

Child Safety Reporting Obligations Policy and Procedures

PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that all staff and members of our school community understand the various legal and other reporting obligations related to child safety that apply to Northcote High School. The specific procedures that are applicable at our school are contained at Appendix A.

SCOPE

This policy applies to all school staff, volunteers and school community members. It also applies to all staff and students engaged in any school and school council-run events, activities and services

POLICY

All children and young people have the right to protection in their best interests.

Northcote High School understands the important role our school plays in protecting children from abuse including:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse (including sexual exploitation)
- Family violence
- Emotional abuse
- Neglect (including medical neglect)
- Grooming

The staff at Northcote High School are required by law to comply with various child safety reporting obligations. For detailed information about each obligation, please refer to [Identifying and Responding to All Forms of Abuse in Victorian Schools](#).

At Northcote High School we also recognise the diversity of the children and young people at our school and take account of their individual needs and backgrounds when considering child safety.

Mandatory Reporting

Principals, registered teachers, registered medical practitioners, nurses and all members of the police force are mandatory reporters under the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic).

All mandatory reporters must make a report to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Child Protection as soon as practicable if, during the course of carrying out their professional roles and responsibilities, they form a belief on reasonable grounds that:

- a child has suffered, or is likely to suffer, significant harm as a result of physical abuse and/ or sexual abuse, and
- the child's parents have not protected, or are unlikely to protect, the child from harm of that type.

A mandatory reporter who fails to comply with this legal obligation may be committing a criminal offence. It is important for all staff at Northcote High School to be aware that they are legally obliged to make a mandatory report on each occasion that they form a reasonable belief that a child is in need of protection and they must make a mandatory report even if the principal does not share their belief that a report is necessary.

At our school, all mandated school staff must undertake the *Mandatory Reporting and Other Obligations eLearning Module* annually. It is also highly recommended that non-mandated staff also complete the training.

For more information about Mandatory Reporting see the Department's *School Policy and Advisory Guide*: [Child Protection – Reporting Obligations](#).

Child in need of protection

Any person can make a report to DHHS Child Protection (131 278 – 24 hour service) if they believe on reasonable grounds that a child is in need of protection.

The policy of the Department of Education and Training (DET) requires **all staff** who form a reasonable belief that a child is in need of protection to report their concerns to DHHS or Victoria Police, and discuss their concerns with the school leadership team.

For more information about making a report to DHHS Child Protection, see the Department's *School Policy and Advisory Guide*: [Child Protection – Making a Report and Four Critical Actions for Schools: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures and Suspicions of Child Abuse](#).

At Northcote High School we also encourage all staff to make a referral to Child FIRST when they have significant concern for a child's wellbeing. For more information about making a referral to Child FIRST see the *School Policy and Advisory Guide: Child Protection – Reporting Obligations*.

Reportable Conduct

Our school must notify the Department's Employee Conduct Branch (9637 2594) if we become aware of an allegation of 'reportable conduct'.

There is an allegation of reportable conduct where a person has formed a reasonable belief that there has been:

- a sexual offence (even prior to criminal proceedings commencing), sexual misconduct or physical violence committed against, with or in the presence of a child;
- behaviour causing significant emotional or physical harm to a child;
- significant neglect of a child; or
- misconduct involving any of the above.

The Department, through the Employee Conduct Branch, has a legal obligation to inform the Commission for Children and Young People when an allegation of reportable conduct is made.

Our principal must notify the Department's Employee Conduct Branch of any reportable conduct allegations involving current or former teachers, contractors, volunteers (including parents), allied health staff and school council employees.

If school staff become aware of reportable conduct by any person in the above positions, they should notify the school principal immediately. If the allegation relates to the principal, they should notify the Regional Director.

For more information about Reportable Conduct see the Department's *School Policy and Advisory Guide*: [Reportable Conduct Scheme](#).

Failure to disclose offence

Reporting child sexual abuse is a community-wide responsibility. All adults (ie persons aged 18 years and over), not just professionals who work with children, have a legal obligation to report to Victoria Police, as soon as practicable, where they form a 'reasonable belief' that a sexual offence has been committed by an adult against a child under the age of 16 by another person aged 18 years or over.

Failure to disclose information to Victoria Police (by calling 000 or local police station) as soon as practicable may amount to a criminal offence unless a person has a 'reasonable excuse' or exemption from doing so.

"Reasonable belief" is not the same as having proof. A 'reasonable belief' is formed if a reasonable person in the same position would have formed the belief on the same grounds.

For example, a 'reasonable belief' might be formed when:

- a child states that they have been sexually abused
- a child states that they know someone who has been sexually abused (sometimes the child may be talking about themselves)
- someone who knows a child states that the child has been sexually abused
- professional observations of the child's behaviour or development leads a mandated professional to form a belief that the child has been sexually abused
- signs of sexual abuse leads to a belief that the child has been sexually abused.

"Reasonable excuse" is defined by law and includes:

- fear for the safety of any person including yourself or the potential victim (but not including the alleged perpetrator or an organisation)
- where the information has already been disclosed, for example, through a mandatory report to DHHS Child Protection.

For more information about this reporting obligation, see the Department's *School Policy and Advisory Guide*: [Failure to disclose offence](#).

Failure to protect offence

This reporting obligation applies to school staff in a position of authority. This can include principals, assistant principals and campus principals. Any staff member in a position of authority who becomes aware that an adult associated with their school (such as an employee, contractor, volunteer or visitor) poses a risk of sexual abuse to a child under the age of 16 under their care, authority or supervision, must take all reasonable steps to remove or reduce that risk.

This may include removing the adult (ie persons aged 18 years and over) from working with children pending an investigation and reporting your concerns to Victoria Police.

If a school staff member in a position of authority fails to take reasonable steps in these circumstances, this may amount to a criminal offence.

For more information about this reporting obligation, see the Department's *School Policy and Advisory Guide*: [Failure to protect offence](#).

Grooming

Grooming is a criminal offence under the *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic). This offence targets predatory conduct undertaken by an adult to prepare a child, under the age of 16, to engage in sexual activity at a later time. Grooming can include communicating and/or attempting to befriend or establish a relationship or other emotional connection with the child or their parent/carer.

For more information about this offence and reporting obligations see: [Child Exploitation and Grooming](#).

RELATED POLICIES AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Child Safety Policy located on our website

REVIEW CYCLE

This policy was last updated on 27/11/18 and is scheduled for review on November 2020

APPENDIX A

CHILD SAFETY REPORTING PROCEDURES AT NORTHCOTE HIGH SCHOOL

For students

- All students should feel safe to speak to any staff member to raise any concerns about their safety or any other concerns that they have.
- If a student does not know who to approach at Northcote High School they should start with any member of the principal team or the student wellbeing team.

Managing disclosures made by students

When managing a disclosure you should:

- listen to the student and allow them to speak
- stay calm and use a neutral tone with no urgency and where possible use the child's language and vocabulary (you do not want to frighten the child or interrupt the child)
- be gentle, patient and non-judgmental throughout
- highlight to the student it was important for them to tell you about what has happened
- assure them that they are not to blame for what has occurred
- do not ask leading questions, for example gently ask, "What happened next?" rather than "Why?"
- be patient and allow the child to talk at their own pace and in their own words
- do not pressure the child into telling you more than they want to, they will be asked a lot of questions by other professionals and it is important not to force them to retell what has occurred multiple times
- reassure the child that you believe them and that disclosing the matter was important for them to do
- use verbal facilitators such as, "I see", restate the child's previous statement, and use non-suggestive words of encouragement, designed to keep the child talking in an open-ended way ("what happened next?")
- tell the child in age appropriate language you are required to report to the relevant authority to help stop the abuse, and explain the role of these authorities if appropriate (for a young child this may be as simple as saying "I will need to talk to people to work out what to do next to help you").

When managing a disclosure you should AVOID:

- displaying expressions of panic or shock
- asking questions that are investigative and potentially invasive (this may make the child feel uncomfortable and may cause the child to withdraw)

- going over the information repeatedly (you are only gathering information to help you form a belief on reasonable grounds that you need to make a report to the relevant authority)
- making any comments that would lead the student to believe that what has happened is their fault
- making promises to the child about what will occur next or that things will be different given the process can be unpredictable and different for each child depending on their circumstances (instead reassure them that you and others will do your best to help).

General procedures

Our school will follow the [Four Critical Actions for Schools: Responding to Incidents, Disclosures and Suspicions of Child Abuse](#) (Four Critical Actions) when responding to incidents, disclosures and suspicions of child abuse.

All staff at our school who believe that a child is in need of protection, even if it doesn't meet the threshold required for mandatory reporting or the staff member is not a mandatory reporter, should in the first instance, speak to the student wellbeing team or should make the required reports to DHHS Child Protection and/or Victoria Police as necessary.

At our school the Assistant Principal's will be responsible for monitoring overall school compliance with this procedure.

Nothing in this procedure prevents a staff member or any other person from reporting to the relevant authorities if they form a reasonable belief that a child is at risk of abuse.

Reporting suspicions, disclosures or incidents of child abuse

Responsibilities of all school staff

If a school staff member reasonably suspects or witnesses an incident of child abuse or receives a disclosure of child abuse, they must:

- If a child is at immediate risk of harm, separate alleged victims and others involved, administer first aid and call 000.
- Speak to the principal/a member of the leadership team/wellbeing team as soon as possible, who will follow the [Four Critical Actions](#).
- Make detailed notes of the incident or disclosure and ensure that those notes are kept and stored securely in a locked office filing cabinet. [optional but recommended: using the [Responding to Suspected Child Abuse: Template](#)]
- If the staff member has formed a 'reasonable belief' that a sexual offence has been against a child, then a report must be made to Victoria Police. The staff member should report this to a member of the principal/student wellbeing team.
- NB. While at Northcote High School we support staff by passing the responsibility to report to DHHS/Victoria Police to a member of the principal/student wellbeing team, it is important to note, any staff member can make a mandatory report when they have

formed a reasonable belief that a student has suffered physical and/or sexual abuse from which the child's parents have not protected the child.

In circumstances where a member of the principal/student wellbeing team disagrees that a report needs to be made, but the staff member has formed a 'reasonable belief' that the child is in need of protection and/or has been the victim of sexual abuse, the staff member must still contact DHHS Child Protection and/or Victoria Police to make the report.

The Principal team and the members of the student wellbeing team are responsible for promptly managing the school's response to an incident, suspicion or disclosure of child abuse, and ensuring that the incident, suspicion or disclosure is taken seriously. They are also responsible for responding appropriately to a child who makes or is affected by an allegation of child abuse.

If the Principal or student wellbeing team receive a report from school staff member or member of the school community of a suspicion, disclosure or incident of child abuse, they must:

- Follow the [Four Critical Actions](#) as soon as possible, including:
 - Responding to an emergency
 - Reporting to authorities/referring to services
 - Contacting parents/carers and
 - Providing ongoing support.
- Make detailed notes of the incident or disclosure, including actions taken using the [Responding to Suspected Child Abuse: Template](#) and ensure that those notes are kept and stored securely in a locked office filing cabinet. They are also responsible for ensuring that any staff member who reported the incident, disclosure or suspicion to them also makes and keeps notes of the incident.

Duty of care and ongoing support for students

Fulfilling the requirements in this procedure does not displace or discharge any other obligations that arise if a person reasonably believes that a child is at risk of abuse.

All staff have a duty of care to take reasonable steps to prevent reasonably foreseeable harm to students. All staff must ensure that the principal/student wellbeing teams are made aware of any incidents, suspicions or disclosures of child abuse as soon as possible after they occur. This will allow appropriate supports to be put in place for the student affected.

For school visitors, volunteers and school community members

All community members aged 18 years or over should be aware of their legal obligations – see *Failure to disclose offence* above, in this Policy.

Any person can make a report to DHHS Child Protection if they believe on reasonable grounds that a child is in need of protection. For contact details see the Four Critical Actions - https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/health/protect/FourCriticalActions_ChildAbuse.pdf

There is no requirement for community members to inform the school if they are making a disclosure to DHHS Child Protection or the Victoria Police. However, where a community member is concerned about the safety of a child or children at the school, and where disclosure of that concern will not compromise any potential police investigation, the community member should report this concern to the Principal so that appropriate steps to support the student can be taken.

APPENDIX B: FOUR CRITICAL ACTIONS

FOUR CRITICAL ACTIONS FOR SCHOOLS

Responding to Incidents, Disclosures and Suspicions of Child Abuse

YOU MUST TAKE ACTION

As a school staff member, you play a **critical role** in protecting children in your care.

- You **must** act, by following the Four Critical Actions, as soon as you witness an incident, receive a disclosure or form a reasonable belief* that a child has, or is at risk of being abused.
- You **must** act if you form a suspicion¹ or reasonable belief, even if you are unsure and have not directly observed child abuse (e.g. if the victim or another person tells you about the abuse).
- It is strongly recommended that you use the **Responding to Suspected Child Abuse template** to keep clear and comprehensive notes, even if you make a decision not to report.

*A reasonable belief is a deliberately low threshold. This enables authorities to investigate and take action.

1 RESPONDING TO AN EMERGENCY

If there is no risk of immediate harm go to **Action 2**.

If a child is at immediate risk of harm you **must** ensure their safety by:

- separating alleged victims and others involved
- administering first aid
- calling **000 for urgent medical and/or police assistance** to respond to immediate health or safety concerns
- identifying a contact person at the school for future liaison with Police.

Where necessary you may also need to maintain the integrity of the potential crime scene and preserve evidence.

2 REPORTING TO AUTHORITIES / REFERRING TO SERVICES

As soon as immediate health and safety concerns are addressed you **must** report all incidents, suspicions and disclosures of child abuse as soon as possible. Failure to report physical and sexual child abuse may amount to a criminal offence.

Q Where does the source of suspected abuse come from?

WITHIN THE SCHOOL

VICTORIA POLICE
You **must** report all instances of suspected child abuse involving a school staff member, contractor, volunteer or visitor to Victoria Police.

You **must also** report **internally** to:

GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

- School principal and/or leadership team
- Employee Conduct Branch
- DET Security Services Unit.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

- School principal and/or leadership team
- Diocesan education office.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- School principal and/or school chaplain
- Commission for Children and Young People on **1300 782 878**.

All allegations of 'reportable conduct' **must** be reported as soon as possible to:

GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

- Employee Conduct Branch

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

- Diocesan education office

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- Commission for Children and Young People on **1300 782 878**.

WITHIN THE FAMILY OR COMMUNITY

DHHS CHILD PROTECTION
You **must** report to DHHS Child Protection if a child is considered to be:

- in need of protection from child abuse
- at risk of being harmed (or has been harmed) and the harm has had or is likely to have, a serious impact on the child's safety, stability or development.

VICTORIA POLICE
You **must also** report all instances of suspected sexual abuse (including grooming) to Victoria Police.

You **must also** report **internally** to:

GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

- School principal and/or leadership team
- DET Security Services Unit.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

- School principal and/or leadership team
- Diocesan education office.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- School principal and/or chaplain.

3 CONTACTING PARENTS/CARERS

Your principal **must** consult with DHHS Child Protection or Victoria Police to determine what information can be shared with parents/carers. They may advise:

- **not to contact** the parents/caregivers in circumstances where the parents are alleged to have engaged in the abuse, or the child is a victim, minor and does not wish for their parent/carer to be contacted;
- **to contact** the parents/careers and provide agreed information (this must be done as soon as possible, preferably on the same day of the incident, disclosure or suspicion)
- **how to communicate** with all relevant parties with consideration for their safety.

4 PROVIDING ONGOING SUPPORT

Your school **must** provide support for children impacted by abuse. This should include the development of a Student Support Plan in consultation with wellbeing professionals. This is an essential part of your duty of care requirements. Strategies may include development of a safety plan, direct support and referral to wellbeing professionals and support.

You **must** follow the **Four Critical Actions** every time you become aware of a further instance or risk of abuse. This includes reporting new information to authorities.

OTHER CONCERNS

If you believe that a child is not subject to abuse, for you will hold **significant concerns** for their wellbeing you **must** still act. This may include making a referral or seeking advice from:

- Child FIRST/The Change Door (in circumstances where the family are open to receiving support)
- DHHS Child Protection.
- Victoria Police.

CONTACT

DHHS CHILD PROTECTION AREA
North Division: **1300 864 8777**
South Division: **1300 655 795**
East Division: **1300 360 391**
West Division (Rural): **1900 075 599**
West Division (Metro): **1300 864 8777**

AFTER HOURS
After hours, weekends, public holidays: **13 12 78**

CHILD FIRST
<https://www.childfirst.vic.gov.au/referal-and-support-services>

ORANGE DOOR
<https://www.orangedoor.vic.gov.au/family-violence/the-orange-door.html>

VICTORIA POLICE AREA
000 or your local police station **DET SECURITY SERVICES UNIT**
(03) 9549 6266

STUDENT INCIDENT AND RECOVERY UNIT
(03) 9651 2622

EMPLOYEE CONDUCT BRANCH
(03) 9637 2695

DIOCESAN OFFICE
Melbourne: **(03) 9267 0228**
Ballarat: **(03) 9327 7126**
Seymour: **(03) 9422 6600**
Shepparton: **(03) 5442 2277**

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS VICTORIA
(03) 9625 7200

THE LOOKOUT
The LOOKOUT has a service directory, information, and evidence based guidance to help you respond to family violence: <https://www.thelookout.org.au>

Family violence victims/survivors can be referred to **1800 Respect** for counselling, information and a referral service: **1800 737 732**

