



PROTECT

Identifying and Responding
to All Forms of Abuse in
Victorian Schools



Four Critical Actions for Schools: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures and Suspicions of Child Abuse

FOUR CRITICAL ACTIONS

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YOU MUST ACT

CRITICAL INFORMATION

- As a school staff member, you **must** act as soon as you witness an incident or form a reasonable belief that a child has been, or is at risk of being abused, including exposure to family violence.
- You **must** act if you form a suspicion/ reasonable belief that abuse has occurred or is at risk of occurring, even if you are unsure and have not directly observed child abuse (e.g. if the victim or another person tells you about the abuse).
- You should make sufficient enquiries to form a reasonable belief and to determine a child's immediate needs. However, once a reasonable belief has been formed, it is not your role to investigate. This is the role of DHHS Child Protection or Victoria Police.
- Child abuse includes any instance of physical or sexual abuse (including grooming), emotional or psychological harm, serious or significant neglect and family violence involving a child.



DUTY OF CARE OBLIGATIONS

As a school staff member you have a duty to take reasonable steps to protect children under your care and supervision from harm that is reasonably foreseeable (this applies to **ALL** school staff).

MANDATORY REPORTING

There are certain classes of professionals who are classified as “mandatory reporters”. Within a school mandatory reporters include all:

- Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) registered teachers, including principals
- staff who have been granted permission to teach by the VIT
- registered doctors and nurses.

All mandatory reporters **must** make a report to Victoria Police and/or DHHS Child Protection as soon as practicable if, during the course of carrying out their professional roles and responsibilities, they form a belief on reasonable grounds that:

- a child has suffered, or is likely to suffer, significant harm as a result of physical abuse and/ or sexual abuse, and
- the child’s parents have not protected, or are unlikely to protect, the child from harm of that type.

It is a criminal offence not to report in these circumstances.



CRIMINAL OFFENCES

Failure to disclose

This offence applies to all adults (not just professionals who work with children) who:

- form a reasonable belief that another adult may have committed a sexual offence against a child under 16 years of age; AND
- fail to report this information to Victoria Police.

Failure to protect

This offence applies to a person in a position of authority within an organisation who:

- knows of a substantial risk that a child under the age of 16, under the care, supervision or authority of the organisation will become a victim of a sexual offence committed by an adult associated with the organisation (e.g. employee, contractor, volunteer, visitor); AND
- has the power or responsibility to remove that risk; AND
- negligently fails to remove or reduce the risk of harm.

Within a school setting, a position of authority includes principals and assistant principals and staff in institutional management positions (for example in government schools this includes Regional Directors and other senior managers).

What is reportable conduct?

- a sexual offence, sexual misconduct or physical violence committed against, with or in the presence of a child; OR
- behaviour causing significant emotional or psychological harm to a child; OR
- significant neglect of a child; OR
- misconduct involving any of the above.

The scope of 'reportable conduct' is wide, and includes:

- information about something that is alleged to have occurred outside the course of the person's employment or engagement with the school
- sexual offences, sexual misconduct or physical violence committed in the presence of a child (which may include family violence committed by a school staff member in front of their own child).

However, student-to-student abuse is not covered by the Scheme.



Identifying Signs of Child Abuse

CRITICAL INFORMATION

As a school staff member:

- it is critical to be able to recognise the physical or behavioural signs of child abuse (in many circumstances they may be the only indication that a child is subject to abuse)
- you may be the best-placed or only adult in a position to identify and respond to suspected abuse.

If indicators lead you to form a reasonable belief that a child is being abused, you **must** follow the **Four Critical Actions**. These actions will support you to immediately report your suspicion to DHHS Child Protection, and/or to Victoria Police.

PHYSICAL CHILD ABUSE

CRITICAL INFORMATION

- Physical child abuse is any non-accidental infliction of physical violence on a child by any person.
- If you suspect that a child has been or is being physically abused, or is at risk of physical abuse, you **must** respond by following the **Four Critical Actions**.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

CRITICAL INFORMATION

Child sexual abuse:

- is when a person uses power or authority over a child to involve them in sexual activity
- can include a wide range of sexual activity and can include exposing a child to pornography
- does not always involve physical contact or force.

You must follow the Four Critical Actions if you suspect that a:

- child has been or is being sexually abused, or is at risk of sexual abuse
- school staff member, contractor or volunteer may be engaging, or are at risk of engaging in sexual behaviour with a child/children.



How can I identify perpetrators of child sexual abuse?

BEHAVIOURAL indicators for perpetrators of child sexual abuse include (but are not limited to):

Family member (adult)

- attempts by one parent to alienate their child from the other parent
- overprotective or volatile relationship between the child and one of their parents/family members
- reluctance by the child to be alone with one of their parents/family members.

Family member (sibling)

- the child and a sibling behaving like they are in an intimate relationship
- reluctance by the child to be alone with a sibling
- embarrassment by siblings if they are found alone together.

School staff member, coach or other carer

- touching a child inappropriately
- bringing up sexual material or personal disclosures in conversations with a student/s
- inappropriately contacting the student/s, e.g. calls, emails, texts, social media
- obvious or inappropriate preferential treatment of the student/s (making them feel "special")
- giving of gifts to a student/s
- having inappropriate social boundaries, e.g. telling the potential victims about their own personal problems etc.
- offering to drive a student/s to or from school
- inviting themselves over to their homes, calling them at night
- befriending the parents themselves and making visits to their home
- undermining the child's reputation (so that the child won't be believed).



GROOMING

CRITICAL INFORMATION

- Grooming is when a person engages in predatory conduct to prepare a child for sexual abuse at a later time. Grooming can include communicating and/or attempting to befriend or establish a relationship or other emotional connection with the child or their parent/carer.
- If you suspect that a child is being groomed, you must follow the Four Critical Actions.

- developing an unusually close connection with an older person
- displaying mood changes (hyperactive, secretive, hostile, aggressive, impatient, resentful, anxious, withdrawn, depressed)
- using street/different language; copying the way the new 'friend' may speak; talking about the new 'friend' who does not belong to his/her normal social circle
- possessing jewellery, clothing or expensive items given by the 'friend'
- possessing large amounts of money which he/she cannot account for

- using a new mobile phone (given by the 'friend') excessively to make calls, videos or send text messages
- being excessively secretive about their use of communications technologies, including social media
- frequently staying out overnight, especially if the relationship is with an older person
- being dishonest about where they've been and whom they've been with
- using drugs; physical evidence includes spoons, silver foil, 'tabs', 'rocks'
- assuming a new name; being in possession of a false ID, stolen passport or driver's license provided by the 'friend' to avoid detection
- being picked up in a car by the 'friend' from home/school or 'down the street'.

FAMILY VIOLENCE

CRITICAL INFORMATION

- Family violence can include physical violence or threats, verbal abuse, emotional and physical abuse, sexual abuse and financial and social abuse.
- If you suspect that a child is exposed to family violence (including witnessing family violence), or is at risk of family violence you must follow the Four Critical Actions.

- being hit, yelled at, or otherwise directly abused
- being injured
- being sexually abused
- experiencing fear for self
- experiencing fear for another person, a pet or belongings
- seeing, hearing or otherwise sensing violence directed against another person
- seeing, hearing or otherwise sensing the aftermath of violence (such as broken furniture, smashed crockery, an atmosphere of tension)
- knowing or sensing that a family member is in fear
- being told to do something (such as to be quiet or to 'behave') to prevent violence

- being told to do something (such as to be quiet or to 'behave') to prevent violence
- being blamed for not preventing violence
- attempting to prevent or minimise violence
- attempting to mediate between the perpetrator and another family member
- being threatened or co-opted by the perpetrator into using violent behaviour against another family member
- being co-opted into supporting the perpetrator or taking their side
- being isolated or socially marginalised in ways that are directly attributable to the perpetrator's controlling behaviours.

EMOTIONAL CHILD ABUSE

CRITICAL INFORMATION

- Emotional child abuse occurs when a child is repeatedly rejected, isolated or frightened by threats.
- If you suspect that a child has suffered, or is likely to suffer, emotional or psychological harm, you **must** follow the Four Critical Actions.

PHYSICAL indicators of emotional abuse include (but are not limited to):

- speech disorders such as language delay, stuttering or selectively being mute (only speaking with certain people or in certain situations)
- delays in emotional, mental or physical development.

BEHAVIOURAL indicators of emotional abuse include (but are not limited to):

- overly compliant, passive and undemanding behaviour
- extremely demanding, aggressive and attention-seeking behaviour or anti-social and destructive behaviour
- low tolerance or frustration
- poor self-image and low self-esteem
- unexplained mood swings, depression, self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- behaviours that are not age-appropriate, e.g. overly adult, or overly infantile
- fear of failure, overly high standards, and excessive neatness
- poor social and interpersonal skills
- violent drawings or writing
- lack of positive social contact.

NEGLECT

MINOR/LOW LEVELS OF NEGLECT

Committed by school staff, volunteers or contractors

ACTIONS

Manage locally

If unsure or concerned, principals can seek advice from:

- Employee Conduct Branch (government schools)
- Diocesan Office (Catholic schools, see below).

EXAMPLES

- A child is accidentally left out in the rain and cold for a short period of time
- A teacher forgets to supervise a particular area of the school grounds for half an hour, and no harm comes to the children there.

Committed by other community members

ACTIONS

Manage locally

Refer child and family to local community based services if appropriate.

Refer child and family to ChildFIRST if appropriate.

EXAMPLES

- A carer fails to give a child pain medication for a minor headache
- A parent forgets to provide a child with their lunch on a single occasion.

SIGNIFICANT/MEDIUM LEVELS OF NEGLECT

Committed by school staff, volunteers or contractors

ACTIONS

If appropriate, refer child and family to local community based services.

Refer child and family to ChildFIRST.

Principal to notify:

- Employee Conduct Branch (government schools)
- Diocesan Office (Catholic schools, see below).

If a principal remains concerned for a child's welfare, they can follow the [Four Critical Actions](#).

EXAMPLES

- A first aid officer fails to examine or treat a child's bleeding cuts and bruises from falling over at school
- A teacher's 5 year old child (who does not attend the school) is seen playing near a busy highway on several occasions without adult supervision.

Committed by other community members

ACTIONS

If appropriate, refer child and family to local community based services.

Refer child and family to ChildFIRST.

If a principal remains concerned for a child's welfare, they can follow the [Four Critical Actions](#).

EXAMPLES

- A carer leaves an 8 year old child alone for hours without supervision
- A parent does not provide their child with fresh clothes for a week at a time
- A carer consistently forgets to give a child prescribed medication for their attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

SERIOUS/HIGH LEVELS OF NEGLECT

Committed by school staff, volunteers or contractors

ACTIONS

Follow the [Four Critical Actions](#), including reporting to:

- Victoria Police
- Employee Conduct Branch (government schools)
- DET Security Services Unit (government schools)
- Diocesan Education Office (Catholic schools, see below).

EXAMPLES

- A teacher is overheard saying that he frequently gets his 6 year old child to look after his 12 month old when he goes out for drinks for hours after work
- A staff member responsible for providing anticonvulsant medication to a child with epilepsy on a week-long school camp fails to do so for the entire week.

Committed by other community members

ACTIONS

Follow the [Four Critical Actions](#), including reporting to:

- DHHS Child Protection
- DET Security Services Unit (government schools).

EXAMPLES

- A carer allows a child in their care to inject illegal drugs in their home and does not intervene
- A parent regularly does not provide warm clothing or closed shoes for a child during winter
- A child's home environment is filthy or hazardous and there is animal or human faeces or urine, and decomposing food in the house.

YOU MUST ACT



CRITICAL INFORMATION

- As a school staff member, you **must** act as soon as you witness an incident or form a reasonable belief that a child has been, or is at risk of being abused, including exposure to family violence.
- You **must** act if you form a suspicion/ reasonable belief that abuse has occurred or is at risk of occurring, even if you are unsure and have not directly observed child abuse (e.g. if the victim or another person tells you about the abuse).
- You should make sufficient enquiries to form a reasonable belief and to determine a child's immediate needs. However, once a reasonable belief has been formed, it is not your role to investigate. This is the role of DHHS Child Protection or Victoria Police.
- Child abuse includes any instance of physical or sexual abuse (including grooming), emotional or psychological harm, serious or significant neglect and family violence involving a child.
- If you hold significant concerns for a child's wellbeing which do not appear to be a result of child abuse you **must** still act (see [Responding to Other Concerns About the Wellbeing of a Child \(page 52\)](#)).

When managing a disclosure, staff should:

- listen to the student and allow them to speak
- stay calm and use a neutral tone with no urgency and where possible use the child's language and vocabulary (you do not want to frighten the child or interrupt the child)
- be gentle, patient and non-judgmental throughout
- highlight to the student it was important for them to tell you about what has happened
- assure them that they are not to blame for what has occurred
- do not ask leading questions, for example gently ask, "*What happened next?*" rather than "*Why?*"
- be patient and allow the child to talk at their own pace and in their own words
- do not pressure the child into telling you more than they want to, they will be asked a lot of questions by other professionals and it is important not to force them to retell what has occurred multiple times

- reassure the child that you believe them and that disclosing the matter was important for them to do
- use verbal facilitators such as, "*I see*", restate the child's previous statement, and use non-suggestive words of encouragement, designed to keep the child talking in an open-ended way ("*what happened next?*")
- tell the child in age appropriate language that you are required to report to the relevant authority to help stop the abuse, and explain the role of these authorities if appropriate (for a young child this may be as simple as saying "*I will need to talk to people to work out what to do next to help you*").

When managing a disclosure, staff should **AVOID**:

- displaying expressions of panic or shock
- asking questions that are investigative and potentially invasive (this may make the child feel uncomfortable and may cause the child to withdraw)
- going over the information repeatedly (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)
- making any comments that would lead the student to believe that what has happened is their fault
- making promises to the child about what will occur next or that things will be different given the process can be unpredictable and different for each child depending on their circumstances (instead reassure them that you and others will do your best to help).



ACTION 1: RESPONDING TO AN EMERGENCY



CRITICAL INFORMATION

If a child has just been abused, or is at immediate risk of harm you **must** take reasonable steps to protect them. These may include:

- separating the alleged victim and others involved, ensuring both parties are supervised by a school staff member
- arranging and providing urgent medical assistance where necessary by:
 - administering first aid assistance
 - calling **000 for an ambulance** and following any instructions from emergency service officers/paramedics
- Calling **000 for urgent police assistance** if the person who is alleged to have engaged in the abuse poses an immediate risk to the health and safety of any person (you should also identify a contact person at the school for future liaison with police).

Take reasonable steps to preserve the environment, the clothing, other items, and potential witnesses until the police or other relevant authorities arrive on the premises.

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ACTION 2: REPORTING TO AUTHORITIES



CRITICAL INFORMATION

As soon as immediate health and safety concerns are addressed you **must** report all incidents, suspicions and disclosures of child abuse as soon as possible. Failure to report physical and sexual child abuse may amount to a criminal offence.

Within the school

If the source of suspected abuse comes from a person within the school (this includes any forms of suspected child abuse involving a school staff member, contractor, volunteer, allied health practitioner, officer or office holder, whether or not the conduct is alleged to have occurred within the course of the person's employment or engagement with the school) you **must**:

- contact **Victoria Police**
(via your local police station)
- ALSO report as soon as possible **internally** to:
 - **School principal/leadership team**
(all instances)
 - **Government schools:** Principals are to contact the Employee Conduct Branch and Security Services Unit as soon as possible
 - **Catholic schools:**
Diocesan education office.

ACTION 3: CONTACTING PARENTS/CARERS

Please note in cases of family violence you:

- **MUST** take care not to inadvertently alert the alleged perpetrator that there is a suspicion or disclosure of abuse (this could increase the risk of harm to the child, other family members and possibly to staff members at the school)
- may already be in communication with a parent/carer who is experiencing family violence (i.e. if they disclose the violence)- see [advice on disclosures \(page 32\)](#)
- can seek advice from DHHS Child Protection or Child FIRST/Orange Door about safe strategies for communicating with a parent/carer who is experiencing family violence and for advice on recommended family violence support services.

CRITICAL INFORMATION

In many cases where it is suspected that a child has been, or is at risk of being abused, it is extremely important that parents/carers are notified as soon as possible, but not if this may impact an investigation or place a child or their parent (victim of violence) at risk.

However, **AFTER** you have formed a suspicion/reasonable belief that a child is subject to abuse and **BEFORE** contacting parents/carers, principals **must** seek advice from DHHS Child Protection and/or Victoria Police (depending on who the report was made to).

This is critical to ensure the safety of the child and not to compromise any investigation being conducted by the relevant authorities or agencies.

Where [DHHS Child Protection \(page 67\)](#) and Victoria Police have advised that it is appropriate, schools should make sensitive and professional contact with parents/carers as soon as possible on the day of the incident, disclosure or suspicion.

Please note in cases of family violence you:

ACTION 4: PROVIDING ONGOING SUPPORT



CRITICAL INFORMATION

In addition to reporting suspected abuse, as a school staff member you have a critical role in supporting students impacted by abuse and have a duty of care to ensure that the students feel safe and are supported at school.

Support can include direct support and referral to wellbeing professionals and community services and should involve the development of a Student Support Plan.

Principals are responsible for ensuring students are supported during interviews at school conducted by Victoria Police or DHHS Child Protection and you may be required to respond to subpoenas to attend court.

Support **must** be provided to any impacted staff members.

Responding to Other Concerns About the Wellbeing of a Child

CRITICAL INFORMATION

Regardless of the suspected cause, all concerns about the wellbeing of a child (or unborn child) should be taken seriously and acted upon. This includes concerns about the wellbeing of a child which do not appear to be the result of abuse.

You should make a referral to Child FIRST/ Orange Door if:

- you have a significant concern for a child's wellbeing
- your concerns have a low-to-moderate impact on the child
- the child's immediate safety is not compromised
- you believe that the child and/or family will act on the referral and be supportive of it.

You **must** contact Victoria Police if:

- there is any concern for a child's immediate safety and/or
- a child is partaking in any risk taking activity that is illegal and extreme in nature or poses a high risk to the child or any other person.

You should contact DHHS Child Protection if:

- after consideration of all of available information you form a view that the child is in need of protection
- you believe that the child's parent/carers will not be open to support from family services to address their child's wellbeing.

If you are unsure whether to take action or what action to take, you should discuss this with your leadership team and make contact with authorities for further advice.

Privacy and Information Sharing

CRITICAL INFORMATION

As a school staff member you are permitted to share certain information about a child who has been impacted (or is suspected to have been impacted) by abuse with:

- parents/carers (page 39), subject to certain exceptions
- other staff members in order to enable staff to best support and protect that child
- an officer from DHHS Child Protection, if the information requested may be of assistance to DHHS Child Protection in their investigation of protective concerns
- Victoria Police if the information may assist in the investigation of potential criminal offences, or may aid in the immediate protection and safety of the child.





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