

# Identifying and responding to elder abuse in intergenerational households



Intergenerational living is most often a joy. Bringing family members of all ages under the one roof can provide rich opportunities for relatives to support, care for and bond with each other. However, intergenerational households can also be a site where the abuse of vulnerable members of the family, including older people, occurs. This resource will explain how to – as a professional – identify and respond to elder abuse in these settings.

# What is elder abuse?

Elder abuse is any form of harm or mistreatment of an older person that occurs within a relationship of trust.<sup>i</sup> It can include many different forms of abuse that can occur in different kinds of personal relationships, including intimate partner relationships and carer relationships. Evidence tells us elder abuse is most often inter-familial and intergenerational with abuse perpetrated by adult children against their ageing parents.<sup>ii</sup> Elder abuse can occur in diverse settings, including intergenerational households.



## Types of intergenerational households

Many circumstances can lead to the formation of an intergenerational household. We've outlined a few of the most common ones here.

### When an ageing parent or family member requires support

As people age, they may experience age-related illness, disability, heightened loneliness or financial difficulties. In some cases, older people may also be facing mental health issues, substance misuse, gambling problems or risk of homelessness.<sup>2iii</sup> In these circumstances, older people may choose to live under the safe roof as family members so they can receive care and support. Some families also make formal arrangements where care and assets are shared between family members.

<sup>2</sup> This is especially common among older women, who have been identified as the fastest growing group of homeless people in Australia.

### When a family member has complex needs

Some adult children may live with their parents due to their own complex needs. This is particularly prevalent among adult children living with disability, experiencing drug dependency, gambling addiction or mental health challenges, exiting the criminal justice system, or who are (or their children are) living with health issues and require care. Reasons why adult children may stay or move in with an older family member include:

- they do not have the resources to care for themselves and the older person is part of their informal carer network
- they cannot establish their own home due to employment loss, gambling problems, financial instability or insufficient housing options
- the conditions of their bail or parole require they live at a particular address
- they are the protected person or the respondent in a family violence intervention order
- the ageing parent feels responsible for the wellbeing of their child or grandchild
- a combination of the above

Older people may live with behaviour that is detrimental to their own safety and wellbeing if it means supporting another family member's needs or protecting relationships.

### When it's a common cultural practice

Some families choose to live in intergenerational households as it is a common cultural norm. This can include older people who have recently arrived from overseas on parent visas, often with the intention of helping care for grandchildren and being cared for themselves as they age. In some Aboriginal communities, older people take on roles caring for and passing cultural knowledge onto children within their family, kinship group, and community.<sup>v</sup>

### When an adult child suddenly returns home

Particularly during times of upheaval, adult children may temporarily move back in with their parents. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic many adult children suddenly out of work and unable to pay rent, recovering from illness or injury, didn't want to be alone, had returned from overseas or had to suddenly change future plans, moved back into the family home with their parents.<sup>iv</sup>



## Identifying elder abuse

### Behaviours that constitute elder abuse

- ▶ Physical abuse, such as pushing, hitting or shoving.
- ▶ Verbal and psychological abuse, such as berating, threatening the older person, or dominating the family home.
- ▶ Financial abuse, such as fraud, controlling how the older person uses their money, or not contributing to the household costs (e.g. bills or rent), thereby draining the older person's resources.
- ▶ Stealing or causing damage to the older person's belongings.

Many intergenerational households are safe environments. However, in some households, unbalanced power dynamics may place older family members at higher risk of experiencing elder abuse. Elder abuse is a form of family violence. Family violence can include acts of psychological, financial, cultural, physical, verbal, social, sexual and spiritual abuse and neglect. Perpetrators of elder abuse are more likely to use financial abuse than in other family violence contexts.<sup>vi</sup>

If you are supporting someone who is older or lives with an older person, it is vital you know how to recognise elder abuse and respond appropriately.

- ▶ Exposing the older person to illicit drugs or other unwanted behaviours
- ▶ Over-medicating or under-medicating the older person.
- ▶ Restricting the older person's access to mobility aids.
- ▶ Neglecting the older person's needs, such as food, shelter, hygiene or other necessities.
- ▶ Exposing the older person to risk of the COVID-19 virus by not taking proper precautions.
- ▶ Maliciously or unnecessarily applying for guardianship, medical or financial administration.
- ▶ Sexual abuse, or unwanted exposure to sexual material.

See section 10.5 of the [MARAM Foundation Knowledge Guide](#) for more information about behaviours that constitute elder abuse.



# Things to keep in mind when supporting someone who may be at risk of elder abuse

## 01 Has the older person been subject to any of the behaviours that constitute elder abuse?

If so, you need to assess their level of family violence risk in accordance with your responsibilities under the MARAM framework.<sup>vii</sup> Otherwise, reach out to Seniors Rights Victoria for secondary consultation or referral.

## 02 Is the older person living with someone who you know is experiencing or using family violence in other relationships?

If so, you need to consider the effects of the violence on the older person. Screen them for family violence and assess their level of risk in accordance with your responsibilities under the MARAM framework.<sup>viii</sup> Otherwise, reach out to Seniors Rights Victoria for secondary consultation or referral.

## 03 Does the older person have any cognitive decline?

It should always be assumed that an older person has the capacity to make decisions. However, be wary that cognitive impairment can make an older person more vulnerable to manipulative or deceitful behaviour, including family violence. It may also affect their ability to engage with support services. When working with an older person or intergenerational household, consider: Is this older person experiencing cognitive decline? How severe is that decline? Does their cognitive capacity fluctuate? How might their capacity affect their relationships with others or their own safety? Are they being appropriately supported in their decision making (rather than having others make decisions for them)?

## 04 Does the older person require communication aids?

Some older people may require help engaging with support services. Consider: Does the older person have appropriate supports or adjustments like communication aids or interpreters in place? If not, can you organise for these to be provided while being mindful that the family member available to support or interpret may be the perpetrator of the abuse?

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## Is your ageism affecting your service response?

It is important to reflect on your own conscious and unconscious biases, including ageism, when working with older people in intergenerational households. Is it possible you're not recognising the person's experience as family violence due to their age? Are you undermining the older person's agency by not engaging with them directly (for example, engaging with their adult child instead)? For more information about what ageism is and how to challenge it, visit [www.cotavic.org.au/publication/challenging-ageism](http://www.cotavic.org.au/publication/challenging-ageism)

## What are the living, care and financial arrangements within the household?

When screening for and assessing family violence risk, think about the older person's living, care and financial arrangements in relation to others living in the household. Consider: Whose home is it (i.e. who is the owner or who is on the lease)? Who is making decisions about living arrangements? Is everyone happy with those arrangements? Are any of the members of the household providing care for others? What type of care? Are there any financial obligations attached to these arrangements?

## Is the older person facing systemic barriers to support?

Older people from some communities can experience additional systemic barriers to support. When assessing the older person's family violence risk, consider: Are they from a refugee or migrant background, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or member of the LGBTIQ+ community? Do they have any disabilities or illnesses that mean they're reliant on others for support? Are they in touch with appropriate social and cultural supports? Do they have a support network outside of the family?

## Is the older person living with a person with complex needs?

When an adult child with complex needs returns to their parent's home, this may place the older person at increased risk of elder abuse. When conducting your risk assessment, consider: Who else is living in the household (permanently, temporarily or intermittently)? Are there any family members, or family-like relationships, which make the older person feel unsafe or fearful? How can we ensure the older person's needs are considered and they know where to go to receive information and support? What supports for the adult child might increase the older person's safety?

# Seniors Rights Victoria is here to help



If you or someone you know is experiencing elder abuse, contact the Seniors Rights Victoria helpline.

Seniors Rights Victoria can provide risk assessment, planning, legal information and advice, and support.

If you're a specialist family violence practitioner, you can reach out to Seniors Rights Victoria for secondary consultation.

**Call SRV on: 1300 368 821**  
**Monday – Friday 10am – 5pm**

<sup>i</sup> Family Safety Victoria. (2019). MARAM Practice Guides: Foundation Knowledge Guide. Melbourne, VIC: State of Victoria, p. 46.

<sup>ii</sup> Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., & Rhoades, H. (2016). Elder abuse: Understanding issues, frameworks and responses, Melbourne, VIC: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved from <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/elder-abuse>

<sup>iii</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission. (2019). Older Women's Risk of Homelessness: Background Paper Exploring a growing problem, Sydney, NSW: Australian Human Rights Commission. Retrieved from <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/older-womens-risk-homelessness-background-paper-2019>

<sup>iv</sup> Hand, K., Baxter, J., Carroll, M., & Budinski, M. (2020). Families in Australia Survey: Life during COVID-19 Report no. 1: Early findings. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved from <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/families-australia-survey-life-during-covid-19>

<sup>v</sup> The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Inc. (n.a.). Connection to Family. Retrieved May 12, 2021 from <https://www.supportingcarers.snaicc.org.au/connecting-to-culture/connection-to-family/>

<sup>vi</sup> Family Safety Victoria. (2019). Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework. Melbourne, VIC: State of Victoria, p. 35.

<sup>vii</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019). Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework. Melbourne, VIC: State of Victoria.

<sup>viii</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019). Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework. Melbourne, VIC: State of Victoria.



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