

# Protecting Children: Strategies for Creating Safe Environments

By Phillip Rowell

## The Importance of Child Safe Environments

Children's services and child care professionals have a moral and legal obligation to ensure that care environments created for children are safe and free from harm.

At the launch of the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) Child Protection Week 2006, Dr Sue Packer stated that child abuse and neglect 'is now the biggest health and wellbeing threat to our children'. (Packer, 2006, p.1)

According to the *2004-05 Child Protection Australia Report*, 252,831 suspected child abuse or neglect cases were reported across Australia, with the number of actual substantiated cases totalling 46,154. The *Report* indicates that suspected child abuse and neglect notifications and substantiated cases have significantly increased since 1999 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006).

Where once protecting children from harm was assumed to be the responsibility of parents and families, it is now generally accepted as a public responsibility. In the course of their career many child care professionals may be faced with identifying a child who has possibly been harmed. Therefore it is important that services have a child protection policy, and that staff and carers are aware of their responsibilities in relation to child protection.

## Taking the First Step

Families, children, staff and carers find it easy to discuss every day safe practices such as crossing the road or wearing a seatbelt. However, informing children about 'safe' protective behaviours regarding their bodies and emotions is equally important, even if the issue of abuse and neglect is uncomfortable to discuss.

It often takes bravery and honesty to broach the subject of child protection. There are many resources available that can support staff and carers to discuss child protection with colleagues, families and, where appropriate, children. These

### This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 4.1, 4.3 and 4.6

**OSHCQA Principles:** 7.1, 7.2 and 8.1

**QIAS Principle:** 5.1

resources include websites, training kits and books developed specifically to support communication with children about child protection. Services may find some of the resources listed on Page 7 helpful.

## Developing a Child Protection Policy

An effective child protection policy can help to disperse any myths or misconceptions surrounding child abuse and neglect. It also focuses attention on developing and maintaining child safe environments and implementing protective practices. An effective child protection policy also reflects the service's values regarding children's rights.

Developing a child protection policy aids in identifying a uniform code of conduct for all stakeholders, establishes procedures for dealing with child protection matters which should include processes for identifying, documenting, reporting and managing child protection concerns or incidents. A clear child protection policy also assists services to meet their legal obligations, including licensing requirements where applicable.

When writing and sourcing information for a child protection policy, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, is a practical starting point. Article 19 of the *Convention* states:

**Protection from all forms of violence:** *Children have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, physically or mentally. Governments should ensure that children are properly cared for and protect them from violence, abuse and neglect by their parents or anyone who looks after them. (UNICEF)*

Some useful questions that stakeholders may reflect upon when they are developing or

reviewing a child protection policy include:

- what do we believe about the rights of children?
- what legislation exists federally, or in our state or territory, regarding child protection?
- what times or activities in our service pose the highest potential risks for child abuse to occur. For example, when children are being picked up from the service; at nappy change or toileting times; when staff or carers are implementing behaviour guidance strategies; when school aged children are engaged in activities requiring less active supervision?
- what procedures should staff and carers follow if they suspect or witness child abuse or neglect at the service or elsewhere?
- how are staff, carers and carers' families made aware of their obligations relating to child protection matters?
- how are children supported to respond to issues that may threaten their sense of personal safety and wellbeing, for example, bullying?
- how are children encouraged to develop protective behaviours?
- what procedures need to be in place to protect the privacy of children, their families, staff and carers in relation to child protection issues?
- where can we access expert and current information to inform the development and review of our child protection policy?

There are many organisations, such as NAPCAN, the Australian Childhood Foundation, Childwise and the Children's Protection Society that can provide information to assist with the development and review of child protection policies. Services can also contact their state or territory community services department, child protection helpline or Ombudsman for further information regarding specific legislation.

### **Employee Recruitment and Selection**

Due to the *Creating safe environments for children: organisations, employees and volunteers: national framework (2005)*, Australian states and territories have aligned their child protection legislation with the national standards. This includes selection and recruitment background checks for staff, carers and volunteers.

Whether it is a 'working with children' or a police check, investigating an individual's history is



important because it:

- treats all persons applying to work with children equally and reinforces procedural fairness and equal opportunity obligations when recruiting and selecting staff and carers
- demonstrates the service's commitment to child protection to the broader community.

Using a national checking system is advantageous as it reduces the risk of offenders moving from one state or territory to another and consequently bypassing legislative checks.

### **Professional Development for Staff and Carers**

One of the most important aspects of providing safe environments for children is the development of staff and carers' knowledge and skills in relation to child protection. Knowledge and skills to be developed may include:

- recognising signs of child abuse and neglect
- understanding the affects of abuse and neglect on children and wider society
- reporting skills
- communication with others such as children, families and colleagues about child abuse and neglect

It is vital that services regularly provide a range of opportunities for staff and carers to update their knowledge and skills in relation to child

## Mandatory Reporting

Mandatory reporting is the legal requirement to report cases of suspected child abuse or neglect to a recognised authority. The act of mandatory reporting is beneficial because it:

- acknowledges the seriousness of the issue within the community
- places a legal responsibility on some members of the community to report suspected cases
- imposes a 'duty of care' responsibility for those professionals who may be reluctant to report suspected cases due to lack of support, knowledge or understanding of child protection issues
- increases the awareness of child protection issues, not only in the profession but in the wider community.

(National Child Protection Clearinghouse, 2005)

It is important to emphasise that when an individual reports suspected child abuse or neglect, they are not expected to *prove* that abuse or neglect has occurred. It is the responsibility of a child protection authority to decide whether a suspected case is investigated and possibly substantiated.

There is no consistent criterion in relation to mandatory reporting in Australia. Each state or territory independently interprets what type of abuse or neglect is mandated to be reported (for example, sexual, physical, psychological) and who is mandated to report.

Child care workers are not mandated to report in every state of Australia – in some jurisdictions only doctors, nurses, police officers or dentists are required to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect.

For further information regarding mandatory reporting, please contact individual state or territory licensing departments or government child protection units ■

protection. This may occur through a range of professional development opportunities, including formal training, networking, attending professional seminars or discussion groups, research and access to professional reading materials.

## Consultation and Collaboration

Collaborating with staff, carers, children and families when developing a child protection policy helps all stakeholders to understand their obligations to child protection legislation and strengthens their commitment to providing a child safe environment.

Opportunities for consultation and collaboration with stakeholders include:

- communicating with families through newsletters, noticeboards and information evenings
- discussing best practices at staff, carer and family meetings
- professional development opportunities, including formal training, in-services, professional reading discussion groups
- discussing the service's policy and practices during staff or carer inductions
- promoting protective behaviours through children's play and learning programs

Teaching and role modelling responsible and informed protective behaviour and safety skills to children ensures that they have a safe place in which to grow and learn. It can also increase



children's knowledge and their skills to support the development of their self-protective behaviours.

Many forms of abuse are a symbolic representation of 'power' and of the offender's need to control (Briggs, 2000). Encouraging children to participate in developing child protection strategies is a beneficial step in creating child safe environments because it empowers them to believe that their opinions are valued and worthy of expression. It can also be a useful experience in understanding children's fears and anxieties, and their understanding of the terms 'safe' and 'unsafe'.

The vulnerability, naivety and innocence of children, and the trust that they place in adults who care for them must be carefully considered by staff, carers and management of children's services.

Child protection policies and practices need to reflect a holistic, transparent and informed approach to child welfare, safety and care. It is essential that all the service's stakeholders are aware of the policy and practices, and have genuine opportunities to contribute to the decision making process.

Services can download NCAC's *Child Protection Policy* template from the NCAC website from April 2007 ■

## References and further reading

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- UNICEF. (n.d.). *Factsheet: A summary of the rights under the convention on the rights of the child*. Retrieved January 18 2007 from [http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights\\_overview.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf)

## Useful websites

- Australia Childhood Foundation - [www.childhood.org.au](http://www.childhood.org.au)
- Children's Protection Society Inc. - [www.cps.org.au](http://www.cps.org.au)
- Child Wise - [www.childwise.net.au/our-vision.php](http://www.childwise.net.au/our-vision.php)
- Early Childhood Australia - [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au)
- NAPCAN - [www.napcan.org.au](http://www.napcan.org.au)
- Protective Behaviours Australia Inc. - [www.pbaustralia.com/The\\_Program.html](http://www.pbaustralia.com/The_Program.html)
- Protective Behaviours Consultancy Group of Australia Inc. - [www.protectivebehaviours.org.au](http://www.protectivebehaviours.org.au) (A number of resources - including books for children about protective behaviours - can be purchased from this organisation)