

## Strong Bonds Fact Sheet: Parents : Child Abuse

We all need to make sure that children are kept safe and looked after. If there are concerns that a child might be being neglected or abused, the government may become involved through child protection services.

The role of child protection services is to protect children and young people from harm or from not being cared for properly.

### What do Child Protection Services do?

Child Protection Services:

- Receive reports from people who believe that a child is in need of protection.
- Provide advice to people who report these concerns.
- Look into reports that a child may be being hurt or may not be cared for properly.
- Refer children and families to services, which help to provide for the safety and wellbeing of children.
- Take matters to the Children's Court if the child's safety is at risk within the family.
- Supervise children on legal orders granted by the Children's Court.

### What is child abuse and neglect?

**Physical abuse is:** punching, slapping, kicking, shaking, biting, applying physical 'discipline' or 'punishment' causing harm or injury.

**Emotional or psychological abuse is:** constant criticism, name-calling, teasing, ignoring, punishing normal behaviour, exposure to domestic and family violence.

**Neglect is:** failing to meet the child's basic needs for adequate supervision, food, clothing, shelter, safety, hygiene, medical care, education, love and affection.

**Sexual abuse is:** any sexual act on a child including exposure, penetration, rape, incest, involvement with pornography, child prostitution.

### Who reports child abuse and neglect?

Anyone can make a report of child abuse or neglect to child protection services. In most states of Australia, professionals such as school principals, teachers, nurses, doctors and the police, are required to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect to child protection services.

### What happens if a report is made?

If a report of abuse or neglect is received, child protection services must look into whether the child is at risk or not.

If a child is found to be at risk, they will recommend what action needs to be taken to try and make sure the young person is kept from harm in the future.

The child protection worker may recommend:

- that the family receive support and counselling
- that the children are regularly checked on by child protection services
- in very serious cases of abuse or neglect the child be removed from the family home and placed in out of home care (see **Out-of-Home Care**).

### Children will be listened to

Child protection workers will always listen carefully to the child's or young person's story. They will trust that the child is telling the truth in most cases.

Sometimes parents feel that their children's word is believed more than their own words.

Research suggests that it is rare for children to make up stories of abuse.

Child protection workers will also talk to other people who know the child well, such as teachers and doctors. They want to find out whether they think the child is cared for properly.

A child protection workers first priority is to ensure the safety of the child.

### Discipline of Children

Child physical abuse is often the result of physical punishment by an angry frustrated parent.

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In Australia parents have the right to administer moderate and reasonable physical punishment to children in their care<sup>1</sup>.

However, physical punishment which results in injury or tissue damage to the child or young person is **physical abuse**. This may become the grounds for a charge of assault, as well as the grounds for Child Protection Services to become involved with a family<sup>2</sup>.

### Finding other ways to discipline your child

There are other safe ways to discipline children that don't involve the risk of harm. For example:

- Using logical consequences - if your child has been told to go to sleep and instead plays on the computer for hours, then they will not be allowed to use the computer for the rest of the week.
- Rewarding good behaviour and ignoring bad behaviour.
- Being clear about what the rules are in your house, so that your child knows what is expected of them.
- Making sure the rules are fair, so your child does not feel the need to fight them

See Fact Sheet **Dealing with Conflict**.

### If you are abusing or neglecting your child

- Don't let shame or pride stand in the way of protecting your child. Ask for help from your doctor, a counsellor, family members that you trust or from child protection services. **It is never too late to ask for help.**
- You might need a break from caring for your child if you or other family members are under a lot of stress and your child is difficult to manage.
- Family or friends may be able to help look after your child until you feel you can care for them well.
- Child protection services can arrange respite care where children or young people stay with carers regularly to give their family a break from caring for them. It might be on weekends, once a month or during holidays.

### If you suspect your child is being abused by someone else

If your child's behaviour has changed and they seem depressed or upset try to find out what is wrong. If your child has:

- a sudden drop in school grades,
- has started to use drugs regularly,
- is scared to go out when they used to be very social,
- is suddenly not wanting to come home or is feeling uncomfortable at home

they may not be being abused, but something is wrong. Talk to them about what is going on for them in an open and caring way.

If your child won't talk to you, perhaps you might have a family friend they would feel comfortable speaking to. Talk to their teachers, friends and school welfare officer to find out what they know about what is happening to your child.

### If your child tells you they have been abused

- If your child tells you that they have been physically or sexually abused in some way, it is important to believe what you are being told. Let your son or daughter know that what has happened is not their fault and that you are there to support them.
- If you think you know who may be abusing your child make sure that your child is not left alone with that person.
- If your partner, a sibling or another relative is abusing your child, you may feel that you can't report the abuse or it will make things worse for the family. **Remember that protecting your child needs to be your first priority.**
- Get help and advice for your child from people experienced in dealing with abuse. There are counsellors and doctors who are trained to help young people who have experienced abuse (see **Resources**).

### Family and Domestic Violence

If you and your child need protection from violence in the home there are refuges and support services for victims of family and domestic violence. Violence is a crime. See the front of the telephone book for the phone number of domestic violence support services in your state or phone **Crisis Line: 1800 019 116**.

<sup>1</sup> Legal Services Commission SA, Physical Punishment, <http://www.lawhandbook.sa.gov.au/ch05s02s04.php>. 2006  
<sup>2</sup> SECASA, When does physical punishment become abuse, <http://www.secasa.com.au/index.php/family/11/95/3>. 2009.

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### → Tips from this Fact Sheet

- The role of child protection services is to protect children and young people from harm or from not being cared for properly.
- If you are abusing or neglecting your child, ask for help from your doctor, a counsellor, family members that you trust or from child protection services.
- If your child tells you that he or she has been abused, let your child know that what has happened is not their fault and that you are there to support them.
- Protecting your child needs to be your first priority.

### → Related Fact Sheets

- Young People in Out-of-Home Care
- Dealing with Conflict
- Dealing with Violence

#### Strong Bonds

Jesuit Social Services  
PO Box 1141  
COLLINGWOOD VIC 3066

Tel (03) 9415 8700  
Email [info@strongbonds.jss.org.au](mailto:info@strongbonds.jss.org.au)  
Web [www.strongbonds.jss.org.au](http://www.strongbonds.jss.org.au)



### → Useful resources

**Child Protection Crisis Line**  
Tel. 131 278

**Crisisline**  
Tel: 1800 019 116

**Lifeline**  
Tel: 131114

**Parent Helpline**  
Tel: 1300 364 100

**Centre Against Sexual Assault - CASA**  
CASA provides counselling and support for victims of sexual assault, and access to medical care and legal services.  
Tel: 1800 806 292

**Child Abuse Prevention Services**  
Australia-wide support, counselling, referral to services and reporting, including support for children and young people.  
Tel: 1800 688 009 (24hrs, 7 days)  
Web: [www.childabuseprevention.com.au](http://www.childabuseprevention.com.au)

**NAPCAN**  
National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect  
Web: [www.napcan.org.au](http://www.napcan.org.au)

**National Child Protection Clearinghouse**  
Web: [www.aifs.gov.au/nch](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch)

**World Health Organisation Guide**  
'Preventing child maltreatment: a guide to taking action and generating evidence'  
Web: [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2006/9241594365\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2006/9241594365_eng.pdf)

**Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service**  
IWDVS provides support and information to women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in their first language.  
Hours: Monday to Friday, 9:30am – 5:00pm  
Tel: (03) 8413 6800  
Web: [www.iwdvs.org.au](http://www.iwdvs.org.au)