

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 the new Child FIRST¹ intake service that is currently being developed within Victoria.

Child FIRST teams will be progressively established across the state between 2007 and 2009, and provide a consolidated intake service to Family Services within sub regional catchments. These arrangements reflect the new provisions in the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* that will commence in April 2007.

A key objective of the legislation is to create an integrated Child Protection and Family Service system that provides improved supports to vulnerable children, young people and their families. The legislation also introduces a range of new reporting and referral arrangements that will replace what is currently known as a child protection notification.

What circumstances and factors should determine whether to make a report to Child Protection or refer to Child FIRST?

There may be many factors, or combinations of factors, within family life that adversely impact upon children's safety, stability and development. You may already have considered these factors and the following lists are intended to provide some further 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 that may impact upon a child's safety, stability or development:

- 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 and/or unsupported families
- significant social or economic disadvantage that may adversely impact on a child's care or development

1. Child and Family Information, Referral and Support Team. Nine Child FIRST sites will be established in April 2007.

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A report to Child Protection should be made in any of the following circumstances:

- Physical abuse of, or non-accidental or unexplained injury to, a child (mandatory reporters must report).
- A disclosure of sexual abuse by a child or witness, or a combination of factors suggesting the likelihood of sexual abuse – the child exhibiting concerning behaviours, for example after the child’s mother takes on a new partner or where a known or suspected perpetrator has had unsupervised contact with the child (mandatory reporters must notify).
- Emotional abuse and ill treatment of a child impacting on the child’s stability and healthy development.
- Persistent neglect, poor care or lack of appropriate supervision, where there is a likelihood of significant harm to the child, or the child’s stability and development.
- Persistent family violence or parental substance misuse, psychiatric illness or intellectual disability – where there is a likelihood of significant harm to the child or the child’s stability and development.
- Where a child’s actions or behaviour may place them at risk of significant harm and the parents are unwilling or unable to protect the child.
- Where a child appears to have been abandoned, or where the child’s parents are dead or incapacitated, and no other person is caring properly for the child.

Many cases will not neatly fit into these categories, and it may be harder to determine whether the level and the 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:

Factors for consideration:

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, capable and willing to take action to ensure the child’s safety and stability, and promote their health, wellbeing, and development?
- Are the parents able and willing to use support services to promote the child’s safety, stability, wellbeing and development?

1. A referral to Child FIRST should be considered 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, where 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 an experienced community-based child protection worker who is based in each 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 a Child FIRST team or a registered Family Services organisation forms a view that a child or young person is in need of protection they *must* report the matter to Child Protection.

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

- the concerns currently have a serious impact on the child's immediate safety, stability or development, or the concerns are persistent and entrenched and likely to have a serious impact on the child's development.

Upon receipt of a report containing such factors, Child Protection will seek further information, usually from 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 who to report or refer to you should contact either Child Protection or Child FIRST for further advice.

More information:

For more information, fact sheets and supporting documents, see the every child every chance website: www.dhs.vic.gov.au/everychildeverychance

Supporting documents:

Information sharing guides are being developed for mandatory reporters and professionals, who work with children, to provide support to vulnerable children and their families. These will be available from early March 2007.

