



nsw commission for
children & young people

Reporting neglect and child abuse

In our everyday lives we're all members of a variety of communities through family, friends or work, which bring us into contact with children and young people.

As community members we each have responsibilities to help protect children and young people. It can be difficult if you find out that a child might be experiencing neglect or sexual, physical or emotional abuse. But children will only be safe from abuse and neglect if responsible adults take action on their behalf and speak up for children who can't speak up for themselves.

It isn't necessary to be absolutely sure when you tell someone of your fears, only to have "reasonable grounds" to suspect that a child is at risk of harm because of one or more of the following circumstances:

- The child's basic physical or psychological needs are not being met
- The parents or carers have not arranged for the child to get medical care when they need it
- The child has been physically or sexually abused
- The child is living in a house where there is domestic violence and as a result they are at risk of serious physical or psychological harm
- The parent or carer is behaving in such a way that the child has suffered serious psychological harm

You may form this view through listening to the child, observing their behaviour or the behaviour of their parents or carers.

Hints for listening to children

- Children usually talk about difficult or painful things in a roundabout way
- Children need assurance from adults that it's OK to talk about upsetting things
- Children often drop hints when something is wrong. For example a child might say "I don't like so and so. Do you like him/her?"
- Children get confused when adults don't understand their signals or don't respond
- When adults don't respond children think they aren't believed or cared about and it is harder for them to bring up the subject again.

When the abuser is a member of my family or works with me

This can be a very difficult situation for anyone who suspects or has been told by a child of abuse by a family member or a co-worker.

It is usual to feel divided loyalties between the child and an adult who you may love and respect.

You may also feel guilty that you hadn't noticed anything was wrong or been unable to prevent the abuse from

happening. Or you may fear the disruption in your family or at the workplace that will happen if the allegation is reported.

It takes great courage to overcome your misgivings and go to the relevant authorities.

Remember, as difficult as it is for you to do this, think about what life has been like for the child who has been the victim.

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information

Seeing and listening

When children try to tell adults they have experienced abuse it is very difficult and painful for them. They often feel ashamed and frightened and find it hard to find the right words to explain.

As adults we can make things easier for children by recognising when a child is trying to talk about difficult things. We should get into the habit of listening to children so they feel comfortable talking to us about their worries.

By being observant, adults are also able to pick up the non-verbal clues that something is wrong in a child's life even when a child is not aware of it.

Adults often notice things are not going well when there are physical signs eg. severe nappy rash that is not treated and the child is continually left in soiled nappies.

If a child can't talk to an adult about abuse, or make an adult understand what they are trying to say, or if adults fail to notice signs that all is not right, a child's distress will come out in other ways, usually in their behaviour. Some children might become angry while others might become silent and withdrawn.

What is being done to help prevent neglect and child abuse?

New South Wales child protection policy encourages Government departments to work together with non-government organisations and the community to look after children and young people.

- *Families First* is a government-sponsored strategy, which focuses on the early years. By providing a range of practical services and information parents are being supported to give their children a good start in life
- The Working With Children Check for all employees and volunteers in child related work to determine their suitability - any person convicted of a serious sex offence is prohibited from working with children
- *2000 Interagency Guidelines for Child Protection Intervention* that outline the responsibilities of Government agencies in protecting children
- The new Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 in NSW that sees the caring for children and young people as a responsibility shared by families, agencies and communities. The Act recognises that parenting is a difficult job and promotes working with children, young people and families in more flexible, responsive and innovative ways to meet their needs

As essential as these government initiatives are, effective child protection cannot be achieved by government action alone – it requires the active involvement of all of us.

Professional groups who have to report neglect and child abuse

People whose work brings them in to contact with children are called mandatory reporters. This means that they are legally obliged to report any suspicions.

Mandatory reporting “applies to a person who, in the course of his or her professional work or other paid employment delivers health care, welfare, education, children’s services, residential services, or law enforcement, wholly or partly, to children, and a person who holds a management position in an organization the duties of which include direct responsibility for, or direct supervision of, the provision of health care, welfare, education, children’s services, residential services, or law enforcement, wholly or partly, to children”.

But always remember, anyone can make a report.

Who do I speak to if I suspect a child is being abused or neglected?

If you have reasonable grounds for concern it is important that you tell the Department of Community Services (DoCS) who will then be able to follow it up.

DoCS can only act to protect a child if someone tells them about their concerns.

Remember that many children who are being abused or neglected can't seek help for themselves. And if they feel unsafe in their family, the child will also feel like there is no one at home who can help.

If the adult who is abusing or neglecting a child is in a position of authority children will be afraid of not being believed. Whatever the circumstances, children need the help of a trusted adult.

Where to get more information and help

Parent Line	13 20 55
Tresillian (for babies)	02 9787 5255 1800 637 357 (freecall outside Sydney)
Karitane (for babies)	02 9794 1852 1800 677 961 (freecall outside Sydney)
Kids Help Line	1800 55 1800
DoCS Help Line	13 21 11
Domestic Violence Line	1800 656 463/ 1800 671 442 TTY
Website	www.parenting.nsw.gov.au