steps would strengthen the capacity of mandated reporters to protect some of the most vulnerable children in the system. Table 9 summarises the main barriers and systemic challenges faced by non-verbal and vulnerable children discussed above as well as suggestions about pathways to addressing the barriers learning from recent evidence.

Table 9: Barriers and Pathways Regarding Identifying Abuse and Neglect in Non-verbal and Other Vulnerable Children

Barriers	Example Issues	Evidence	Pathways to Addressing Barriers
Communication and Disclosure Gaps	Inability to verbalise experiences; signs (e.g., behavioural changes, withdrawal, pain) often attributed to disability rather than abuse. Emotional/neglect harder to detect; sexual abuse may involve tech (images/ grooming) without clear cues.	Dimitropoulos et al. (2022): Mandatory reporters struggle with less overt forms like emotional abuse and abuse in children with disabilities. Lack of evidence/incomplete information reduces reporting confidence. Vale et al. (2024); Raum et al. (2024): disabilities (especially intellectual, developmental, or communication-related) create fundamental barriers to verbal disclosure.	Mandate modules on non-verbal/ disability cues for mandated reporters (Walsh, 2019; Brown and Clarke, 2023).
Systemic and Practical Constraints	Poor coordination, limited capacity, and insufficient disability-specific training. Providers trained more for typical verbal children or obvious physical abuse. Limited knowledge of how disabilities intersect with abuse indicators or hybrid online-offline dynamics (e.g., device-facilitated grooming).	Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021): Under-confidence in identifying and reporting TA-CSA overall. Binford (2023): Frontline professionals often older/less digitally fluent. Ciftci et al., 2026: Need for upskilling frontline professionals to respond sensitively to victim-survivors.	Multi-agency collaboration to improve coordination and data systems and shift to upstream prevention and community engagement (Ciftci et al., 2026; Naddour et al., 2024).
Inadequate Assessment Tools	Tools lack ecological validity for non-verbal/ disabled cases.	Lätsch et al. (2021): Paying attention to one set of requirements alone may be a costly mistake.	Tailored, valid tools to develop assessments with ecological fit and multi-modal indicators (Laurens et al., 2020; Lätsch et al., 2021).
Attribution and Bias Issues	Behaviours misattributed to disability (diagnostic overshadowing); online elements viewed as "less serious" or victim-initiated.	Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021): Organisations minimise online/TA-CSA; some blame victims as "active."	Disability-specific safeguards with tailored policies, monitoring, and evaluation (Raum et al., 2024).
Hybrid and Technology Amplification	Disabilities may increase online vulnerability (e.g., via devices for communication); professionals miss digital red flags. Online platforms amplify risks for those with limited ability to navigate digital interactions safely (Turner et al., 2024).	Binford (2023) & Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2021): Hybrid abuse common; professionals unprepared for tech facilitation in vulnerable groups. Raum et al., (2024): athletes with disabilities face increased risk of interpersonal violence due to impaired communication and social challenges and technology can amplify this.	Adapt tools (e.g. AI and monitoring tools) for vulnerable groups with communication disabilities (Tabi et al., 2023).
Diagnostic overshadowing & higher risk	Disability-related behaviours misattributed; disabled children are higher-risk but under-detected.	Smith et al. (2024): clinical presentations of child and adolescent psychopathology can vary between children with different expressions of specific symptoms. Lloyd (2025): 85% of exploited youth experienced school exclusion, with differences linked to disability, gender, and ethnicity.	Multi-source assessment with comprehensive frameworks to identify risks beyond the surface (Lebel et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2026). Shift from reactive responses to proactive screening and early intervention (Higgins et al., 2019, 2022).

4.2 Other Contextual Contexts with a Focus on Gender and Culture and in Response to Socioeconomic Disadvantage

While there are many interconnected contextual considerations that have already been discussed in the report so far, the themes of gender, culture and socioeconomic disadvantage warrant further attention based on current evidence.

It is important to recognise the extent to which gender can shape both the type of harm children experience and the likelihood of recognition and disclosure. Girls face higher rates of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, emotional abuse, grooming, online solicitation, and commercial sexual exploitation (Turner et al., 2024, Finkelhor et al., 2022, Smith et al., 2024). Boys are more likely to experience physical abuse, neglect and peer violence; sexual abuse of boys is frequently under-identified, in part because externalising behaviours may mask the underlying harm and because gender norms discourage disclosure (Mathews et al., 2020; Savage, 2024). Both girls and boys are affected by gendered expectations: boys may fear stigma associated with victimhood, while girls may encounter victim-blaming responses. Additional risks for transgender youth also need further attention; for example, a self-reporting study shows evidence of higher levels of experience of psychological, physical and sexual abuse (Thoma et al., 2021). Also, Mountz (2020), regarding organisational harm, reports on experiences of trans youth of colour in juvenile detention centres where they were more at risk of violence and neglect.

Likewise, children from particular cultural or ethnic backgrounds may face elevated risks linked to socioeconomic disadvantage, acculturation stress, lower social support, language barriers and systemic bias. Cultural norms around discipline and parenting can also influence how neglect or physical chastisement are understood, both within communities and by professionals (Abdullah & Thattengat 2025). Under-reporting is common in communities that distrust authorities or fear family separation, while in other contexts the same groups may experience over-surveillance and disproportionate investigation (Johnson-Motoyama, 2019; Royal Commission, 2017). The Council of Europe (2020) notes that cultural and power imbalances contribute to the under-reporting of sexual violence. Mandatory reporting laws apply equally, yet in practice cultural sensitivity is essential if systems are to avoid both the under-protection of children and the over-representation of certain communities in child protection processes.

It is also more widely recognised that structural differences impact child welfare due to social and economic inequalities in society (Bywaters, 2020). Specific attention is needed with regard to welfare inequalities and experiences of poverty (Kim et al., 2018, 2024; Lefebvre et al., 2024; Lloyd et al., 2018; Foussiakda & Kasherwa, 2020; Helton et al., 2022; Higgins et al., 2019; Hyslop and Keddell, 2018; Indika et al., 2025; Ismail, 2026; Jayasooriya et al., 2026; Kulmala et al., 2023). While the association with deprivation is most acute in relation to the category of physical neglect, the impact of structural inequality and factors such as poverty, homelessness and disadvantage affect child protection responses across the board. Child welfare inequality arises if 'the

conditions which make the decision necessary reflect unequal social, economic and environmental structures, or services discriminate inappropriately between children in similar circumstances because of some aspect of their identity such as their social class, age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, health or disability' (Bywaters et al., 2020, p. 18). For example, in the UK, children in the most deprived 10% of small neighbourhoods in the were over ten times more likely to be in care or on protection plans than in the least deprived 10% (Bywaters, 2020, p. 29). Some key messages to note are:

- Definitional variability persists regarding establishing the interconnection between social inequality and child abuse and neglect (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2020; Schmidt, 2025; Scott and Faulkner, 2019; Segal & Gross-Manos, 2026; Sheehan, 2019, 2024; Sriwiset, 2024; Takaffoli et al., 2023; Trinh, 2025; Williams et al., 2025).
- Child welfare inequality interconnects with ethnicity (Bull and Baidawi, 2021), gendered violence (Orsolini et al., 2024, Parton & Rogers, 2026; Pentaraki & Speake, 2024) and age (Rienks et al., 2017).
- Social inequalities between ethnic groups are complex, often misunderstood and absent from policy discussions (Bywaters, 2020).
- An inequalities perspective requires an intersectionality approach to promote understanding of how family socioeconomic circumstances interact with dimensions of identity, such as age, gender, ethnicity and disability (Bywaters, 2020).

When considering differentiations such as gender, culture and social inequality, the challenge for guidance and practice is to ensure that the threshold of 'reasonable suspicion' is applied with an informed understanding of:

- differential vulnerability.
- barriers to disclosure.
- the risk of both under- and over-intervention.

Section 5: Learning from Child Protection Failures and Record-Management Processes

This section addresses specific sub-questions from RQ1 and RQ2. These are:

- Section 5.1: Learning from child protection failures.
- Section 5.2: Record-management processes.

5.1 Learning from Child Protection Failures Since 2017

Since 2017, several significant reviews and inquiries have examined systematic and organisational failures in the protection of children in Ireland. These include the Scouting Ireland Learning Review (Elliott, 2020), the National Review Panel report on the case of Kyran Durnin (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2025), the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes (Nicholson, 2021), and the legislative process surrounding the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (commonly known as Coco's Law). It should be noted that the Mother and Baby Institution report relates to historical abuse and was included in the sample because it provides useful learning that can inform current child protection guidance.

Across these reports, recurring themes emerge:

- In the case of Scouting Ireland and the Mother and Baby Institutions report, organisational cultures frequently prioritised reputation and self-interest over child safety, enabling cover-ups, poor record-keeping, and the protection of powerful individuals (Elliott, 2020).
- Historical institutional abuse, exemplified by the Mother and Baby Institutions report, demonstrated how societal stigma, religious and state power, and the absence of human-rights-based oversight allowed severe harm to continue over decades.
- Systemic weaknesses in information-sharing, child tracking (including cross-border and school-transfer movements), and the management of unallocated cases have persisted, as highlighted in the Kyran Durnin review.
- More recently, the debates leading to Coco's Law exposed major gaps in legal and organisational responses to technology-facilitated abuse, including non-consensual intimate image sharing and online harassment.

Taken together, these reports underline that failures are rarely the result of isolated individual actions. They are sustained by weak governance, inadequate interagency cooperation, insufficient independent oversight, and a tendency to minimise or overlook certain forms of harm, in particular those that are cumulative, institutional, or technology-facilitated. The key learnings point consistently toward the need for:

- robust independent safeguarding monitoring.
- proactive risk management.
- clearer multi-agency protocols.

- stronger accountability.
- a cultural shift that places the safety and rights of the child above institutional reputation.

Table 10 and Table 11 summarise the key organisational learnings drawn from these reports, illustrated with specific examples, while identifying corresponding practical actions that organisations can take to strengthen their safeguarding practice.

Table 10: Reports: Failures, Learnings and Recommendations

Report / Review	Responsible Bodies	Key Failures	Key Learnings	Main Recommendations
Scouting Ireland Learning Review (Elliot, 2020)	Scouting Ireland (Leadership, Volunteers, Board).	• Cover-ups, failure to report abuse. • Records lost/destroyed. • Cronyism and poor governance enabled offenders in power. • Culture prioritised reputation over child safety.	• Culture of self-interest and weak governance are the root causes of sustained abuse. • Reputation protection often overrides child safety - Independent oversight is essential.	• Implement robust, independent safeguarding monitoring. • Strong accountability and disciplinary processes. • Prioritise safeguarding as the core organisational value. • Maintain transparency and victim support.
Kyran Durnin National Review Panel (2025)	Tusla, Dept of Education, Dept of Children, Data Protection Commissioner, An Garda Síochána.	• Inadequate child tracking (school transfers, cross-border). • GDPR barriers to information sharing. • Poor wait-list management & risk escalation. • Gaps in social work guidance.	• Systemic gaps in information sharing and child tracking persist. • Risk management must be proactive, especially for unallocated cases. • Cumulative history and inter-agency cooperation are critical.	• Develop national policy for tracking pupil movement (incl. cross-border). • Review GDPR impact and improve network checking for assessments. • Strengthen wait-list risk protocols and social work guidance. • Review Tusla / Garda protocol. • Quality assurance framework for family support services.
Mother and Baby Homes Commission (2021)	Irish State, Catholic Church, Medical Establishment, Local Authorities.	• Extremely high infant mortality (15% overall, up to 75% in some homes). • Punitive culture, stigma, poor medical care, hygiene issues. • Unconsented vaccine & milk formula trials. • Forced family separations and coerced adoptions.	• Societal stigma and institutional power enabled systemic abuse over decades. • Official narratives often minimise victim experiences and state responsibility. • Need for stronger human rights and survivor-centred approaches.	• Full acknowledgement of human rights violations. • Improved redress, memorialisation, and access to records. • Cultural shift away from institutionalisation and discrimination.
Seanad Debate on Coco's Law (Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill 2017)	Tech/Social Media Platforms, Gardaí, Schools, Department of Justice.	• Major gaps in existing laws regarding non-consensual intimate images, revenge porn, and online harassment. • Insufficient organisational response from tech platforms and authorities to technology-facilitated abuse. • Devastating impact on children (e.g., suicide following severe bullying).	• Major gaps existed in protecting children from online harassment, image-based abuse and harmful communications. • Tech platforms and organisations have significant responsibility for preventing technology-facilitated abuse. • Legislation alone is insufficient without cultural and organisational change.	• Introduce new criminal offences for non-consensual intimate images and harmful communications. • Ensure victim anonymity and better support. • Increase education, awareness and platform accountability.

Table 11: Reports: Key Learnings for Different Types of Organisations

Org. Type	Key Learnings for Organisations	Specific Sources and Examples	Practical Actions for Organisations
Youth / Voluntary Organisations	• A culture of self-interest, cronyism, and reputation protection is one of the biggest risks to child safety. • Poor governance and weak accountability allow known offenders to gain and retain power. • Resistance to independent oversight and robust policies enables cover-ups. • Safeguarding must be the absolute top priority above growth, popularity, or internal harmony. • Strong, independent monitoring and disciplinary processes are essential.	"Negative culture driven by self-interest, along with poor governance structures" were the main causes of continued abuse. Records lost/destroyed; known offenders rose to influential positions. Scouting's popularity increased while abuse was prevalent because offenders became "largely impregnable". (Elliott, 2020) Historical Sexual Abuse in Scouting Ireland: A Learning Review.	• Establish independent safeguarding oversight. • Implement rigorous vetting and disciplinary procedures. • Maintain complete, secure records. • Prioritise child safety over organisational reputation.
Statutory Child Protection Agencies	• Information sharing and child tracking systems are critical weaknesses that must be fixed (especially cross-border and school transfers). • GDPR must not become a barrier to timely risk assessment and network checking. • Proactive wait-list and unallocated case management with clear risk escalation protocols is essential. • Cumulative history must be properly considered at every stage.	Inadequate tracking of pupil movement and GDPR-related barriers hindered assessments in the Kyran Durnin case. Cases that cannot be located or remain unallocated for long periods require automatic risk increase and multi-agency action. (National Review Panel, 2025) Kyran Durnin Recommendations.	• Develop real-time child tracking systems (especially cross-border). • Create clear guidelines for network checking under GDPR. • Introduce automatic risk escalation for unallocated cases. • Improve inter-agency information sharing protocols.
Religious Institutions / Historical Residential Care Institutions	• Punitive organisational cultures rooted in stigma and moral judgement create environments where abuse and neglect thrive. • Lack of qualified staff, poor oversight, and absence of consent protocols lead to severe harm.	High infant mortality, unconsented medical trials, and dehumanising treatment were enabled by institutional culture and weak governance. (Nicholson, 2021) Mother and Baby Homes Report, Irish Medical Journal.	• Review and reform institutional governance to prioritise human rights. • Implement strict consent protocols for any medical procedures. • Ensure full access to records for survivors.

			• Embed survivor voices in policy and redress processes.
Tech Platforms, Social Media & Digital Organisations	• Organisations must take proactive responsibility for preventing and responding to technology-facilitated abuse (image-based abuse, harmful communications, online bullying). • Stronger legal obligations, transparency, and cooperation with law enforcement are required. • Cultural change and education are essential alongside legislation.	Named after Nicole (Coco) Fox, who died by suicide following severe online harassment and non-consensual sharing of intimate images. The debate highlighted major gaps in existing laws and the devastating impact on children, calling for new criminal offences and better platform accountability. Seanad Éireann Debate on Coco's Law (18 December 2020).	• Strengthen content moderation and rapid response to harmful content. • Cooperate fully with law enforcement on reports of abuse. • Implement clear reporting and takedown procedures. • Support education campaigns on online safety.
Cross Cutting: All Organisations	• Record-keeping, transparency, and accountability are foundational to safeguarding. • Independent external scrutiny and victim/survivor voices must be embedded in organisational practice.	Failures in record retention (Scouting) and minimisation of harm in official reports (Mother & Baby Institutions) hindered learning and justice.	• Prioritise safeguarding culture over reputation. • Maintain secure, complete records and enable safe information sharing. • Implement independent external audits and monitoring. • Embed survivor voices and lived experience in policy development. • Provide regular safeguarding training and clear escalation pathways. • Balance data protection with child protection responsibilities.

5.2 Record-Management and Information-Sharing Practices

Effective record-management and information-sharing are foundational to safeguarding in organisations that work with children but sit outside the statutory child protection system. In Ireland, schools, healthcare providers, youth services and sports organisations are expected to maintain factual, contemporaneous records of concerns (including those that fall below the formal reporting threshold) and to share information with Tusla or An Garda Síochána on a 'need to know' basis once reasonable grounds for concern exist. Guidance consistently emphasises that confidentiality should not act as a barrier to the protection of children (Tusla Child Safeguarding: A Guide for Policy, Procedure and Practice; Department of Education Procedures for Schools).

In Irish schools, the Designated Liaison Person (DLP) holds central responsibility for records. Nohilly (2025) highlighted the inconsistencies that included lack of standardised whole-school system for record-keeping and ongoing monitoring of lower-level concerns. The publication of the Irish Child Protection Procedures for Schools in 2025 addresses these inconsistencies. For example, it provides a full chapter on record-keeping that covers areas including record management, case file and storage procedures. Healthcare settings tend to operate more standardised recording systems, including multidisciplinary notes and mechanisms intended to highlight repeated presentations, with clear expectations that mandated persons will report and record concerns. Youth services and sports organisations are required to maintain factual incident reports under the oversight of a DLP, retaining records securely and sharing them with statutory agencies when thresholds are met (Sport Ireland Safeguarding Guidance; Irish Football Association (FA) Safeguarding Policy; Youth Work Ireland guidelines). Across these non-statutory settings, the expectation is that records remain secure, accessible for review, and capable of supporting the identification of patterns over time.

Comparator jurisdictions reinforce the same principles while highlighting the risks of weak practice:

- In the UK and Northern Ireland, schools maintain detailed concern logs and operate within protocols that balance data protection with safeguarding requirements (ICO, 2023).
- The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) identified inadequate information-sharing within and between institutions (including schools and out-of-home care) as a factor that can compromise children's safety and recommended stronger inter-institutional arrangements.
- Sports and youth organisations in the UK and Australia are similarly expected to retain safeguarding records and to share information with statutory agencies where risks are identified.
- In healthcare settings in Qatar, record-keeping is highlighted as a critical operational element of an effective child protection system. The country has a restricted national child abuse registry, a system-wide electronic alerts for high-risk and confirmed cases, and a confidential section within the electronic health

record for sensitive safeguarding information. These combined measures were introduced to improve detection, ensure continuity of information across care settings, and support safer clinical decision-making (Jilani and Alansari, 2026).

The concept of participatory information governance was raised by Evans and colleagues (2019). They argue that conventional record-keeping in the childhood out-of-home care sector is fundamentally inadequate for safeguarding needs and call for a shift from organisation-centred information governance to participatory information governance. They are critical of record-keeping systems designed around closed organisations and information silos that prioritise the rights and risk management of government agencies and service providers over the rights of children and care leavers. Meanwhile existing laws, standards and governance frameworks largely treat records as organisational assets under singular ownership and control. Furthermore, quality record-keeping is essential to good governance, transparency, accountability and child safety, and effective safeguarding requires records that can move across organisational boundaries and over time. Evans and colleagues (2019) propose a National Framework for Record-keeping in Out-of-Home Care built on the following participatory principles:

- shared ownership and stewardship, interoperability.
- active participation by children, young people and care leavers in decisions about their records.
- 'Independent Lifelong Living Archives' that provide a secure, distributed, participatory record-keeping network in which individuals retain access and a measure of control throughout their lives.

Overall, the literature and guidance point to three consistent requirements for non-statutory organisations:

- factual and secure record-keeping that captures concerns below as well as above the formal threshold.
- clear 'need to know' information-sharing pathways with statutory services.
- recognition that data protection obligations must be interpreted in a manner that prioritises the protection of children.

Furthermore, the concept of participatory information governance as proposed by Evans and colleagues (2019) and the creation of a National Framework for Record-Keeping is highly relevant in an era where data-driven, interagency systems increasingly shape decisions about children.

Table 12 summarises current record-management and information-sharing practices across the main non-statutory settings in Ireland and selected comparator jurisdictions.

Table 12: Information-Sharing Practices in Non-Statutory Settings (Schools, Healthcare, Youth Services, Sports)

Organisation Type / Jurisdiction	Record-Management Practices	Information-Sharing Practices	Evidence / Excerpts with Page & Citation
Schools (Ireland)	Factual, contemporaneous records of concerns (even below reporting threshold); secure storage (e.g., safe); no standardised whole-school system; ongoing monitoring often inconsistent. Designated Liaison Person (DLP) maintains central records.	"Need to know" basis; share with Tusla/ Gardaí when reasonable grounds exist; internal sharing limited; GDPR-compliant.	Nohilly (2025): "No system-wide approach to record keeping in child protection in Irish primary schools... inconsistencies in practice" (pp. 123–143). Tusla Child Safeguarding Guide: "Clear procedures... for information sharing and recording all... concerns, including those which do not meet reasonable grounds" (Section 3.5.1, p. 41). DES Procedures for Schools (2017/2025): Records factual; shared on need-to-know.
Healthcare (Ireland)	Standardised records of presentations (injuries, history); multidisciplinary notes; secure electronic/paper systems.	Share with Tusla on reasonable suspicion; inter-agency protocols with Gardaí/Tusla.	Children First Guidance (2017): Mandated persons (incl. health professionals) report and record.
Youth Services / Sports Organisations (Ireland)	Factual incident reports; secure retention; Designated Liaison Person oversees. Records include contacts, actions, rationale.	"Need to know" basis internally; mandatory sharing with Tusla/Gardaí for concerns; parental involvement where appropriate.	Sport Ireland Safeguarding Guidance: "Your organisation/club's child safeguarding procedures should contain guidance on record-keeping. Records should be factual..." Irish FA Policy: Recording process detailed; confidentiality on need-to-know; share with statutory bodies (Section 6, pp. 36–38). Youth Work Ireland Guidelines: Similar protocols.
General Non-Statutory (Ireland)	Secure, accessible records reviewed periodically; include concerns below threshold for pattern monitoring.	Early sharing within organisation then to Tusla; confidentiality not a barrier to child protection sharing.	Tusla Guide (pp. 41): "Good guidance and record-keeping procedures... support the recording of pertinent information... shared as soon as possible." GDPR/Data Protection considered.
Schools / Education (UK / Northern Ireland)	Detailed concern logs; secure systems; multi-agency input where relevant.	Protocols for sharing with social care; data	ICO 10-Step Guide (2023): Step-by-step for sharing to safeguard; examples in schools. NI Safeguarding in

		protection balanced with safeguarding.	Schools: Record keeping and information sharing emphasised.
Sports / Youth Organisations (UK / Australia)	Retention policies for safeguarding records; factual documentation of concerns/allegations.	Inter-institutional sharing to prevent risks (e.g., harmful behaviours); protocols with statutory agencies.	Australian Royal Commission: "Inadequate information sharing within and between institutions, such as schools... can compromise safety" (pp. 88–145). Recommendations for strengthened sharing in schools/out-of-home care. Youth Sport Trust (UK): Retention of safeguarding records; reporting procedures.
Healthcare / Community (Comparators - e.g., Norway, Canada)	Professional records integrated into case management; training on documentation.	Inter-agency protocols; consent where possible, but safeguarding overrides in risk cases.	Rogeberg et al. (2026): Professional reporting practices vary; record outcomes of referrals (pp. 1–3). Broader literature (e.g., UK Munro reviews) stresses inter-agency sharing barriers/solutions.

Section 6: Holistic, Systems-Oriented Approaches and Interagency Structures Recommended to Prevent, Identify and Respond to Abuse and Harm

6.1 Introduction: Holistic, Systems-Oriented Approaches and Interagency Structures

The overall question for this section is What holistic, systems-oriented approaches and interagency structures are recommended in recent literature and international best practice to prevent, identify and respond to abuse and harm of children in general child welfare contexts and specifically in organisational settings?

The literature to support learning about holistic child welfare systems and context for child welfare and protection is substantial and far beyond the scope of this review. It interconnects in particular with literature relating to system change and orientation (Berrick et al.,2023; Gillen et al., 2024), public health and preventative approaches to child welfare (Lonne et al, 2019), family and parenting support (Harriet et al. 2024; Devaney & Crosse, 2023; Jiménez & Canavan, 2026) and socio-legal practice. This review focused in particular on literature that can specifically inform child protection guidance with regard to holistic approaches and best practice for preventing and responding to abuse and harm. Much of the discussion in earlier chapters also contributes to this knowledge.

Key messages from current evidence include the following:

- Child protection systems are complex adaptive systems with path-dependent structures, limited resources, and established ways of working (Gillen et al., 2024; Munro, 2021).
- It is strongly evidenced that reactive, siloed, individualised approaches are insufficient to address the complex, multi-dimensional drivers of harm to children and a number of holistic, systems-oriented approaches are recommended in the literature.
- A child protection system is best understood as a set of coordinated formal elements (laws, policies, and government services) and informal elements (family, community norms, and traditional practices) that work together to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and other forms of violence against children. These systems encompass laws, policies, standards, service delivery mechanisms, professional skills and capacities, and accountability and monitoring arrangements. In essence, they form a highly interdependent ecosystem that is inherently complex.
- While inter- and intra-organisational collaboration is widely regarded as the gold standard, a recent scoping review of interagency models between child protection and domestic abuse or family law services concluded that, although a growing number of promising approaches have been identified, ‘there is little evidence of effectiveness, or the views of child and adult family members about the acceptability and utility of such approaches’ (Hale et al., 2026, p. 653).

- It is long and well established in the literature that population-level prevention, universal services, and early intervention are central and family support services and structures are key (see Churchill et al., 2024).
- Evidence indicates strongly the need for a more fundamental shift toward proactive, population-level prevention that prioritises universal services, public health, early intervention, and action on the structural determinants of vulnerability, including poverty, housing instability, intergenerational trauma, family violence and unequal access to supports.
- There are numerous variations of 'structures' to outline relationships between different levels of need and harm/risk, such as outlined by Hardiker et al. (1991). However, it is well established that services do not operate in such a linear manner, nor does this reflect many family experiences, where 'risks' can be strongly interconnected with 'needs for support' 'in the middle' (McGregor & Devaney, 2020a).
- Strategies to improve prevention of abuse include greater attention to contextual safeguarding and more focus on 'mediating' between prevention/support and protection.
- Through processes of mandated reporting and mandated assisting, greater emphasis can be placed on the complex interconnections between needs for support and protection within guidance to enhance a focus on preventing low-level concerns from escalating while at the same time ensuring that cases of serious harm receive rapid, decisive attention.
- This environmental scan has provided updated knowledge that can inform stakeholders with regard to updating practice and training and wider policy developments.

Within this broad context, Section 6.2 addresses the question: What best practices, identified in recent literature (2017 to present) on the prevention of abuse, can inform the guidance to organisations, agencies and government departments on risk assessment and mitigating procedures?

6.2 Best Practices on the Prevention of Abuse to Inform the Guidance to Organisations, Agencies and Government Departments on Risk Assessment and Mitigating Procedures

As discussed at the introduction to this section, the field of prevention and early intervention intersects with wider complex themes relating to child and family services and supports from universal through targeted services. For this section, we have focused on current themes in the literature which contribute to knowledge to inform best practice to prevent abuse. The emphasis is on specifically informing the guidance update, recognising there are many wider considerations to be taken into account regarding practice, policy, training and legal developments. The themes covered are:

- Contextual safeguarding.
- 'Mediation' between support and protection.
- Actionable guidance for mandated reporters.

- Application of learning from current evidence about categorisations, indicators, prevalence and response in training, policy and practice developments.

6.2.1 Contextual Safeguarding

The term contextual safeguarding has featured more strongly in the literature in recent years. In this context, it means moving beyond individual-focused approaches to place-, and situation-based prevention (Rayment-McHugh et al., 2024), although it can also be used to refer to protecting children in different contexts (such as institutions, care homes etc.). Regarding contextual safeguarding and situation-based prevention, the literature repeatedly shows that effective safeguarding is multi-layered, including formal agencies, schools, health, community actors, families and peers. A key feature of contextual safeguarding is to work toward prevention and to improve interagency cooperation. In Irish guidance, contextual safeguarding is managed by requiring that any organisation providing services to children must have a Child Safeguarding Statement and set of underlying procedures to address potential risks to children. Table 13 illustrates the facets of contextual safeguarding and the way in which it differs from the traditional emphasis on parental capacity. Contextual safeguarding goes far beyond the development of a Child Safeguarding Statement and needs to be considered as multi-dimensional (Kor, 2026; Firmin et al., 2026).

Table 13: Contextual Safeguarding

Aspect	Traditional Child Protection	Contextual Safeguarding
Primary Focus	Parental capacity and the home.	The locations and social conditions where harm occurs.
Main Response	Support or challenge parents; sometimes relocate the child.	Change the environment(adult presence, peer dynamics, policies, physical design).
Key Partners	Primarily family and children's services.	Schools, housing, police, youth work, community, businesses.
Objective	Protect the individual child.	Make the context safer for all young people who use it.

6.2.2 'Mediation' Between Support and Protection

Traditionally there has been a tendency for child protection systems to operate with an implicit or explicit two-tier differentiation. At the higher tier sits the legal threshold: situations of significant harm that trigger formal investigations, child protection conferences, or court applications. At the lower tier sit 'reasonable concerns': worries about neglect, mild abuse, or suboptimal care that do not meet the threshold for compulsory intervention but may still require protection and supportive intervention. While this distinction is necessary for legal clarity and the proportionate use of statutory powers, it creates practical difficulties. Lower-tier concerns can drift into the formal system through repeated referrals or escalating anxiety, consuming scarce resources and subjecting families to unnecessary investigation (Rogeberg et al., 2026). Simultaneously, high-tier cases may face delayed or diluted responses when systems are overloaded with lower-level work. Good practice requires more than two polarising modes that encourage 'protective support' and 'supportive protection' (McGregor & Devaney, 2020a, 2020b).

There is much debate in the literature about thresholds for intervention and when and how to mediate between 'middle spaces' of needs for support and needs for protection. This middle ground – sometimes referred to as the grey area – focuses on preventing low-level concerns from escalating while ensuring that cases of serious harm receive rapid, decisive attention. The Protective Support and Supportive Protection Framework (McGregor & Devaney, 2020a, 2002b) gives an example of a conceptual and practical foundation for practice and supervision. The framework challenges the tendency to polarise practice into either purely investigative or purely supportive modes. Effective safeguarding requires practitioners and supervisors to hold a dual responsibility: protecting children from harm while simultaneously offering support that is relational, contextual and strengthening. Support is not offered in isolation from risk; it is oriented toward reducing vulnerability and enhancing protective factors. In other words, this space has to be mediated, taking into account the complex factors already discussed in this report.

By explicitly recognising and resourcing this middle tier, systems can respond more proportionately. Early, relationship-based interventions can divert families away from formal processes when risks are manageable, while clearer pathways and dedicated capacity ensure that high-threshold cases are addressed swiftly and thoroughly. The Protective Support and Supportive Protection Framework therefore offers both a practice orientation and a system design principle: safeguarding is most effective when protection and support are held together rather than treated as opposing alternatives. Enhancing and resourcing the middle tier may also address some of the issues highlighted by Rogeberg and colleagues (2026) on substantiation rates.

6.2.3 Actionable Guidance for Mandated Reporters

Child protection guidance provides reporters with actionable and practical steps to equip them to fulfil their obligations.

To facilitate appropriate response to cases, mandated professionals need to be equipped with the tools, resources and mechanisms to act with the appropriate level of formality, intensity and authority; matching their response to the nature and severity of the concern rather than defaulting to a single mode of intervention. Under Children First National Guidance, mandated persons have two main legal obligations, these are:

1. To report the harm of children above a defined threshold to Tusla.
2. To assist Tusla, if requested, in assessing a concern that has been the subject of a mandated report.

Through mandated assisting, mandated persons provide high-quality reports to improve the initial assessment and enable faster, more effective decisions. In some cases, additional details may be requested, and professionals with ongoing contact with the child are expected to continue collaborating with Tusla. In so doing, greater awareness of the interconnection between prevention, support and protection, as discussed in 6.2.2, may enhance the capacity to provide assistance in responding to abuse and neglect concerns. While much of this practice will take place through more

detailed policy and organisational developments, child protection guidance could be used to signpost approaches, such as in the following illustrative examples:

- Use (or request) decision trees and flowcharts that distinguish legally required reports from appropriate alternative actions. Where feasible, complete consultation protocols and a supervisor/team review before filing a report (Casey Family Programs, 2026).
- Know and offer community resources and helplines as preventative measures, alternatives or complements to reporting. Where feasible, develop and distribute resource guides and referral directories that map supports and infrastructure (Casey Family Programs, 2026).
- Share information proactively and lawfully, do not wait for others to act. Understand the boundaries of GDPR within relevant national data protection legislation, such as (in the UK context) recognising that information pertaining to child safeguarding is special-category data (UK Government, Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2026).
- Participate in or request multidisciplinary teams, multi-agency support hubs, or Meitheal coordination structures. For example, a team of people who continue to be employed by their individual agencies (local authority, police and health services) but who are co-located in one office coordinate one fact-finding interview to reduce trauma (Massachusetts Children's Alliance, 2026).

6.2.4 Application of Learning from Current Evidence About Categorisations, Indicators, Prevalence and Response in Training, Policy and Practice Developments

Finally, for this section, the updated knowledge (and associated resources referenced through the environmental scan) can contribute to the development of holistic, systems-oriented approaches and interagency structures to prevent, identify and respond to abuse and harm.

Some key messages from the evidence are as follows:

- There are many complex factors that can impede a parent or carer's capacity to provide good enough care and protection for their children and lead to greater risks of cumulative and or hidden harms.
- The centrality of inter-disciplinary and interagency working across all levels and systems points to the importance of prioritising commitment and investment to continue to improve effective collaboration and partnership working.
- Not all children and families receive the 'same' interventions in response to concerns about risk and harm. In fact, many factors affect the processes from referral to response, showing the importance of critical awareness, especially of such factors as discrimination, racism, cultural blindness, ableism and classism.
- For some parents and carers, there are barriers to engaging effectively with child protection processes because of mistrust, fear, sense of unfair over-surveillance, stigmatisation and so on.
- A significant proportion of risk can be reduced with extensive parental and family support, especially where this is linked to social deprivation (economic

and material support), parenting capacity (social and emotional support), and additional factors relating to mental health, substance abuse or family violence.
- While sometimes parents/carers are the perpetrators of harm, they are more often the main protectors of children and need to be supported to protect their children, especially in response to more recently emerging risks like technology-related abuses.
- Greater attention to cumulative and hidden harm can improve the development of preventative measures, cross-service information sharing and collaborative assessments.
- To engage the public more effectively, more emphasis is needed on communication and engagement regarding child protection guidance as discussed in Section 7.

Section 7: Clear and Accessible Public and Professional Messaging

Clear and accessible messaging is essential to inform awareness, prevention and collective safeguarding responsibility. Effective communication must reach both the general public and professionals in ways that are understandable, actionable, and free from unnecessary jargon or stigma (Braithwaite et al., 2025). Public messaging needs to normalise the idea that protecting children is a shared community responsibility, while professional messaging must equip practitioners with the confidence and clarity to respond proportionately across the continuum of concern (Risser et al., 2020). Drawing on recent research and advocacy insights, Sections 7.1 to 7.5 focus on the following areas:

- Standardised, inclusive and accessible terminology.
- Public and professional awareness.
- Messaging regarding prevention.
- Collective safeguarding.
- Communication strategies and public awareness approaches.

7.1 Standardised, Inclusive and Accessible Terminology

Clear, consistent and audience-sensitive language is essential for effective recognition and reporting of, and response to, child abuse, neglect and exploitation. The damaging impact of stigmatising language and terminology regarding children and parents highlights the importance of attention to this issue (Devaney et al., 2025). Post-2017 literature and guidance documents increasingly emphasise the need for terminology that is:

- precise for professionals.
- legally robust for mandated reporters.
- empathetic and accessible for parents and carers.
- non-stigmatising for the general public.

Recent international guidance, particularly the second edition of the *ECPAT Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse* (ECPAT, 2025), provides comprehensive guidance. Together with complementary resources from Barnardos and selected national governments (including UK and Scottish CSE practitioner briefings), the following principles are promoted:

- Person-centred and rights-based language that respects the agency and dignity of children.
- Avoidance of terms that minimise harm, blame the child, or sensationalise the issue.
- Clear differentiation between legal, professional, and public-facing language.

- Preference for accurate descriptors such as 'Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)' over outdated or minimising terms such as 'child pornography'.

These frameworks stress that language choices shape how concerns are recognised, recorded, and acted upon, and therefore form an integral part of safeguarding practice.

Table 14: Sample of Recommended Terminology for Different Audiences

Concept	Professionals	Mandated Reporters	Parents/Carers	General Public	Rationale/Source
Victim / Survivor	Victim-survivor or Survivor.	Child who has been abused/ harmed.	Child who has been hurt.	Child who has been hurt.	Person-centred and respects agency (ECPAT, 2025).
Grooming	Grooming / Sexual Grooming.	Grooming.	Grooming / Building Trust to Harm.	Grooming / Tricking Children.	Describes the manipulative process clearly (ECPAT, 2025).
Perpetrator	Perpetrator / Offender.	Person who harmed the child.	Adult who hurt the child.	Person who hurt the child.	Avoids dehumanising or overly clinical language for non-professionals.
Image-based Abuse	Image-based Sexual Abuse.	Sharing intimate images without consent.	Sharing private photos without permission.	Sharing someone's private photos without permission.	Clear and victim-centred terminology (ECPAT, 2025).
Sexual Abuse Material	Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM).	Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM).	Sexual Images/Videos of Children.	Sexual Images or Videos of Children.	Strongly preferred over "child pornography" (ECPAT, 2025).

These recommendations support a coherent approach to language that can be adapted across training, public awareness materials, organisational policies and formal reporting pathways. Consistent application of such terminology will strengthen shared understanding and reduce barriers to recognition and reporting.

Despite growing consensus, several challenges relating to appropriate and effective language use persist. These include the following:

- Definitional variability across jurisdictions and sectors continues to complicate communication and data comparability.
- Professional language that is highly technical or clinical can create barriers for mandated reporters outside specialist child protection roles and for the public.
- Conversely, overly simplified or euphemistic language risks underplaying the seriousness of harm.

Best practice therefore requires a deliberately layered approach. Table 15 summarises recommended terminology across four key audiences, drawing on the ECPAT (2025) guidelines and aligned national resources to reflect this.

Table 15: Principles for Audience-Sensitive Approach to Terminology

Cohort	Principle	Supporting Source
Professionals	Precise, legally robust, academically accepted terms.	ECPAT (2025); WeProtect Global Alliance reports.
Mandated Reporters	Balance accuracy with clarity and legal reporting obligations.	UK Government CSE Guidance (2017 & updates); Scottish Government Practitioner Briefing; ECPAT (2025).
Parents/Carers	Clear, empathetic, and less clinical language.	The Children's Society - Child Exploitation Language Guide (2024); Barnardo's Language Matters Guide; ECPAT (2025).
General Public	Accessible, non-stigmatising, and non-sensational language.	ECPAT (2025); National Children's Alliance (USA) Style Guide; Childhood USA Language Guide.

7.2 Public and Professional Awareness

Public Messaging: When communicating with the public, the key messages are:

- Use clear and accessible language and terminology (See 7.1)
- Awareness campaigns should highlight that:
  - Abuse is more common than people think.
  - Can happen to any child.
  - Does enormous harm.
  - Everyone is responsible for its prevention.
  - Prevention is possible (braithwaite et al., 2025).
- Accessible, emotional and storytelling approaches rather than technical or institutional messaging are most effective for creating awareness, strengthening institutional trust and fostering community co-responsibility (García de la Fuente et al., 2026).
- When audiences are emotionally engaged, they give more attention to the message being communicated (Berger et al., 2023).
- Communication and awareness strategies need to effectively translate expert knowledge so the public can accurately understand that child abuse is a preventable public health problem. This includes:
  - identifying gaps between expert and public perspectives.
  - developing and testing messages that align public understanding with the evidence that abuse is preventable.
  - disseminating validated strategies (Fix et al. 2021).

Professional Messaging: While mandated professionals have a duty to be aware of the legal and professional requirements associated with child protection, there is an ongoing need for targeted awareness raising to build on existing professional knowledge and equip practitioners with the confidence to respond proportionately across different contexts and levels of concern (Hudson, 2017; Braithwaite et al., 2025; Fix et al., 2021).

Both Public and Professional Messaging: Messaging for public and professionals could focus on building awareness of new and emerging forms of harm as well as demonstrating the complexities involved, such as the fact that certain cohorts face markedly higher rates of abuse. For example, messaging might highlight that sexual and gender minorities face markedly higher rates of technology-facilitated abuse, while children with disabilities experience neglect and abuse at rates 3.4 times more than their non-disabled peers.

7.3 Messaging Regarding Prevention

Prevention Messaging for the Public:

- Prevention should be framed as a normal, ordinary, positive parenting and community-wide matter rather than a crisis response (Risser et al., 2020). This form of messaging reduces stigma, so caregivers feel entitled to seek support

early, thereby ensuring help is accessed quickly before formal thresholds are reached (Hudson, 2018).

- Prevention of child abuse and neglect is possible but requires a comprehensive focus that cuts across key sectors of society (e.g. public health, government, education, social services, and justice) (Fortson et al., 2023).
- Some research shows that the public do not clearly differentiate between the prevention and protection role of child welfare organisations, and a need for greater attention to public awareness is emphasised (see 7.2) (McGregor et al., 2020).
- Structured programmes for parents, carers and professionals can increase knowledge and prompt preventative action, although outcomes vary by programme design and audience (Hudson, 2018).

Prevention Messaging for Professionals:

- Messaging that highlights that prevention operates on a continuum may be useful (see Figure 2 from Risser et al., 2020, p. 4).
- Messaging that reinforces early, relational and proportionate responses and that equips professionals with the skills and nuances to distinguish concerns that require formal reporting from those that can be addressed supportively is important (Hudson, 2018).
- Given the emergent knowledge on cumulative harm, it is fundamental that professionals are equipped with the knowledge to identify, document, report and most importantly re-report repeated instances of harm so its cumulative nature can be identified.

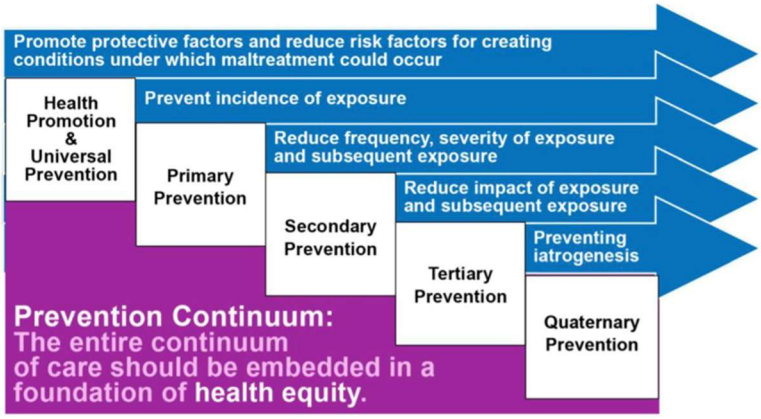


Figure 2: Prevention Continuum – Risser et al. 2020

Prevention Messaging for Both the Public and Professionals:

- Positive and empowering messaging can also be impactful. For example, messaging noting that intergenerational patterns contain both 'cycle maintainers' and 'cycle breakers'; focusing only on risk is inadequate (He et al., 2025; Bryce et al., 2023). Presenting the choice between maintaining or breaking a cycle of abuse is empowering and allows audiences to be proactive rather than reactive.

- While there are cross-cutting themes across all forms of abuse, the particular nature and impact of different types of abuse and neglect also has to emphasised.

7.4 Messaging Regarding Collective Safeguarding

Public Messaging for Collective Safeguarding:

- Messaging should continue to actively promote collective safeguarding, the principle that keeping children safe is everyone's business as currently emphasised in the Children First National Guidance.
- Messaging can include guidance on how members of the public can seek advice and support (see also Section 7.3 on prevention).
- Messaging needs to make clear the different roles for people in relation to the prevention of abuse (Risser et al. 2020).

Professional Messaging for Collective Safeguarding:

- Messaging should emphasise multi-agency responsibility, information-sharing, consultation and shared decision-making.
- Messaging should counter the perception that reporting is the only available action and promote confidence in using intermediate pathways, prevention strategies and community supports (see also Section 7.3 on prevention).

Public and Professional Messaging for Collective Safeguarding:

- Consistent national principles, tailored sectoral and cohort materials and regular reinforcement through training and culture rather than one-off campaigns will ensure changes are embedded in the fabric of the system rather than momentary while a campaign is running (Braithwaite et al., 2025; García de la Fuente et al., 2026; Fix et al., 2021).
- Enhancing public and professional understanding of shared child protection responsibilities, and promoting more proactive safeguarding behaviours, requires carefully designed messaging and communication strategies that go beyond traditional awareness campaigns.
- Professional and Public cooperation in relation to collective safeguarding can include co-design of guidance and building of collective partnerships in relation to awareness raising activities.

7.5 Concluding comments regarding Communication Strategies and Public Awareness Approaches

From section 7.1 to 7.4, messaging in relation to communication has been addressed regarding use of terminology, awareness raising, prevention and collective safeguarding. There are a number of recurring messages to note, as follows:

- Effective strategies are deliberate and multi-layered, rather than one-off campaigns.
- Contemporary social marketing campaigns increasingly use emotional narratives, storytelling, audiovisual formats, and multichannel dissemination to combine awareness-raising, prevention, and guidance toward resources.
- Messages aimed at professionals are most effective when directed at specific sectoral cohorts rather than through large-scale public media.
- Education and Awareness programmes need to be multi-dimensional to include public education, professional education and shared collective education and awareness programmes.
- Strategies should be tailored while maintaining consistent core features as follows:
    - Develop sector-specific toolkits and guidance (education, health, sports, community organisations, online platforms) that translate national messages into everyday practice.
    - Co-design with people with lived experience to increase authenticity and relevance (Braithwaite et al., 2025; García de la Fuente et al., 2026).
    - Use multichannel delivery that reaches different population groups, including those who may face additional barriers (language, digital access, cultural context).
    - Reinforce communication through organisational culture, supervision, and ongoing training rather than reliance on isolated campaigns (Risser et al., 2020).

Overall, the message from the evidence is that the most effective approaches combine clear, personally relevant and empowering core messages with strategic, tested, multichannel communication that is tailored to different sectors and audiences. Messaging should simultaneously raise awareness, reduce stigma, clarify everyone's role, and promote proactive, proportionate safeguarding behaviours. The following facet from a communication campaign provides an illustration of a recently successful campaign by way of conclusion to this section.

Campaign Name: The 2025 Pause Before You Post by Ireland's Data Protection Commission. The campaign centres on a short, powerful video featuring a young girl named Eva. As she walks down the street, she is approached by several adult strangers. They casually greet her by name, wish her a happy eighth birthday, mention her Thursday football practice, and note that her father is running late to collect her. The twist reveals that none of these adults actually know Eva. They have pieced together her name, age, routine and location entirely from public photos and status updates posted by her well-meaning parents. The advert closes with a clear warning: 'Every time you share their life online, you risk sharing their personal data with the world. Pause before you post.'

The campaign resonated and was lauded globally as it depicted:

- **Loss of control:** Once photos or videos are uploaded, parents permanently lose control over who can download, screenshot or redistribute them.

- **Limits of 'private' accounts**: Even private accounts often have large networks of contacts. The campaign effectively asks: would you allow that many strangers physical access to your child?
- **Emerging risks:** The wider discussion sparked by the advert highlighted how images can be downloaded, altered or used in AI-generated illicit content.

The campaign provided practical recommendations/actions for parents, drawing on guidance associated with the campaign and wider online safety advice:

- Audit existing content: Review and delete older posts, check tagged photos, and regularly prune follower lists.
- Coordinate with others: Speak with schools, sports clubs and family members to ensure they do not publicly post identifiable images or details of children.
- Prefer private channels: Use secure, direct-sharing apps or private digital albums rather than broadcasting children's milestones on open social networks.

Why It Worked: The campaign successfully transformed an abstract concern about data privacy into an immediate and tangible child safety issue, making the risks of oversharing personally relevant and emotionally resonant for parents.

Section 8: Summary Overview

This knowledge synthesis has brought together a substantial body of evidence relating to cross-cutting themes to inform an update of the Children First National Guidance. It confirms the complex nature and context of child abuse and neglect and points to many interacting themes that have arisen since the National Guidance was published in 2017. The report delivers key findings using an environmental scan methodology to inform updates to the Children First National Guidance regarding understanding of abuse and neglect, public concerns about child welfare, mandatory reporting, working across organisations and public awareness. In addition, it has provided a synthesis of evidence available to provide a broader contextual analysis to assist critical thinking and reflection about the purpose, underpinning assumptions and intentions of the updated Guidance and any associated training that will be developed based on this. The knowledge synthesis is intended to inform the next steps for a review of the Children First National Guidance and consideration of the implications from this review for wider policy, service development, professional practice and training and public awareness.

This section concludes with an overview of some key messages that can inform next steps in the review of Children First National Guidance and related developments. These are delivered in four sections in line with the main themes covered in this report:

- Categories, thresholds and indicators for abuse and neglect.
- Mandated reporting.
- Wider system contexts.
- Public and professional awareness and messaging.

Key Messages Regarding Categories, Thresholds and Indicators for Abuse and Neglect

Figure 3 provides a snapshot of the main categories of abuse and new and emerging forms of harm that have been covered in this report and explained further in the key messages that follow.



Figure 3: Updated Categories, New and Emergent Harms

- Strong evidence to support 'exposure to domestic violence' as a separate category.
- More explicit recognition that child sexual abuse includes child sexual exploitation – CSAE. Other terms include TA-CSA (technology-assisted child sexual abuse).
- Emotional neglect is covered in both 'Neglect' and 'Emotional Abuse/Psychological Abuse' categories and may warrant more explicit differentiation.
- More attention to the categorisation of new and emerging forms of harm including child trafficking, peer-to-peer abuse, technology-facilitated harm, cumulative harm and institutional/organisational harm is needed.
- Growth of technology-facilitated abuse and harm has occurred across all categories of abuse, though it manifests differently across categories.
- More distinctive indicators are needed regarding cumulative harm in response to evidence of its relevance across all categories.
- Need for a focus on differentiated harms to emphasise the need for particular considerations for different cohorts of children and young people, including children with disabilities and greater understanding of factors like gender, culture and socioeconomic status.

Key Messages Regarding Reporting and Responding to Abuse and Neglect

- Reporting thresholds are almost universally based on 'reasonable suspicion' or 'reasonable belief' rather than definitive proof, with professionals expected to report concerns rather than investigate them themselves.
- There is a need for ongoing monitoring of decreasing substantiation rates as referral rates increase.
- It is important to ensure continuity of messaging regarding interagency and inter-professional cooperation.
- There is a need for more explicit articulation of 'contextual safeguarding'.
- Guidance could include incident specific and cumulative/interconnected indicators and mechanisms for recording (e.g. low threshold concerns that may contribute to hidden or cumulative harm).
- Guidance needs to include updates in relation to responding to interconnected online and offline harm and the multi-dimensionality of extra-familial harms.
- Mandated reporters need updated training in new and emerging forms of harm and responding to online and offline harm, recognising the interconnection between both.
- System developments and guidance must contend with under-reporting driven by stigma, fear or normalisation of harm, the risk of over-surveillance of particular ethnic or cultural groups, and resource constraints that limit the quality of interagency responses.
- Guidance for reporters needs to take account of differential vulnerability, especially the disproportionately higher risk of abuse faced by children with disabilities.
- Learning from child protection failures highlights the impact of weak governance, inadequate interagency cooperation, insufficient independent oversight, and a tendency to minimise or overlook certain forms of harm.
- Learning from past failures emphasises the importance of robust independent safeguarding monitoring, proactive risk management, need for clearer multi-agency protocols, stronger accountability, and a cultural shift that places the safety and rights of the child above institutional reputation.
- Evidence from safeguarding reviews indicate that organisational culture is a critical protective or risk factor.
- The concept of participatory information governance may help improve quality record-keeping to improve governance, transparency, accountability and child safety, and effective safeguarding across different organisational boundaries and over time.
- Literature relating to record-keeping emphasises the need for factual and secure record-keeping that captures concerns below as well as above the formal threshold, clear 'need to know' information-sharing pathways with statutory services; and recognition that data protection obligations must be interpreted in a manner that prioritises the protection of children.

Key Messages Regarding Importance of Guidance Taking Account of Wider System Contexts

- Evidence strongly indicates the need for a more fundamental shift toward proactive, population-level prevention that prioritises universal services, public health, early intervention, and action on the structural determinants of vulnerability, including poverty, housing instability, intergenerational trauma, family violence, and unequal access to supports.
- Prevention of abuse and neglect is complex, and a significant proportion of risk can be reduced with extensive family and parental support that is multi-dimensional.
- Safeguarding requires balancing protection and support, recognising that many concerns arise in a middle space, where early, relationship-based intervention can prevent escalation.
- Processes of mandating assistance can be used to enhance more holistic responses.
- Parental and family support is essential to prevent many risks of child abuse and neglect reaching the threshold for reasonable grounds /significant harm.
- Parental and family support is essential to enable parents and carers to protect their children, especially from the many extra-familial risks highlighted in this report.
- For some parents and carers, there are barriers to engaging effectively with child protection processes because of mistrust, fear, sense of unfair over-surveillance, stigmatisation and so on.
- Not all children and families receive the 'same' interventions in response to concerns about risk and harm, showing the importance of critical awareness of factors including structural inequality, discrimination, racism, cultural blindness, ableism and classism.

Key Messages Regarding Public and Professional Awareness and Messaging

- Guidance and supporting processes can be used to raise public awareness in relation to collective safeguarding responsibilities as well as increasing understanding of abuse and neglect.
- Specific guidance is needed in relation to public and professional awareness.
- Specific attention to use of terminology for different reports (e.g. public/mandated professionals) as well as critical awareness of the potentially stigmatising effects of use of terminology is crucial.
- Public messaging needs to normalise the idea that protecting children is a shared community responsibility, while professional messaging must equip practitioners with the confidence and clarity to respond proportionately across the continuum of concern.

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Appendix 1: Literature Queries and Results

Web of Science		
Search Criteria	TS=('child protection' OR 'child safeguarding' OR 'child welfare') AND TS=(child* OR adolescent* OR youth OR teen* OR minor* OR infant*) AND TS=(abuse OR maltreatment OR neglect OR exploitation OR 'emotional abuse' OR 'physical abuse' OR 'sexual abuse' OR CSE OR CSAM OR grooming OR *extortion) AND TS=(conceptualize* OR terminolog* OR framework* OR 'new form*' OR 'emerging form*' OR indicator* OR threshold*)	1159
	Only include years 2017–2026	768
	Only English language publications	743
Scopus		
Search Criteria	TITLE-ABS-KEY ('child protection' OR 'child safeguarding' OR 'child welfare') AND (child* OR adolescent* OR youth OR teen* OR minor* OR infant*) AND (abuse OR maltreatment OR neglect OR exploitation OR 'emotional abuse' OR 'physical abuse' OR 'sexual abuse' OR CSE OR CSAM OR grooming OR *extortion) AND (conceptuali* OR terminolog* OR framework* OR 'new form*' OR 'emerging form*' OR indicator* OR threshold*)	1558
	Only include years 2017–2026	905
	Only English language publications	875
Merged Web of Science and Scopus (with duplicates removed)		**1206**
Web of Science		
Search Criteria	TS=(child* OR youth OR adolescen* OR teen* OR minor* OR infant*) AND TS=(abuse OR maltreatment OR neglect OR exploitation OR 'child abuse' OR 'child maltreatment') AND TS=('extra-familial' OR 'extra familial' OR 'contextual safeguarding' OR 'peer-to-peer' OR 'technology-facilitated' OR 'online and offline' OR 'online-offline' OR 'hybrid harm' OR 'digital harm') AND TS=(online OR digital OR cyber OR 'social media' OR internet OR CSAM OR grooming OR sextortion OR 'online sexual abuse' OR 'child sexual exploitation' OR CSE)	226
	Only include years 2017–2026	194
	Only English language publications	192
Scopus		
Search Criteria	TITLE-ABS-KEY (child* OR youth OR adolescen* OR teen* OR minor* OR infant*) AND (abuse OR maltreatment OR neglect OR exploitation OR 'child abuse' OR 'child maltreatment') AND	284

	('extra-familial' OR 'extra familial' OR 'contextual safeguarding' OR 'peer-to-peer' OR 'technology-facilitated' OR 'online and offline' OR 'online-offline' OR 'hybrid harm' OR 'digital harm') AND (online OR digital OR cyber OR 'social media' OR internet OR CSAM OR grooming OR sextortion OR 'online sexual abuse' OR 'child sexual exploitation' OR CSE)	
	Only include years 2017–2026	239
	Only English language publications	236
Merged Web of Science and Scopus (with duplicates removed)		**309**
Web of Science		
Search Criteria	TS=('child protection' OR 'child safeguarding') AND TS=(indicator* OR threshold* OR 'risk indicator*' OR 'reporting threshold*')	398
	Only include years 2017–2026	254
	Only English language publications	237
Scopus		
Search Criteria	TITLE-ABS-KEY ('child protection' OR 'child safeguarding') AND (indicator* OR threshold* OR 'risk indicator*' OR 'reporting threshold*')	558
	Only include years 2017–2026	361
	Only English language publications	340
Merged Web of Science and Scopus (with duplicates removed)		**411**
Web of Science		
Search Criteria	TS=('child*' OR youth) AND TS=(abuse OR maltreatment OR exploitation) AND TS=(online OR digital OR cyber OR 'technology enabled' OR 'technology facilitated') AND TS=(offline OR 'extra-familial' OR familial)	203
	Only include years 2017–2026	163
	Only English language publications	159
Scopus		
Search Criteria	TITLE-ABS-KEY ('child*' OR youth) AND (abuse OR maltreatment OR exploitation) AND (online OR digital OR cyber OR 'technology enabled' OR 'technology facilitated') AND (offline OR 'extra-familial' OR familial)	226
	Only include years 2017–2026	176
	Only English language publications	172
Merged Web of Science and Scopus (with duplicates removed)		**224**

Lorum Ipsum Knowledge-synthesis project to inform a review of Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2017

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