

<b>Practice Guideline name</b>	Managing the disclosure of risk of harm, harm, abuse or neglect by a child or young person
<b>Practice Guideline date</b>	December 2022
<b>Authorisation</b>	Executive - Practice, Evidence & Insights
<b>Practice Guideline owner</b>	National Manager, Practice Quality
<b>Practice Guideline type</b>	Enterprise – whole of organisation
<b>Practice Guideline setting</b>	Standard

## 1 Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this Practice Guideline (Guideline) is to assist Mission Australia (MA) workers to respond to disclosures of risk of harm, harm abuse or neglect by a child or young person.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.2 Workers are to refer to the policies and procedures listed in Section 5 when applying this Guideline.

## 2 Scope

- 2.1 This Guideline applies to case managers, line managers (e.g. Program and Area Managers) and any other workers who provide direct services to children and young people.
- 2.2 This Guideline may also be useful to workers in programs where they have less frequent contact with children and young people, as part of service delivery practice.

## 3 Guidelines

### 3.1 When disclosures of risk of harm, harm, abuse or neglect may occur

Children and young people can disclose risk of harm, harm, abuse or neglect at any time. If the risk of harm, harm abuse or neglect is ongoing over a period of weeks, months or years, they may disclose while the abuse is happening. Others might disclose either immediately after the abuse has ended or years later. For example, on average it takes 33 years for a person to disclose sexual abuse<sup>2</sup>.

Many children and young people do not disclose risk of harm, harm, abuse or neglect at all during their childhood or adolescent years. Delays in disclosure may be linked to a range of factors including

<sup>1</sup> This Practice Guideline has been informed by the Department of Education South Australia, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and the Department of Communities, Western Australia.

<sup>2</sup> *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse (2018)*, Volume 4, Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse.

concerns regarding the consequences of disclosing, for example, expecting negative consequences, including physical harm or death for themselves, and/or another person (usually their mother or sibling) if they disclose.

### 3.2 People children and young people disclose to

Children and young people are most likely to initially disclose risk of harm, harm, abuse or neglect to either a parent or same-aged friend. However, a child or young person may disclose risk of harm, harm, abuse and neglect to a trusted professional who is working with, or supporting them.

### 3.3 How children and young people may disclose

Children and young people may disclose in a number of ways however, it is rarely straightforward, and the majority of disclosures are made indirectly or accidentally.

Children and young people sometimes attempt to alert adults they trust to the fact they are being, or have been abused or neglected by changing their behaviour or by making ambiguous verbal statements. For example, a child or young person might suddenly refuse to attend the house of a previously loved relative, or could begin saying and doing sexual things that are inappropriate for their age.

Adults who disclosed as a child or young person have reported that they made a series of small disclosures rather than a full disclosure of the abuse or neglect. Potentially children and young people do this to see how the person responds, or they may limit the disclosure if they think the person they are telling is not receptive or not coping with the disclosure.

### 3.4 Feelings of the child or young person disclosing

Should a child or young person disclose, it is important to be mindful of what they may be feeling:

- Guilt – children and young people often blame themselves for the risk of harm, harm, abuse and neglect and feel guilty for telling someone about it.
- Shame – children and young people may feel ashamed of the risk of harm, harm, abuse or neglect itself, particularly in relation to sexual abuse, and as with feeling guilty believe it was their fault that it occurred.
- Fear – children and young people may fear the repercussions of telling someone, including (as referred to previously) being fearful of physical harm or death. They may also be fearful that the risk of harm, harm, neglect or abuse will happen again or that their actions will cause their family to break up.
- Confusion – Children and young people may be confused about their feelings for the abuser particularly if it is a family member.
- Disempowered - children and young people who have been abused or neglected often feel disempowered and lacking control in their own life.

### 3.5 Responding to the child or young person disclosing

It is essential to provide safety, immediate support and comfort to a child or young person should they disclose. A professional's response can have a great impact on the child or young person's ability to seek further help and recover from the trauma. All disclosures of harm made by a child or young person must be taken seriously and will require a response from MA workers.

At no time in responding to the disclosure is the perpetrator to be confronted.

### 3.5.1 Immediate response

If the disclosure means that the child or young person is in **immediate danger** or a **life threatening situation**, the Police and/or Ambulance are to be called on **000**. Workers should then follow the relevant State or Territory *Recognising and Responding to Risk of Harm - Children and Young People Procedure*

If the disclosure means that there is a concern or allegation of misconduct of a Mission Australia worker, proceed as per the State or Territory *Responding to Concerns or Allegations of Misconduct towards Children and Young People Procedure*.

### 3.5.2 Listening, reassuring and respecting the child or young person

#### ***Listen to the child or young person***

It is important to take on the role of active listener and not that of a counsellor or investigator.

Children and young people have their own way of describing their experiences. Using open ended questions is the most supportive way of responding to children and young people's personal disclosures. It also protects the child or young person's emotions and ensures that the questions they are asked do not influence their response.

For example, if a child or young person says 'I am scared to go home', rather than asking 'Did mum hurt you?' which is a leading question and puts words in the child or young person's mouth, support them to say what is happening in their own words with an open questioning approach, for example 'Tell me about what is making you feel scared?' or 'Tell me more about what happened at home to make you scared?'

It is also important to:

- Move to a suitable environment that is free of distractions and where the child or young person can be given full attention.
- Be calm and patient and try to control any expression of shock or anxiety to what the child or young person is saying.
- Listen supportively in a way that the child or young person does not feel rushed or panicked.

#### ***Reassure the child or young person***

Children and young people who disclose harm need to be reassured that they have done the correct thing by talking about the risk of harm, harm, abuse or neglect and that they are not at fault. It is also important to address any fears the child or young person may have about disclosing.

This reassurance may need to be repeated over an extended period of time, especially if legal proceedings follow, or if the parents separate as a result of the disclosure, and the child or young person starts to blame themselves.

#### ***Respect the child or young person***

Children and young people need to feel they have some control of the situation they are in. It is important to acknowledge their bravery and strength, and respect that they may only reveal some

details of the risk of harm, harm, abuse or neglect. It is possible to gently prompt with questions such as: 'Can you tell me more about that?' but it is best not to press the child or young person for details.

It is also important not to make promises that cannot be kept, such as agreeing with the child or young person that no-one else will be told about what they have disclosed. Rather, explain to the child or young person what the next steps will be and how they will be protected and supported (see 3.6 of this Guideline).

### 3.6 Providing protection and support

Immediate supports are to be put in place to protect the child or young person following a disclosure, in consultation with a more experienced manager if required. A child or young person is not to be left on their own until these supports are in place and the child or young person feels safe.

Ongoing supports and services are to be provided as per the State or Territory *Recognising and Responding to Risk of Harm - Children and Young People Procedure*.

### 3.7 Documentation and reporting

A record is to be documented immediately of what the child or young person has said using their exact words. Other details can be added including details of their non-verbal communication (e.g. eye contact, posture and hand movements) and their para-verbal communication (i.e. tone and pace and pitch of their voice) while making the disclosure.

While it is important to note specific information including the name of the person involved, and any details about where and when and what they disclose has happened, the child or young person may not be able to recall or express these details.

Documentation and reporting of the disclosure is to be undertaken as per the State or Territory *Recognising and Responding to Risk of Harm - Children and Young People Procedure*.

## 4 Review and Evaluation

This Guideline will be reviewed every three years, or more often as required.

## 5 Resources

The documents that are relevant to this Guideline are listed below.

### Source

### Relevant sections

#### Legislation

Care and Protection of Children Act 2007 – NT  
 Child Protection Act 1999 – QLD  
 Children and Community Services Act 2004 – WA  
 Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017 – SA  
 Children and Young People Act 2008 – ACT  
 Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 – NSW

**Source****Relevant sections**

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Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1997 – TAS  
Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 – VIC  
Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) (the “Privacy Act”)

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**External resources**

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Child Family Community Australia (2015)  
Responding to children and young people’s  
disclosures of abuse. Melbourne: *CFCA* ,  
Australian Institute of Family Studies

Royal Commission into Institutional  
Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2018):  
Volume 4, Identifying and disclosing child  
sexual abuse.

**Mission Australia Policy and Procedure**

[MA SharePoint – Internal Policy Hub](#)

- Recognising and Responding to Risk of Harm - Children and Young People Policy and Procedures (by State/Territory)
- Responding to Concerns or Allegations of Misconduct towards Children and Young People Policy and Procedures (by State/Territory)
- Child and Youth Safe Policy
- Code of Conduct
- Enterprise Incident Management Policy and Procedure
- Enterprise Privacy Policy and Procedure

**Mission Australia contacts**

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