

# Guidance on identifying and responding to possible child neglect or abuse

*This document is adapted from the Oranga Tamariki (Ministry for Vulnerable Children) document 'Safer organisations Safer children' (v 2.3. Feb 2010). Text is primarily extracted and/or adapted from this document and is intended to convey Ministry advice. It should be read in conjunction with relevant sections of the University's [Child Protection Policy](#).*

## Guidance on identifying possible abuse or neglect

- ▶ Child abuse and neglect can take many forms. While there are different definitions and categories of abuse, the important thing is to consider overall wellbeing and the risk of harm to the child. It is not so important to be able to define or categorise the type of abuse or neglect.
- ▶ It is normal to feel uncertain. The important thing is to recognise when something is wrong, especially if you notice a pattern, or several signs that make you concerned.
- ▶ Indicators of potential abuse may include:
  - *Physical signs* (e.g. unexplained injuries, burns, fractures, unusual or excessive itching, genital injuries, sexually transmitted diseases).
  - *Developmental delays* (e.g. small for their age, cognitive delays, falling behind in school, poor speech and social skills).
  - *Signs of emotional abuse/neglect* (e.g. sleep problems, low self-esteem, obsessive behaviour, inability to cope in social situations, sadness/loneliness and evidence of self-harm).
  - *Behavioural concerns* (e.g. age inappropriate sexual interest or play, fear of a certain person or place, eating disorders/substance abuse, disengagement/neediness, aggression).
  - *Direct allegations or disclosures of abuse from the child.*
- ▶ Indicators of potential neglect may include:
  - *Physical signs* (e.g. looking rough and uncared for, dirty, without appropriate clothing, underweight).
  - *Developmental delays* (e.g., small for their age, cognitive delays, falling behind in school, poor speech and social skills).
  - *Signs of emotional abuse/neglect* (e.g. sleep problems, low self-esteem, obsessive behaviour, inability to cope in social situations, sadness/loneliness and evidence of self-harm).
  - *Behavioural concerns* (e.g. disengagement/neediness, eating disorders/substance abuse, aggression).
  - *Neglectful supervision* (e.g. out and about unsupervised, left alone, no safe home to return to).
  - *Medical neglect* (e.g. persistent nappy rash or skin disorders or other untreated medical issues).
- ▶ Every situation is different and it's important to consider all available information about the child and their environment before reaching conclusions. For example, behavioural concerns may be the result of life events, such as divorce, accidental injury or the arrival of a new sibling.

## Responding to a child when they disclose abuse

1. Listen to the child  
Disclosures by children are often subtle and need to be handled with particular care, including an awareness of the child's cultural identity and how that affects interpretation of their behaviour and language.
2. Reassure the child  
Let the child know that they:
  - are not in trouble, and
  - have done the right thing.
3. Ask open-ended prompts  
- e.g. "What happened next?"  
Do not interview the child (in other words, do not ask questions beyond open prompts for the child to continue).  
  
Do not make promises that can't be kept, e.g., "I will keep you safe now".
4. If the child is visibly distressed  
Provide appropriate reassurance and re-engage in appropriate activities under supervision until they are able to participate in ordinary activities.
5. If the child is not in immediate danger  
Re-involve the child in ordinary activities and explain what you are going to do next.
6. If the child is in immediate danger  
Contact the Police immediately.
7. As soon as possible formally record the disclosure  
Record:
  - word-for-word, what the child said, and
  - the date, time and who was present.

## Recording and notifying the Oranga Tamariki (Ministry of Vulnerable Children) of suspected abuse or neglect

1. Recording  
Formally record:
  - anything said by the child
  - the date, time, location and names of any staff that may be relevant
  - factual concerns or observations that have led to the suspicion of abuse or neglect
  - the action taken by your organisation, and
  - any other information that may be relevant.
2. Decision-making  
Discuss concerns with your manager or supervisor.
3. Notifying authorities  
Notify [Oranga Tamariki \(Ministry of Vulnerable Children\)](#) who will advise further.

4. Storing relevant information

Securely store:

- the record of the concern
- a record of any related discussions (including copies of correspondence where appropriate).
- a record of any advice received
- the action your organisation took, including any rationale, and
- this concern with any earlier concerns, if the notification is based on an accumulation of concerns (rather than a specific incident).