

Child protection

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It is every child's right to be safe and protected from all forms of abuse, neglect, violence or exploitation. It is the legal and moral obligation of every adult who works with children to ensure their safety and wellbeing. This duty of care is held by all those involved in the outside school hours care service including owners, sponsors, management committees, licensees, coordinators, casual and permanent child care professionals, students and volunteers.

Defining child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and neglect are broad terms for the actions that endanger children's physical and/or emotional health. Child abuse usually involves a pattern of behaviour that takes place over a period of time, but can occur as a single incident. Child abuse and neglect are usually categorised as follows:

Physical Abuse: Physical abuse describes an injury or injuries inflicted on a child by another person, caused by a single or repeated physical act such as hitting, smacking, punching, shaking, kicking, burning, scalding or restraining.

Emotional Abuse: Emotional abuse occurs when a child is deprived of care and attention, is subject to yelling or bullying, or is ridiculed, threatened, ignored or scared in a way that affects their confidence, self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. Psychological harm can also result from a child being involved in anti-social behaviour such as crime, violence or substance abuse perpetrated by another person.

Sexual Abuse: Sexual abuse occurs when an adult, a more powerful child or an adolescent exposes a child to sexual activity. Tricks, bribes or threats and sometimes physical force are used to make a child participate. Sexual abuse can include: inappropriate touching; involving a child in a sexual act; exhibitionism; and sexually suggestive comments and behaviour. Deliberately exposing children to sexually explicit or pornographic material through magazines, videos, computer images or music is also a form of sexual abuse.

Neglect: Neglect occurs when the basic needs of the child are not met. This can include failing to provide adequate nutrition, clothing, medical attention, education, shelter and safe living conditions.

Domestic Violence: Exposure to domestic violence can cause both physical and emotional harm to children. They do not have to be involved in or witness the violence to be affected by it.

Children who experience domestic violence over a period of time may be aggressive or violent themselves, but are just as likely to appear anxious or depressed and may have low self-esteem.

Bullying: A person is bullied when they are deliberately and often repeatedly physically or emotionally hurt by a more powerful person or group of people.

Bullying can involve name calling or teasing, verbal threats and rumours, or deliberately excluding a child from an activity. Bullying may also involve the child being hit or pushed around by another child or group of children or the child's property being taken away or damaged.

Bullying is often subtle, and can occur during free play or when a child care professional is not close by. The victim can be reluctant to tell anyone and, when the bullying is consistent, they can become depressed and ill.

Creating an environment that protects children

Establishing a safe environment can minimise the risk to children using the service. Management and child care professionals should consider strategies that ensure children are protected while at the service, on excursions and while they are travelling between school and the service venue.

Policies and procedures

The policies that are developed by the service provide a framework for best practice and safe environments for children. Clear policies and procedures can help stakeholders understand and comply with their legal responsibilities and effectively manage child protection issues when they arise.

A child protection policy should clearly demonstrate the service's commitment to the protection of children. Current state or territory child protection legislation should be reflected in the service's policy together with the mandatory reporting responsibilities. Since child protection is a sensitive and highly emotive issue, the service may also consider the strategies it uses to support child

care professionals, families and children, both during and after the process of reporting child abuse issues.

Having clear procedures will support the child protection policy and guide child care professionals who may be required to record and report suspected child abuse. Contact information for the state or territory child protection agency should also be made accessible to all stakeholders.

It is important that everyone has a clear understanding of their responsibilities in relation to the service's child protection policy and that the procedures are implemented consistently. All new and existing child care professionals need to sign to acknowledge that they have read the policy, and a process should be implemented which informs casual child care professionals, volunteers and students about their obligations.

Child protection procedures should include clear guidelines for:

- selecting and recruiting child care professionals and volunteers who are in contact with children (directly or indirectly);
- releasing children from the service;
- appropriate supervision of children;
- identifying and responding to child protection observations, concerns or incidents, including the procedures for documenting and reporting to a regulatory authority or external agency;
- handling child protection accusations against a child care professional, student, volunteer and/or visitor; and
- managing non-compliance with child protection policies and procedures.

Employment of child care professionals

The service's recruitment and selection processes should support the provision of a safe environment for children. Prior to commencement, all adults who will be working or volunteering at the service should undertake a clearance check from the relevant state or territory government authority. This is currently a requirement in most jurisdictions.

The service's induction process should be used to ensure that new child care professionals feel confident and well prepared to manage situations that have the potential to place children at risk. Responsibilities in relation to the child protection policy, the importance of supervision and appropriate responses to bullying should form an important part of the induction process.

Professional development

Child care professionals should be aware of the common signs and indicators of child abuse and be clear about their responsibilities and the process of reporting child protection issues. Children may be placed further at risk when the adults who care for them are aware of abuse and either handle the information inappropriately or take no action at all.

Ongoing professional development and training will ensure skills and knowledge are maintained and kept up to date. By encouraging discussion and debate about child protection at meetings, reading journals and regularly checking relevant websites, the service can strengthen understanding of best practice and promote the regular review of the service's policy and procedures.

Relationships with children

A service that values the right of children to a safe environment, including access to child care professionals that are accepting and easy to talk to can send a powerful message to children that the adults in the service will look after them, keep them safe and help them if they have a problem.

It is important that child care professionals take the time to observe individual children and to actively listen to their comments about their day and the events occurring in their lives. Children can sense when adults are preoccupied and may withdraw or end a conversation when they believe the adult is not listening. Attention should also be paid to children's non-verbal communication, their body language, facial expressions, creative expressions and play behaviour with other children. These things can reveal how children are feeling, and what they know and understand.

Adults can be important role models for children and it is crucial that child care professionals' verbal and non-verbal communications with each other and children demonstrate respect, empathy and acceptance. When child care professionals shout across the room, use threats or behaviour guidance strategies that frighten or humiliate children, they are sending a message that reinforces how to exercise power and control others.

Media and popular culture

School age children are also generally interested in popular culture such as music, magazines, comic books, television, videos and computer games. When these materials are made available at the service there is a risk that children will be exposed to inappropriate images and adult concepts which can be both confronting and confusing.

The service, in consultation with children and their families, should develop guidelines about when, how and by whom these materials will be used and how increasing media coverage of world issues such as famine, war, and terrorism will be managed.

When child care professionals share and discuss popular culture and world events with children at the service, they can ensure that children's exposure to violence, stereotypes and adult themes are minimised and explained in context.

Supervision

Child care professionals need to be aware of the children and the environment at all times. Actively supervising children in areas they can access plays an important part in providing a safe and protective environment. In outside school hours care services, the children can range from four to twelve years of age and will often be engaged in a range of both active and passive activities during a typical session.

Child care professionals need to assess the level of supervision required in each situation, taking into account the development of each child, the difficulty of the activity, and the potential for an incident to occur which may place children at risk. Students, volunteers and visitors to the service should be closely monitored and not be left alone to supervise individual or groups of children.

Priority should be given to the development and implementation of procedures for signing children in and out of the service and releasing them only to people who have been authorised to collect them.

It is also important to consider how the service manages daily transitions to and from the service and the child's home, school, or independently run extracurricular activities. This will assist in clarifying when and where the service assumes responsibility for each child and will reduce the potential for children being placed at risk.

Responding to bullying

Child care professionals play an important role in helping to make the environment a happy and safe place by promptly responding to bullying behaviour when it is observed. They must be prepared to take decisive action by confronting the 'bully' and insist that the behaviour stop,



otherwise the child care professional may be inadvertently sending a message that they accept or even condone the behaviour.

It is important to discuss bullying with children, including how it feels to be bullied and what constructive 'rules' can be applied to deal with bullying behaviour at the service. These rules might include conflict resolution or protective strategies; what the child being bullied can do; and the strategies other children can use if they witness another child being bullied. It is important to give a clear message that informing a child care professional when bullying occurs is not 'telling tales' but an important way of helping people stay safe.

Responding to a child's disclosure

It takes an enormous amount of courage for children who are being abused to talk to someone about what is happening to them. It is important that when a child discloses an allegation of abuse, child care professionals are ready to listen carefully. If the child's concerns are ignored or brushed aside they may not bring up the subject again.

Finding a quiet, private place to talk and allowing a child to tell their story using their own words is important. Child care professionals should avoid asking leading questions or probing for information that the child is not ready to disclose. It is important that the child is reassured that they have a right to feel safe and have done the right thing in telling someone what has happened. The child care professional should let the child know that they believe them and will try to help them.

Protective behaviours

A protective behaviours program encourages children to identify situations that are unsafe, or potentially unsafe, and to develop strategies to manage these situations and preserve their physical and emotional safety. Protective behaviour strategies should be introduced to children gradually, over time adding more detail and discussion as children grow older.

The service can consider:

- discussing with children what it means to feel safe. Talking about road and water safety can provide a sound introduction to discussing other types of safety, such as personal safety;
- helping children to identify their feelings. For example, the difference between feeling 'scared' (and excited) on a ride in an amusement park and 'scared' when someone might hurt them. Similarly child care professionals might talk with children about when it is, or is not, appropriate to keep secrets;
- introducing the subject of protective behaviours and assertiveness by reading appropriate picture books or involving children in role plays;

- playing "what if..." scenarios which model for children how they might react in potentially unsafe situations;
- helping children to identify trusted adults that they can talk to if they are feeling unsafe or worried about a problem; and
- explaining how children can access the Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800) and displaying the telephone number prominently at the service.

All children are competent, capable and rich in potential. They also depend on adults to keep them safe. When the outside school hours care service creates an environment that encourages children to discuss any concern, and ensures that all stakeholders understand their responsibilities in relation to child protection, it can play an important role in protecting all children who attend ■

Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance

Principles: 1.1, 2.2, 2.3, 5.3, 7.1, 8.1, 8.4 and 8.5

References and further information

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Useful websites

- Australian Childhood Foundation: www.childhood.org.au
- Bullying in schools and what to do about it: www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying
- Kids Helpline: www.kidshelp.com.au
- National Child Protection Clearinghouse: www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/reporting
- National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN): www.napcan.org.au
- Raising Children Network: www.raisingchildren.net.au



For more information on OSHCQA please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

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