

RESPONDING TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION FACT SHEET FOR SCHOOL STAFF

As a school staff member, you play a crucial role in keeping all children and young people safe and protected from abuse. This includes by knowing how to spot the signs of sexual exploitation and understanding how to best respond.

WHAT DO I DO IF I SUSPECT A CHILD IN MY CARE IS AT RISK OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OR IS BEING SEXUALLY EXPLOITED?

As a professional who works with children and young people it is critical to be able to recognise the signs of sexual exploitation, as you may be the only adult in a position to identify and respond to this type of abuse. As professionals who work with children and young people, you are often best placed to identify signs and behaviours that may indicate that a child or young person has been subject to sexual exploitation, or that a school community member may be a perpetrator.

See *Identifying sexual exploitation of children and young people fact sheet* to learn more about the warning signs.

If indicators lead you to form a reasonable belief that a child or young person is being sexually exploited, you must follow the [Four Critical Actions for Schools: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures or Suspicions of Child Abuse](#), which will support you to immediately report your suspicion to DHHS Child Protection and/or to Victoria Police. Following these actions will help you to best protect children and young people in your care, and to fulfill your legal obligations.

Sexual exploitation can be difficult to speak about with students. They may be very reluctant to share information and disclose details about the abuse. When listening to the child or young person make a disclosure about potential abuse, including sexual exploitation, it is important to avoid asking leading or intrusive questions.

These sections include explicit descriptions of abuse and may be distressing to engage with for some staff members. If you need to talk to someone, it is recommended that you speak to your school leadership team about arranging appropriate support. You can also talk to your GP or another allied health professional. Government school staff can also contact the Employee Assistance Program on 1300 361 008.

Your role is simply to receive the information in an unbiased way and to reassure the child or young person that they no longer have to deal with the abuse alone. It is the role of Victoria Police and other relevant authorities to investigate the concerns and identify the details of what exactly happened. Some tips to remember when talking to children and young people about suspected abuse include:

- listen to the child or young person and allow them to speak
- stay calm and do not display expressions of panic or shock
- use a neutral tone with no urgency and where possible use the child or young person's language and vocabulary
- be patient and non-judgmental throughout
- highlight to the child or young person that they are doing the right thing in telling you about what happened and that it is not their fault
- do not ask leading questions, but instead, gently ask "What happened next?" rather than "Why?"
- be patient and allow the child or young person time to talk at their own pace and in their own words
- do not pressure the child or young person into telling you more than they want to
- reassure the child or young person that you believe them and that disclosing the matter was the right thing to do
- use verbal facilitators such as "Okay, I see", restate the child or young person's previous statement, and use non-suggestive words of encouragement, designed to keep the child or young person talking in an open-ended way
- avoid going over the information time and time again (you are only gathering information to help you form a belief on reasonable grounds that you need to make a report to the relevant authority)
- tell the child or young person you are required to report to the relevant authority to help stop the abuse, and explain the role of these authorities if appropriate
- following the conversation, when the child or young person has left, note down the key facts using the words the child or young person used.

Questions you could ask the child or young person are:

- "Can you tell me a bit more about that?"
- How do you feel when this happens?
- What do you mean by that?"

As a school staff member, you must keep clear and comprehensive notes relating to incidents, disclosures and allegations of child abuse using the [Responding to Suspected Child Abuse: Template](#).

Provide as much information within the template as possible as these records will be important when reporting the abuse to relevant authorities.

This information may be sought at a later date if the matter is the subject of court proceedings. These notes may also later assist you if you are required to provide evidence to support their decisions (see [Responding to subpoenas or court attendance](#) for further information).

WHAT ARE MY OBLIGATIONS?

All school staff members have a moral and legal obligation, and a duty of care to protect any child or young person under their care from foreseeable harm, (not just staff who are classified as mandatory reporters).

As a school staff member you **must** respond to any reasonable suspicion that a child has, or is at risk of being abused by following the [Four Critical Actions for Schools: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures or Suspicions of Child Abuse](#).

You must report suspected abuse, or risk of abuse, regardless of any concerns about the risk to the reputation of the suspected perpetrator or school. Your report could prove critical to protecting children or young people in your care. A failure to report can result in criminal charges.

Recent changes to Victorian legislation create additional legal obligations in relation to reporting suspected child sexual abuse. Failing to meet these obligations can constitute a criminal offence, including a:

- *failure to disclose a sexual offence*
- *failure to protect a child (where it is known that a person associated with their organisation poses a substantial risk of sexually abusing children).*

The easiest way to comply with your legal and moral obligations is to remember that **you must report any reasonable suspicion that a child has been abused, or is at risk of being abused** by following the [Four Critical Actions for Schools: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures or Suspicions of Child Abuse](#).

For more information see:

[Duty of Care Obligations](#)

[Mandatory Reporting Obligations](#)

[New Criminal Offences](#)

[Ministerial Order No. 870 - Child Safe Standards](#)

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND REGULATION 'FAILURE TO DISCLOSE' OFFENCE FACT SHEETS

<http://assets.justice.vic.gov.au/justice/resources/ea484f74-feb7-400e-ad68-9bd0be8e2a40/failure+to+disclose.pdf>

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND REGULATION 'FAILURE TO PROTECT' OFFENCE FACT SHEET

<http://assets.justice.vic.gov.au/justice/resources/790183f8-3ad0-41c4-bbc4-08d9a0bd8618/failure-to-protect.pdf>

WHERE CAN I GET SUPPORT?

In order to identify supports appropriate to the situation you are responding to refer to [Four Critical Actions for Schools: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures or Suspicions of Child Abuse](#).

For additional support, the Department Security Services Unit provides a 24-hour communications centre for schools and Departmental staff to report a range of incidents. On receiving notification of an incident involving Child Abuse the Security Services Unit immediately alerts the [Student Incident and Recovery Unit \(SIRU\)](#) and relevant staff within the Central and [Regional Office](#).

Within Catholic education, there are a number of supports available to schools when responding to incidents, disclosures or suspicions of child abuse. Catholic schools should contact their Diocesan education office for support and advice.

- Archdiocese of Melbourne: Student Wellbeing Information Line on **(03) 9267 0228**
- Diocese of Sale: Child Protection Officer on **(03) 5622 6600**
- Diocese of Ballarat: Child Safety on **(03) 5337 7135**
- Diocese of Sandhurst: Child Protection Officer on **(03) 5443 2377**

USEFUL RESOURCES

PROTECT

www.education.vic.gov.au/Protect

- Identifying and Responding to suspected abuse
- Four Critical Actions for Schools: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures or Suspicions of Child Abuse.
- Responding to Suspected Child Abuse: Template
- Principal Checklist
- Identifying and Responding to Student Sexual Offending

SPEAK UP: UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO CHILD ABUSE

http://childwise.blob.core.windows.net/assets/uploads/files/SpeakUp_booklet_VIC.pdf

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND REGULATION 'GROOMING' OFFENCE FACT SHEET

<http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/home/safer+communities/protecting+children+and+families/grooming+offence>