Recognising when a child is at risk

Summary

- Child abuse is defined as any act by parents or caregivers that puts a child or young person’s physical or emotional health or development in danger. This includes neglect.
- Children may experience a range of emotional, psychological and physical problems and trauma as a result of being abused or neglected.
- A referral to Child FIRST or The Orange Door may be the best way of connecting vulnerable children, young people and their families to the services they need to protect and promote their healthy development.
- The child protection system is responsible for investigating alleged child abuse and neglect, and determining the most appropriate care or support for the child.
- If you know about the sexual abuse of a child, you are legally required to speak up.

Child abuse is a serious problem. Too many children are physically, sexually and emotionally abused. Other forms of abuse include neglect and exploitation. When this happens it is up to adults to speak up.

In Victoria, reports to child protection must be made to Child protection Intake Service. Reports cannot be made via the department’s website or email. 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 following website for details on the LGAs covered by each intake service https://services.dhhs.vic.gov.au/child-protection-contacts.

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

Child abuse or neglect

Child abuse can refer to a one-off incident or it can be a number of separate incidences that happen over time. Child abuse is defined as any act by parents or caregivers that endangers a child or young person's physical or emotional health or development.

In Victoria, under the Children Youth and Families Act 2005, a child is defined as a person who is under the age of 17 years, unless they are subject to a protection order granted by the Children’s Court of Victoria, Family Division, that continues in force until they turn 18 years of age.

Abuse of children is not isolated to specific cultural or socio-economic groups although abuse is often associated with high mobility, a lack of parental education, loneliness, poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing or social isolation.

With physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect, boys are somewhat more at risk than girls. However, there are more girls sexually abused than boys.

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Children can be abused at any age. Some children are more vulnerable, for example, those under two years of age and children with disabilities. Sometimes abuse begins during adolescence when parents start experiencing difficulties in dealing with the adolescent’s behaviour and desire for independence. Child abuse may be directed at only one child in the family.

**Physical abuse**

Physical abuse occurs when a child suffers or is likely to suffer significant harm from an injury inflicted by their parent or caregiver. The injury may be inflicted intentionally or may be the inadvertent consequence of physical punishment, physically aggressive treatment or the indirect consequence of family violence between the parents. The physical abuse injury may take the form of bruises, cuts, burns or fractures.

Both men and women commit physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Child abuse usually takes place in the home with someone who the child knows rather than with strangers.

Physical indicators of abuse include:

- bruises, burns, sprains, dislocations, bites, cuts
- fractured bones, especially in an infant where a fracture is unlikely to occur accidentally
- poisoning
- internal injuries
- forced marriage
- family violence

Possible behavioural indicators of physical abuse include:

- showing wariness or distrust of adults
- wearing long-sleeved clothes on hot days (to hide bruising or other injuries)
- demonstrating fear of parents and of going home
- becoming fearful when other children cry or shout
- being excessively friendly to strangers
- being very passive and compliant

**Sexual abuse**

Sexual abuse occurs when a person uses power or authority over a child to involve the child in sexual activity. Physical force is sometimes involved. Child sexual abuse involves a wide range of sexual activity. It includes fondling of the child’s genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, finger or other object, or exposure of the child to pornography. Sexual abuse frequently commences with a process in which the child is groomed by the adult. This process may include the adult giving gifts or affection to gain the child’s friendship, build trust and dependence.

It is important to know that sexual abuse can be perpetrated by both men and women, toward both girls and boys.

Sexual abuse is not usually identified through physical indicators. Often the first sign is when a child tells someone they trust that they have been sexually abused. However, the presence of sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy or vaginal or anal bleeding or discharge may indicate sexual abuse.

Possible physical indicators of sexual abuse:

- itching, soreness, discharge or unexplained bleeding from the genital or anal area
- torn, stained or bloodied underwear
- recurrent urinary tract infections
- unexplained pain in the genital area
- bruises, scratches or other injuries around the genital area not consistent with accidental injury
- complaining of headaches or stomach pains
- forced marriage
- sexual exploitation

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In child sexual abuse, one or more of these behavioural indicators may be present:

- the child telling someone that sexual abuse has occurred
- displaying sexual behaviour or knowledge that is unusual for the child’s age
- experiencing problems with schoolwork
- experiencing difficulties sleeping
- having difficulties relating to adults and peers
- sudden changes in mood or behaviour
- regressed behaviour such as bedwetting
- acting out behaviour – aggression, lying, stealing, unexplained running away, drug or alcohol abuse, suicide attempts.

**Emotional abuse**

Emotional abuse occurs when a child’s parent or caregiver repeatedly rejects the child or uses threats to frighten the child. This may involve name calling, put downs or continual coldness from the parent or caregiver, to the extent that it significantly damages the child’s physical, social, intellectual or emotional development.

There are few physical indicators, although emotional abuse may cause delays in emotional, mental, or even physical development. Possible behavioural indicators include:

- displaying low self-esteem
- tending to be withdrawn, passive or tearful
- displaying aggressive or demanding behaviour
- being highly anxious
- showing delayed speech
- acting like a much younger child
- displaying difficulties in relating to adults and peers
- forced marriage
- exposure to family violence

**Child neglect**

Neglect is the failure to provide a child with the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, medical attention or supervision, to the extent that the child’s health and development is, or is likely to be, significantly harmed.

Physical indicators of neglect include:

- frequent hunger
- malnutrition
- poor hygiene
- inappropriate clothing such as summer clothes in winter
- left unsupervised for long periods
- medical needs not attended to
- being abandoned by parents.

Possible behavioural indicators of neglect in children include:

- stealing food
- staying at school outside school hours
- often being tired, falling asleep in class
- abusing alcohol or drugs
- displaying aggressive behaviour
The effects of child abuse

Children may experience a range of emotional, psychological and physical problems and trauma as a result of being abused or neglected.

All forms of abuse are likely to result in emotional problems for the child, in particular, a lack of self-esteem and distrust of adults. The longer the abuse of the child goes on, the more serious the effects. Abused and neglected children are more likely than other children to be self-destructive or aggressive, to abuse drugs or alcohol, or become young offenders or homeless. In some situations, abuse and neglect may result in permanent physical damage.

Treatment and counselling services for children who have been abused help by working through the trauma and in reducing the effects of the abuse. The most serious effects are likely to occur when no one takes action to stop the abuse and to protect the child.

Reporting child abuse

We all have a responsibility for protecting the children in our community. The Victorian Child Protection Service is the government agency that is ultimately responsible for young people and children at risk of harm or in cases where families are unable or unwilling to protect them.

The main functions of child protection services are to:

- investigate matters where it is alleged that a child is at risk of harm
- refer children and families to services that assist in providing the ongoing safety and wellbeing of children
- take matters before the Children’s Court if the child’s safety cannot be ensured within the family
- supervise children on legal orders granted by the Children’s Court

If you are worried about a child’s wellbeing, but don’t believe the child is in need of protection

Child FIRST or The Orange Door

If you have significant concern for the wellbeing of a child, but do not believe they are at risk of significant harm, and where the immediate safety of the child will not compromised, a referral to Child FIRST or The Orange Door may be appropriate.

Child FIRST, as the access point for family services, is progressively transitioning to The Orange Door. The Orange Door is the new access point for families who need assistance with the care and wellbeing of children, including those experiencing family violence, to contact the services they need to be safe and supported.

Referring to Child FIRST or The Orange Door would be appropriate where families:

- are experiencing significant parenting problems that may be affecting the child’s development
- are experiencing family conflict, including family breakdown
- are under pressure due to a family member’s physical or mental illness, substance abuse, disability or bereavement
- are young, isolated or unsupported
- are experiencing significant social or economic disadvantage that may adversely impact on a child’s care or development.

Contact numbers to make a referral in each local government area are listed at the following website: https://services.dhhs.vic.gov.au/referral-and-support-teams

It may be difficult to determine whether the risk is such that the child needs protection. Many circumstances will not fit neatly into one of the above categories. Answering the following questions may help you decide what to do:

- How vulnerable is the child? What makes you think that?
- Has something specific happened to the child that has caused you to be concerned?
- What is the likely impact of the child’s circumstances on their safety, health, wellbeing and development?

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Is this an ongoing issue? Have there been other instances of concern with this child or other children in the family?

Are the parents willing and able to connect with support services for the sake of the child?

With support, could the parents be capable of ensuring the child’s safety? Could they gain the knowledge and skills to promote the child’s health, wellbeing and development?

Find information on Child and family services information, referral and support teams.

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.

Mandatory reporting of child abuse

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

Any person who believes on reasonable grounds that a child needs protection can make a report to Child Protection. Child protection will decide when follow up is required and how to classify the report. This may mean providing advice to the reporter, progressing the matter to an investigation, or referring the family to support services in the community, or taking no further action.

More information is available on the Department of Health and Human Services Mandatory reporting page.

Failure to disclose child sexual abuse offence

A new offence for failure to disclose child sexual abuse came into effect on 27 October 2014. The law now requires that any adult who holds a reasonable belief that a sexual offence has been committed in Victoria, by an adult against a child (aged under 16) disclose this information to police. This law applies to all adults in Victoria, not just professionals who work with children, unless they have a reasonable excuse.

Further information about this offence and how to report it, can be found on Criminal offences to improve responses to child sexual abuse.

Where to get help

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