

# New research shows parents are major producers of child sexual abuse material

February 19 2021, by Michael Salter

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Child sexual abuse material—images and videos of kids being sexually abused—is a growing international problem. Almost [70 million reports of this material](#) were made to US authorities in 2019. That figure rose

still further in 2020, as the COVID pandemic drove children and adults to spend [more time online](#)

[Police and online safety agencies](#) have been sounding the alarm that online sex offenders are seeking to capitalize on the increased online presence of [children](#), tricking and blackmailing kids into creating [abuse](#) images and videos. Parents are being called on to be [especially vigilant](#).

However, the sad fact is that online exploitation begins at home for many kids, and in those cases their parent is the last person who can be trusted to keep them safe. [One study of 150 adult survivors](#), who indicated they had appeared in [sexual abuse material](#) as children, found 42% identified their biological or adoptive/stepfather as the primary offender. More than two-thirds of such images appear to have been [made at home](#).

Parental abusers are especially [difficult to detect](#). They have constant access to their victims and almost total control over them. Children abused by a parent are the [least likely group to tell anyone](#), and the [shame and fear caused by victimization](#) makes it extremely difficult to speak out.

However, there is [long-standing concern](#) that parental perpetrators of child sexual abuse material have been overlooked as governments have instead focused on online threats outside the family.

## **Our study**

The aim of our [world-first study](#) was to identify the circumstances in which parental figures (including biological, step and adoptive parents) produce sexual abuse material of their children in Australia.

We also provided recommendations on how to increase the chances of

law enforcement and agencies catching abusers.

Our research team developed a database of 82 cases in which Australian parents or parental figures were charged with sexual abuse material offenses against their children, as reported in media or legal databases from 2009 to 2019. Our team included academics in criminology, child welfare and law as well as a detective sergeant and a forensic pediatrician who specialize in such cases and provided front-line expertise.

## **What did we find?**

Parental production of child sexual abuse material is a gendered form of abuse. Men were offenders in 90% of cases, and girls were victims in 84% of cases. Boys were victimized in one-fifth of cases, with multiple children abused in some cases.

The victim's biological father (58%) or stepfather (41%) were most likely to be the offender. However, the victim's biological mother was involved in 28% of cases, most often as a co-offender.

In eight of the 82 cases, the mother was the sole perpetrator. In these cases, the woman appeared to be producing this material of her children at the request of male acquaintances. In 22% of cases, there were multiple perpetrators involved in the face-to-face abuse, such as both parental figures, other relatives or acquaintances.

The victims were young, with more than 60% under the age of nine. In the 58 cases for which we had information about how the abuse was detected, only 20% of victims told anyone about the abuse. Self-blame, guilt, trauma and confusion about their feelings towards the abuser(s) were common among victims and were barriers to speaking out.

Three typical profiles of offending by parental figures emerged from our study:

1. the biological paternal offender who forms adult relationships and has children of his own to exploit
2. the step- or de facto parental offender who forms a relationship with a woman and exploits her children or seeks to obtain children by some other means (such as surrogacy)
3. the biological mother who produces sexual abuse material of her children at the behest of her partner or men with whom she is acquainted.

## What does this mean?

Our study highlights that parental offenders are often highly premeditated in their abuse and exploitation of their children, which supports [survivors' descriptions of parental offenders](#). The offenders in our study were capable of maintaining adult romantic relationships and an otherwise "normal" facade.

The study has several implications for policy and practice.

First, sexual abuse prevention and online safety education programs can't assume parents are protective. These programs should sensitively address the problem of abuse, exploitation and image-making by family members.

Second, some perpetrators groom and manipulate potential partners to gain access to children. Community education could help people identify the warning signs when an [offender](#) is trying to groom someone in a romantic relationship.

Third, people with concerns their partner might be accessing child sexual

abuse material need to be able to access non-stigmatizing support and advice. Services such as [PartnerSPEAK](#) are crucial not only to support people partnered with offenders, but to promote early intervention in the offending and the protection of children.

Fourth, child protection and criminal justice interventions in sexual abuse often depend upon the child's disclosure. However, this group of severely abused children were very unlikely to disclose. This finding underscores the need to alert protective adults to non-verbal signs of abuse.

The sexual exploitation of a child by a parent is a profound violation of trust. As Australia and other jurisdictions scale up efforts to prevent child sexual abuse before it occurs, we can't overlook the ways that some perpetrators use their homes and families to exploit their children and create sexual abuse material.

As 2021 Australian of the Year [Grace Tame](#) said, as she accepted the award in the name of all survivors of [child](#) sexual abuse: "Just as the impacts of evil are borne by all of us, so too are solutions borne of all of us."

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