

Keeping Kids Safer

A guidebook for parents and caregivers
to help keep children safer from abuse



Introduction

Keeping Kids Safer is a guide for parents and caregivers to help them keep their children safe from abuse and violence.

There is good reason to be concerned about New Zealand's poor record of protecting children from abuse. Abuse can happen to any child. It is not bound by race, gender, wealth, location or family composition.

No-one should make abuse and neglect the way of life for any children. Reading this guide will be one step you can take towards preventing it.

A New Zealand perspective

Nobody really knows exactly how much child abuse goes on in New Zealand because a lot of it is not reported. Abuse and neglect is serious because their effects can be seriously harmful and may last a lifetime.

In school communities children can be educated about abuse and teachers can handle disclosures that may arise. It is important that this child protection work is a partnership between with teachers, parents, and carers.

What is child abuse?

Child abuse is defined as the harming, ill-treatment, abuse, neglect or deprivation of any child or young person.¹

There are different types of child abuse.

- **Emotional abuse**
A child's development may be affected by how they are treated by adults. Examples include persistent verbal abuse, put downs, or lack of love and support.
- **Neglect**
A child who is neglected doesn't receive basic physical, emotional, or educational needs. Or they are not protected from harm or potential harm.
- **Physical abuse**
Non-accidental injury to the child or young person. Examples include bruising, burning, breaking bones, biting, or hitting with objects such as electric jug cords.
- **Sexual abuse**
A sexual act between an adult or a more powerful person and a child or young person. This may be consensual or not, and can happen within or outside the family. Most sexual abuse is done by someone the child knows and trusts.
- **Family violence**
Family violence occurs within a variety of close interpersonal relationships, such as between partners, siblings, and other people who are seen as part of the family and/or are fulfilling the function of family. Even witnessing family violence can be very distressing for children, and cause them harm.

¹ Section 2 of the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989

How does abuse affect children?

Severe cases of neglect, or physical and sexual abuse can all result in physical effects on the body. Less obvious may be the psychological effects that abuse can have on the child.

Child abuse can lead to sadness, anger, feelings of isolation, problems with trusting people, difficulties in building or maintaining safe and healthy relationships and, at times, highly self-destructive behaviour. There is a possible link between child abuse and adolescent depression, drug abuse, alcoholism and suicide.

Abused children often have a negative image of themselves. They often blame themselves. This self-blame is encouraged by the abusers, as it helps to ensure that the victims don't tell anyone about the abuse.

Abused children often lose trust in adults, and feel powerless. They can find it difficult to concentrate at school. They are often anxious, depressed, hostile, or may behave inappropriately in a number of ways, including sexually. The teenage years are often a time of crises for abused children. They may become violent, abusive, uncommunicative and generally aggressive towards others, especially adults who they see as having power over them.

Who abuses children?

Child abuse occurs in all groups in society. Abusers are both men and women, and cover a wide age range from the elderly to people only a few years older than the abused child.

The image of the 'dirty old man in a rain coat' as the typical child abuser is an outdated and dangerous myth. This 'stranger danger' approach to preventing child abuse is not appropriate because the majority of abusers are known to the child.

There are a number of very good reasons for moving away from the 'stranger danger' approach. There may be times when your child needs to approach adults whom they don't know for help, for example if they are hurt or lost. Students may not be able to recognise abuse from someone they know and trust, if they have only been taught about it in the contexts of someone they don't know. It is far better to give children practice in identifying situations that could be dangerous, and to talk about things they could do to stay safe.

Recognising abuse

We all have a duty to act on suspicions. Sometimes it is difficult to see the signs of child abuse. However, it is important that adults are aware of possible signs in children they interact with, such as a neighbour's children or your children's friends.

The major problem with identifying child abuse is that many of the commonly discussed signs can be linked to issues completely unrelated to child abuse. For example:

- injuries can be caused through rough play or genuine accidents
- developmental delays can be caused through illness or differences in rates of development
- some sexual play is normal for children at various stages of their development.

Take note of changes in a child's behaviour or personality, especially if there is no explanation for these changes. Abused children often seem to have unexplained sadness, crankiness and irritability. They may start bed-wetting again, change in the way they react to other people, or have an unexplained deterioration in their school work.

Try to listen to the child and think about what they might be trying to tell you. They may choose an inconvenient time. A common response when parents or caregivers ask their children why they did not tell them is, *"I did try and tell you, but you didn't listen"*. Look for knowledge and behaviours, especially sexual, which seem too grown up for the age of the child. This may be an indicator of abuse.

Some children tell through their drawings. Question a child about the meaning of parts of their drawings, but avoid analysing too much and never criticise a child who draws a sexual picture. For example, *"That's an interesting colour/shape, tell me about it. Who is the person in the picture?"* is a way to phrase such a question.

Often, physical abuse is kept hidden, so observe any reluctance to undress or change into more revealing clothes. Consider carefully a child or adult's explanation of the injuries to see how realistic, natural and spontaneous this is.

Note: All indicators of child abuse may also have harmless explanations.

Indicators of possible physical abuse

- Many bruises at different stages of healing.
- Bruising on an infant who is not yet mobile.
- Black eyes, with bruising around the eyes rather than on the cheek.
- Grasp marks caused by pressure from fingers and thumbs.
- Bite-marks.
- Marks from specific objects, for example, cords, rulers, or broom handles and shapes of objects on the skin, for example, irons or pokers.
- Injuries to the mouth in young babies.
- Burns and scalds.
- Multiple fractures and head injuries.
- Rib fractures in young children.
- Bald patches with haemorrhages beneath the scalp (a sign of hair pulling).
- Cigarette burns.

Indicators of possible neglect

- Accidental injuries caused by lack of supervision appropriate for the child's age.
- A child describing lack of supervision or care (appropriate to their age).
- An adult failing to respond properly to a child's injury or ongoing illness.
- A malnourished child.

Indicators of possible emotional abuse

- Lack of interest in and ongoing rejection of a child by a parent or caregiver.
- Lack of any show of care and affection by the parent or caregiver.
- Consistently negative attitudes to, and negative interactions with a child by a parent.
- Parents or caregivers are uncaring, very detached, or physically or emotionally remote.
- For no obvious medical reason the child fails to thrive.
- Growth is stunted.
- The child displays inappropriate social behaviour (and has no mental disability), for example, lack of social responsiveness, fixed stare, rocking movement.
- The child shows apathy, depression and/or extreme and age-inappropriate aggression.

Indicators of possible sexual abuse

- The child has a sexually transmitted disease.
- The child has bruises, cuts, and/or bleeding to the genital and/or anal area.
- The child tells of sexual abuse.
- The child has pain or discomfort in the genital area.
- The child has a discharge or infection in the anal or genital area.
- The child has repeated urinary infections.
- The child has knowledge of sex inappropriate to their age, or sexual play that is advanced beyond their years.
- The child is unusually aware of, or anxious about, touching.
- The child talks with another child about abuse.
- The child has abrupt changes in behaviour or personality.
- The child is unusually worried about toileting or changing clothes.
- The child gives vague hints, such as *"Is it ok to tell a secret?"* or *"Uncle wears funny underpants."*

Please do not panic. However, if in doubt... consult a professional.

Dealing with abuse

What should I do if a child tells me about abuse?

- Believe the child and accept what they tell you. Say *“Thank you for telling me. I believe you.”*
- Show love, concern and support. *“I love you very much. I’m here if you want me to listen.”*
- Keep calm. Keep any feelings such as anger, fear, guilt or disgust to yourself. Children will notice your reactions to what they tell you. If you get angry, children might think you’re angry with them and may not tell you again.
- Listen carefully to what is said, but don’t interrogate or question a child about what has happened. A person trained to deal with abuse can talk with your child at a later time. This will probably be very difficult, as you will want to find out as much as possible from your child. However, questioning from you could influence the outcome of any court proceedings at a later date. If you show shock, your child will withdraw and the truth may never be known.
- Reassure them that it is not their fault and that they are not to blame for what happened. *“I am very sorry that this has happened to you. What happened was NOT your fault. That person should not have done that to you.”*
- Tell them that you are pleased that they have told you, and that you are very sorry about what has happened. *“You are very brave for telling me. I am very pleased that you have told me.”*
- Assure them that you will do something to help.
- Seek help and advice for the child. Dealing with abuse is painful. Find someone that you can trust. Someone who will not judge you or your family.
- Report the abuse to either a member of a Child Protection Team at your local police station, or to Child, Youth and Family on phone 0508 FAMILY (0508 326 459) or email cyfcallcentre@cyf.govt.nz
- If you think a child is in immediate danger – phone the Police on 111.

Getting help

If you report a case of abuse, you can ask to be told how the case will be handled and how you will be kept informed.

There are many organisations you can talk to or report abuse to. The following services are available in New Zealand.

Police

You can report abuse to the Police. You might prefer to visit a police station and talk directly to staff. While any police officer should be able to help, you might want to ask to speak to a member of a Child Protection Team. If you think a child is in immediate danger – phone the Police on 111.

Child, Youth and Family

You can report abuse to Child, Youth and Family on phone 0508 FAMILY (0508 326 459) or email cyfcallcentre@cyf.govt.nz. Social workers are trained to find the best ways to help keep their children safe. This might involve working with them directly, or putting them in touch with people in the community who can give practical support.

Note:

In New Zealand, the Police and Child, Youth and Family have agreements about working together when dealing with child abuse cases.

Police are responsible for the criminal investigation of the alleged abuse, while Child, Youth and Family undertake the investigation and assessment to ensure the safety of the child, now and in the future.

If your child needs to be medically examined, this will be arranged with specialist doctors experienced at working with children and young people. Your consent is required before your child may be examined. Your child may also need to be interviewed by a trained interviewer.

Doctors

Abuse may become evident while visiting your doctor. Your doctor is encouraged to report abuse, but is not required to by law.

School

If abuse becomes evident at the school, the case will be handled as set out in the school's child protection policy. Ask to see this policy.