

Safety of children with a disability

All children are vulnerable but some children need special care and protection to ensure they are safe – children with a disability have an increased risk of being abused.

It is unlawful to discriminate against children with a disability and like all children, children with a disability have the right to participate in decision-making that affects them.

In Victoria, mandatory child safe standards have been introduced to help protect children from abuse in organisations. In complying with the standards, organisations must promote the safety of children with a disability. It is your responsibility to uphold the legal and human rights of children with a disability to ensure they are safe when in your care.

Children with a disability are more vulnerable to harm and abuse such as harassment, bullying, humiliation, physical and sexual abuse. This can be due to:

- social isolation
- limited provision of developmentally appropriate sexual and relationship information
- low levels of expectation held about their capacity to identify and report concerns
- inaccessible pathway to raise issues, concerns and complaints
- communication difficulties
- personal care needs requiring the involvement of different people and various levels of supervision
- signs of abuse being viewed as being related to the child's disability.

Each child is different and will experience their disability and the world differently – it is important not to stereotype or make assumptions. It can be hard for a child with a disability to make themselves heard or understood.

What you can do to help keep children with a disability safe in your organisation:

- Ensure your organisation has a child safe culture in which abuse and harm is not tolerated and diversity is welcomed.
- Pre-empt unsafe situations via your risk assessment processes.
- Ensure you have sound recruitment and screening processes in place for staff and volunteers.
- Ensure your code of conduct for staff and volunteers clearly outlines boundaries about staff and volunteer interaction with children with a disability, including personal care assistance.
- Have a robust complaint process, encourage feedback and be responsive if problems arise.
- Empower children with a disability by assisting them to build their self-esteem and confidence.

A child's disability does not reduce their need for cultural respect and competency.



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- Teach children about their bodies and their safety, including online activities (sex and relationships education).
- Enable and facilitate independence with dressing and toileting and personal care where possible.
- Communicate directly with children with a disability about how safe they feel.
- Be inclusive and collaborative with families.
- Raise awareness about abuse and ways to seek help. Make sure children with a disability know who they can go to if they feel unsafe or have a concern or complaint – make sure these processes take into account the child's developmental level and communication requirements.
- If children have communication difficulties, organisational procedure must ensure vigilance in identifying indicators or warning signs. Listen to children, no matter how they communicate their thoughts, views and concerns.

'When students experienced abuse, they said the most helpful thing was being believed and having action taken to resolve the situation.'

Robinson, S. & McGovern, D. (2014) *Safe at School? Exploring safety and harm of students with cognitive disability in and around school*. Lismore, Centre for Children and Young People.

Useful resources

Davis Miller and Jon Brown, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), United Kingdom, *'We have the right to be safe' Protecting disabled children from abuse*, October 2014

Government of South Australia, Department for Education and Child Development, Families SA, *Protecting children and young people with disability: a booklet for parents and carers*, August 2012

State of South Australia, Ministerial Advisory Committee: *Students with Disabilities, A guide to protecting children and young people with disability and preventing sexual abuse: For parents and carers*, 2012

Robinson, S. & McGovern, D. (2014) *Safe at School? Exploring safety and harm of students with cognitive disability in and around school*. Lismore, Centre for Children and Young People. Report completed for the NSW Law and Justice Foundation.

