

Responding to Child Welfare Concerns

*Your Role in Knowing When
and What to Report*

MARCH 2017



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INTRODUCTION

Most children and youth grow up in families where they are safe and secure. Others may be abused or neglected – and those children and youth need our help.

Whether they are our own kids, a neighbour's or a stranger's, we all have a role to play in keeping children and youth safe. This booklet tells you how you can help by:

- » Knowing the signs of abuse and neglect, and
- » Knowing what to do when a child or youth may be at risk.

This booklet also tells you what happens after someone makes a report about child abuse or neglect, including the steps a child welfare worker takes to support families and help keep children and youth safe. Finally, it tells you where to get help – for yourself or someone in your family or community.

Child abuse and neglect are serious problems. We all have to work together to prevent them, and take action if we believe a child or youth is being harmed.

This booklet is for everyone in British Columbia who cares about children and youth. Thank you for reading it and learning what you can do. It could make a world of difference to a child or youth.

If you think a child or youth under the age of 19 is being abused or neglected, you have the legal duty to report your concern to a child welfare worker.

Phone 1 800 663 9122 at any time of the day or night. If you are a child or youth and would like to talk to someone, phone the Helpline for Children at 310-1234 at any time of the day or night. The Helpline call is free. You do not need an area code and you do not have to give your name.

If the child or youth under 19 years is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 or your local police.

WHAT IS THE LAW?

In B.C., the law that protects children and youth from abuse and neglect in their homes is the *Child, Family and Community Service Act*. It states that anyone who has concerns about a child's safety and well-being must promptly report that concern to a child welfare worker. In B.C., a child is anyone under the age of 19. Children between the ages of 16 to under 19 years are called youth. Concerns about a youth's safety and well-being must also be promptly reported to a child welfare worker.

The same law gives child welfare workers the authority to help when children or youth are at risk. These workers may be employed by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) or by a Delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Services Agency.

Child welfare workers provide a range of services to families, including child protection, to help keep children and youth safe. They do this in partnership with police and people in the justice, education and health care systems as well as with agencies that provide services to children, youth and families.

Children and youth who suffer abuse and neglect are also often victims of an offence under the *Criminal Code of Canada*. Police respond first when a child or youth is in immediate danger, or when someone has, or is likely to have, committed a crime.

WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

Child abuse can take different forms. It may be physical, sexual, emotional – or the result of neglect.

Physical abuse is any physical action by a person that harms, or could harm, a child or youth. It includes hitting, kicking, slapping, shaking, burning, pinching, biting, choking, throwing, shoving and whipping. It also includes using unreasonable force to punish children or youth or prevent them from harming themselves or others.

The child's or youth's injuries may range from minor bruises, burns, welts or bite marks to broken bones or – in extreme cases – death.

The likelihood of physical harm to a child or youth increases when the child or youth is living in a situation where there is domestic violence by or towards a person with whom the child or youth resides. Domestic violence is a pattern of intentionally coercive and violent behaviour toward an individual with whom there is or has been an intimate relationship. It includes physical abuse such as hitting, slapping, pushing, choking, assault with a weapon, locking out of the house or the threat of physical abuse.

Emotional harm is the most difficult type of harm to recognize. A child or youth is defined as emotionally harmed if they demonstrate severe:

- » Anxiety;
- » Depression;
- » Withdrawal; or
- » Self-destructive or aggressive behaviour.

Reason to believe that a child or youth needs protection from being emotionally harmed may arise due to emotional abuse from a parent. It is best described as a pattern of harmful behaviour. It includes any attitude or action by an adult that is likely to have serious, negative emotional effects on a child or youth. Emotional abuse can include a pattern of:

- » Scapegoating;
- » Rejection;
- » Verbal attacks on the child or youth;
- » Threats;
- » Insults; or
- » Humiliation.

Emotional harm can also happen to a child or youth who is living in a situation where there is domestic violence by or towards a person who lives with the child or youth. Domestic violence may involve physical abuse, threats, verbal insults or psychological abuse such as stalking.

Sexual abuse happens when a person uses a child or youth for sexual purposes. It can include:

- » Sexually touching a child or youth, or inviting a child or youth to touch;
- » Intercourse (vaginal, oral or anal);
- » Threatening sexual acts, obscene gestures or communications, or stalking;
- » Sexual references (words or gestures) to the child’s or youth’s body or behaviour;
- » Asking the child or youth to expose their body for sexual purposes;
- » Exposing the child or youth to sexual activity or material; or
- » Sexual aspects of organized or ritual abuse.

Sexual exploitation happens when a child or youth becomes involved in sexual activity, usually through manipulation or coercion, in exchange for things like money, drugs, food or shelter. Sexual activities include:

- » Sexual acts;
- » Sex for the purpose of entertainment;
- » Escort or massage parlor services; and
- » Appearing in pornographic images.

Children or youth in the sex trade are not prostitutes or criminals. They are victims of sexual exploitation.

Neglect happens when a parent or guardian ignores or overlooks a child’s or youth’s basic needs – to the point where the child or youth is, or could be, harmed. Neglect includes failing to provide a child or youth with food, shelter, basic health care, supervision, nurturing or protection from risks.

WARNING SIGNS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Children and youth who are abused or neglected almost always show signs of what they have been going through. Some of the most common signs are listed below. These are warning signs. They do not always mean that abuse or neglect is happening. But if you do see these signs, you should be concerned.

Physical warning signs may include:

- » Any injury or bruising to a baby who is not crawling or walking yet – especially head or facial injuries;
- » Injuries where there is no explanation, the explanation does not seem to fit with the injuries, or the story keeps changing;
- » Injuries with a pattern or in the shape of an object like a hand, stick, buckle, stove element, etc;
- » Bruising in unusual places, such as the ears, neck, upper arms, back, thighs or buttocks;
- » The child or youth is not seeing a doctor or dentist when needed;
- » Clothing that does not protect the child or youth from the weather;
- » The child or youth looks unwell or hungry, or complains of hunger, or is unusually thin or malnourished;
- » Poor personal hygiene;
- » Unexplained genital or anal injuries; or
- » Sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy, especially in a young child.

Other warning signs may include:

- » Running away from home or being scared to go home;
- » In a young child, not responding to affection or positive attention;
- » Poor self-esteem (for example, when children call themselves bad or say they deserve to be punished);
- » Unexplained setbacks, like toileting problems in a child who has been toilet trained;
- » Extreme aggression or withdrawal;
- » Suicidal thoughts or self-destructive behaviour (such as self-mutilation, a suicide attempt or extreme risk-taking);
- » Foraging for, hoarding or stealing food;
- » Problems at school like poor attendance or trouble paying attention;
- » Delinquent behaviour like drinking, drug use, stealing, fire setting, etc;
- » Showing sexual knowledge not common for their age in their language, behaviour, drawings or play, or forcing another child into sexual play;

- » Withdrawing from family, friends and activities the child or youth used to enjoy;
- » Having unexplained gifts, new clothes or sums of money; or
- » Being secretive about “new” friends, activities, phone calls or Internet use.

Remember: These are warning signs. They do not necessarily mean a child or youth is being abused or neglected. But if you see one or more of these signs you should be concerned.

If you are not sure, call a child welfare worker who will discuss your concerns with you.

IF A CHILD OR YOUTH TELLS YOU THEY HAVE BEEN ABUSED OR NEGLECTED

Sometimes, children or youth who are being abused or neglected will tell someone they trust. If this happens to you:

Stay calm and listen. Let the child or youth tell their story. You may feel angry or shocked or scared, but you need to be calm for the child’s or youth’s sake. That way, they know it is okay to talk about what happened.

Go slowly. Let the child or youth tell you what happened in their own way and at their own pace. Gentle questions such as: “Can you tell me more about what happened?” can help.

Be supportive. Let the child or youth know that:

- » They are not in trouble and have not done anything wrong;
- » They did the right thing by telling you;
- » You are sorry this has happened to them;
- » You will do everything you can to help; and
- » You know other people who can help them, too.

Get only the basic facts. You do not need a lot of details. You just need to know what happened in general. Remember that the child or youth may have to tell their story to a child welfare worker, and maybe the police, too. And it is hard to have to talk about abuse or neglect again and again.

Tell the child or youth what will happen next. Let them know you will be talking to a child welfare worker, and possibly the police, who may need to come and talk to them.

If the child or youth asks questions, answer what you can. If you do not know the answer, it is okay to say, “I do not know” or “We can ask the child welfare worker about that.” Do not promise to keep it a secret.

IF YOU BELIEVE A CHILD OR YOUTH MAY BE AT RISK OF CHILD ABUSE OR NEGLECT

- » If a child or youth tells you they have been abused or neglected – or if you have a reason to believe a child or youth is being harmed – call a child welfare worker. *Phone 1 800 663 9122 at any time of the day or night.*
- » You do not need proof. Just report what you know.
- » If you are not sure, or if you have questions, or if you think someone else has already made a report, or if you think a child welfare worker is already involved, you should still call.
- » If you are unsure that the parent is unable or unwilling to protect the child or youth you should report your concerns and the child welfare worker will assess the information further.
- » *If the child or youth is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 or your local police.*

YOUR DUTY TO REPORT

Under B.C. law you have a duty to report your concerns if you have reason to believe a child or youth has been, or is likely to be, abused or neglected. "Reason to believe" means that, based on what you have seen, or information you have, you believe a child or youth could be at risk and you are concerned about the child's/youth's safety and well-being. The duty to report includes youth who are under the age of 19.

Circumstances That Must Be Reported Are:

- » A child or youth has been, or is likely to be, physically harmed, sexually abused or sexually exploited by a parent or another person and the parent is unwilling or unable to protect the child or youth;
- » The child or youth has been or is likely to be physically harmed because of neglect by the child's/youth's parent;
- » The child or youth is emotionally harmed by the parent's conduct;
- » The child or youth is deprived of necessary health care;
- » The child's or youth's development is likely to be seriously impaired by a treatable condition and the child's/youth's parent refuses to provide or consent to treatment;
- » The child's or youth's parent is unable or unwilling to care for the child/youth and has not made adequate provisions for the child's/youth's care;
- » The child or youth is or has been absent from home in circumstances that endanger the child's/youth's safety or well-being;
- » The child's or youth's parent is dead and adequate provision has not been made for the child's/youth's care;
- » The child or youth has been abandoned and adequate provision has not been made for the child's/youth's care; or
- » The child or youth is emotionally harmed or likely to be physically harmed due to living in a situation where there is domestic violence by or towards a person with whom the child or youth resides.

If you are not sure about whether to make a report, you can contact a child welfare worker to discuss your concerns without mentioning any names, phone numbers or addresses including your own. The child welfare worker will determine — based on your conversation — whether or not the situation needs to be reported, and will let you know.

What to Expect When You Make a Report

The person you speak to will be a child welfare worker, specially trained in responding to reports of child abuse and neglect. The child welfare worker will ask you for basic information, such as:

- » The child's or youth's name, age and location;
- » Any immediate concerns for the child's or youth's safety;
- » Why you think the child or youth is at risk;
- » What the child or youth has said;
- » Any info about the child's or youths parents and/or the alleged offender(s);
- » Whether any other children or youth may be affected;
- » Whether the child or youth has any disabilities or speaks a language other than English; and
- » The names of other people or agencies involved with the child, youth and/or family.

Do not wait until you have all this information. Just tell the child welfare worker what you know. They will also ask for your name and phone number, and how you know the child or youth. If you do not want to give your name or phone number, that is okay. If you do, every effort will be made to keep your name confidential.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU MAKE A REPORT

A child welfare worker will look into your report and decide on the best way to keep the child or youth safe. The worker may be with the Ministry of Children and Family Development, or with a Delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Services Agency that specializes in helping Aboriginal children and families.

If the child or youth is at immediate risk of harm, the child welfare worker – and others, such as police, family and community members – will act right away to keep the child or youth safe.

If the child or youth is NOT at immediate risk but needs help, the child welfare worker may offer supports for the family, or connect them with others who can help in their community.

Keeping Children and Youth Safe

Child welfare workers work directly with families and the people who support them (like friends, relatives and community members). When responding to reports of suspected child abuse and neglect, child welfare workers choose the best way to help keep the child or youth safe. For example:

- » They may use a family development response. That means they work out a plan with the family that will strengthen the family's ability to help keep the child or youth safe. That plan could involve using services available in the community so that the child or youth can live at home safely.
- » If the child is 16 or older and disconnected from family, they may use a youth service response. That involves providing support and services to the youth and the family until they can safely be together again, or the youth can live independently through a youth services agreement.
- » In other cases, the child welfare worker may start an investigation. This involves seeing and talking to the child or youth and people who know the child or youth, such as parents, extended family, a teacher, doctor or child-care provider. If the child or youth is Aboriginal, their band or community may also be involved.

Children and youth can only be removed from their homes if nothing less disruptive will protect them. If this happens, a court process starts. A Family Court Judge hears evidence from all sides and then decides where the child or youth will live until the child or youth can safely return home. Usually the child or youth will stay with family members, friends or a foster family during this time.

Planning and decision making processes such as family group conferences, mediation or traditional ways of bringing families and communities together can be used to make plans to keep children and youth safe without having to go to court.

HOW CAN WE HELP PREVENT CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

As parents, family and community members, we are all responsible for making sure children and youth are safe and well-cared for. Here are some simple things that everyone can do.

Parents:

- » Know your limits. Parenting is hard work. Everyone gets stressed now and then – and everyone needs a break sometimes. Arrange for someone you trust to care for your child and go for a walk.
- » If you need help, ask for it. If family and friends are not available, ask someone you trust like your family doctor. Or call a child welfare worker. *Phone 1 800 663-9122 at any time of the day or night.*
- » Learn about positive parenting and healthy ways to discipline your children and youth. There are many Internet sites with lots of information for parents including the Ministry of Children and Family Development site: www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/public-safety/protecting-children

Family and friends:

- » Offer to baby-sit, or be there to support a parent who needs help.
- » Take a stressed parent out for coffee or a walk to talk about what is going on.
- » Learn about supports in your community and share the information with a parent who is struggling. Let them know it is okay to ask for help, and that there are others who can lend a hand.

Everyone:

- » Know the warning signs of child abuse and neglect. If you think a child or youth may be harmed, call a child welfare worker. *Phone 1 800 663-9122 at any time of the day or night. If you are a child or youth and would like to talk to someone call the Helpline for children at 310-1234. The Helpline call is free. You don't need an area code and you do not have to give your name.*

- » Know that the duty to report applies to concerns for youth under the age of 19.

Never:

- » *Shake a baby or young child – it can cause brain damage, blindness or death;*
- » *Discipline a child or youth when your anger is out of control; or*
- » *Leave a young child alone, even for a short time.*

IF YOU NEED HELP

Call a child welfare worker 1 800 663-9122 or the Helpline for Children at 310-1234. The Helpline call is free. You do not need an area code. And you can call any time of day or night.

On The Other End of The Phone

When you call the Helpline, you will reach a child welfare worker who is ready to listen, help and take action. These workers care about what is going on, and it is their job to help children, youth and families who are having problems.

Anyone Can Call The Helpline at 310-1234

Children and youth – Children and youth who are being abused or neglected, or just need to talk to someone, can call for help.

Parents – Parents who are hurting their children/youth or worried they might hurt them can call for help and learn about community supports.

Relatives, friends and community members – Anyone who thinks a child or youth is, or may be, abused or neglected has a legal duty to report their concern to a child welfare worker.

How to Contact a Child Welfare Worker

In any community in B.C. at any time of the day or night.

Phone 1 800 663-9122

Telephone Device for the Deaf (TDD)

Call toll-free 1 866 660-0505, province-wide and 24 hours a day.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Parent Support Services of BC

Parent Support Services of BC is a non-profit, volunteer-based society whose mandate is preventing child abuse and promoting healthy parent-child relationships by supporting parents, families and communities. www.parentsupportbc.ca
Phone: 1 800 665-6880

BC Council for Families

The BC Council for Families is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that supports families by providing resources, education and training to strengthen family relationships. www.bccf.ca
Vancouver: 604 678-8884

VictimLINK BC

VictimLINK BC provides help for anyone who has been a victim of crime. You can call from anywhere in the province at any time of the day or night, toll free. The call is kept confidential and you can remain anonymous. There are people who can talk to you in the language you speak best. The service is also TTY accessible: www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime/victimlinkbc

Phone: 1 800 563-0808 toll free or 604-875-0885
(to call collect, dial the Telus Relay Service at 711)

Representative for Children and Youth

Responsibilities of the Representative include advocating and supporting children and youth, protecting their rights, and making the child protection system more responsive, particularly for those who are most vulnerable. www.rcybc.ca
Phone: 1 800 476-3933 (*Confidential, for all of B.C.*)

Complaint Resolution Process for the Ministry of Children and Family Development

If you don't agree with a decision or action of the ministry, you can make a complaint to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. For more information about the complaint resolution process, click on: www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/employment-business/employment-standards-advice/employment-

standards/complaint-process

or call your nearest Ministry of Children and Family Development office and ask for the person responsible for responding to complaints.

Complaint Resolution Processes for the Delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Services Agencies

Each delegated agency has its own complaint resolution process. Contact the agency for more information. Contact information for delegated Aboriginal child and family service agencies can be found in the white pages, or online at:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/download/36BF9B57E34D428EAADC098A5EDAD19E>

Ombudsperson

The Ombudsperson receives questions and complaints about the services provided by public agencies. The Ombudsperson can conduct investigations to determine if a public agency is being fair to the people it serves. *www.bcombudsperson.ca*

Phone: 1 800 567-3247 (*all of B.C.*)

Public Guardian and Trustee of British Columbia

The Public Guardian and Trustee protects the legal and financial interests of minors and acts in the roles of Trustee, Guardian of Estate and Litigation Guardian. *www.trustee.bc.ca*

Phone: 1 604 660-4444

If you think a child or youth under the age of 19 is being abused or neglected, you have the legal duty to report your concern to a child welfare worker. Phone 1 800 663 9122 at any time of the day or night.

If the child or youth is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 or your local police.

If you think a child or youth under the age of 19 is being abused or neglected, you have the legal duty to report your concern to a child welfare worker. Phone 1 800 663 9122 at any time of the day or night.

If the child or youth is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 or your local police.

*To report a concern about suspected child abuse or neglect call a child welfare worker.
Phone 1 800 663 9122 at any time of day or night.
For more information see our website at:
www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/public-safety/protecting-children*

