

## Parenting support to help prevent abuse

Looking after children can be hard work. For some families it is made even harder by other problems; lack of money, poor housing, not having support of family and friends, being in a violent relationship, being affected by an addiction to alcohol, drugs or gambling, or having a disability or mental health problem.

Parents have a responsibility to protect their children from abuse and neglect. The community and the government have a responsibility to help parents to work through problems they might have. There are a range of services to assist families with children who need support.

If you, as a parent, believe you need help to keep your children safe from harm and to ensure they are able to grow and develop well, it is important you find some help. This help might come from your partner, your family or friends or from services in the community.

If you know a family that you think needs such help, it is important that you talk to them.

### Parenting services that can help

There are many places you can go for advice on what to do. You might start by talking to someone who is already known to you or your family. These people could include:

- Your doctor
- Your maternal and child health nurse if you have a young child
- Your child's teacher or child-care worker
- Your local council or community health centre
- Your local Aboriginal community controlled organisation or co-operative

Sometimes these services will be able to help you themselves or sometimes they will refer you to someone who can assist.

### Integrated Family Services

Often families experiencing complex or significant difficulties are referred to Family Services. These are services funded by the Victorian Government but provided by local community-based organisations. They promote the safety, stability and development of vulnerable children (including before they are born) and young people up to the age of 17 years.

Family Services aim to reduce the personal and social pressure on parents and help them provide better care for their children. They are staffed by people experienced in helping people improve their parenting skills and family relationships. Once a referral has been accepted by Family Services, it can only offer to work with families with their permission. Parents can decide whether or not to use the service and when it finishes.

Family Services will assist families when there are significant parenting or wellbeing concerns for children. They will do this by:

- Identifying and reducing the stress felt by parents
- Offering family support and someone to talk to
- Providing advice and new ideas on looking after children
- Referring parents to groups
- Helping form links in the local community
- Helping with referrals to specialists like health services or family violence services for specific problems.

## Child FIRST

To access support from Family Services, a referral must be made first. Usually a person will contact a Child FIRST – Child and Family Information Referral and Support Team to make a referral for Family Services.

Sometimes a person may contact Child FIRST because they have a significant concern about the wellbeing of a child, but feel unable to discuss their concerns directly with the family before doing so. If this happens, Child FIRST will contact the family to discuss the referral and seek their consent before referring the family to Family Services.

These teams are available across Victoria. The purpose of Child FIRST is to ensure that children, young people and their families are linked effectively to services they need. Sometimes Child FIRST will recommend a referral to Family Services, and other times it may offer the caller advice or information, or help to refer the family to a more appropriate service.

You can contact your local Child FIRST directly or someone can speak to them on your behalf.

## Isn't Family Services the same as Child Protection?

No, it is not. Family Services are provided by community organisations to help parents be more in control of their lives and be better parents.

Family Services have a responsibility to work with families to help prevent problems from getting worse, and possibly becoming involved with Child Protection. However they also have an obligation to ensure the safety and protection of children. Sometimes this may involve the need to consult with Child Protection and if necessary to make a report to Child Protection.

Child Protection has a different responsibility. It is a Victorian Government service which is required by law to:

- Receive reports from people who believe a child needs protection from abuse or neglect.
- Provide advice to people who report cases of child abuse or neglect.
- Investigate when a child is believed to have been abused or is at risk of abuse or neglect.
- Refer children and families to services in the community for ongoing support and harm prevention.
- Take matters to the Children's Court if the child's safety within the family cannot be guaranteed.
- Supervise children on legal orders granted by the Children's Court.

Sometimes Child Protection and Family Services will work together with a family to decide what should be done in a particular situation. In such situations you will be kept informed of the decisions made and the reasons for these decisions. If you are already involved with Child Protection and want more support, speak to your allocated Child Protection worker.

If you have concerns that a child is at risk of harm, contact your local Child Protection office or the Child Protection after hours service.

## Where to get help

- Maternal and Child Health Line (24 hours) Tel. 132 229
- Parentline (24 hours) Tel. 132 289
- Child FIRST and Family Services information
- Your local Child Protection office or the after hours service, Tel.13 12 78

## Things to remember

- There are a range of services a parent can contact if concerned about issues to do with parenting or children.
- Child FIRST is the entry point for Family Services for when these problems are affecting the wellbeing of children.
- Child Protection should be contacted when there is a concern that a child is being harmed.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

DHS - Children Youth & Families

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