

## 2

## What to do when harm occurs – or if you suspect it

Harm to a child can happen anywhere – including at school, a hospital, playground, shopping centre, park or disability service.

Children and young people with disability experience violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation from both people they know and from strangers. They can also experience these things because of the way some systems, such as schools or organisations, are set up.

While some types of harm may be more visible, such as a child being physically hurt, other types of harm are less so; for example, where a child is excluded from an activity.

To read more, see *Fact Sheet 1: What is violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children and young people with disability*.

All people in contact with children and young people need to know what harm looks like and what to do when they see it occur. This includes parents, neighbours, other children, friends, teachers, support workers, sports coaches and therapists.

This fact sheet will explain what to do if you see harm occur or if you suspect harm may be occurring.

The more people that know what harm looks like – and what to do – the better.

**If you know harm has occurred, it's important not to look away. Even if you are not sure, it's best to do something.**

Your action may bring more attention to the situation and help keep children and young people with disability **safe**.

Things that may concern you:

- A child or young person has told you something disturbing, like someone is hurting them
- A child's behaviour has changed, such as becoming quiet and reserved or hurting themselves
- Changes in a child's enjoyment – they may no longer be happy to go to a particular place, or participate in an activity they used to enjoy
- Physical signs, like bruises.

**Remember, it can be really hard for children and young people with disability to speak up.**

They may feel:

- Unsure
- Embarrassed by what has happened
- Scared of the person harming them
- Like no one will believe them
- That no one will do anything
- Unable to communicate what has happened to them.

It can also be hard for you. It's common to feel embarrassed, worried that your concerns won't be listened to, or that you may be overreacting.

**Acting when children and young people with disability express concerns helps to build trust and could prevent future abuse.**

**What to do if your child, or a child or young person with disability you know, has been abused:**

- Keep calm
- Listen to and support the child or young person
- Reassure the child or young person that they did the right thing by telling you
- Tell them you believe them
- Remove the child from the harmful situation if possible
- Do not contact the perpetrator
- Do not make promises you can't keep
- Contact the appropriate authorities.



## What if you suspect a child has been harmed, but you're not sure?

All of the above points apply, plus:

- Ask other people if they have noticed changes in the child or young person's behaviour or if they have any information
- Create a safe space to talk with the child
- Reassure the child or young person that it is okay to talk about these things and that they will not get in trouble
- Get advice from a disability advocacy organisation.

It can be particularly difficult to respond to abuse from peers. This harm can be in the form of psychological, sexual or physical abuse. It's hard for children and young people with disability to share this with their families, and they are often fearful that intervention will make a difficult situation worse. CYDA's recent National Education Survey results showed that about half of students with disability were bullied at school.

A first point of contact if you suspect there is abuse from peers is the school principal or teacher. You can:

- Ask for a meeting to discuss your concerns and provide these in writing to the school
- Ask the school to develop a safety plan for your child
- Ask your child to identify adult leaders that make them feel safe and include them in the plan.

You may also consider keeping a diary of what your child has told you has happened, with the dates.

If the situation is not resolved at the school you can contact the regional education office or authority, or a disability advocacy organisation.

Often families are fearful of repercussions for their child if they speak out, but abuse is not acceptable. Schools and other settings that children and young people attend have a legal responsibility to keep them safe.

Finally, equip your child – help them with some strategies to deflect or respond if they can; keep communication open so they can trust you to advocate for them; and build their store of positive experiences outside of the place where the bullying is occurring so they feel more resilient.

## What about harm caused by the way policies or organisations work?

It can be hard to know how to respond when your child is experiencing harm caused by the way policies or organisations work. You may feel that the issue is too big for you to fix alone.

However, there are things you can do:

- Ask questions when you think places are not safe, for example: 'Can you tell me more about this?', 'What do you do when this happens?' and 'What training does your staff have?'
- Point out when things are not right. Sometimes people are unaware that the way they're doing things is causing harm and are willing to change.



*Rebecca asked the local council to make sure that fliers about school holiday activities were sent to disability services and special schools, so that all children and families could be aware of what was on offer. While she felt nervous about asking, the vacation care service welcomed her enquiry and responded positively.*

- Find out who the decision-makers are, such as school principals, and ask them to act on issues. Speak up, write letters and send emails.
- Work with an advocacy group or peak body that has experience working on issues. They may have a range of ways for you to get involved, from easy things like signing a petition, to sharing your story, meeting a politician or contacting the media.

Change can happen at a systemic level, though not always as quickly as we would like. Persevering is important, as well as trying different ways to make change happen. This can be hard going, so having the support of others is helpful. It can also be more powerful when people work together.

### More information

This fact sheet may have raised concerns for you or for people you know.

If you have any concerns or you would like support, please contact CYDA on:

**t:** 03 9417 1025 or 1800 222 660 (regional or interstate callers outside Melbourne metro)

**e:** [info@cyda.org.au](mailto:info@cyda.org.au)

For information about providing a submission to the Disability Royal Commission, please visit our website:

<https://www.cyda.org.au/disability-royal-commission>

or the Disability Royal Commission website:

<https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/>