



# Protecting children and young people with disability

A booklet for parents and carers



Government of  
South Australia

National Library of Australia Cataloguing  
-in-Publication entry

Title: Protecting children and young people with  
disability: a booklet for parents and carers

Government of South Australia.  
Department for Education and Child Development,  
Families SA.  
Department for Communities and Social Inclusion.

ISBN: 9781921649271 (hbk.)

Subjects: Children with disability--  
Services for--South Australia.  
Child abuse--Prevention--  
Government policy--South Australia.  
Social work with children--South Australia.  
Abused children--Services for--South Australia.

Dewey Number: 362.767099423

© 2012 Government of South Australia.  
Department for Education and Child Development.  
Department for Communities and Social Inclusion.

Printed August 2012  
Publication Number: DCSI-80

The information in this publication can be  
provided in an alternative format or another  
language upon request:

Phone: 1300 786 117  
Email: [disabilityinfo@dcsi.sa.gov.au](mailto:disabilityinfo@dcsi.sa.gov.au)

In addition to images protected by intellectual property rights owned by  
the State Government of South Australia, certain intellectual property  
rights of third parties exist in respect of images contained in this material.  
Whilst the State Government has obtained the necessary licences to  
reproduce the intellectual property rights of the third parties, further  
reproduction is not permitted.

# Content

Acknowledgements	2
Foreword — Minister Portolesi	3
Foreword — Minister Hunter	4
Parent's Foreword	5
Why are children with disability more vulnerable to abuse and neglect?	6
What is abuse, and what should I look for?	8
What can I do to protect my child from abuse and neglect?	10
What if I think I might harm my child?	11
What are we doing in South Australia to reduce the risk?	12
Where can I go for advice?	14
Where can I get more information?	15
Checklist for Parents and Carers	17



## Acknowledgements

*This booklet has been developed by staff from the Department for Education and Child Development, Families SA, and the Department for Communities and Social Inclusion, Community and Home Support SA (formerly known as Disability SA). The work has been informed by the personal and professional experience of several individuals and agencies:*

Jayne Lehmann

---

Minister's Disability  
Advisory Council

---

Ministerial Advisory Committee:  
Students with Disabilities

---

Novita Children's Services

---

The different perspectives and dedication to this undertaking have been greatly appreciated and have enriched the final booklet.





# Protecting children and young people with disability

**Hon Grace Portolesi MP**  
Minister for Education and Child Development

Children with disability rely on parents, carers and service providers for their safety and wellbeing.

The protection of children and young people from abuse and neglect is everyone's responsibility. As a parent or carer, you know your child better than anyone else and are best placed to identify when something is wrong.

It is acknowledged that children and young people with disability, especially those with chronic health problems or multiple and complex issues, are more vulnerable to abuse and/or neglect than other children.

*"Protecting children and young people with disabilities: A booklet for parents and carers"* was first produced in 2005 to highlight child protection issues for children with disability. Over time, the booklet has empowered parents and carers and increased knowledge in the care and protection of children with disability.

This second edition booklet has been created to raise awareness of protecting children and young people with disability and outline where you can go for advice if

you are concerned. A companion resource to increase knowledge of protective behaviours and the prevention of sexual abuse is also available.

As a parent or carer of a child or young person with disability, you may access a range of services to support you in the care of your child.

This booklet contains a checklist that you can use when deciding on a service provider for your child.

Engaging with service providers who are committed to protecting children and providing an environment that is child safe will allow you to feel more confident in your choice.

By updating this resource, we can continue to increase the confidence of families and work together to create safer communities for our children to grow and learn.



# Protecting children and young people with disability

**Ian Hunter MLC**  
Minister for Communities  
and Social Inclusion

Children and young people with disability have the same rights as all children – to be safe, to feel safe, to feel included in the community, to participate in community activities, to feel good about themselves, to privacy, to get help when they need it.

Parents and carers want to support their children and young people with disability to achieve their potential and realise their rights.

This booklet provides essential information on the rights of children and young people with disability and the responsibilities of parents and carers. By increasing our skills and knowledge of how to make the environment safer for children and young people with disability, we will increase their ability to participate more fully in the community.

Importantly, the booklet provides practical advice for parents and carers on preventative strategies to reduce the risk of your child or adolescent being abused, and identifies the behaviours and symptoms of abuse which will assist you to recognise when abuse may be occurring.

This booklet also assists parents and carers to identify when they are becoming overwhelmed and where to seek assistance to talk through the daily challenges of parenting and caring for a young person with disability.

It is essential that parents and carers familiarise themselves with the new legal requirements to protect children and report abuse, and *Protecting children and young people with disability* provides clear guidance on what constitutes abuse and why your child or adolescent may be more vulnerable.

I congratulate the groups who have revised the publication, including my Disability Advisory Council and Department for Communities and Social Inclusion, and commend the booklet to all parents and carers and young people with disability.

# Parent's Foreword

As a parent of a daughter with an intellectual disability, I find it difficult to think about her increased risk of abuse. It would be much easier for me to assume she is safe. However, I know this is not always the case.

As parents we cannot ignore that our children with disabilities are at higher risk of abuse than those without disabilities. In fact, we can play an important role in checking the services and people we leave our children with, are doing all they can to keep them safe.

The information in this booklet will increase your understanding of the reasons why your child is at higher risk of harm, what you can do to make abuse less likely and which services can help you if you suspect your child has been harmed.

Equally, caring for a child with a disability can be stressful and may result in parents feeling they could harm their child. Advice is included on what to do if this happens to you.

The checklist at the back of the booklet provides questions to use when talking to the people providing your child's services such as school, vacation care, respite, day options programs and accommodation services. Photocopy it to take with you when discussing abuse prevention with your current services.

If we learn more about the risks, then we are able to help minimise them to keep our children with disability safer when they are away from us.

## **Jayne Lehmann**

Parent of a daughter with disability

# Why are children with disability more vulnerable to abuse and neglect?

It is important that we understand what can make children with disability more vulnerable to abuse and neglect so that we can take steps to help protect our children and prevent abuse from occurring. Reasons for the increased vulnerability of children with disability include:

## **Lack of awareness**

- Some methods of managing behaviour may be seen by some people as acceptable when they are actually abusive (see page 8 for examples).
- Negative community attitudes regarding disability can mean abuse or neglect is not recognised or not believed.

## **Family resilience and stress levels**

- There may be additional emotional, physical and financial demands on families raising a child with disability.
- Children with disability and their families may be more socially isolated, reducing their support networks.
- Difficulties in accessing adequate resources and support for a child with disability can affect family stress levels.

## **Vulnerability linked to the child's disability**

- Children with disability may lack a good understanding of social relationships, personal boundaries, protective behaviours, sexual awareness, and what abuse is.
- Children with a physical disability may be more vulnerable to neglect or to rough and intrusive personal care. They may also be physically unable to resist or avoid abuse.
- If communication is difficult, children with disability find it hard to let someone know that abuse is occurring.
- Children with behavioural issues are more likely to be dealt with in a forceful or restrictive way, and indicators of abuse may be wrongly attributed to the behavioural issue.



- Children with disability may be more dependent on others to have their needs met and care may be provided by someone other than a parent or primary carer.
- Greater structure and protection of children with disability can teach them to be more compliant with adult demands.
- Children may accept abusive treatment if they have low understanding, self-esteem or a low perception of their abilities.

## **Children with disability and their families may be more socially isolated**



# What is abuse, and what should I look for?

Abuse can involve one or all of the following: *physical abuse*, *sexual abuse*, *emotional abuse* and *neglect*. Each of these types of abuse are explained in more detail. There are a number of signs that could indicate a child has been or is being abused or neglected. The following information will help you to know what to look for to pick up signs of abuse in your child with a disability, especially children with communication difficulties.

## Physical abuse

Physical abuse covers physical injury resulting from actions such as: punching; beating; shaking; biting; pulling; burning or otherwise harming a child. Physical abuse may also include:

- Restraining a child in an unsafe way.
- Using medication that has not been advised, or over medicating to restrict the actions of a child.
- Inappropriate kinds of discipline, including withholding food or removing essential equipment.

## Signs of physical abuse

Signs of physical abuse include: bruising in unlikely places that have no explanation; bite marks; pressure marks; burns; and unexplained fractures.

Behaviours your child may show if they are being physically abused include: being unusually wary of physical contact with adults; being frightened of a certain caregiver; offering an unlikely explanation of injuries or being overly withdrawn or timid.

---

## Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse occurs when someone forces or entices a child or young person to take part in sexual activity, either directly, as an observer or via the internet.

## Signs of sexual abuse

Physical signs of sexual abuse include: injuries to private areas (ie breasts, buttocks, inner thighs and genitals); discomfort when going to the toilet; inflammation and infection of genital areas; frequent urinary tract infections or having a sexually transmitted disease.

Other signs of sexual abuse may include: inappropriate sexual behaviour or explicit sexual knowledge for their age; showing excessive fear when being bathed or having a nappy changed; sleep

disturbances or night terrors; uncharacteristic bed wetting; loss of appetite; hurting themselves; obsessive and compulsive washing and out-of-character behaviours such as tantrums, 'melt-downs', aggression, withdrawal or crying.

---

## **Emotional abuse**

Emotional abuse is a pattern of behaviour directed at a child or young person whereby their self-esteem is undermined over time. It can be caused by bullying, frequent put-downs, isolation, and setting unrealistic expectations making the child feel worthless or inadequate.

## **Signs of emotional abuse**

Physical signs of emotional abuse can include delays in physical development and failure to thrive or slower developmental progress (not related to their disability).

Behaviours your child may show if they are being emotionally abused include: aggression; antisocial and/or destructive behaviour; easily frustrated; unexplained mood swings; low self-esteem; poor relationships with peers; fear of the dark and fear of being left alone with, or clingy to certain people.

---

## **Neglect**

Neglect is the ongoing failure to provide for the child or young person's basic needs, whether deliberately or unintentionally. This can include not taking precautions to ensure the child's safety (eg not getting medical care and treatment) and not providing adequate food, clothing or shelter.

## **Signs of Neglect**

Physical signs of neglect for children include: being regularly dirty and unwashed; being left unsupervised for long periods of time; being consistently hungry and tired; being prone to illness or having untreated medical conditions. Children may also be delayed in their physical development and have slower developmental progress (not related to their disability).

Behaviours your child may show if they are being neglected include: stealing or hoarding food; gorging on food; poor social skills; signs of poor attachment to carers or irregular school attendance.

---

# What can I do to protect my child from abuse and neglect?

There are steps you can take that will help keep your child safe from abuse and neglect. Connecting with mainstream services and resources, including with your child's school, is a good starting point. It is also important to let your child know they have a right to feel safe at all times and that if something is wrong, they can tell someone they trust.

Here are some other suggestions that can help protect your child:

## **With service providers**

Be clear with service providers about your child's developmental level, their behaviours and their needs.

Get to know all persons working with your child and observe interactions between the worker and your child.

Ask questions about the care provided to your child and the level of supervision and monitoring.

Speak with service providers about the risk assessment they conduct for employees and volunteers as part of recruitment and ongoing practice.

If your child has communication difficulties, ask for a report on your child's activities and daily routines.

Ask your service provider about their child safe environments policies and other procedures they have in place to protect your child.

Work with your child's school regarding their participation in protective behaviour programs.

Use the Checklist for Parents and Carers in this booklet to assist you in choosing a service provider.

## **With your child**

Teach your child about their bodies and which areas are private. Also teach them about relationships and personal boundaries.

Give information about being safe in a way your child can understand (ie using symbols and pictures as well as words, and repeating information).

Teach your child to say 'no' when someone makes them feel scared, sad or uncomfortable.

Help your child to understand and identify who they can trust and go to if they feel unsafe.

Be aware of where your child is and with whom.

Educate and monitor your child on their use of internet, chat-rooms and social networking sites.

# What if I think I might harm my child?

Caring for a child with disability can be very difficult. Extra pressures on parents can include health related worries, increased expenses, social isolation, increased physical demands, strain on relationships, limited time for relaxation and a greater reliance on specialist supports. Feelings of anxiety, stress and pressure are normal in these circumstances, but if these feelings are starting to build up or take over, and you are worried they could cause you to harm your child, it is important to ask for help.

## Signs that you need to ask for help:

- You cry more than usual.
- You are unusually tired and often low on patience.
- You feel alone and like no one understands.
- You are afraid to be alone with your child.
- You have had outbursts of anger towards your child that you could not control.
- You are drinking alcohol or taking drugs to feel better.
- You have already done something to harm your child.

## What to do if you are worried you may harm your child:

- Take a deep breath to try to stay calm.
- Make sure your child is in a safe place and leave the situation or go into another room.
- Call a neighbour, family member or friend and ask if they can give you a break.
- Call Lifeline or the Parent Helpline, listed near the back of this booklet.
- Talk to someone you trust about what happened or is happening and ask for help to prevent the same happening again in the future. You could talk to family or friends, your doctor, your child's teacher or other parents in the same situation.

As a parent or carer, take time to look after your own health, make time for yourself and accept offers of help. It is never all right to harm your child. Look out for the warning signs and get the help you need to keep on top of the situation.

*If you recognise some of the signs that indicate you need to ask for help yourself, speak to family or friends, or look at the section in the back of this booklet regarding where to go for advice and information. You need never feel embarrassed about seeking support.*



# What are we doing in South Australia to reduce the risk?

- The mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect is part of the *Children's Protection Act 1993*. This means that a range of people working with children or young people must report observed or suspected child abuse or neglect.
- Trained social workers are available 24 hours a day, every day of the year through the Child Abuse Report Line.  
**Telephone: 13 14 78**
- To keep children safe when they are accessing services in the community, Section 8C of the *Children's Protection Act 1993* requires that certain service providers<sup>1</sup> for children create and maintain a child safe environment. The focus for service providers is to build an environment which is both child-safe and child-friendly, where children feel respected, valued and encouraged to reach their full potential.
- A Disability Services Provider Panel register is kept of government approved disability support agencies. Membership on the Provider Panel requires agencies to work to a common set of standards and requirements. This includes the requirement for all workers and volunteers providing services to children and young people with disability to undergo police and screening checks.
- Disability support agencies providing residential facility services for children with disability undergo annual licensing audits which include site inspection and policy and procedure assessment. The purpose of licensing is to make sure that an agency meets the legal requirements and minimum standards in their care for children.

<sup>1</sup> This requirement applies to government and non-government organisations that provide health, welfare, education, sporting or recreational, religious or spiritual, child-care or residential services wholly or partly for children.



- The State Government Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) has a Child Protection curriculum program for preschool through to year 12, with professional training for staff.
- DECD, Catholic Education SA and the Association of Independent Schools of SA Inc have Protective Practices Guidelines for staff and volunteers working in schools, preschools and out-of-school care. These guidelines provide advice to adults for establishing positive caring and respectful relationships with children and young people, including those with a disability.
- The *Information Sharing Guidelines for Promoting the Safety and Wellbeing of Children, Young People and their Families* (ISG) were approved by Cabinet in October 2008 for implementation within all relevant State Government agencies and non-government organisations. They present a simple, clear process that guides good practice, embeds a consistent approach to information sharing and focuses on improved service coordination when responding to safety and wellbeing risks.

**Your child  
has a right to  
support, care  
and protection**

# Where can I go for advice?

Dealing with suspected or disclosed abuse can be stressful. Your child has a right to support, care and protection. Even when children may not tell you directly that they have been harmed in some way, their behaviour may indicate that something is wrong. If you notice any of the indicators of abuse and neglect outlined in this booklet and your child's attitude and/or behaviour has changed, call the **Child Abuse Report Line** to speak with a trained social worker.

## Child Abuse Report Line

The Child Abuse Report Line operates 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Workers can provide advice about issues of concern and record a child abuse or neglect notification. Yaitya Tirramangkotti provides assistance in cases involving Aboriginal families.

**Telephone: 13 14 78**

---

## Community and Home Support SA - Disability Services

Disability Services offers a one-stop point of call for all information in South Australia for people living with disability. You can obtain information and resources on disability issues by contacting the information line listed below. If your child is eligible for Disability Services you can gain advice by contacting your local Disability Services Office.

**Information Line: 1300 786 117**

**Email: [disabilityinfo@dcsi.sa.gov.au](mailto:disabilityinfo@dcsi.sa.gov.au)**

**Website: [www.sa.gov.au/disability](http://www.sa.gov.au/disability)**

---

## Lifeline

Lifeline is a 24 hour service providing crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health support services. Support can be accessed over the phone, face-to-face or through their website.

**Telephone: 13 11 14**

**Website: [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)**

---

## Parent Helpline

The Parent Helpline provides advice on child health and parenting in relation to children aged from birth to 12 years. The Helpline can be accessed 24 hours a day, however if your call is outside of the hours of 7:15am to 9:15pm it will be redirected to the national *healthdirect* helpline.

**Telephone: 1300 364 100**

**Website: [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

---

**Children  
may not tell  
you directly  
that they have  
been harmed  
in some way...**

## Where can I get more information?

The Department for Education and  
Child Development,  
Families SA – Protecting Children

**[www.sa.gov.au/childprotection](http://www.sa.gov.au/childprotection)**

---

The Department for Communities  
and Social Inclusion - Library  
and Information Service,  
Disability Collection

**[www.sa.gov.au/disability](http://www.sa.gov.au/disability)**

---

Disability Information and  
Resource Centre (DIRC)

**Telephone: (08) 8236 0555**  
**[www.dircsa.org.au](http://www.dircsa.org.au)**

---

Carers Australia (SA)

**Telephone: 1800 242 636**  
**[www.carersaustralia.com.au](http://www.carersaustralia.com.au)**

---

SHine SA – Sexual Health  
information networking and  
education in SA

**Telephone: (08) 8300 5300**  
**[www.shinesa.org.au](http://www.shinesa.org.au)**

---

A guide to protecting children and  
young people with disability and  
preventing sexual abuse:  
For parents and carers

**[www.macs wd.sa.gov.au](http://www.macs wd.sa.gov.au)**

---







# Checklist for Parents and Carers

The *Children's Protection Act 1993* requires that certain service providers for children and young people become child-safe organisations. A child-safe organisation is committed to protecting children from physical, sexual and emotional harm and from neglect. This is demonstrated by having a child-safe policy in place, taking steps to ensure that staff and volunteers are safe people to work with children, listening to children and respecting their rights and making sure that everyone knows how to report concerns about child safety.

Actively engaging with service providers who are committed to providing a child-safe environment will allow you to feel more confident in choosing the right service. An organisation that works openly and collaboratively with you to meet your child's needs will also make your child's safety and wellbeing a priority.

This checklist has been included to help inform your decision making when selecting a service provider for your child.

When using the checklist, you may find you are circling "no" more often than you feel comfortable. Different organisations have different approaches to assessing and managing vulnerability. You are encouraged to contact the service provider and talk about whether there is flexibility in what is available and if alternative arrangements are possible.

**You can also contact the Disability Services Information Line on 1300 786 117 if you are still unsure.**

**A child-safe organisation is committed to protecting children from physical, sexual and emotional harm and from neglect.**

# Checklist for Parents and Carers

Name of Service Provider: .....

Address: .....  
.....

Phone: .....

Time and Date of Visit: .....

Contact Person: .....

## Quality

Is the service provider registered on the Disability Services Provider Panel?

Yes / No

Is the service provider licensed by Families SA to provide services for children?

Yes / No

## Communication

Does the service provider give verbal and/or written advice on the activities available for your child to participate in?

Yes / No

Does the service provider have information regarding the rights and responsibility for the parent/carer?

Yes / No

Are parents/carers encouraged to telephone or visit the venue?

Yes / No

Does the service provider inform parents/carers of new or updated organisational policies and procedures?

Yes / No

Does the service provider give written feedback on the child's activities and experiences during their stay, including staff members involved in your child's care?

Yes / No

## Privacy and Dignity

Does the service provider have a Privacy Policy, and is it properly enforced?

Yes / No

Is the service provider able to provide a choice of female or male staff regarding the intimate care (eg personal hygiene) of children and young people?

Yes / No

Are toilet and/or bathroom facilities fully accessible, and do they provide privacy for children and young people?

Yes / No

Is there an appropriate space where parents/carers can discuss sensitive matters?

Yes / No

### **Child Abuse and Neglect**

Are staff members trained in recognising abuse and neglect and recognising indicators for children with disability?

Yes / No

Does the service provider teach protective behaviours to children with disability that attend its service?

Yes / No

Are staff members adequately trained in the appropriate use of restraint practices (eg seclusion, medication)?

Yes / No

Does the service provider use positive behaviour strategies to address challenging behaviour?

Yes / No

Does the service provider request information about the child or young person's support or behavioural needs to better tailor its service to your child?

Yes / No

Does the service provider develop individual plans for each child?

Yes / No

Does the service provider have a child protection policy?

Yes / No

Are parents/carers involved in the development of plans?

Yes / No

Have all staff undergone appropriate police and screening checks and are trained as mandated notifiers for child abuse and neglect?

Yes / No

Does the service provider understand and apply appropriate cultural practices when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children?

Yes / No

### **Suggestions and Feedback**

Is the service provider willing to work with you to improve their practice in supporting your child and family?

Yes / No

As a parent/carer, are you encouraged to provide feedback and input regarding the management of the service provider?

Yes / No

## Notes





The information in this publication can  
be provided in an alternative format  
or another language upon request.

Phone: 1300 786 117

**[www.sa.gov.au/disability](http://www.sa.gov.au/disability)**

**[www.sa.gov.au/childprotection](http://www.sa.gov.au/childprotection)**