

Reporting child abuse for teachers

What to do if you think a child is being abused



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Take notes

Keep notes of what you observe or hear. Be objective. Include dates and times, including the year. Record all actions carried out by you. Ensure notes state only the facts or what was reported to you. Keep notes in a locked filing cabinet or a password protected document on your computer.

Example of teacher notes:

Johnny Meen DOB 2.8.2002 Grade 3, 2011

4/5/2011 - Mr Webster reported J. had big purple bruise on left leg last week when I was absent. No action was taken after first aide teacher, Ms. Johns, inspected his leg.

6/5/2011 - J cried in classroom. Said his parents had been fighting. It was scary. He was taken for some time out with Ms Dester.

6/5/2011 2.30pm - Phone call to Mrs Meen to inform J upset. No answer. Left message, for her to call me.

9/5/2011 - J came to school with a black eye, and a big graze on his arm. He told me it happened at soccer. He told Ms Finch at recess that he tripped and hit it on the table.'

9/5/2011 - Discussed with Principal at 9.50 am

9/5/2011 - 10.20pm Telephone call to Mrs Meen, J's mother. Made appt to see her at the school.

9/5/2011 - 3.30 pm Meeting with Mrs Meen (J's mother), Mrs Allan (Principal), Mr Chau (Psychologist) and myself. See attached notes from meeting:

9/5/2011 4.30pm - Call to child protection and spoke to duty worker, Carol.

Talk to colleagues at your school.

It is important to consult and gain support from colleagues when you suspect a child in your class is being abused. Most schools have guidelines about who to consult when child abuse is suspected. This is often the principal or another experienced senior staff member. Follow your school guidelines or protocols. However, once you form a belief that a child is being abused or neglected you must follow your mandated obligations to report to the relevant state or territory authority.

What to do if you are worried you might be wrong.

If you believe you might be wrong or have any doubts whether it constitutes abuse you can do one or more of the following:

- **Talk it through** confidentially with the Principal or another experienced senior staff member.

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- **Call the child abuse reporting phone number** in your state or territory and speak with the protective officer about your concerns, and further clarify whether the information and facts constitutes a report of suspected abuse or neglect.
- **Use the interactive online tool** developed by the NSW government that helps you decide whether the situation constitutes abuse and whether to report the abuse. It is important to note that the tool is intended for those in NSW, however it is comprehensive and useful, and in most cases will apply to other states and territories. The website is <http://www.keepthemsafe.nsw.gov.au/> Click on the link titled 'mandatory reporting guide'.
- **Remember**, It is not your obligation to investigate abuse, but to report when you believe abuse is occurring.
- **It is normal to think** the following when making a report:
 - **'What if I'm wrong?'** It is not your job to decide this. It is the job of the child protection agency. You will not be penalized for making a call that does not eventuate in action being taken by the child protection agency. You must report however when you 'form a belief' that a child is being abused.
 - **What if the child is taken away from their family?'** Child protection agencies are focusing on the child's safety and protection in regards to their needs and welfare. Protective officers will only take a child away from their family when it is in the best interests of the child to do so, for example if they believe a child has suffered or is likely to suffer significant harm, and the child's parent is unwilling or unable to protect the child from harm. This decision is considered carefully, often in consultation with more senior protective staff or managers.
 - **'What if me telling just makes the abuse worse?'** Not reporting is far worse than reporting. You have a moral and where mandated an obligation to report. Child protection is taken seriously by the government agency responsible, by the community and by the police. Child protective staff will often make a risk management plan that could include taking a child or young adolescent into safe custody if they are in danger of immediate or on-going harm.
 - **'The parents will hate me.'** In the short term this may or may not be true. In the longer term it is in everyone's best interests to protect a child from harm. An abusive parent may well regret the harm caused and there are mechanisms in the welfare and judicial system to help perpetrators of violence or neglect to change. Reporting can be seen as the first step in assisting a perpetrator to make appropriate changes to their life.

Do I tell the parents or the child that I am making the report?

- **In most cases, yes.** It is good practice to tell the parents that you will be making a report. However if you are concerned that doing so will increase the risk to the child or yourself then this information should not be shared with the parents. In addition, if the child is suspected of being sexually abused by their parent it is generally advised that you do not inform the parent before making the call. It is important to note that in some states of Australia, such as Victoria, there are requirements that alleged sexual assault be also reported by the Principal to the Education Department's own sexual assault unit, see

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/safety/childprotection/childprotection.htm>

- **Call your child protection agency for advice on the best way to do this.** You can call the local child protection authority to discuss the best way to talk to parents about your obligation to make a mandatory report or consider using the recommendations below.

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How do I tell the parents I am making a report if they, or their partner are involved in the abuse?

- **Remember the emphasis is on helping the family.** Telling the parents should be done with the intention of helping the family and doing the best thing for the child. The aim of the conversation is to make the parents feel empathy with the child's or young adolescent's situation, and admit that they need help for their child's sake. The ease with which you and others are able to inform the parents will depend on the situation, your relationship with the parents, and whether the parents are perpetrators, and your experience in reporting abuse.
- **Ensure a senior staff member attends the meeting.** Ensure the Principal, school psychologist or other experienced senior staff is at the meeting. It is important to include a senior staff member that the parents have a good relationship with in the meeting. Having another staff member attend means that you have support, and the parent cannot later make false claims of what was said in the meeting. In some cases it is advisable for the senior staff member to lead the meeting, or for you not to attend. Talk this through with the Principal and the senior staff member prior to meeting with the parent.
- **Before the meeting develop an action plan** with the senior staff member attending. The action plan will include how you will approach the topic of abuse with the parent, and the services you are able to offer as a school to the child and/or parent, or the telephone numbers and names of appropriate support agencies outside of the school.
- **Tell the parent the facts.** Inform the parents of the reasons you are concerned. State the facts and be specific. Stating the facts can remove the blame and some of the emotion from the conversation. For example you might say 'I have noticed that Johnny has had a lot of bruises lately. On Monday he came to school with a black eye, and he had that big bruise on his leg last week. When I asked him about his eye he told me it was from soccer, but he told Ms Finch he tripped and hit it on a table.'
- **Inform the parent of your obligation, if relevant, to call the child protection agency.** 'As a teacher I am required by law to report if a child in my class is being hurt or harmed.'
- **Do not blame the parent.** This is not productive and will lead the parents to feel defensive and the conversation will likely end there. Do not use statements such as 'How could you let this happen', 'What is wrong with you'. Rather use some of the following ideas:
 - **State your concern for the child,** and parent if relevant. 'Mrs Meen, I'm really worried about Johnny, and I'm worried about you too.'
 - **State the facts.** Tell the parent why you are concerned 'On Friday Johnny cried in the classroom, as we previously spoke about on the phone. On Monday he came to school with a black eye, and he had that big bruise on his left leg last week. When I asked him about his eye he told me it was from soccer, but he told Ms Finch he tripped and hit it on the coffee table.'
 - **Talk about the impact the suspected abuse is having on the child's school work, friendships, mood and self-esteem.** 'Johnny seems really sad at the moment. At the beginning of last term he was so happy and now I often see him sitting by himself at lunchtime, looking dejected, despite his friends repeatedly asking him to join in their games.'
 - **Ask the parent if they need help.** 'I'd like to try and help you and Johnny. Would you like to speak to our school counsellor?' It is helpful to refer the parent to the school's psychologist or counsellor, or to an external agency. This may be best done by the Principal or the senior staff member present.

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What happens when I call to make a report?

You will typically be asked for some or all of the information below. It can be helpful to have your complete record of notes and observations about the child, and jot down some answers to the points below to help you when you make the phone call.

- **Identifying information about the child** including name, date of birth, address.
- **Events that have led you to call.** What has occurred to make you suspect abuse or neglect. It is important that you state all of the facts that have led you to believe the child is or may be being abused.
- **Information about the child's family.** This includes names, ages, cultural and language factors that may be important in working with the family.
- **How safe the child currently is.** The child protection worker may try to ascertain how safe the child is currently at school and at home. This may include providing information about the child's parents or carer. Again if you are unsure or do not know inform the worker that you don't know.
- **What other support agencies or individuals (if any) are assisting the child** and their family. Examples of support agencies might include counsellors, social workers, psychologists, paediatricians, or welfare support.
- **Where the child is currently.** The child protection worker may want to know where the child is now.

A report is typically made even if you do not have all of the information. Your identity will be kept confidential unless you provided written consent for it to be disclosed, or if it is required by the Court.

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