

Child protection

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It is every child's right to be safe and protected from all forms of abuse, violence or exploitation. It is the legal and moral obligation of all adults responsible for children to ensure their safety and wellbeing. This duty of care is held by all those involved in the family day care scheme including owners, sponsors, management committees, licensees, coordination unit staff, carers, students, volunteers and all other adults who reside in the carers' homes.

Defining child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and neglect are broad terms for the actions that endanger children's physical and/or emotional health. Child abuse usually involves a pattern of behaviour that takes place over a period of time, but can occur as a single incident.

Child abuse and neglect are usually categorised as follows:

Physical Abuse: Physical abuse describes an injury or injuries inflicted on a child by another person, caused by a single or repeated physical act such as hitting, smacking, punching, shaking, kicking, burning, scalding or restraining.

Emotional Abuse: Emotional abuse occurs when a child is deprived of care and attention, is subject to yelling or bullying, or is ridiculed, threatened, ignored or scared in a way that affects their confidence, self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. Psychological harm can also result from a child being involved in anti-social behaviour such as crime, violence or substance abuse perpetrated by another person.

Sexual Abuse: Sexual abuse occurs when an adult, a more powerful child or an adolescent exposes a child to sexual activity. Tricks, bribes or threats and sometimes physical force are used to make a child participate. Sexual abuse can include: inappropriate touching; involving a child in a sexual act; exhibitionism; and sexually suggestive comments and behaviour. Deliberately exposing children to sexually explicit or pornographic material through magazines, videos, computer images or music is also a form of sexual abuse.

Neglect: Neglect occurs when the basic needs of the child are not met. This can include failing to provide adequate nutrition, clothing, medical attention, education, shelter and safe living conditions.

Domestic Violence: Exposure to domestic violence can cause both physical and emotional harm to children. They do not have to be involved in or witness the violence to be affected by it. Children who experience domestic violence over

a period of time may be aggressive or violent themselves, but are just as likely to appear anxious or depressed and may have low self-esteem.

Bullying: A person is bullied when they are deliberately and often repeatedly physically or emotionally hurt by a more powerful person or group of people. Bullying can involve name calling or teasing, verbal threats and rumours, or deliberately excluding a child from an activity. Bullying may also involve the child being hit or pushed around by another child or group of children or the child's property being taken away or damaged.

Creating an environment that protects children

Establishing a safe environment can minimise the risk to children using the scheme. In family day care, where the care environment is also a family home, carers and coordination unit staff need to think about ways in which they can ensure children are protected while they are in care. Children's safety also needs to be ensured at the coordination unit, in play session venues, on excursions and while they are travelling to and from school.

Effective communication is the key to ensuring that staff, carers and their families have a clear and agreed understanding about their child protection responsibilities.

Policies and procedures

The policies that are developed by the family day care scheme can provide a framework for best practice and safe environments for children. Clear policies and procedures can help carers and coordination unit staff understand, and comply with, their legal responsibilities and effectively manage child protection issues when they arise.

A child protection policy should clearly demonstrate the scheme's commitment to the protection of children. Current state or territory child protection legislation should be reflected in the scheme's policy, together with the mandatory reporting responsibilities. Since child protection is

a sensitive and highly emotive issue, the scheme may also consider the strategies it uses to support carers, staff, families and children, both during and after the process of reporting child abuse issues.

Having clear procedures will support the child protection policy and guide carers and staff who may be required to record and report suspected child abuse. Contact information for the state or territory child protection agency should also be made accessible to all stakeholders.

It is important that everyone has a clear understanding of their responsibilities in relation to the service's child protection policy and that the procedures are implemented consistently. All new and existing carers and staff need to sign to acknowledge that they have read the policy, and a process should be implemented which informs visitors, volunteers and students about their obligations.

Child protection procedures should include clear guidelines for:

- selecting and recruiting staff/carers and volunteers who are in contact with children (directly or indirectly);
- appropriate supervision of children;
- releasing children from care;
- identifying and responding to child protection observations, concerns or incidents, including the procedures for documenting and reporting to a regulatory authority or external agency;
- handling child protection accusations against a staff member, carer, carer's family member, student, volunteer and/or visitor; and
- managing non-compliance with child protection policy and procedures.

Employment of child care professionals

The scheme's recruitment and selection process for staff and carers can support the provision of a safe environment for children. Caring for children in family day care impacts on the carer's whole family. Therefore, before a carer is registered with a scheme, it is important that coordination unit staff meet with all of the people who reside in the carer's home. This provides an opportunity to clearly explain what is expected of the family in a positive home environment that supports and protects children. It is also an opportunity for prospective carers and their families to consider how:

- rules may need to be put in place to minimise the risk of children being exposed to alcohol, cigarette smoke, and inappropriate images that may be accessed through magazines, television programs, videos, computer games, music and the internet. This is particularly important when children are in care overnight and at weekends;

- children will be protected when there are visitors to the carer's home, or when the family attends events outside the home while children are in care;
- private, safe and appropriate places for children to dress, sleep, bathe or shower will be provided; and
- the privacy of carers' families can be protected, and how they can protect themselves from erroneous allegations of abuse.

Prior to commencement, coordination unit staff, carers and the adult members of their households and anyone else who will be working or volunteering at the scheme should undertake a clearance check from the relevant state or territory government authority. This is currently a requirement in most jurisdictions.

The scheme's induction process provides an opportunity to ensure that new staff, carers and their families understand the scheme's child protection policy and the importance of supervision. This will help them to feel confident and be well prepared to manage situations that have the potential to place children at risk.

Professional development

Carers and staff should be aware of the common signs and indicators of child abuse and be clear about their responsibilities and the process of reporting suspected child protection issues. Children may be placed further at risk when the adults who care for them are aware of abuse and either handle the information inappropriately or take no action at all.

Schemes may find it helpful to develop a kit to assist carers to comply with their legal responsibilities and to effectively manage child protection issues. A child protection kit could include: procedures for reporting suspected child abuse and neglect; contact telephone numbers for the state or territory child protection agency; and resource materials. This is particularly useful when carers are located at a distance from the coordination unit or are providing care at times when the unit is unattended.

Ongoing professional development and regular training will ensure skills and knowledge are maintained and kept up to date. By encouraging discussion about child protection and linking it to everyday practice during meetings and home visits, carers and staff can keep the scheme's policy and procedures 'alive'. Reading journals and regularly checking relevant websites can strengthen an understanding of best practice and assist in the regular review of the scheme's policy and procedures.

Relationships with children

A scheme that values the right of children to a safe environment, including access to carers who

are accepting and easy to talk to, can send a powerful message to children that the adults in the scheme will look after them, keep them safe and help them if they have a problem.

Children can sense when adults are preoccupied and may withdraw or end a conversation when they believe an adult is not listening. It is important that staff and carers take the time to observe individual children and to actively listen to their comments about their day and the events occurring in their lives. Attention should also be paid to children's non-verbal communication, their body language, facial expressions, creative expressions and play behaviours with other children. These things can reveal how children are feeling and what they know and understand.

Adults are important role models for children and it is crucial that coordination unit staff and carers' verbal and non-verbal communications with each other and children demonstrate respect, empathy and acceptance. When adults shout or use threats and behaviour guidance strategies that frighten or humiliate children, they are sending a negative message that reinforces how to exercise power and control others.

Media and popular culture

Children are also generally very interested in popular culture including music, magazines, comic books, television, videos, computer games and the internet. When these materials are made available in the carer's home there is a risk that children will be exposed to confronting and confusing images and adult concepts.

The scheme, in consultation with carers and families, can develop guidelines about when, how and by whom these materials will be used and how increasing media coverage of world issues such as famine, war and terrorism will be managed. When carers share and discuss popular culture and world events with children they can ensure that their exposure to violence, stereotypes and adult themes are minimised or explained in context.



Supervision

An important part of providing a safe and protective environment involves carers and staff actively supervising children, and the environment they can access, at all times.

Priority should be given to the development and implementation of procedures for signing children in and out of care and releasing them only to people who are authorised to collect them.

It is also important to consider how carers manage daily transitions between their home and the child's home, to and from school, or any independently run extracurricular activities. This will assist in clarifying when and where the carer assumes responsibility for each child and will reduce the potential for children being placed at risk.

Children's families also have the right to expect that the person caring for their children has the appropriate skills, training and experience and is a registered carer with the family day care scheme. Relatives, neighbours, friends and the carer's older children should not be left alone to supervise individual or groups of children unless they have been approved as a co-carer by the family day care scheme and each child's family has agreed to this arrangement.

Responding to bullying

Carers and staff can also play an important role in helping to make the environment a happy and safe place by promptly responding to bullying behaviour when it is observed. They must be prepared to take decisive action by confronting the 'bully' and insisting that the behaviour stop, otherwise they may be inadvertently sending a message that they accept or even condone the behaviour.

It is important to discuss bullying with children; how it feels to be bullied; what the child being bullied can do; and strategies they can use if they witness another child being bullied. It is important to give a clear message that informing an adult when bullying happens is not 'telling tales' but an important way of helping people to stay safe.

Responding to a child's disclosure

It takes an enormous amount of courage for children who are being abused to talk to someone about what is happening to them. It is important that when a child discloses an allegation of abuse, carers and staff are ready to listen carefully because they may often disclose only small amounts of information at a time. If the child's concerns are ignored or brushed aside they may not bring up the subject again.

Finding a quiet, private place to talk and allowing a child to tell their story using their own words is important. Carers and staff should avoid asking leading questions or probing for information that

the child is not ready to share. The child needs to be reassured that they have a right to feel safe and have done the right thing in telling someone what has happened. The carer or staff member should let the child know that they believe them and will try to help them.

Carers and staff should follow the family day care scheme's procedure for documenting and reporting the child's disclosure.

Protective behaviours

A protective behaviours program encourages children to identify situations that are unsafe, or potentially unsafe, and to develop strategies to manage these situations in a way that preserves their physical and emotional safety. Protective behaviour strategies should be introduced to children gradually, over time adding more detail and discussion as children grow older. Carers and coordination unit staff can consider:

- discussing with children what it means to feel safe. Talking about road and water safety can provide a sound introduction to discussing other types of safety, such as personal safety;
- helping children to identify their feelings. For example, the difference between feeling 'scared' (and excited) at the top of the biggest

slide in the park and 'scared' when they think someone might hurt them. Similarly carers and staff might talk with children about when it is, and is not, appropriate to keep secrets;

- introducing the subject of protective behaviours and assertiveness by reading appropriate picture books;
- playing "what if..." scenarios which model for children how they might react in potentially unsafe situations;
- helping children to identify trusted adults that they can talk to if they are feeling unsafe or worried about a problem; and
- explaining to older children how they can access the Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800).

All children are active, competent learners and rich in potential. They also depend on adults to keep them safe. When the family day care scheme creates an environment that encourages children to discuss any concern they might have, and ensures that all stakeholders understand their responsibilities in relation to child protection, it can play an important role in protecting all of the children in care ■

Family Day Care Quality Assurance

Principles: 1.1, 1.4, 3.3, 4.1, 4.3, 4.6, 5.1, 5.3, and 6.1

References and further information

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Useful websites

- Australian Childhood Foundation: www.childhood.org.au
- Bullying in schools and what to do about it: www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying
- Kids Helpline: www.kidshelp.com.au
- National Child Protection Clearinghouse: www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/reporting
- National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN): www.napcan.org.au



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