

Spotting the Warning Signs of Child Abuse (Early Childhood)

A REASONABLE BELIEF

What do I do if I suspect (form a reasonable belief) a child is being abused?

You **MUST** take action as soon as you witness an incident, receive a disclosure or suspect that a child has been, or is at risk of being abused. You **MUST** act whenever you form a reasonable belief which means acting even if you are unsure and have not directly observed the abuse. Failure to act can be a criminal offence.

You **MUST** follow the **Four Critical Actions for Early Childhood Services: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures or Suspicions of Child Abuse.**

When should I act?

You **MUST** act even if you are unsure and have not observed the abuse.

You **MUST** follow the **Four Critical Actions for Early Childhood Services: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures or Suspicions of Child Abuse.** Failure to act can be a criminal offence.

What is child abuse?

Child abuse can include physical abuse, sexual abuse, grooming, emotional or psychological harm, neglect or family violence.

It doesn't have to involve physical contact or force. Child abuse can include:

- talking to a child in a sexually explicit way
- grooming a child for future sexual activity
- forcing a child to watch pornography
- being witness to family violence
- failing to provide a child with an adequate standard of nutrition, supervision or medical care to the extent that the development of the child is placed at serious risk, or is significantly impaired.

Who is most likely to be impacted by child abuse?

Any child can be victim to child abuse, however children who are vulnerable, isolated and/or have a disability are disproportionately abused.

Child abuse is often committed by someone the child knows well such as a family member or someone within the early childhood setting. In fact, child abuse can be committed by any member of the community.

Regardless of who the perpetrator or victim is, the trauma of child abuse can have a devastating and life long impact upon a child's wellbeing and development.

This is why it is critical that we respond immediately to any form of suspected abuse within our communities.



What are the signs that a child has been abused?

The most common physical and behavioural indicators of child abuse are outlined below. This is not an exhaustive list.

If you feel uncomfortable about a child's physical presentation or behaviour, but have not directly witnessed or been told about abuse, or risk of abuse, you should still act.

You can contact DHHS Child Protection or Victoria Police for advice (see pg. 3 for contact details).

If you form a reasonable belief that a child has been abused, is being abused, or is at risk of abuse then you **MUST** follow the **Four Critical Actions for Early Childhood Services: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures or Suspicions of Child Abuse.**

Common PHYSICAL indicators of child abuse

- bruises, welts, cuts/grazes or burns (especially those on back, bottom, legs, arms and inner thighs or in unusual configurations and may resemble an object)
- internal injuries and bone fractures not consistent with the explanation offered
- any injury to the genital or rectal area (e.g. bruising, bleeding, infection or anything causing pain to go to the toilet)
- wearing clothes unsuitable for weather conditions to hide injuries
- sexually-transmitted diseases and/or frequent urinary tract infections
- appearing consistently dirty and unwashed and/or inappropriately dressed for weather conditions
- being consistently hungry, tired and listless
- having unattended health problems and lack of routine medical care.

Common BEHAVIOURAL indicators of child abuse

In an infant or toddler:

- self-stimulatory behaviours, for example, rocking, head banging
- crying excessively, or not at all
- listless and immobile and/or emancipated and pale
- significant delays in gross motor development and coordination
- inadequate attention to the safety of the home (e.g. dangerous medicines left where children may have access to them)
- being left unsupervised, either at home, on the street or in a car
- parent/carer is unresponsive or impatient to child's cues and unreceptive to support
- developmental delay due to lack of stimulation.

In all children:

- disclosure of abuse and/or drawings or writing which depicts violence and abuse
- inconsistent or unlikely explanation for an injury, or inability to remember the cause
- regressive or unusual changes to behaviour (E.g. sudden decline in academic performance, nervousness, depression, withdrawal, hyperactivity, aggression, bedwetting)
- reluctance to go home and/or a wariness or fear of a parent/carer
- unusual fear of physical contact with adults
- persistent and age-inappropriate sexual activity (e.g. excessive masturbation or rubbing genitals against adults, promiscuity)
- suicide or self-harm, harm to others or animals
- an unusually close connection with an older person
- possessing expensive gifts or money (e.g. a new mobile phone given to them by a "friend")
- taking on a caretaker role prematurely, trying to protect other family members.

What are the signs that an adult is perpetrating abuse?

The most common indicators that an adult is abusing a child are outlined below. This is not an exhaustive list.

If you feel uncomfortable in any way about a relationship between an adult and a child (or inappropriate relationships between children such as siblings) you **MUST** still act by following the **Four Critical Actions for Early Childhood Services: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures or Suspicions of Child Abuse**.

Common indicators of adults abusing children

Family members (parents, siblings, extended family)

- attempts by one parent to alienate their child from the other parent
- overprotective or volatile relationships
- reluctance by the child to be alone with one or more of their family members
- a child and a sibling behaving like boyfriend and girlfriend (embarrassment if they are found alone together).

Other adults (service staff member, volunteers, coaches etc.)

- touching a child inappropriately
- befriending the parents/carers of the child and making visits to their home
- undermining the child's reputation, so that the child won't be believed
- bringing up sexual material or personal disclosures into conversations with a child
- obvious or inappropriate preferential treatment of the child. (e.g. making them feel "special")
- inappropriate contact with the child, (e.g. calls, emails, texts, social media)
- giving inappropriate/expensive gifts to a child
- having inappropriate social boundaries, e.g. telling the child about their own personal problems

Where to go for further advice?

- Your service's management
- DHHS Child Protection on **131 278**
- Your local police station.

Want to know more?

The advice contained within this factsheet is drawn from **Identifying and Responding to All Forms of Abuse in Early Childhood Services** which can be found at www.education.vic.gov.au/protect

You must refer to this guidance to ensure you meet your obligations to protect children.

