

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ABUSE: INFORMATION FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

WEEROONA COLLEGE BENDIGO IS A CHILD SAFE SCHOOL WITH A ZERO TOLERANCE TO CHILD ABUSE.

As adults we all play a critical role to protect children from harm. As a parent or carer you have the primary responsibility for protecting and caring for your own children and supporting them to build relationships that are safe and respectful. You also play a critical role in identifying and responding to suspected abuse within the community. In fact it may amount to a criminal offence if you fail to report suspected sexual child abuse.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I SUSPECT THAT MY CHILD HAS BEEN ABUSED?

If you believe that your child has been abused, or is at risk of being abused contact Victoria Police immediately via the local police station or on 000 if it's an emergency.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I SUSPECT THAT ANOTHER CHILD HAS BEEN ABUSED?

If you suspect that a child has been abused, or is at risk of abuse (such as physical abuse, family violence or neglect) you should report immediately to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Child Protection (see contact detail at the end of this fact sheet)

- If you suspect that a child has been sexually abused, you must also report your concerns to the Victoria Police. You may be committing a criminal offence if you fail to do so.
- You should report even if you're not sure. It is the role of authorities to investigate your concerns and determine if any further action needs to be taken.
- Parent and carers are also often in a position to protect the friends of their children. This is because children are most likely to disclose their experiences of abuse to their peers, who in turn may share this with their own parents and carers.
- If your child talks to you about their friend, and you suspect that the child is being abused or is at risk of being abused, you should act. You may be the only adult in a position to act and your response may be critical in protecting that child's safety.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I SUSPECT THAT A CHILD IS BEING ABUSED AND AUTHORITIES HAVE PREVIOUSLY INVESTIGATED AND DISMISSED MY REPORT?

If you have new grounds for believing that a child is being abused, you should make another report to DHHS Child Protection or Victoria Police. Every report is critical to protecting a child as it builds evidence and helps authorities to gain a clearer understanding of risks to the child.

WHAT HAPPENS TO MY CHILD IF SOMEONE AT THE SCHOOL SUSPECTS THAT MY CHILD HAS BEEN ABUSED?

- All staff members at your child's school are required to report suspected child abuse to DHHS Child Protection and, in some circumstances, to Victoria Police.
- Your child's school will contact you as soon as possible, unless they have been advised not to do so by DHHS Child Protection and/or Victoria Police.
- Where appropriate the school will work with you to ensure that your child is provided with support, which may include referring them to wellbeing professionals.

WHEN IS IT A CRIMINAL OFFENCE TO NOT REPORT SUSPECT ABUSE?

Any adult may face criminal charges if they believe that another adult has committed a sexual offence against a child under 16 years of age and does not report this information to the police.

FACTS ON CHILD ABUSE

- can include physical abuse, sexual abuse, grooming, emotional or physiological harm, neglect or family violence
- does not have to involve physical contact or force (eg, child sexual abuse can include talking to a child in a sexually explicit way)
- can be committed by any member of the community, including someone within a child's family or someone within the school setting.

The trauma associated with child abuse can significantly impact upon the wellbeing and development of a child. This is why it is critical that we all respond immediately to any form of suspected abuse.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT A CHILD HAS BEEN ABUSED?

There are a range of physical and behavioural indicators of child abuse. Most importantly you should act if you notice anything that causes you to form a reasonable belief that a child has been, or is at risk of being abused, including (but not limited to):

- a change in a child's behaviour (e.g. withdrawal, regressive behaviour, or non-age appropriate sexual behaviours)
- physical indicators of abuse (e.g. unexplained bruises, welts, signs of malnutrition)
- an inappropriate relationship between an adult and a child (e.g. inappropriate physical contact, unexplained gifts or phone/email contact).

HOW MUST SCHOOLS RESPOND TO SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE?

All staff in Victorian schools are obligated to respond to any incident or suspicion of child abuse as outlined below:

- 1. Respond to the emergency**
Address any immediate health and safety needs (eg. administer first aid or contact emergency services).
- 2. Inform authorities**
Report any reasonable belief that a child has been, or is at risk of being abused to the DHHS Child Protection or Victoria Police.
- 3. Contact parents/carers when appropriate**
Contact parents/carers once authorities advise that it is safe and appropriate to do so.
Ideally parents/carers will play a central role in providing support for their children, however schools will be instructed not to contact parents/carers in circumstances where this may impede an investigation or place the child at greater risk.
- 4. Provide ongoing support for all children impacted by the abuse**
Provide appropriate support for all children impacted by abuse. This will likely include ongoing counselling from professionals. The child's ongoing support will be documented in a Student Support Plan.

ALL STAFF AT YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL ARE REQUIRED TO REPORT CHILD ABUSE.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP EDUCATE AND PROTECT MY CHILD FROM ABUSE?

Have a chat to your child and make sure that he or she knows that no one is allowed to threaten, hurt or touch them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. Every relationship should be respectful and no one should behave in a way that makes them feel unsafe or afraid. Your child's school will also be supporting your child in learning about their rights to be safe and respected. Victorian government schools are teaching the *Respectful Relationships* program which promotes positive attitudes and behaviours and is aimed at preventing family violence.

WHAT SHOULD I TALK ABOUT WHEN I EXPLAIN SAFETY TO MY CHILD?

There are some things you can do at home to build your child's understanding of safe and respectful relationships including:

- talking openly with your child about their feelings and relationships
- being sure that they understand you will listen and act if they are concerns about how anyone is treating them
- using the correct names for body parts and having age-appropriate conversations about touching and sexual activity
- letting your child know that adults should never harm or act in a sexual way with any child.

KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE OUTSIDE OF THE HOME OR SCHOOL

You play a critical role in ensuring that your children are spending time in safe places.

In Victoria all people who are working with your children such as coaches and music teachers need to have a current *Working With Children Check*.

You may like to check that any staff and volunteers spending time with your child after school hours and on weekend have a valid *Working With Children Check*.

If you think that you may need some help to keep your children safe from harm and support their healthy development, it is important you find some help. Visit the Victorian Government's Better Health Channel for information on seeking support: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/parenting-support-to-help-prevent-abuse>

FURTHER INFORMATION

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT?

You can contact DHHS Child Protection and Victoria Police directly to discuss any concerns you may have for the wellbeing of a child (see contact details on the next page)

If you have any concerns about your child or another child at your child's school talk to the principal or another staff member at the school about your concerns. You can also raise this matter with DHHS Child Protection and the Victoria Police.

For further information on where to go for support to keep your children safe from harm visit the Victorian Government's Better Health Channel: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/parenting-support-to-help-prevent-abuse>

For more information on:

- your child's school's role in preventing and managing child abuse: www.education.vic.gov.au/protect
- indicators of abuse, visit www.education.vic.gov.au/protect

If you are concerned or unsure about your school's response and/or would like to talk to someone outside of the school please contact:

- Victorian Government schools Regional Office (www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/Pages/regions.aspx)

CONTACT NUMBERS 24 HOUR SERVICES

Victoria Police
Department of Health and Human Services Child Protection
Department of Education and Training Security Services Unit

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131 278
(03) 9589 6266