Child abuse - reporting procedures

Summary

- Child Protection protects children and young people from harm caused by abuse or neglect within the family.
- A report to Child Protection is appropriate when the risk of harm to children is significant.
- Child First or The Orange Door may be able to help families having difficulties.
- A referral to Child FIRST or The Orange Door is appropriate if you have a significant concern for the wellbeing of a child, but do not believe they need protection from significant harm.
- Some professional groups are legally required to report a reasonable belief of child physical or sexual abuse to child protection authorities.
- Anyone who forms a reasonable belief that a child is in need of protection from significant harm due to abuse or neglect can make a report to child protection.
- If a child is in immediate danger, contact police on 000.

In Victoria, any person who believes, on reasonable grounds, that a child needs protection from child abuse or neglect can make a report to Child Protection. Child Protection will assess and, where necessary, investigate whether the child or young person is at risk of significant harm. Child Protection is part of the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services. It provides child-centred, family-focused services to protect children and young people from significant harm caused by abuse or neglect within the family. It also aims to make sure that children and young people receive support to deal with the impact of abuse and neglect on their wellbeing and development.

Potential signs of child abuse

If you work with children and young people, you can help to keep them safe by being alert for the signs or indicators of harm and taking appropriate action early.

People who work with children and young people should pay attention to:

- Physical signs of abuse or neglect – these could include bruises, burns, fractures (broken bones), frequent hunger, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or poor hygiene.
- Behavioural signs of abuse or neglect – these could include showing little or no emotion when hurt, wariness of their parents, alcohol or drug misuse, age-inappropriate sexual behaviour, stealing food, excessive friendliness to strangers or wearing long sleeves and trousers in hot weather (to hide bruises).
- Disclosure – if the child tells you they have been abused.

Responding to signs of child abuse

Each situation is different. In considering the most effective response that will ensure the child’s safety and wellbeing, you may need to gather information and facts. These could include:

- Make notes – record what you observe. Date and sign the entry.
- Continue to observe – record what you observe, and date and sign each entry.
- Consult colleagues – get support and advice from your colleagues and supervisors. Compare notes and brainstorm possible strategies.
- Develop action plans based on procedures – familiarise yourself with your employer’s procedures and processes about what to do.
- Talk to other agencies about helping the family – collaborate with or engage family support services, community health services, local government services, Department of Health and Human Services and Child Protection contacts, and disability services. You may want to call a case conference for professionals to
discuss their concerns.

- **Talk to the child** – do this with respect for the child’s or young person’s need for privacy and confidentiality.
- **Talk to the parent or parents** – only if you believe it will not jeopardise the safety of the child or young person, or compromise a child protection or police investigation should this be required.

## Responsibilities of a mandated reporter

The following professional groups are required to make a report to child protection where they form a reasonable belief, that a child has been or is at risk of significant harm, as a result of physical or sexual abuse, and the child’s parents have not protected or are unlikely to protect the child from that abuse:

- registered medical practitioners
- nurses including midwives
- Victoria police officers
- registers teachers and school principals
- out of home care workers (excluding voluntary foster and kinship carers)
- early childhood workers
- youth justice workers, and
- registered psychologists

As a mandated reporter, you are legally obliged to:

- make a report to Child Protection if you believe on reasonable grounds that a child is in need of protection from physical injury or sexual abuse
- make the report as soon as practicable after forming your belief
- make a report each time you become aware of any further grounds for your belief

Keep in mind:

- you don’t have to prove that the abuse has occurred
- a belief is a belief on reasonable grounds if a reasonable person in your position would have formed the belief on those grounds
- grounds for a belief are matters of which you have become aware, and opinions based on those matters
- if you have formed the belief, you are obliged to make the report even if someone in a position of authority over you directs you not to make a report
- you are responsible for reporting your belief – it is not the responsibility of your boss, supervisor, principal or anyone else – however, if you honestly and reasonably believe all of the grounds for your belief have already been reported to Child Protection by someone else, this is a valid reason for you not to make the same report
- mandatory reporting requirements take precedence over professional codes of practice where confidentiality or client privilege would otherwise apply
- a report made in good faith does not constitute unprofessional conduct or a breach of professional ethics, nor does it subject the person to any liability, or contravene the confidentiality provisions in the legislation governing health and mental health services.


## Contacting Child Protection

To report child abuse, contact the divisional Child Protection intake service where the child resides as soon as possible. If you are making a report, please use the main Intake Unit number. For all other enquiries, please contact the appropriate local office.

## How to make a report

Call the appropriate Intake phone number. The Child Protection Intake worker will ask you for certain information, including:

- **details** – the child’s or young person’s name, age and address

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• indicators of harm – the reason for believing that the injury or behaviour is the result of abuse or neglect
• reason for reporting – the reason why the call is being made now
• safety assessment – assessment of immediate danger to the child or children. For example, information may be sought on the whereabouts of the alleged abuser or abusers
• description – description of the injury or behaviour observed
• child’s whereabouts – the current whereabouts of the child or young person
• other services – your knowledge of other services involved with the family
• family information – any other information about the family
• cultural characteristics – any specific cultural or other details that will help to care for the child, for example, cultural origins, interpreter or disability needs.

A report should still be made, even if you don’t have all the information listed above. The reporter’s identity is protected unless they provide written consent for it to be disclosed or it is required by order of the Court.

Your ongoing role when making a report

When Child Protection becomes involved, this may provoke a crisis for the family. After making a report, some of your ongoing responsibilities can include:

• acting as a support person for the child or young person during interviews
• attending a case conference
• participating in case planning meetings
• continuing to monitor the child’s or young person’s behaviour and circumstances for signs of reduced or increased risk
• providing written reports for case planning meetings or court proceedings
• helping families make the changes required to keep children safe.

To make a report

In Victoria, reports to child protection must be made to a protective intervener, or other appropriately delegated officer. Reports cannot be made via the department’s website or email, as staff who monitor the department’s website are not delegated officers. Almost all reports are made to child protection by phone.

To make a report, you should contact the child protection intake service covering the local government area (LGA) where the child normally resides.

Telephone numbers to make a report during business hours (8.45am - 5.00pm), Monday to Friday, are listed below.

• North Division intake: 1300 664 977
• South Division intake: 1300 655 795
• East Division intake: 1300 360 391
• West Division intake - metropolitan: 1300 664 977
• West Division intake - rural and regional: 1800 075 599

If you are not sure which number to call, check the Department of Health and Human Services website for details on the LGAs covered by each intake service

For immediate help for a child

To report concerns that are life threatening, you should contact Victoria Police: 000

To report concerns about the immediate safety of a child outside of normal business hours, you should contact the After Hours Child Protection Emergency Service on 13 12 78.

Things to remember

• Child Protection protects children and young people from harm caused by abuse or neglect within the family.
• Community-based family support services may be able to help families having difficulties. A referral to Child

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A child may be in need of protection if you believe the child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm, and their parents have not protected, or are unlikely to protect, them.

Anyone who forms a reasonable belief that a child is in need of protection is entitled to make a report to child protection.

Some professional groups are legally required to report a reasonable belief a child is in need of protection from physical injury or sexual abuse to child protection authorities.

If someone has a significant concern for the wellbeing of a child, but does not believe they are in need of protection, or that the immediate safety of the child is compromised, a referral to Child FIRST or The Orange Door is appropriate.