What does it mean?

A guide for families and carers about how the Department for Child Protection helps keep children safe
Keeping our children safe

Being a parent is a big job. It is rewarding, exciting and sometimes stressful. Raising a family and providing the best possible care for children is not always easy. Most families need help from time to time from friends, relatives or professionals.

Sometimes things can go wrong and families experience problems. In some families things get out of hand and children can get hurt. Sometimes children and young people do not get the care they need. They may be emotionally and physically hurt by the people who look after them. Sometimes parents or caregivers are unable or unwilling to keep their children safe.

We are all responsible for keeping children safe.

‘Child maltreatment’ is the term used to describe physical, sexual or emotional abuse and neglect of children. These types of abuse often occur together, and can have a detrimental effect on the child’s physical or emotional health, development and well being.

The effects of child abuse can be visible, but often they may take the form of depression, low self-esteem, or poor relationships with other people. Child abuse can affect the whole family and may occur from one generation to another. Some studies show links between child abuse and teenage suicide, juvenile offending and truancy.
The Department for Child Protection

Protecting children is a major role of the Department for Child Protection. When someone reports that a child has been harmed, the Department has a legal responsibility to investigate this.

To protect children from harm, the Department works with other organisations, the community and families.

Parents and families have the important job of caring for children. The Department supports families carrying out this role. Where parents or caregivers cannot care for their children and keep them safe, the Department will work with you.

If a criminal offence has occurred, the Department must report this to the police and there will be a joint investigation.
Investigating concerns about harm to children

If the Department for Child Protection believes a child or young person has been harmed or is at risk of significant harm, the Department does a ‘child protection investigation and assessment’.

The aim of this is to work out whether a child has experienced significant harm.

The Department will investigate the circumstances that led to the abuse or harm, who was responsible for harming the child and what needs to happen to make sure the child is safe. The Department will also look at the areas in which the family is doing well and the areas where the family needs more support.

The whole community is responsible for keeping children safe. Anyone can contact the Department about a child at risk of harm. Sometimes the information may have come from you as a parent, people in the local community, a relative, a friend, a school teacher or a doctor.

It is against the law for Department staff to tell you who made the report.
The first meeting

Usually two field officers will meet with your family to follow up on the reported concerns received about your child/ren. During the first meeting the field officers will:

• explain their role and the Department’s legal responsibilities in child protection
• identify concerns that have been reported about your child/ren
• give you the chance to say how you see what has happened and to provide information that will assist with the investigation
• identify with you the current strengths, concerns and/or pressures that your family may be experiencing, and how this may be impacting on the well being of your child/ren
• work with you, where necessary, to make an immediate safety plan to ensure that your child/ren receive adequate care and protection
• talk with your child/ren (sometimes field officers will have spoken with our child/ren before they contact you - if this happens you will be told the reasons why explained)
• sight and check your child for injuries (if deemed necessary)
• record all discussions that are part of the child protection assessment.

What can I do?

As a parent or caregiver you will want to do all you can to make sure that your child is well cared for and safe. It is important for you to work with the field officers to find ways to solve any problems affecting your child.

It is useful if you work with the Department and provide accurate information about your child and your family situation so they can help you. You may choose, however, not to discuss your concerns with the Department if you so wish.

Tell the field officers if there is someone you would like them to talk to so they can get a better picture of your family life.
What happens next?

The field officers may need to look into your child’s situation further. If so they will:

• arrange more meetings to talk to you and your child
• get in touch with other people who can give their views on your child’s situation
• work with you to identify ways to support your child and family
• arrange for a doctor or other specialist to examine your child (if necessary).

Depending on the situation and level of risk to the child, action may be taken quickly. Most ‘child protection investigations and assessments’ will be finished within a month. However, you will be told if it will take longer.

The field officers will ask for your views and take them into account when making decisions. They will keep you informed of decisions that affect you or your family. You will be consulted and advised in writing of the result of the Department’s investigation and of any decisions made by the Department. It is important that you fully understand what is happening and that you are able to have your views understood. If English is not your first language an interpreter can be arranged.

What if my child has not been harmed?

If there is no indication that your child has been harmed the case will be closed, and a record made to that effect. However, if you require further support services, or referrals to other agencies to provide assistance and support, this can be provided.
What if my child has been harmed?

If the Department believes your child has been significantly harmed or is in danger of being significantly harmed, the Department will make sure the child is cared for and protected.

In many cases this might involved giving your family practical help such as organising child care, counselling, parenting information or information on health and other services.

If the situation is more serious, the Department will work with your family to develop a safety plan to protect your child or children from any further harm. This plan may include referrals to support services and counselling. In some cases the person believed to have harmed your child may need to leave the family home. In others it may mean that someone else cares for your child until it is safe for your child to come home.

Usually when children cannot live at home they are placed with extended family or when this is not possible with a foster family. Field officers will make arrangements for parents and other people important to the child to have ongoing contact during the time they are away from home.

The Department will work with families to try to reunite them with their children as soon as the child’s safety can be assured.
What action might the Department take?

As a last resort, when parents or caregivers cannot protect their children from harm, the Department may apply to the Children’s Court for an order in relation to the protection and/or care of the children.

For children who have been seriously harmed this may mean that the Department becomes their legal guardian and is responsible for deciding where and with whom they will live.

Field officers will advise if the Department plans to take this step. As the child’s parent you will be involved with this process and as such are strongly encouraged to get some legal advice. Please see the back page for contact phone numbers for legal services.
What if I disagree with the Department?

You may believe that the Department has made the wrong decision, or you may not be satisfied with the way the Department is working with you and your child. In these instances you are able to take any of the following steps:

- Explain your concerns to the field officers who are working with your family.
- Contact their team leader to discuss their concerns - the team leader supervises the work done of the field officers who are working with you and your child.
- Contact the office manager to discuss your concerns - this person supervises the work done in that Department office.
- Ask the field worker, team leader or office manager for the decisions and assessments made as part of the child protection investigation to be independently reviewed by a manager from another Departmental office.

If you are still not satisfied you can contact the Department’s Consumer Advocacy Service on (08) 9222 2594 or free call 1800 013 311. The staff there will listen to your complaint, and advise you about the Department’s processes and decision making. If you have been unsuccessful in negotiating with staff in the District office the Consumer Advocacy Service can act on your behalf and keep you informed. The Consumer Advocacy Service can also advise you regarding external avenues of appeal to the Ombudsman and the Minister for Child Protection; Communities; Women’s Interests; Seniors and Volunteering.

In cases before the Children’s Court you can also make application to the court for decisions about placement and contact.
What records does the Department keep?

As a government agency, the Department for Child Protection must keep paper and electronic records of contact with children and families, including child maltreatment allegations and investigations.

These records are confidential and are maintained for case management purposes. These records can be accessed by departmental staff if there are further concerns about harm to a child. They will also need to be considered if you apply to adopt a child, to be a foster carer or make an application for paid, unpaid or volunteer work with children for whom the Department has a role or concern.

Where can I get further information?

It is important that you understand what is happening, and why your family is being visited. If you don’t understand, ask the field officer to explain.

If you are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person you can also ask to speak with an Aboriginal worker.

The Department has a Crisis Care Unit that can be contacted after hours on (08) 9223 1111 or free call 1800 199 008.

For people with a hearing impairment contact TTY (08) 9325 1232.

If English is not your first language an interpreter can be arranged through Translating and Interpreting Services (TIS 13 14 50).
Department for Child Protection

Metropolitan offices

Armadale (08) 9497 6555
Cannington (08) 9351 0888
Fremantle (08) 9431 8800
Joondalup (08) 9301 3600
Midland (08) 9274 9411
Mirrabooka (08) 9344 9666
Perth (08) 9214 2444
Rockingham (08) 9527 0100

Country offices

Albany (08) 9841 0777
Broome (08) 9192 1317
Bunbury (08) 9722 5000
Bussetlon (08) 9752 3666
Carnarvon (08) 9941 1244
Collie (08) 9734 1699
Derby (08) 9191 1577
Esperance (08) 9083 2566
Fitzroy Crossing (08) 9191 5002
Geraldton (08) 9921 0768
Halls Creek (08) 9168 6114
Kalgoorlie (08) 9022 0700
Karratha (08) 9185 0200
Katanning (08) 9821 9000
Kununurra (08) 9168 0333
Laverton (08) 9031 1104
Leonora (08) 9037 6132
Mandurah (08) 9535 6688
Manjimup (08) 9771 1711
Meekatharra (08) 9981 1104
Merredin (08) 9041 1622
Moora (08) 9651 1100
Mullewa (08) 9961 1004
Narrogin (08) 9881 0123
Newman (08) 9175 1051
Norseman (08) 9039 1129
Northam (08) 9621 0400
Onslow (08) 9184 6005
Roebourne (08) 9182 1208
South Hedland (08) 9140 2433
Southern Cross (08) 9049 1016
TomPrice/Paraburdoo (08) 9189 1592
Wyndham (08) 9161 1110

Other departmental services

Crisis Care (08) 9223 1111
Free call 1800 199 008
Family Helpline (08) 9223 1100
Free call 1800 643 000

Non departmental services

Aboriginal Legal Services (08) 9265 6666
Family Law Helpline (08) 9488 1300
Free call 1300 729 910
Legal Aid Information Line 1300 650 579
Perth Children’s Court (08) 9218 0100