



Signs of Abuse & Risk of Harm to Children Practice Guide

If you think a child or young person is at Risk of Significant Harm contact the Child Protection Helpline on 132 111 (open 24 hours/7 day) and if there is immediate danger call NSW Police 000

Children and young people have a right to be safe in their own homes and community and live without violence, abuse and neglect. Child abuse and neglect is a crime, yet it continues to be an issue in Australia. This Practice Guide has been developed to give you guidance about when to be concerned about a child. Being aware of indicators of abuse and neglect will help to keep children safe.

There are different forms of child abuse: neglect, sexual, physical and emotional abuse.

Neglect – Neglect is when a parent, worker or caregiver cannot regularly give a child the basic things needed for their growth and development, such as food, clothing, shelter, medical and dental care, adequate supervision, and enough parenting and care.

Sexual abuse – Sexual abuse is when someone involves a child or young person in sexual activity by using their power over them or taking advantage of their trust. Often children and young people are bribed or threatened physically and psychologically to make them participate in the activity. Sexual abuse is a crime.

Problematic Sexualised Behaviour – Problematic Sexualised Behaviour is when a child or young person is sexually harming another child or young person. It could involve coercion, threats, secrecy, violence, aggression or developmentally inappropriate acts or exploration becoming a re-enactment of specific adult sexual activity.

Physical abuse – Physical abuse is the intentional use of physical force against a child that results in – or has a high likelihood of resulting in harm for the child's health, survival, development or dignity. This includes but is not limited to hitting, beating, shaking, burns, strangulation, poisoning and suffocating. Indicators of physical abuse may include injuries that have not been explained or the explanation is inconsistent with the severity of the injury and failure to provide appropriate medical attention.

The application of any unreasonable physical force to a child is a crime in NSW. For example, hitting a child or young person around the head or neck, or using a stick, belt or other object to discipline or punish a child or young person (in a manner that is not trivial or negligible) may be considered a crime.

Emotional abuse or psychological harm – Serious psychological harm can occur where the behaviour of an adult damages the confidence and self-esteem of the child or young person, resulting in serious emotional disturbance or psychological trauma. Although it is possible for 'one off' incidents to cause serious harm, in general it is the frequency, persistence and duration of the adult behaviour that is instrumental in defining the consequences for the child or young person.

This can include a range of behaviours such as excessive criticism, withholding affection, exposure to domestic violence, intimidation, or threatening behaviour.



Signs of Abuse

There are common physical and behavioural signs that may indicate abuse or neglect. The presence of one of these signs **does not** necessarily mean abuse or neglect. Other things need to be considered, such as the age, circumstances of the child, young person or family. When considering if a child or young person has been abused or neglected, or is at risk of this, it is important to keep in mind the life circumstances of the child, young person and their family.

Risk factors

The following risk factors (either singularly or in combination) are associated with increased risk of harm for children and young people:

- social or geographic isolation from significant persons
- previous abuse or neglect of family members
- history of violence including domestic violence
- physical or mental health issues for the adult which affects their ability to care for the child or young person in their care
- the adults' abuse of alcohol or other drugs that affects their ability to care for the child or young person in their care.

Careful consideration

The signs below are only possible signs of abuse and neglect. The presence of these signs does not necessarily mean abuse and neglect has been, or is, occurring. The child or young person's circumstances and their age or other vulnerabilities, for example disability or chronic illness, also need to be taken into consideration.

If you have concerns, then you should report them to the Child Protection Helpline and contact the Safeguarding Office for guidance and support.

Remember, the following are only possible signs of abuse and neglect.

Possible signs of neglect

Signs in children or young people

- low weight for age and failure to thrive and develop
- untreated physical problems, such as sores, serious nappy rash and urine scalds, dental decay
- poor standards of hygiene, for example child or young person consistently unwashed
- poor complexion and hair texture
- child not adequately supervised for their age
- scavenging or stealing food and focus on basic survival
- extended stays at school, public places, other homes
- longs for or indiscriminately seeks adult affection
- rocking, sucking, head-banging
- poor school attendance.



Signs in adults

- unable or unwilling to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, safe home conditions
- leaving the child without appropriate supervision
- abandons the child or young person
- withholding physical contact or stimulation for prolonged periods
- unable or unwilling to provide psychological nurturing
- has limited understanding of the child or young person's needs
- has unrealistic expectations of the child or young person.

Possible signs of physical abuse

Signs in children

- bruising to face, head or neck, other bruising and marks which may show the shape of the object that caused it e.g. belt buckle, handprint
- lacerations and welts
- drowsiness, vomiting, fits or pooling of blood in the eyes, which may suggest head injury
- adult bite marks and scratches
- fractures of bones, especially in children under three years old
- dislocations, sprains, twisting
- burns and scalds, including cigarette burns
- multiple injuries or bruises
- explanation of injury offered is not consistent with their injury
- abdominal pain caused by ruptured internal organs, without a history of major trauma
- swallowing of poisonous substances, alcohol or other harmful drugs
- general indicators of female genital mutilation, such as having a 'special operation'.

Signs in adults

- frequent visits with the child or young person in their care to health or other services with unexplained or suspicious injuries, swallowing of non-food substances or with internal complaints
- explanation of injury offered by the adult is not consistent with the injury
- family history of violence
- history of their own maltreatment as a child
- fears injuring the child or young person in their care
- uses excessive discipline
- has threatened to harm the child or young person.



Possible signs of sexual abuse

Signs in children or young people

- bruising or bleeding in the genital area
- sexually transmitted diseases
- bruising to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen or thighs
- child or young person or their friend telling you about it, directly or indirectly
- describing sexual acts
- sexual knowledge or behaviour inappropriate for the child's age
- going to bed fully clothed
- regressive behaviour, such as sudden return to bed-wetting or soiling
- self-destructive behaviour, such as drug dependency, suicide attempts, self-harm
- child being in contact with a known or suspected paedophile
- anorexia or overeating
- adolescent pregnancy
- unexplained accumulation of money and gifts
- persistent running away from home
- risk taking behaviours, such as self-harm, suicide attempts.
- excessive compliance or a desire to be overly obedient towards the adult
- difficulty concentrating, memory loss or decline in school performance
- not wanting to be left alone with a particular individual/s.

Signs in adults

- exposing a child or young person to prostitution or pornography or using a child for pornographic purposes
- intentional exposure of a child to sexual behaviour of others
- previous conviction or suspicion of child sexual abuse
- coercing a child or young person to engage in sexual behaviour with other children
- verbal threats of sexual abuse
- denial of adolescent's pregnancy by family or another adult
- a range of grooming behaviours including building trust with the child, young person and their parent's /carers or isolating them from family and friends, using intimidation and secrecy and shaping the child's perceptions to prepare them for sexual abuse.

Possible signs of problematic sexualised behaviour

Signs in children or young people

- curiosity about sexual behaviour becomes obsessive preoccupation
- exploration becomes re-enactment of specific adult sexual activity
- behaviour involves injury to self or others
- children's behaviour involves coercion, threats, secrecy, violence, aggression or developmentally inappropriate acts
- sexual penetration
- genital kissing
- oral copulation
- simulated intercourse.



Possible signs of emotional abuse

Signs in children

- constant feelings of worthlessness about life and themselves
- unable to value others
- lack of trust in people
- extreme attention-seeking behaviour
- is obsessively eager to please or obey adults
- takes extreme risks, is markedly disruptive, bullying or aggressive
- is highly self-critical, depressed or anxious
- suicide threats or attempts
- persistent running away from home or other places of significance such as school.

Signs in adults

- constant criticism, belittling, teasing of a child or young person, or ignoring or withholding praise and attention
- excessive or unreasonable demands
- persistent hostility and severe verbal abuse, rejection and scapegoating
- belief that a particular child or young person is bad or 'evil'
- using inappropriate physical or social isolation as punishment
- domestic violence.

Remember, the above are **only possible signs of abuse and neglect**. The presence of these signs does not necessarily mean abuse and neglect has been, or is, occurring.

If you are a Mandatory Reporter, you have a legal obligation to report a child at Risk of Significant Harm - *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 (the Act)*.

Disclaimer: *The above detail is provided by the NSW Government Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ). DCJ work to empower people in NSW to live fulfilling lives and achieve their potential in community inclusion. They can be contacted at <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au>.*

Further Information

The following documentation is available from the Diocesan intranet.

Legislation that affects those that work with children in Broken Bay Practice Guide
Responding to a disclosure of a child, young person or vulnerable adult Practice Guide
Responding to a disclosure of a child, young person or vulnerable adult Poster
Expectations of attitudes and Behaviours when engaging with children and young people in your role Practice Guide
Diocesan Risk of Significant Harm Mandatory Reporting Fact Policy
Risk of Significant Harm Report Form
Risk of Significant Harm Reporting Fact Sheet
Reporting Crimes to NSW Police Fact Sheet



Contact Details

To know more about children at risk of harm & signs of abuse please visit the DCJ website at <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/families/Protecting-kids/reporting-child-at-risk/harm-and-neglect>

Email the Safeguarding Office (Chancery & Parishes) at safeguarding@bbcatholic.org.au or phone **02 8379 1605** if you require support reporting harm of a child.

REVISION/ MODIFICATION HISTORY

Date	Version	Current Title	Summary of Changes	Approval Date	Commencement Date
14/08/2020	1.	Child at risk of harm & signs of abuse	New	September 2020	September 2020
23/09/2022	2.	Signs of Abuse and Risk of Harm to Children Practice Guide		September 2022	September 2022
29/04/2024	3.	Practice Guide - Signs of Abuse and Risk of Harm to Children	Updated to include PSB and signs of PSB in children	April 2024	April 2024

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