



## Belle Vue Primary School REPORTING CHILD ABUSE (Child Safe Standard 5)

The child safe standards require schools to have processes for responding to and reporting suspected child abuse. This resource is designed to provide guidance on what to do if a child discloses an incident of abuse, or if a parent/carer raises a concern or allegation of abuse which may have taken place in your organisation.

The school's Child Safety Reporting Obligations Policy and Procedures should be read in conjunction with this document and includes information on reportable conduct, failure to disclose and failure to protect.

### **WHEN MUST I ACT?**

You must act as soon as you witness an incident or form a reasonable belief that a child has been or is at risk of being abused. This section steps you through when and how to respond if you:

#### Witness an incident

If you witness an incident where you believe a child has been subject to abuse you must take immediate action to protect the safety of children involved.

Is there an immediate risk to health and safety?

- Yes - go straight to: Action 1: Responding to an emergency
- No - go straight to: Action 2: Reporting to authorities

#### Form a suspicion

All suspicions that a child has been, or may be in danger of being abused must be taken seriously. This includes abuse that is suspected to have occurred outside of school grounds and hours.

If you form a reasonable belief that a child has been, or may be at risk of being abused, you must act, even if you have not directly witnessed the child abuse or student sexual offending.

Go to: Action 2: Reporting to authorities

In some circumstances, you may also form a belief that a student's sexual behaviour is indicative of their own experience of child abuse. Physical or behavioural signs may be the only indication that a child is impacted by abuse.

For information on how to recognise physical and behavioural indicators of sexual abuse, see: [Identify child abuse](#).

#### Receive a disclosure from a current student

If a child discloses that they have been, are being, or are in danger of being abused, you must treat the disclosure seriously and take immediate action by following the four critical actions

If another child or adult, discloses that they believe another child has been, is being, or is at risk of being abused, you must also treat these disclosures seriously and take immediate action.

#### Receive a disclosure from a former student

If you receive a disclosure from a former student of your school about historical abuse you must act.

- If the former student is currently of school age and attending a Victorian school you must follow the Four Critical Actions For Schools
- If the former student is no longer of school age or attending a Victorian school you must also still act.

#### Form a reasonable belief

If you have witnessed behaviour, have a suspicion, or received a disclosure of child abuse, you will need to determine whether you have formed a 'reasonable belief' or a 'belief on reasonable grounds' that a child has or is being abused or is at risk of being abused.

Forming a belief on reasonable grounds may include:

- a child stating that they have been abused
- any person telling you they believe someone has been abused (sometimes the child may be talking about themselves)
- physical indicators of abuse such as non-accidental or unexplained injuries; persistent neglect, or inadequate care and supervision lead you to believe that the child has been abused (see Identify Signs of Abuse)
- behavioural indicators of abuse lead you to believe that the child has been abused (see Identify Signs of Abuse)
- other signs such as family violence, parental substance misuse, psychiatric illness or intellectual disability that is impacting on the child's safety, stability or development

A reasonable belief is a deliberately low threshold:

- so that people are encouraged to report suspected abuse to the relevant authorities and agencies, enabling authorities to investigate the allegations and take further action to prevent or stop any further abuse
- which does not require proof, but does require something more than a mere rumour or speculation
- which is met if a reasonable person in the same position would have formed the belief on the same grounds.

Most of the reporting provisions in the Children Youth and Families Act and Crimes Act (2005) require people to report suspected child abuse that has occurred, is occurring, or is at risk of occurring where they have formed a 'reasonable belief' or 'a belief on reasonable grounds'.

## **RESPONDING TO AN INCIDENT, DISCLOSURE OR SUSPICION OF CHILD ABUSE**

Follow the four critical actions when responding to an incident, disclosure or suspicion of child abuse:

- Action 1: Respond to an emergency
- Action 2: Report to authorities
- Action 3: Contact parents or carers
- Action 4: Provide on-going support

Further information on each of the four actions is highlighted below:

### **ACTION ONE – RESPOND TO AN EMERGENCY**

#### **Ensure Immediate Safety**

If there is no immediate harm to the child or young person, proceed to Action Two.

You must ensure immediate safety, by:

- separating the alleged victim and others involved, ensuring all parties are supervised by a school staff member
- arranging and providing urgent medical assistance where necessary by:
  - administering first aid assistance
  - calling 000 for an ambulance and following any instructions from emergency service officers/paramedics.
- calling 000 for urgent police assistance if:
  - the person who is alleged to have engaged in the abuse poses an immediate risk to the health and safety of any person. You should also be prepared to identify a contact person at the school for future liaison with police.

#### **Preserve Evidence**

Where an incident of suspected child abuse occurs at the school, you may need to take action to preserve any items that may amount to evidence of the abuse. Consider all of the following:

##### Environment

Do not clean up the area and preserve the sites where the alleged incidents occurred. Cordon off the relevant area/room/building and take reasonable steps to ensure that no one enters these areas.

##### Clothing

If sexual abuse/physical abuse is suspected you may also need to ensure that the person who has allegedly committed the abuse and the child who has allegedly been abused remain in their clothing and, if this is not possible, ensure that the clothes are not washed, are handled as little as possible, and stored in a sealable bag

### Other Physical Items

If there are any other items that may amount to evidence (e.g. weapons, bedding, condoms), try and ensure that these things remain untouched.

### Potential Witnesses

Reasonable precautions must be taken to prevent discussion of the incident between those involved in the alleged incident (including any other children who may have witnessed the incident). If the incident involves:

- two or more students, a staff member should be allocated to remain with each student involved in separate rooms
- a staff member, they should be asked to remain with a member of the school's leadership team and be instructed not to discuss the incident with any staff/student/s carers/family members.

## **ACTION TWO – REPORT TO AUTHORITIES**

As soon as immediate health and safety concerns are addressed you must report all incidents, suspicions and disclosures of child abuse as soon as possible.

The following information sets out reporting processes for all forms of child abuse. Failure to report physical and child sexual abuse may amount to a criminal offence.

### **When the source of suspected abuse is within the school**

If the source of suspected abuse comes from within the school (this includes any forms of suspected child abuse involving a school staff member, contractor or volunteer) you must:

- contact Victoria Police via your local police station
- also report internally

As a Government School the following actions must also take place:

- report to your school principal/ leadership team
- report to the Department's Employee Conduct Branch and Security Services Unit, on (03) 9637 2934
- identify a contact person at the school for future liaison with Child Protection and Victoria Police and seek advice about contacting parents.

It is important that you first contact your local police station, where appropriate they will refer you on to the local Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation team.

### **When the source of suspected abuse is within the family or community**

If the source of suspected abuse comes from within the family or community you must:

1. Report to DHHS Child Protection if a child is considered to be:
  - in need of protection due to child abuse
  - at risk of being, harmed (or has been harmed), and the harm has had, or is likely to have, a serious impact on the child's safety, stability or development.

2. Report suspected sexual abuse (including grooming) to Victoria Police
3. Report internally to:
  - School principal and/or leadership team (all instances), highlighting:
    - the details of the suspected child abuse or risk of abuse including the name of those involved
    - any immediate actions taken to protect the safety of the child
    - your report or intention to report to DHHS Child Protection, Victoria Police and/or Child FIRST
    - possible steps that can be taken to contact parents (if appropriate) and support the student
4. Government schools should also report to:
  - Security Services Unit on (03) 9637 2934

### **Report student sexual offending**

As soon as immediate health and safety concerns are addressed you must report incidents, disclosures and suspicions of student sexual offending as soon as possible to:

1. Victoria Police on 000 (all instances)
2. DHHS Child Protection if you believe that:
  - the victim's parent/s are unable or unwilling to protect the child
  - the student who is alleged to have engaged in the student sexual offending is aged over 10 and under 15 years, is exhibiting sexually abusive behaviours, and may be in need of therapeutic treatment to address these behaviours
  - the student who is alleged to have engaged in the student sexual offending may be displaying physical and behavioural indicators of being the victim of child abuse
3. ALSO report internally to:
  - School principal and/or leadership team (all instances)
  - Security Services Unit

### **Abuse relating to international students**

If the incident, suspicion or disclosure relates to an international student you will most likely be required to make an additional report. Government schools should contact the International Education Division on (03) 9637 2990.

### **Reporting further reasonable grounds for belief**

You must make a new report in any circumstance where you become aware of any further incidents, or disclosures, or a form a new suspicion that a child is a victim of offending, or has engaged in student sexual offending.

Every report is critical to protecting a child by building evidence and enabling authorities to gain a clearer understanding of the risks.

This means that you must make a report to protect a child even if:

- DHHS Child Protection or Victoria Police were previously involved or are already involved with the child and/or their family
- staff are aware that another party, such as a family member, has already raised concerns with the relevant authorities.

### **Further Information**

If you're unsure whether to take action, or what action to take, you should discuss this with your leadership team. The following considerations or situations should also be taken into account:

- [When to contact Child FIRST](#)
- [When to contact Victoria Police](#)
- [When to contact DHHS Child Protection](#)
- [What if my principal or leadership team advise me to not make a report?](#)
- [What if another person has already made a report?](#)
- [What if I don't think the child is being abused but I have other concerns for their wellbeing?](#)

Further information on what to do if you're unsure can be found at: [Report child abuse action 2: Report to authorities](#)

### **Document your actions**

It is strongly recommended that you document your actions using the responding to suspected child abuse template

## **ACTION THREE – CONTACT PARENTS OR CARERS**

In many cases where it is suspected that a child has been, or is at risk of being abused, it is extremely important that parents are notified as soon as practicable.

However there are some circumstances where contacting parents may place a child at greater risk.

### **Contact the relevant authority**

Before contacting the child's parents, your principal (or their delegate) must contact Victoria Police or Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Child Protection (depending on who the report has been made to).

DHHS Child Protection will advise about whether it is appropriate to contact parents at this stage.

### **Permission not given to contact parents**

Your principal (or delegate) will be advised not to contact the parents in circumstances where:

- the parents are alleged to have engaged in the abuse
- a disclosure to the parent may subject the child to further abuse

- the child is a mature minor (assessed to be sufficiently mature and intelligent to make such decisions on his or her own behalf) and have requested that their parent/carer not be notified (in these circumstances ideally the child will nominate another responsible adult who can be contacted)
- the notification is likely to adversely affect the investigation of the incident by the relevant authorities.

### **Permission given to contact parents**

Where advised to be appropriate, schools should make sensitive and professional contact with parents as soon as possible on the day of the incident, disclosure or suspicion. This enables parents to take steps to:

- prevent or limit their child's exposure to further abuse
- ensure that their child receives the support that they require.

### **Guidance on contacting parents**

The principal and/or reporting staff member (ideally together) should inform the parents/carers of the child impacted by the suspected child abuse.

During this conversation it is important to:

- remain calm
- be empathic to feelings
- validate concerns
- provide appropriate details of the incident, disclosure and/or suspicion of child abuse
- outline the action the school staff have taken to date
- inform them of who the incident, disclosure and/or suspicion has been reported to
- provide the name and contact phone number of DHHS Child Protection and/or the police officer who is investigating
- provide information on whether they are likely to be contacted by DHHS Child Protection or Victoria Police (if known)
- inform them that the investigation may take some time and ask what further information they would like and how school staff can assist them
- assure them that school wellbeing staff can provide support to the child. Victorian government school staff can make referrals to student support services or other wellbeing staff based at the school
- invite the parents/carers to attend a student support group meeting where a student support plan can be prepared to ensure that appropriate support can be provided for their child.

### **Further support on contacting parents**

For advice and support on contacting parents contact Student Incident and Recovery Unit on (03) 9637 2934

### **Privacy**

For what information can be shared, see: [Privacy and information sharing](#).

## **ACTION FOUR - CONTACT PARENTS, CARERS OR GUARDIANS**

Experiences of child abuse can cause trauma and significantly impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children. In addition to reporting and referral into relevant authorities, as a school staff member you play a central role in addressing this trauma and have a duty of care to ensure that the students feels safe and supported at school.

### **Working together and planning support**

Providing holistic support to address the trauma and wellbeing issues associated with child abuse is best achieved through careful planning and working in partnership with wellbeing professionals, parents/carers and educators.

If a student is impacted by suspected abuse, and it is deemed appropriate, school staff must:

- establish regular communication between staff and the child's parent/guardian/carer (if this is appropriate) to discuss a child's progress wellbeing and the effectiveness of planned strategies
- convene a student support group to plan ongoing monitoring, support, and follow-up of the child's health and wellbeing (student support groups usually comprise school wellbeing staff, teachers, allied health professionals and where appropriate the student and/or their parent/carer)
- develop and implement a student support plan, which documents the planned support strategies and includes timeframes for review (where possible, these support strategies should be informed by allied health and wellbeing professional with expertise in addressing child abuse and trauma).

### **Engaging allied health and wellbeing professionals**

Where appropriate school staff should engage allied health and wellbeing supports and services to meet the wellbeing needs of the child impacted by abuse, including:

- wellbeing staff members
- allied health and wellbeing professionals engaged by the student and families.

Allied health and wellbeing professionals can provide:

- intensive support to children and their families
- critical input into student support plans
- advice to school staff members on how to appropriately support the student.

Government schools can:

- contact their regional office
- contact Student Support Services
- refer to the continuum of supports for a description of the range of school based support services that may be locally available. For more information, see: [School Focused Youth Service](#)

### **Referring to external supports**

School staff can also refer to the wide range of non-school based support services, which specialise in providing tailored support and advice for children impacted by abuse.

- contact your local government for advice on available local services
- contact your regional office for advice on local and specialised services.

### **Counselling and support organisations**

The following Counselling and support organisations are available:

- [The Victorian Centre Against Sexual Assault](#)
- [Gatehouse Centre, Royal Children's Hospital](#)
- [Kids First](#)
- [Australian Childhood Foundation](#)
- [The Victorian aboriginal Child Care Agency \(VACCA\)](#)
- [Child Wise](#)
- [Aboriginal Family Violence and Legal Services](#)
- [The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service \(VALS\)](#)
- [Safe Steps](#)
- [headspace](#)

### **Support for children**

#### **Developmentally and culturally appropriate support**

Whilst a child's background should not impact on a decision to report suspected abuse, school staff need to be sensitive to a child's individual circumstances when providing support and working with families impacted by abuse.

It is a requirement under the Child Safe Standards that school governing authorities must "take account of the diversity of all children", including (but not limited to) the needs of:

- [Children with disabilities](#)
- [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children](#)
- [Children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse \(CALD\) backgrounds](#)
- [Students with refugee backgrounds](#)
- [International students](#)

Further information on support for children can be found at: [Report child abuse action 4: Provide ongoing support](#)

### **Students who are victims of a student sexual offence**

In consultation with the Student Incident and Recovery Unit and Victoria Police and/or DHHS Child Protection (if appropriate), schools:

- must develop a student support plan to determine and document support strategies for students who are the alleged victim/s and students impacted by student sexual offending to address their wellbeing
- should (where appropriate) convene a student support group to inform planning
- should (where appropriate) consult with wellbeing professionals (including student support services officers in government schools) to support the student.
- should (where appropriate) make referrals into specialised non-school based supports, including Centres Against Sexual Assault who provide expert support for victims of sexual assault.

## **Students who have engaged in student sexual offending**

In consultation with the Student Incident and Recovery Unit and Victoria Police and/or DHHS Child Protection, schools:

- must develop and regularly review a student support plan to establish and implement safety and support strategies, including return to school strategies
- should (where appropriate) convene a student support group to inform the student support plan
- should (where appropriate) engage with wellbeing professionals (including student support services officers in government schools) to support the student who has engaged in student sexual offending.
- should (where appropriate) make referrals into specialised non-school based supports, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) who provide specialist clinical mental health treatment and care.

In some cases children aged over 10 and under 15 years may be referred to Sexually Abusive Behaviour Treatment Services. These services provide treatment for 12 to 24 months to ensure that early intervention services are provided to prevent ongoing and more serious sexual offences in adulthood.

Often this referral will be made by DHHS Child Protection and a young person may be placed on a Therapeutic Treatment Order and/or a Therapeutic Treatment Placement Order. Children, young people and their families are also able to access treatment programs in a voluntary capacity.

## **Students transferring schools due to student sexual offending**

If as a result of student sexual offending, a student needs to transfer to another school:

- government schools must contact their regional director and the Student Incident and Recovery Unit

## **Other impacted children**

It can be stressful for other children involved in any incidents, disclosures or suspicions of child abuse. Principals must ensure that other impacted children are offered and provided appropriate support.

## **Children who are interviewed at school**

All children (including children who are alleged to have perpetrated abuse) must be independently supported in any interviews conducted by Victoria Police or DHHS Child Protection at school.

Where possible and appropriate the child's parent/carer should be present for these interviews. However if this is not appropriate or practicable the Principal (or delegate) may be identified as the independent person or support person for the child for the purpose of the interview.

Further information on children who are interviewed at school can be found at: [Report child abuse action 4: Provide ongoing support](#)

This includes information on:

- [Police interviews](#)
- [Police interviews at school where the child is the alleged victim or witness](#)
- [Police interviews at school where a student has allegedly abused another child](#)
- [DHHS Child Protection interviews at school](#)

### **Support for impacted staff members**

It can also be stressful for staff involved in any incidents, disclosures or suspicions of child abuse. Principals must support impacted staff members to access necessary support.

Government school staff requiring wellbeing support can contact the Employee Assistance Program on 1300 361 008.

### **Complying with subpoenas or court attendance**

A subpoena/witness summons is a court order that compels you to produce documents, or attend court and give evidence, or to do both of these things.

You are usually issued with a subpoena/witness summons because one of the parties to the legal proceedings believes that you may have information/documentation that is relevant to the legal proceeding.

If a government school staff member receives a subpoena or witness summons in the context of their employment, they should contact the Legal Division for advice on (03)9637 3146.

### **Responding to complaints or concerns**

There may be concerns or complaints about the school staff's management of an incident, in particular by parents/carers. This is a very stressful time for parents/carers, and concerns that they do not believe have been dealt with fairly may quickly escalate.

As a first step school staff must consider whether the complaint raises any concerns about unreported abuse and/or risk of abuse.

### **DOCUMENT YOUR ACTIONS**

As a school staff member, you must keep clear and comprehensive notes relating to incidents, disclosures and allegations of child abuse. It is strongly recommended that you use the responding to child abuse template.

If the incident, disclosure or allegation is related to student sexual offending use the Responding to student sexual offending: template.

This information may be sought at a later date if the matter is the subject of court proceedings. These notes may also later assist you if you are required to provide evidence to support their decisions.

## **STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING A DISCLOSURE**

When managing a disclosure of abuse or student sexual offending, it is important that you respond in an appropriate and supportive manner.

All disclosures of abuse must be taken seriously and addressed immediately by following the four critical actions above.

### Confidentiality

When a disclosure of abuse is made and/or you are concerned that a child has been abused or is at risk of being abused, you must inform the student that their confidentiality cannot be maintained.

This should be done in language appropriate to the student's age and stage of development. For example:

To a younger student:

'I am not going to be able to keep your story a secret. I really have to tell someone who is going to be able to help you.'

To an older student:

'The information you have given me has made me very concerned for your welfare and I need to tell you that it is my responsibility to report this information to help you get some assistance.'

### When managing a disclosure you should:

- listen to the child and allow them to speak
- stay calm and not display expressions of panic or shock
- use a neutral tone with no urgency and where possible use the child's language and vocabulary
- be patient and non-judgmental throughout
- highlight to the child that they are doing the right thing in telling you about what has happened and that it is not their fault
- do not ask leading questions, but instead, gently ask, 'What happened next?' rather than 'Why?'
- be patient and allow the child to talk at their own pace and in their own words
- not pressure the child into telling you more than they want to
- reassure the child that you believe them and that disclosing the matter was the right thing to do use verbal facilitators such as, 'Okay, I see', restate the child's previous statement, and use non-suggestive words of encouragement, designed to keep the child talking in an open-ended way
- tell the child you are required to report to the relevant authority to help stop the abuse, and explain the role of these authorities if appropriate.

When managing a disclosure you should not:

- ask questions that are investigative and potentially invasive. This may make the child feel uncomfortable and cause the child to withdraw
- go over the information time and time again (you are only gathering information to help you form a belief on reasonable grounds that you need to make a report to the relevant authority).

## PRIVACY AND INFORMATION SHARING

As a school staff member you are permitted to share certain information about a child who has been impacted by abuse. Reading guidance on [privacy and information sharing](#).

## CONTACTS

- DHHS Child Protection - 24 hour services **131 278**
- Victoria Police **000**
- Department of Education and Training Security Services Unit **(03) 9603 7999**

## Relevant authorities

- [DHHS Child Protection](#): Under the Children Youth and Families Act 2005 the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has a responsibility to provide child protection services for all children and young people under the age of 17 years, or where a protection order is in place, for children under the age of 18.
- [Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams \(SOCIT\)](#): Both DHHS and Victoria Police have statutory responsibilities under the Children Youth and Families Act 2005. DHHS Child Protection is the lead agency responsible for the care and protection of children, while Victoria Police is responsible for criminal investigations into alleged child abuse.
- [Child FIRST](#): Child and Family Information, Referral and Support Teams (Child FIRST) were introduced to give families an opportunity to obtain family services earlier at their own request or following a referral from others, including school staff.

## RELATED POLICIES AND DOCUMENTS

- Belle Vue Primary School Child Safety Reporting Obligations Policy and Procedures

**RATIFIED BY SCHOOL COUNCIL**

**DATE: 15 May 2019**

Date	Version Number:	Update information	Next Review:
7 December 2016	1.0	N/A	December 2018
3 May 2019	2.0	Updated in line with DET guidelines. One year update cycle to check links to DET information	May 2020