



# Child abuse

What you need to know





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## Introduction

Caring for a child can be fun and rewarding, but it can also be stressful and is not always easy. Sometimes children do not get the care they need and their families may need help from friends, family and their community.

A child may be harmed in any family or neighbourhood. It is not something that people like to talk about but it can happen to a child who attends your local school or plays in your local sporting team. Child abuse is not isolated to particular social groups or areas.

All adults have a responsibility to protect children from harm. The information in this booklet is designed to help you make informed decisions to help ensure children are safe.

The booklet provides information about child abuse and its impact on a child's life. It also provides advice on what to do if a child tells you they have been harmed or if you suspect that a child has been harmed.

This information is relevant for all adults who have contact with children.

Organisations providing programs or activities for children can use the information in this booklet to better inform policies and procedures for handling suspicions of abuse or disclosures by a child about harm.

## The role of the department

The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services is the lead government agency that provides child protection and adoption services in Queensland. The department is dedicated to protecting children who have been harmed or are at risk of harm, and whose parents are unable to provide adequate care or protection for them.

The department administers the *Child Protection Act 1999* and the *Adoption Act 2009*.

The department's role is to ensure vulnerable children up to the age of 18 years in Queensland are safe and protected from harm. When a child's parents are unable or unwilling to protect them, intervention from the department or support from other child protection agencies may be needed.

Wherever possible, the department works to keep families together, offering counselling and support services to help families help themselves. In situations where children need to live away from the family home for their own safety, every effort is made to place them with extended family members.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who may require care out of their family home, the department is committed to ensuring they are cared for in a way that respects their culture, and wherever possible, are placed with extended family, community or Indigenous carers.

The department is also sensitive to the needs of children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

## What is child abuse?

There are four different types of child abuse that lead to harm:

- physical abuse
- sexual abuse
- emotional abuse
- neglect.

Child abuse can be a single incident, or can be a number of different incidents that take place over time.

Under the *Child Protection Act 1999* it does not matter how much a child is harmed, but whether a child:

- has suffered harm, is suffering harm, or is at risk of suffering harm
- does not have a parent able and willing to protect them from harm.

Harm is defined as 'any detrimental effect of a significant nature on the child's physical, psychological or emotional wellbeing' (section 9 of the *Child Protection Act 1999*). For harm to be significant, the detrimental effect on the child's wellbeing must be substantial or serious, more than transitory and must be demonstrable in the child's presentation, functioning or behaviour.



## **Physical abuse**

Physical abuse occurs when a child has suffered, or is at risk of suffering, non-accidental physical trauma or injury.

Physical abuse can include:

- hitting
- shaking
- throwing
- burning
- biting
- poisoning.

Physical abuse does not always leave visible marks or injuries. It is not how bad the mark or injury is, but rather the act itself that causes injury or trauma to the child.

## **Sexual abuse**

Sexual abuse occurs when an adult, stronger child or adolescent uses their power or authority to involve a child in sexual activity.

Sexual abuse can be physical, verbal or emotional and can include:

- kissing or holding a child in a sexual manner
- exposing a sexual body part to a child
- having sexual relations with a child under 16 years of age
- talking in a sexually explicit way that is not age or developmentally appropriate
- making obscene phone calls or remarks to a child
- sending obscene mobile text messages or emails to a child
- fondling a child in a sexual manner
- persistently intruding on a child's privacy
- penetrating the child's vagina or anus by penis, finger or any other object
- oral sex
- rape
- incest
- showing pornographic films, magazines or photographs to a child

- having a child pose or perform in a sexual manner
- forcing a child to watch a sexual act
- child prostitution.

### **Emotional abuse**

Emotional abuse occurs when a child's social, emotional, cognitive or intellectual development is impaired or threatened. It can include emotional deprivation due to persistent:

- rejection
- hostility
- teasing/bullying
- yelling
- criticism
- exposure of a child to domestic and family violence.

Domestic and family violence is strongly associated with child abuse and neglect. There is an increased risk for a child living in a household experiencing domestic violence that their basic childhood needs will not be met, including the need for care and protection by their parents.

Witnessing violence between parents can have a serious impact on the emotional wellbeing and development of a child. It can impact on their self-image, their response to other people and their ability to form healthy relationships as adults. Witnessing domestic violence denies a child a sense of security and safety, teaches them that violence is a solution to problems and may lead to them developing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. For more information on the impact of child abuse please refer to page 13 of this booklet.

### **Neglect**

Neglect occurs when a child's basic necessities of life are not met and their health and development are affected.

Basic needs include:

- food
- housing
- health care



- adequate clothing
- personal hygiene
- hygienic living conditions
- timely provision of medical treatment
- adequate supervision.

## Why does child abuse happen?

Children are usually abused by someone they know in their own home, most often a parent or a carer, rather than a stranger. The causes of child abuse are complex and there is no single or simple explanation.

Most parents want to love and care for their children within a safe home. Abuse can occur when stress, tiredness or a lack of skills, knowledge or support make the pressures of caring for children overwhelming. Some of the factors that may contribute to the likelihood of abuse occurring include:

- isolation and lack of support — when there is no one, such as extended family, friends, a partner or community support to help with the demands of parenting
- stress — financial pressures, job worries, medical problems or taking care of a family member with a disability can increase stress and overwhelm parents
- unrealistic expectations — a lack of understanding of a child's developmental stages and behaviour can impact on a parent's relationship with their child
- intellectual disability — caring for children and protecting them, especially babies and toddlers, takes a lot of time and attention - an intellectual disability may lead to a parent not being able to adequately care for their baby or child
- lack of parenting skills — parents may not know how to help children learn, grow and behave in a positive way
- mental illness — mental health problems may lead to a person not being able to adequately care for their baby or child

- drug, alcohol or gambling problems — addiction or substance abuse may limit a parent's ability to meet their child's needs
- low self-esteem and self-confidence — sometimes insecure parents doubt their ability to meet their child's needs and find it hard to seek help and support
- poor childhood experiences — parents may have previous experience of abuse as a child in their own family.

The presence of one or more of these factors may be an indicator that a child could be neglected or abused. Given the right circumstances, skills, knowledge and resources, most people who harm a child can positively change their behaviour.

Parents are responsible for the care of their children and need to recognise when they need help before harm occurs. If you feel yourself becoming stressed and losing control of a situation:

- stop and think about how you and your child are affected by what is happening
- do something to change the situation for the better
- get support to make changes — seeking support can take courage, but is critical for you and your child.

Community attitudes are also a contributing factor to child abuse. There is still some acceptance in the community of excessive physical force for the purposes of discipline and punishment of children. Attitudes vary across different communities and those that can inadvertently support abuse include:

- accepting the use of violence and force
- accepting physical punishment of children
- accepting parental 'ownership' of children and their right to treat children as they see fit
- inequality between men and women
- limited community understanding about the impact of child abuse and neglect for children.

People may not report their concerns because they do not consider it any of their business, may not want to get involved or do not trust child protection agencies.

Effective protection of children relies on community members reporting their concerns for a child. This needs to occur in a timely way to prevent concerns becoming more serious and the child being harmed.

## **Myths and facts about child abuse**

### **Myth: Children make up stories about abuse.**

Fact: Children rarely lie about abuse. Their disclosures of abuse may vary because of their reluctance and fear to tell what has happened. Children may fear that they or their parents may be removed from the family, or they may be pressured and threatened into retracting any disclosure.

### **Myth: Sometimes children are to blame for their abuse**

Fact: Children are never to blame for the abuse they suffer. Adults are responsible for their own behaviour and no matter how children behave, an adult never has any right to harm a child.

### **Myth: If children do not see domestic violence, they are not affected by it.**

Fact: Children do not need to see violence to know that it is happening and to be affected by it. Children see the aftermath of violence in their home and they see the impact of violence on a person close to them.

### **Myth: Reporting suspected child abuse can cause more harm than the abuse itself.**

Fact: Sometimes people are concerned about children being affected by efforts to protect them, which may include legal proceedings. Continued abuse will cause more harm than any action taken to protect the child.

**Myth: If child abuse is reported to authorities, they will take the child away from their family.**

Fact: Removing the child from the family home is a last resort if the child is assessed as being at significant risk of ongoing harm. In the majority of cases, the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services will work with the family to address issues that are causing the child to be abused or neglected. This often involves assisting with access to family support or counselling services. Children are removed from their families where there is an immediate serious threat to their safety or when it is determined that the risk of further serious abuse is too great.

**Myth: Child abuse only happens in poor families.**

Fact: Child abuse happens in every type of family. People who harm children can come from any background, race or religion, and have any kind of job. Some are rich, some are financially disadvantaged and some are well-educated.

**Myth: Young children are the only ones vulnerable to child abuse.**

Fact: Child abuse can happen to infants, children and adolescents. Sometimes it might seem like adolescents should be able to fight back, but it is hard to stand up to an adult causing physical, sexual or emotional harm, especially when it is their own parent. Child abuse is often an abuse of power and trust. Cruel words and sexual or physical abuse can hurt adolescents as much as they can hurt a child.

**Myth: Physical discipline is not child abuse.**

Fact: Discipline is correcting behaviour and showing a child how to behave in a more acceptable way. Physical discipline will become abuse if it results in harm or injury to a child. There are many ways to discipline children without using

excessive force.

**Myth: Children who are abused will harm children when they are adults.**

Fact: Many children who are abused do not harm children themselves when they grow up. With support and counselling many children will go on to live productive lives and parent their children safely.

## **Incidence and impact of child abuse**

### **Incidence**

- Children up to four years of age are the most likely to be abused.
- Indigenous children are over-represented in the child protection system with neglect being the most common type of harm.
- Similar numbers of girls and boys experience abuse.
- Emotional abuse is the most common type of abuse.

### **Impact**

All forms of child abuse can have both short and long-term impacts for children, and no two children react to harm in the same way. Some children show no observable effects of child abuse, while others show a wide range of signs. There may be long-term impacts even when short-term effects are not apparent.

The younger the child and the more vulnerable they are, the more serious the consequences are likely to be.

Children may experience a range of emotional, psychological and physical impacts as a result of being harmed, including:

- permanent physical injuries or death
- low self-esteem
- increased fear, guilt and self blame
- distrust of adults
- depression

- suicidal thoughts and self-harming
- anxiety disorders
- attachment disorders
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- learning disorders, including poor language and cognitive development
- aggressive behaviour and other behavioural problems
- developmental delay, eating disorders and physical ailments
- delinquency and criminal behaviour, including violence towards others
- drug and alcohol abuse and high-risk sexual behaviour
- difficulty forming relationships with other adults
- behaviour that leads to them being singled out, bullied and victimised.

The most serious effects are likely to occur when no one takes action to help stop the abuse and protect the child.

With early identification and appropriate response and support, children can recover from experiences of abuse and neglect. A child's support network, and bonds with those who believe and protect them, will help them to cope. Support and counselling can also help them identify protective behaviours and establish positive relationships for the future.

Without effective support, ongoing child abuse can have long-term effects on individuals and communities. Research links the experience of childhood abuse with psychological problems, an increased risk of suicide and drug and alcohol

misuse.

## Indicators of child abuse

Children who have been, or may be, experiencing abuse may show behavioural, emotional or physical signs of harm.

Some children show no indications of harm, while others may show many. A child's behaviour is likely to be affected if they have experienced harm however it is important to find out specifically what may be causing any negative behaviour.

### General indicators of child abuse can include:

- showing wariness and distrust of adults
- rocking, sucking or biting excessively
- bedwetting or soiling
- demanding or aggressive behaviour
- sleeping difficulties, often being tired and falling asleep
- low self-esteem
- difficulty relating to adults and peers
- abusing alcohol or drugs
- being seemingly accident prone
- feeling suicidal or attempting suicide
- having difficulty concentrating
- being withdrawn or overly obedient
- being reluctant to go home
- creating stories, poems or artwork about abuse.



### **Indicators of physical abuse include:**

- broken bones or unexplained bruising, burns or welts in different stages of healing
- a child being unable to explain an injury, or explanations that are inconsistent, vague or unbelievable
- unusual or unexplained internal injuries
- having a family history of violence
- a marked delay between injury and seeking medical assistance
- parents showing little concern about the wellbeing of their child or the treatment and care of an injury
- repeated visits to health services with injuries, poisoning or minor complaints (this could also be an indicator of Fabricated or Induced Illness (FII, originally and more commonly known as Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSbP) which is a mental illness where a caregiver, usually a parent, guardian or spouse, feigns or induces an illness in another person, usually a vulnerable child or adult, to gain power and control over the victim as well as attention or sympathy from others)
- a child being unusually frightened of a parent or carer
- arms and legs covered by inappropriate clothing in warm weather (to hide bruises, cuts or marks)
- a child avoiding physical contact
- becoming scared when other children cry or shout
- being excessively friendly to strangers
- being passive and compliant.

### **Indicators of sexual abuse include:**

- displaying greater sexual knowledge than normally expected for the child's age or developmental level
- hints about sexual activity through actions or comments that are inappropriate to the child's age or developmental level
- inappropriate sexual play and behaviour with themselves, other children or dolls and toys
- excessive masturbation or masturbation in public after



kindergarten age

- persistent bedwetting, urinating or soiling in clothes
- regressive behaviour, such as baby talk and thumb-sucking
- persistent sexual themes in their drawings or play time
- fear or avoidance of any aspect of sexuality
- sexually suggestive behaviour with adults or older children
- poor social boundaries
- starting fires or a fascination with fire
- destroying property
- hurting or mutilating animals
- promiscuity or prostitution
- refusing to undress for activities or often wearing layers of clothing
- bruising, bleeding, swelling, tears or cuts on genitals or anus
- unusual vaginal odour or discharge
- torn, stained or bloody clothing, especially underwear
- pain or itching in the genital area, difficulty going to the toilet, walking or sitting
- a sexually transmitted disease, especially in a pre-adolescent child
- pregnancy
- a child implies that they are required to keep secrets
- fear of being alone with a particular person.

**Indicators of emotional abuse include:**

- extremes in behaviour from overly aggressive to overly passive
- delayed physical, emotional or intellectual development
- compulsive lying or stealing
- high levels of anxiety
- lack of trust in people
- feelings of worthlessness about life and themselves
- eating hungrily or hardly at all
- uncharacteristic attention-seeking
- self-harming
- a parent or carer constantly criticising, threatening, belittling, insulting or rejecting the child.

### **Indicators of neglect include:**

- malnutrition, begging, stealing or hoarding food
- poor hygiene, matted hair, dirty skin or body odour
- unattended physical or medical problems
- comments from a child that no one is home to provide care
- being constantly tired
- frequent lateness or absence from school
- inappropriate clothing, especially inadequate clothing in winter
- frequent illness, infections or sores
- being left unsupervised for long periods
- alcohol or drug abuse being present in the household.

### **Responding to suspicion or disclosure of child abuse**

Child abuse, in any form, by anyone, is unacceptable. It is not unusual for a child to deny that something is wrong because it is a natural way of coping with something that can be overwhelming.

If you suspect a child has been, or is being, abused:

- remain alert to any warning signs or indicators that a child is experiencing or is at risk of abuse
- observe the child and make written notes as soon as you begin to have concerns — pay attention to changes in their behaviour, ideas, feelings and the words they use
- have gentle, non-judgemental discussions with the child — expressing your concern that a child looks sad or unwell can result in disclosures
- do not pressure a child to respond and do not ask questions that put words into a child's mouth
- assure the child that they can come and talk to you when they need to, and listen to them when they do
- remember that child abuse does not go away and usually becomes more serious over time
- seek expert advice by contacting the department
- remember that not acting on a suspicion or disclosure may result in further harm to the child.

If a child tells you they are being abused:

- remain calm
- do not express shock, panic or disbelief — the child is counting on you to provide calm reassurance that they are being listened to and heard
- find a private place to talk
- thank the child for coming to talk to you about it and recognise their bravery for talking about something that may be difficult or embarrassing
- be supportive, tell them that you believe what they are saying and thank them for helping you to understand
- be a listener not an investigator — encourage children to talk in their own words and ask just enough questions to act protectively, for example, “can you tell me more about that?”
- do not conduct any form of interview with the child
- stress that what has happened is not their fault, for example, “you are not in trouble” and “if I look or sound



- upset it is because I want you to feel safe”
- be aware of your tone of voice and help the child make sense of what you are feeling, for example, “I am feeling concerned for you,” or “what we can do right now is talk about ways to help you feel safe”
  - act proactively, for example, “I know some people do wrong things and it is up to grown-ups to protect children ,” or “every child has a right to be safe, there are laws to help protect children”
  - reassure the child that they have done the right thing by telling you, and that they are not in trouble
  - do not make promises you cannot keep, such as promising you will not tell anyone — you need to tell someone in order to get help for the child
  - as a concerned community member you can contact the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services and ask how best to respond to the situation
  - do not contact the person responsible for the abuse, regardless of who that person is — leave this to the department or the police
  - keep information confidential — only those who absolutely need to know should be told at this point.

If a parent tells you that a child has been abused, but the person responsible no longer has contact with the child, you should still contact the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services to help protect other children. You could also provide information to the parent about where they can get help and advice.

## Speaking out about child abuse

Confronting child abuse and neglect can be very difficult. Often people find it easier to down play their concerns or avoid thinking about the possibility that a child may have been harmed or be at risk of harm. This can leave a child unprotected and allow the abuse or neglect to continue.

### **Why should you break the silence about child abuse?**

- Every child has the right to be protected by caring adults.
- Abuse can affect a child for the rest of their life.
- Think about how you may feel if you do not act to protect the child.
- A child is never to blame for abuse.
- If you suspect that a child has been abused it is better to report it, even if you are not sure, rather than do nothing.
- Trust your gut feeling, rely on intuition and speak out if you think someone is abusing a child.
- If the person responsible is a child or an adolescent, speaking up may enable them to get help to address their behaviour.
- If you do report abuse, the child will always remember that someone had the courage to stand up for them and do something to protect them.
- If a child has been abused, it is important for the family to reach out for help and not isolate itself.

There are many organisations in the community that can provide services to help children and families. Take some time to find out what is available in your community.

Communities need to do something about child abuse — stand together, be strong and break the silence. Stop protecting the person responsible for the harm and speak out about child abuse.

## **Common concerns you may have when deciding whether to report child abuse**

### **The person responsible could be a relative or a wellknown person in the community.**

If the person is related to you, it may put you in a difficult position. It is very important that you talk to someone you can trust or someone outside of the family. It is also important to access support services for yourself, to assist you through this difficult situation.

### **You might feel that the problem could best be dealt with inside the family network or by the community.**

Sometimes the community's response is to move the person responsible away from where they live. The problem will not go away as they may go to another community and continue to harm children. People who harm children need to get help so they can stop this behaviour.

### **You do not want to make the situation worse for the family.**

This is a realistic concern. It may seem that reporting your concerns will make things worse for the family, organisation, community or the child. However, in the long run, you could make the situation a whole lot better for a child who may not have anyone else to protect them, or may be too scared and ashamed to report any harm.

The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services works with families to support them and help them care for their children. In many cases the child can remain living at home as long as family members can keep them safe.

**You may be concerned that the child will be harmed more if they are removed from their family.**

The department must work in the best interests of the child. Wherever possible, they will work with and support the family to help them nurture and protect the child. In the majority of cases, children are able to remain at home. With the provision of support, the family may be able to keep their child safe and ensure their needs are met.

There may be times when a child is placed away from home if it is not safe for them to remain in the family home. The department is committed to ensuring that children are placed in caring and supportive environments.

**You might be worried about a child but not convinced that they are being harmed.**

It is not necessary for you to prove that the child has been harmed. The department is responsible for investigating and assessing the risk of harm to the child.



**You might be concerned that if you make a report you will have to give evidence in court.**

The majority of reports made are resolved without the need for an application for a child protection order in the Childrens Court. If the case does go to court you may be asked to give evidence. The department will support and help you through any court process.

**You might be worried about a child from a cultural background you are not familiar with, and be confused about the role of parenting and discipline within that culture.**

Child abuse and neglect is not appropriate or condoned in any culture. Cultural sensitivity is an important consideration for the department when assessing reports of harm, but harm to a child is never justified.

If an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child is involved, the department consults with a Recognised Entity, which is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander individual or organisation, recognised within their community, that provides cultural and family advice in Indigenous child protection matters.

**You might know the person who is responsible for the harm and do not want to make it worse for their family.**

This places you in a difficult situation, but think about what is more important — protecting a child or protecting the person responsible? The child's right to be safe and protected is always the most important. The person responsible may have contact with the police. This is not your fault, as it is a result of their own actions.



**It may cause trouble between your family and the family of the person responsible. It may also cause a lot of tension and stress within your own family if the person responsible is a close family member.**

It is sad that reporting child abuse sometimes causes families to fight and result in a rift that may never be mended. However there may also be family members who will admire you for having the courage to stand up for what you believe in, and for having done something to protect a child from ongoing harm.

**You might be afraid that you could be the victim of verbal or physical abuse if you tell someone about a child that is being harmed.**

This is a real concern for people who live in close-knit communities. Section 186 of the *Child Protection Act 1999* ensures that a notifier's details will not be disclosed by the department or the Queensland Police Service, except in specific circumstances, for example when ordered to do so by a court or tribunal.

In small communities, people can sometimes guess who has spoken to the department. If you are worried about this, find a support network of strong minded people in your community whose beliefs are similar to your own and who agree it is important to protect children. It is very important for communities to put support mechanisms in place for those people who are brave enough to report abuse.

**You simply may not want to get involved or you may think it is none of your business.**

Protecting children from harm is everybody's business. Children cannot protect themselves and it is the responsibility of government and communities to work together to nurture and protect children.

**You may feel that you do not know enough about the reporting or investigation process or the options available.**

Speak to officers from the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services about the policies and procedures for responding to reports of child abuse. Contact the department's regional intake service and ask them to send information about the process to you.

## **Reporting child abuse**

If you suspect a child has experienced harm, or is at risk of experiencing harm, there are a number of agencies that can provide support and advice.

### **Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services**

In the first instance you should contact the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, which is responsible for the administration and implementation of the *Child Protection Act 1999* (the Act).

The purpose of the Act is to provide for the protection of children. This involves responding to allegations of harm, providing services to strengthen and support families to reduce the incidence of harm and providing services to families to protect their children if harm or risk of harm has been identified.

To contact the department call a regional intake service on **13 QGOV (13 74 68)**. You can also visit **[www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety](http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety)** for further information.

### **Child Safety After-Hours Service Centre**

If it is an emergency and you wish to speak to somebody outside of normal working hours, you can contact Child Safety After-Hours Service Centre. This is a service provided by the department and is available after business hours and on weekends. Call **3235 9999** or freecall **1800 177 135**.

### **Queensland Police Service**

The Queensland Police Service investigates allegations of harm to children when a criminal offence may have been committed.

The Queensland Police Service has a number of dedicated Child Protection and Investigation Units across the state to investigate criminal matters relating to child abuse. If you believe a criminal offence against a child may have occurred, contact your local police station.

There is a full list of contact details for organisations that can provide advice and support concerning child abuse at the back of this booklet.



## The reporting process

Government agencies that can investigate harm to a child are the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services and the Queensland Police Service.

When you contact the department's regional intake service or the Queensland Police Service about your concerns, the officer taking the call will gather as much information as possible from you and decide the best way to respond.

The department will assess the information given by you and decide whether an investigation and assessment will occur to determine whether the child has been harmed or is at risk of harm in the future.

The Queensland Police Service will decide whether a criminal offence has occurred.

Initial information required by the department or the Queensland Police Service includes:

- the name, age and address of the child
- reasons why you suspect the child may have experienced harm, or is at risk of experiencing harm
- any concerns you may have for the child's immediate safety in their home.

It is vital that you call, even if you do not have all the details. Do not question the child too much as this may upset them and make it harder for the authorities to investigate what has really happened.

When you contact the department, the information gathered will be recorded on the information system. This system contains records of all reports of harm received by the department. When making a report you may remain anonymous. However, it is preferable that you provide contact details so that officers are able to contact you if required.

Even if you think the information you have is trivial, your call may provide a vital piece of information that enables the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services or the Queensland Police Service to act.

If a decision is made that the department's intervention is not required, a child safety officer may provide you with information or advice, or refer the family to another service. All details received from and given to you will be noted, but a child safety officer may not necessarily contact or visit the family.

If the assessment determines that the child has been harmed or is at risk of significant harm, a child safety officer will further assess the information received by visiting the child and their family, and if necessary, making contact with other parties such as the school, doctor or other agencies involved with the family. When the concerns relate to sexual abuse, a police officer will also be involved in the investigation, as a criminal offence may have occurred.

Following a full assessment of the child's protective needs, a decision will be made about whether it is possible to address the child's needs by supporting and assisting the family. In the majority of cases, children are able to remain at home, with support provided to the family by the department and community agencies to ensure they are safe and their needs are met. Sometimes short-term care for the child is arranged until their safety needs can be met within the family.

# Making a report to the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services

If a child tells you that they have been harmed, you witness a child being harmed or somebody else passes on this information, or you believe that a child may be at risk of harm, remember to:

- listen carefully
- remain calm
- record details
- do not blame the child
- believe and support the child
- thank the child for telling you
- do not make promises you cannot keep
- only tell those who need to know.

Contact the department's regional intake service on **13 QGOV (13 74 68)**.

The department will gather information including the child's details and situation.

If a criminal offence has occurred, the department will work with the police during the investigation.

The role of the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services is to assess the report of harm to the child.

If the child is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child, the local Recognised Entity will be involved. A Recognised Entity is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander individual or organisation, recognised in their community as a provider of cultural and family advice in Indigenous child protection matters.

The department will assess whether the information identifies that the child may be in need of protection.

If a crime has been committed the police may lay charges.

If harm has been identified, the department will provide an appropriate response, which may include a referral to a Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) team.

The department will consider a range of appropriate options under the *Child Protection Act 1999* to ensure the child's right to protection is exercised.

## The Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) team

The purpose of the Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) team system is to enable a coordinated multi-agency response to children where the department's assessment or intervention is required to assess and meet their need for protection.

Each SCAN team includes experienced child protection professionals from:

- the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services
- the Queensland Police Service
- Queensland Health
- the Department of Education, Training and Employment
- a Recognised Entity, when the discussion is about an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child.

SCAN teams plan and coordinate actions to assess and respond to the protection needs of children who have been harmed or are at risk of harm. A SCAN team may recommend that team members or other agencies and services

## Confidential reporting

When a report is made to the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services or the Queensland Police Service, the caller's identity and the information provided will be kept confidential. The caller's identity is strictly protected, with specific sections within the *Child Protection Act 1999* (the Act) to ensure confidentiality is maintained. These are:

### **Section 22 — Protection from liability for notification of, or information given about, alleged harm or risk of harm**

Section 22 of the Act provides protection from any legal liability for people who report their concerns about a child to either the department or the Queensland Police Service.

A person making a report cannot be considered to have breached any code of professional conduct or ethics. This section also covers situations where information about a child is provided to the department or the Queensland Police Service in the course of an investigation. Officers may talk to relevant people or agencies who can provide further information, such as the family doctor or school teacher.

### **Section 186 — Confidentiality of notifiers of harm or risk of harm**

A 'notifier' is a person who contacts Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services or the Queensland Police Service to report their concerns about a particular child. This section ensures that confidentiality of notifier information is maintained.

This section prohibits officers from disclosing the notifier's identity except in the course of performing their duties under the Act or if ordered to do so by a court or tribunal.

The child's family will not be told who provided the information upon which the officers are acting. Remember:

- Queensland law protects the source of the report
- the details of your report are kept strictly confidential

- only discuss your concerns with those who absolutely need to know.

You can speak with an officer from Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services if you have any concerns.

## **If you make a report and believe no action has been taken**

If you have concerns about a child's situation after a report has been made:

- contact the department's regional intake service you had initial contact with to discuss your concerns further
- if you are not satisfied with the outcome of this contact, ask to speak with the regional intake service team leader
- if you are still not satisfied, you can ask to talk to the manager of the regional intake service, make contact with the regional office or lodge a formal complaint with the department.

While every attempt will be made to resolve any complaints that arise, if you are still not satisfied, the department can provide you with contact details for external agencies to proceed further with your complaint.



## Information for employees of organisations related to children or child care

Every organisation that cares for children should have a policy on how best to respond to suspicions or disclosures of child abuse. If you are working with children you must obtain a blue card. For information on how to apply for a blue card visit the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian website **[www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au](http://www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au)**

The organisation's policy should be directly, explicitly and repeatedly communicated to staff and volunteers to ensure they are fully aware of, and understand how to manage the process of reporting child abuse. Communicating an organisation's commitment to the policy sends a strong message to everyone involved in the organisation that harm to children will not be tolerated.

If you work in an organisation and a child tells you they are being harmed, you should immediately inform your manager, management committee, or the licensee of the service to develop a plan of action.

If the person responsible for the harm is a staff member, follow your organisation's policy for this situation for referral to the appropriate child protection agencies. An action plan should be developed by management.

You can also notify the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services or the Queensland Police Service if you suspect that a child is being harmed.

As a staff member you do not need to prove that harm has actually occurred, your responsibility is to notify your suspicion and the reasons for it.

You have reasonable grounds to take action if:

- a child tells you that they have been harmed
- someone tells you (for example, a sibling, relative, friend or neighbour) that a child has experienced or is being harmed
- a child tells you that they know someone who has been harmed
- you have suspicions because of the child's physical or behavioural indicators.

There are some people in Queensland who have a legal obligation to report suspicions of child abuse to the appropriate authorities. These include:

- medical practitioners and registered nurses under the *Health Act 1937*
- the Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian under the *Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000*
- staff members of state or non-state schools under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*
- Family Court personnel, including court counsellors, mediators, welfare officers and registrars, under the *Family Law Act 1975*
- persons employed in a licensed care service, under the *Child Protection Act 1999*
- detention centre employees under the *Juvenile Justice Act 1992*
- licensees of child care services, under the *Child Care Act 2002*.

There are many other organisations, both government and non-government, that have their own procedures that require their employees to report suspicions of child abuse.

If you are informed or have suspicions that a child is being abused, an appropriate response should include the following:

- Access a copy of your organisation's internal policy and be knowledgeable about how to respond appropriately.
- Be alert to any warning signs that may indicate the child is being abused.
- Observe the child and make written notes as soon as you begin to have concerns.
- Pay attention to body cues, such as changes in the child's behaviour, ideas, feelings, and the words they use.
- Have gentle, non-judgmental discussions with the child. Expressing your concern that a child looks sad or unwell can result in disclosures. Do not pressure the child to respond and do not ask leading questions that put words into a child's mouth. Try to use language that is appropriate for their age.
- Assure the child they can come and talk to you when they need to. Be available and listen carefully to a child when they do.
- Promptly advise the person nominated by your organisation of your concerns.
- Report the matter to the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services or the Queensland Police Service.

If a child tells you they are being abused you should:

- remain calm — do not express shock, panic or disbelief
- be a listener not an investigator — encourage the child to talk using their language. Ask just enough questions to act protectively, such as, "Can you tell me more about that?" or just nod or say, "yes" to acknowledge you are hearing the child. Do not conduct any form of interview with the child
- reassure the child that they have done the right thing by telling you
- stress what has happened is not their fault, "you are not in trouble" or "if I look or sound upset it is because I want you to feel safe"

- do not make any promises to the child that you cannot keep, such as not telling anyone else. Explain that you will have to speak to other people in order to help
- make written notes as soon as possible following the disclosure. Record the words that the child used and the behaviours displayed to indicate their distress
- promptly advise the person nominated by your organisation of the disclosure
- report the matter to the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services or the Queensland Police Service.

Important points to remember:

- Keep information confidential. Only those who absolutely need to know should be told.
- Do not notify the individual against whom an allegation or complaint has been made, regardless of who this person is. Leave this to the authorities.
- Do not contact the parent until you have discussed the matter with the department or the Queensland Police Service.

## Contact numbers

### Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services

If you have a reason to suspect a child in Queensland is experiencing harm, or is at risk of experiencing harm, you need to contact the department.

During normal business hours contact the department's regional intake service on **13 QGOV (13 74 68)**. The regional intake service has professionally trained child protection staff who are skilled in dealing with information about harm or risk of harm to children.

After business hours and on weekends, contact the Child Safety After Hours Service Centre on **3235 9999** or freecall **1800 177 135**.

### Queensland Police Service

The Queensland Police Service investigates allegations of harm to children when a criminal offence has been alleged.

If you believe a child is in immediate danger or in a life-threatening situation, contact the Queensland Police Service immediately by dialling **000**.

The Queensland Police Service has a number of Child Protection and Investigation Units across Queensland. To locate the unit nearest to you, contact the Police District Communication Centre (see over).

## **Police District Communication Centres (24 hours)**

Beenleigh	3345 8000	Brisbane	3361 3400
Broadbeach	5581 2800	Bundaberg	4153 9111
Cairns	4030 7000	Charleville	4650 5500
Gladstone	4971 3222	Gympie	5480 1111
Innisfail	4061 5777	Ipswich	3817 1585
Longreach	4652 5200	Mackay	4968 3444
Mareeba	4030 3300	Maroochydore	5475 2444
Maryborough	4123 8111	Mount Isa	4744 1111
Redcliffe	3283 0555	Rockhampton	4932 3500
Roma	4622 9333	Toowoomba	4631 6333
Townsville	4759 9777		

## **Other contacts**

For additional support, families can contact one of the confidential organisations below that provide a variety of services, counselling and referrals.

<b>Crimestoppers</b>	1800 333 000
<b>TTY for the speech or hearing impaired (24-hour relay call numbers)</b>	133 677 (voice calls) or 1300 555 727 (speak and listen)
<b>Parentline</b>	1300 301 300 (8am – 10pm)
<b>Kids Help Line</b>	1800 55 1800 (24 hours)
<b>Community Child Health Service</b>	13 HEALTH or 13 43 25 84
<b>Community Care Information Service</b>	13 QGOV or 13 74 68
<b>Women's Infolink</b>	1800 177 577
<b>Men's Info Line</b>	1800 600 636
<b>Statewide Sexual Assault Service</b>	1800 010 120

For more information you can also visit the department's website [www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety](http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety)

Many local community groups are also engaged in activities to promote a strong and supportive community. Find out which groups operate in your local area and support their activities to promote child protection.



**Department of Communities,  
Child Safety and Disability Services  
13 QGOV (13 74 68)  
[www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety](http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety)**