

# Fact Sheet

## *I am concerned about a child*



### Is it child abuse?

If you have concerns about a child's safety it can be difficult to know what to do. Most children and young people live in safe and supportive environments however some will sadly experience child abuse. This may be physical, sexual or emotional abuse, neglect or exposure to family violence.

**Emotional abuse** is not a one off incident but rather a pattern of behaviour over a period of time. It impacts on a child's emotional, social, cognitive and intellectual development. It can include persistent behaviour by adults such as rejection, isolation, ignoring, hostility, yelling, criticism or exposure to family violence. It is the most common type of abuse experienced by children and is likely to be present alongside physical and sexual abuse

**Exposure to family violence** is when a child hears or sees a parent, sibling or other family member experience, physical, sexual or emotional abuse. It could also be when a child sees the outcomes from the violence. Such as physical injuries to a person or damage to property

**Neglect** is the failure to provide the basic necessities for emotional and physical development and wellbeing of a child. This includes food, safe and hygienic housing, appropriate clothing, access to medical treatment, personal hygiene and adequate supervision

**Physical abuse** is when a child experiences deliberate physical injury or trauma. Most commonly it includes hitting but can also be biting, shaking, burning or poisoning

**Sexual abuse** is when an adult, child or adolescent uses their power and authority to involve a child in sexual activity. Sexual activity includes sexual intercourse and also a range of sexual behaviours that can be physical, verbal or emotional

### What should I do?

- If a child is in immediate danger or if there is an emergency contact triple zero (000)
- Write down your concerns or observations, making note of times and incidents
- Speak with the child gently, letting them know they can talk to you if they ever need to
- Don't force or pressure the child to tell you what is happening, instead ask them how they are or let them know that you have noticed they are looking or behaving differently. This may provide an opportunity for the child to share what they may be experiencing
- Be conscious of the child's safety and your own. If you think your direct intervention will affect yours or the child's safety, leave it to the people who are trained in this area to respond. You may be able to provide support later down the track
- Report your concerns to child protection services in your state or territory. There are slightly different processes depending on where in Australia you live. Usually it involves making a phone call and speaking with a professional in a statutory child safety agency. In some locations there is online or eReporting for child safety reports. The Australian Institute of Family Studies provides an up to date list of contact details for making a report in each state and territory in Australia <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/reporting-abuse-and-neglect>.

## Do I have to report?

Some people who work with children and families are mandatory reporters. This means if they have reasonable grounds to suspect or believe a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm, they must report it to the relevant child protection agency in their state or territory. Some examples of professionals that are often mandatory reporters include: teachers, doctors, nurses and police.

In the Northern Territory and Victoria, mandatory reporting is not just required by some professionals.

In the Northern Territory all individuals are mandatory reporters of all types of child abuse. In Victoria, all individuals are mandatory reporters of child sexual abuse.

Regardless of whether you are a mandatory reporter or not, we all have a responsibility to ensure that children are safe within our community. If you have concerns about a child, you should contact the relevant state or territory child protection agency.

### Common worries about reporting child abuse

**One of the reasons adults do not act when they suspect abuse is because they are worried about the consequences for them, the child or the family.**

***If I tell, the family will know it was me:*** Each state and territory department that responds to child safety reports ensures that your identity remains confidential. You can even make an anonymous report. It is helpful to provide your contact details as you may need to be contacted for further information or so the department can provide you with an update. In extremely rare circumstances a court may order that the reporter is identified

***I don't want to break up the family:*** Reporting child abuse does not automatically mean that a child will be removed from their home. Wherever possible the goal of child protection professionals is to ensure that children are able to remain with their parents if it is safe to do so. Your report might mean the family receives additional support and resources

***Maybe it's not as bad as I think:*** Trust your instincts if you feel that something isn't right. By making a report you can talk to child safety professionals who are trained to identify and assess risk. It is better to make a report and let the professionals decide the seriousness of it

***It's not going to change anything:*** It could be that the piece of information you provide makes all the difference. Your report could contribute to other reports that may have been received about a child. It may demonstrate a pattern of behaviour or confirm that child abuse has occurred

***It's none of my business what goes on behind closed doors:*** Child protection is everyone's business. It is not a child's responsibility to keep themselves safe, this is the job of adults. As individuals and a community we need to ensure that all children are safe and that we know who to contact when we see or hear that a child has experienced or is at risk of harm

***Maybe it's a cultural difference, I shouldn't impose my standards:*** Diverse communities contribute to the richness and vibrancy of our country and there are a variety of approaches around the world to raising children. However, Australia has a legal, ethical and political framework that places the rights of the child as paramount. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children in Australia have the right to be safe and live lives free of violence

## What to expect when making a report

Making a report about a child you have concerns for can feel like an overwhelming task. It helps to know a little about the process prior to making the call.

You will most likely be asked a combination of the following:

- The child's name, age, address and school
- The parent/carers name, address and contact number
- To be specific about what your concerns are and why you believe abuse has occurred or is likely to
- How safe is the child right now? Are they in a safe location or do you know where they are?
- The name, contact details and the whereabouts of alleged abuser/s and their relationship to the child
- Whether there are other support services involved, if so which ones?
- What is the living situation for the child and information about the child's family. Such as who lives at home
- Other considerations such as culture, disability, mental health or drug and alcohol use
- Any other relevant information
- Provide your name, contact details and relationship to the child or family (remember, this information is kept confidential)

If you don't know all these details, don't worry, just share what you know, it is important that you still make a report.

## What happens now?

The following are potential outcomes from your report:

- After an assessment of risk, no further action is required but the family may be provided with counselling or support referral options
- An investigation takes place and the child remains in the family home with direct support to ensure that the child remains safe in that environment
- For the child's safety they may be removed from the family home for a short time so safety measures can be implemented or for a longer time if it is unsafe. Depending on the circumstances the child may be placed with other family members or friends, in foster care or a group home with other children, with support workers onsite.

In 2015-16, 46% of reports made to statutory child safety agencies were serious enough to be investigated. Of these investigations 37% resulted in a substantiation of abuse.

## Will I find out what has happened from my report?

You can request to be informed of what happens as a result of your report. The information you may be provided will depend on what happens after your report and will always take into consideration the need for maintaining confidentiality for the child.

Some mandatory reporters may be provided with information that can help them to continue to support a child or family if that is part of their role.

## Where to get help

- In an emergency call triple zero 000
- If you suspect that a child has experienced abuse or is at risk of harm you should contact the relevant state or territory child protection agency. The Australian Institute of Family Studies has an up to date contact list <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/reporting-abuse-and-neglect>
- If you make a report and you still believe that a child is not safe or receiving the support they need you can contact the children's commissioner or guardian in your state or territory. They are independent of government and their role is to advocate for the rights of children <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/mandatory-reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect>

- Parentline 1800 30 1300 provide free telephone counselling and advice to parents and carers. Resources are available to support parents and carers to understand a wide range of issues related to raising children and young people <https://www.parentline.com.au>
- If you would like more information about child abuse or advice about what to do if you are concerned about a child contact Child Wise's National Child Abuse Helpline on 1800 991 099 <http://www.childwise.org.au>
- Resources teach child safety skills to children and young people are available from the Daniel Morcombe Foundation <http://www.keepingkidssafe.com.au>

## References and resources

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