

# How is Risk of Child Abuse or Neglect Assessed?

## An information sheet for the public

DISABILITY, CHILD, YOUTH AND FAMILY SERVICES

### Why is child abuse or neglect so serious?

Child abuse (which includes neglect) is a major source of trauma and disadvantage for children as they grow up. Research tells us that:-

- It disrupts their normal development and often affects their ability to manage at school
- It damages their sense of belonging
- It confuses the way they see themselves, and
- It can lead to long term emotional and psychological difficulties, such as mental illness, crime, drug and alcohol addiction.

Child abuse can bring tragedy to the life of an individual and its impact is extremely damaging and expensive to the whole community. Abuse takes many forms: sexual, physical, emotional and neglect and there is increasing evidence that the impact is being felt by children at an extremely early stage – even before birth.

The majority of situations where children are at placed risk do not result from parents or carers intentionally harming their children. Many cases arise from insufficient or lack of support, information, understanding of child development and resources.

Professionals and community members who are concerned that a child may be at risk may contact Child Protection Services or Gateway Services.

In order to determine what response is most appropriate to improve the situation for the child and his or her family, a thorough unbiased risk assessment is conducted.

### How does a Gateway Service assess risk?

Gateway Services are able to connect vulnerable children, young people and their families to the services they need to protect and promote their healthy development. On receiving a report about concern relating to child or young person, Gateway services undertake an information gathering process which enables the worker to assess the possible risk of harm to that child.

A community-based Child Protection practitioner in the Gateway Service is able to provide advice on occasions where the risk of harm may be significant. In these cases, the information might be provided to Child Protection Services further assessment and possibly intervention.

### How does Child Protection assess risk?

Risk assessment is an ongoing process that starts when someone reports a concern and continues in Child Protection Services until the case is closed.

A great deal of research has been carried out nationally and internationally to isolate the kinds of factors that increase the level of risk to a child.

The Tasmanian Risk Framework (TRF) provides an evidence-based professional judgement model to guide Child Protection Practitioners in this difficult task. The TRF sets out a logical process which progresses from **Information Gathering** through **Analysis** to a professional **Judgement** about the immediate risk and future likelihood of abuse.

Both risk and 'protective factors' are considered in this process. In other words, the strengths in the family are explored in addition to the factors that may increase the likelihood of harm to the child occurring.

### What risk factors are considered?

The Tasmanian Risk Framework guides workers in gathering information about:

- **The Child or Young Person** – including age, development and functioning
- **The Parents (or Carers)** – including their attitudes to any alleged harm and to the child, the relationship between the child and their caregivers, the level of functioning of the caregivers and their capacity to carry out the role of parenting
- **The Opportunity for Harm** – including the access to the child of anyone believed to be responsible for harming them and the way in which the child has been exposed to harm
- **The Source of Harm** – including details of the incident or harm-causing behaviour, such as persistent neglect or avoiding responsibility, the severity of the harm and the pattern and history of the incidents or the harm-causing behaviour, including the information from previous reports.
- **Networks** – including both the formal and informal networks, such as services working with the child or parent and family, community and social supports. Any alternative caregivers for the child, such as grandparents or friends' parents, and significant others are also identified.

## What about the strengths in the family?

Information about strengths and protective factors is also gathered as part of the assessment. These strengths could include things such as

- a strong family support network in which the care of the child can be shared
- the acknowledgement by a parent that he or she was stressed, not meeting the needs of his or her child and in need of help
- serious attempts to provide rich experiences for a child despite poverty or
- the commencement of a drug rehabilitation program by a substance-abusing woman to reduce the risk of harm to her unborn child during pregnancy.

The TRF is used to help Child Protection Workers at every point in the Child Protection process to make a judgement about whether a child has been harmed or is likely to be harmed in the future.

It is used at the time of notification to Child Protection Intake to determine whether a Child Protection Worker from a local office needs to visit the family and it is then used by the local workers to determine what action is in the child's best interests. It is also used to provide the rationale for closing a case and withdrawing from involvement with the child or family.

### Contact number for Gateway Services: 1800 171 233

From 9am-5pm Monday – Friday, this number will divert you to your regional Gateway Services office.

South West Gateway is run by Baptcare

South East Gateway is run by Mission Australia

Northern Gateway is run by Baptcare

North West Gateway is run by Mission Australia

### Contact number for Child Protection: 1300 737 693

This Statewide number can be used 24 hrs a day to report concerns about children. However, outside of usual business hours (9-5) it should only be used to report emergencies or urgent concerns regarding risk of immediate harm.

Website:

[http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/service\\_information/information/making\\_a\\_notification\\_to\\_the\\_child\\_protection\\_advice\\_and\\_referral\\_service](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/service_information/information/making_a_notification_to_the_child_protection_advice_and_referral_service)