

Reporting concerns about children or young people: a guide for professionals

Information for professionals working with vulnerable children

Professionals involved with vulnerable children, young people (0-17 years) and their families, including families with an unborn child, may from time to time consider they should report or refer a concern to either Child Protection or Child FIRST (Child and family services information, referral and support teams).

Child FIRST or Child Protection?

There may be a range of circumstances and factors to consider when deciding whether to make report to Child Protection or refer to Child FIRST. There are many factors, or a combination of factors, that can adversely impact upon children's safety, stability and development. The following lists are intended to provide some basic guidance on how to decide whether to refer a matter to Child FIRST or make a report to Child Protection.

A referral to Child FIRST may be the best way of connecting children, young people and their families to the services they need, where families exhibit any of the following factors:

- significant parenting problems that may be affecting the child's development
- family conflict, including family breakdown
- families under pressure due to a family member's physical or mental illness, substance abuse, disability or bereavement
- young, isolated or unsupported families
- significant social or economic disadvantage that may adversely impact on a child's care or development.

A report to Child Protection should be made where you believe the child may be in need of protection from significant harm or damage to their health or development in connection with:

- physical abuse, non-accidental or unexplained injury (mandatory reporters must report)
- sexual abuse (mandatory reporters must report)
- emotional abuse or ill treatment
- persistent neglect, poor care or lack of appropriate supervision
- persistent family violence, parental substance misuse or psychiatric illness, or intellectual disability
- a child's actions or behaviour which places them at risk.

A report should also be made where a child appears to have been abandoned, or where the child's parents are dead or incapacitated, and no other suitable person is willing and able to care for the child.

Factors to consider

Many cases will not fit neatly into these categories, and it may be harder to determine whether the level and nature of any risk is such that the child is in need of protection. The following questions may help resolve the best course of action in such cases:

- What specifically has happened to the child that has caused your concerns and what is the impact on their safety, stability, health, wellbeing and development?
- How vulnerable is the child?
- Is there a history or pattern of significant concerns with this child or other children in the family?
- Are the parents aware of the concerns? Are they also concerned?
- Are they willing and able to take action that will be sufficient to address the concerns you hold?
- Are the parents willing and able to use support services that will assist them to meet their child's needs?

A referral to Child FIRST will be appropriate if, after consideration of the available information, you are on balance more inclined to form a view that:

- the concerns currently have a low to moderate impact on the child, and the immediate safety of the child is not compromised.

On receiving a referral from a professional or community member, the Child FIRST team will conduct further assessment of the family and may consult with an experienced community-based child protection practitioner based in the Child FIRST team. This assessment may lead to the involvement of a local family services organisation. In most circumstances, Child FIRST will inform you of the outcome of your referral.

Where Child FIRST forms a view that a child or young person is in need of protection they are required to report the matter to Child Protection.

A report to Child Protection will be appropriate if, after consideration of the available information, you are on balance more inclined toward a view that:

- the concerns currently have a significant adverse impact on the child's safety or development, or are likely to significantly harm the child or damage their development.

On receiving a report from a professional or community member, Child Protection may seek further information from other professionals who may also be involved with the child or family to determine whether further action is required. In determining what action to take, Child Protection will also consider any previous concerns that may have been reported about the child or young person. In most circumstances, Child Protection will inform you of the outcome of your report.

If you are still unsure about whether to report to Child Protection or refer to Child FIRST you may contact either service for further advice.

More information

For more information, see the Department of Human Services website: www.dhs.vic.gov.au – particularly under 'Family & Parenting Support' and 'Child Protection'.

Please note that as for any adult in Victoria, if you have a reasonable belief that a sexual offence has been committed in Victoria by an adult against a child (aged under 16) it is an offence not to disclose that information to police (unless you have a reasonable excuse). Information about the failure to disclose offence is available on the [Department of Justice website](#).

If you would like to receive this publication in another format, please phone 9096 0000, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email DHS.Website.Enquiries@dhs.vic.gov.au

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

October 2014