



Ministry of
Children and Family
Development

The B.C. Handbook for
**Responding to
Child Welfare
Concerns**

For the Public

Working Together to Keep Children and Youth Safe

The Ministry of Children and Family Development acknowledges the territories of First Nations across B.C. and is grateful to carry out our work on these lands.

We acknowledge the rights, interests, priorities and concerns of all Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis and Inuit), respecting and acknowledging their distinct cultures, histories, rights, laws and governments.



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About this Handbook

Our Shared Responsibility for Child and Youth Safety

Everyone—families, communities, and service providers—shares the responsibility for keeping children and youth safe in British Columbia. Partnerships create safe, supportive environments for children and families.

Child abuse and neglect cause lasting harm to children and youth. If you are concerned about the safety and well-being of a child or youth, call the Ministry of Children and Family Development toll-free at 1-800-663-9122. This service is available 24 hours a day.

This handbook will help you:

- Recognize the signs of abuse and neglect
- Know what steps to take if a child or youth may be at risk
- Know how to make a child protection report, and what happens after a report is made
- Understand the *Child, Family and Community Service Act* (CFCSA)
- Find out where to get help—for yourself, your family, or someone you know

This booklet is for everyone in British Columbia to learn how they can help keep children and youth safe and support families.

Thank you for taking the time to learn how you can help. Your actions matter, they can protect a child and strengthen a family.

Working Together

Working Together to Keep Children and Youth Safe

Supporting families is a collective responsibility, not just the role of one ministry. Whether you are a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, teacher, coach, neighbour, or in the role of a service provider your care and attention matter.

When we focus on well-being of children instead of just protection, we open the door to many more ways of helping. We recognize that a child's well-being is shaped by many people and systems. That's why we must all work together to create safe, supportive environments where children and families can grow and succeed.

What are the laws?

In B.C., one of the laws that guides child safety is the *Child, Family and Community Service Act* (CFCSA). This law says that:

- If you believe a child or youth may be at risk, you are legally required to report your concerns to a child welfare worker.
- A child or youth means anyone under the age of 19.
- This legal duty is a part of our shared responsibility to care for children and youth.



Rights and Responsibilities

It's essential for all parties involved to understand their rights and responsibilities:

Parents/Guardians: Have the right to participate in decision-making processes and access support services. It's their responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of their children.

Children: Have the right to be heard and have their best interests considered in all decisions that affect them.

Child Welfare Workers: Have a duty to investigate reports of concern and take appropriate action to protect children. They must also respect the rights and cultural heritage of families, particularly Indigenous families.

Community Members: Can play a vital role in supporting families and reporting concerns when necessary.

The *Child, Family and Community Service Act* provides child welfare workers with legal authority to step in and help when a child or youth may be at risk. These child welfare workers are employed by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) or by an Indigenous Child and Family Service Agency (ICFSA). Their job is to assess safety, support families, and make sure children and youth are protected.

Under the law child welfare workers help protect children and support families by working with partners such as:

- Indigenous communities
- Police
- Schools and health care providers
- Community agencies that serve children, youth, and families



In 2020, the federal government passed historic legislation, *An Act Respecting First Nation, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families* (federal Act) which affirmed the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services and set national standards for child and family service delivery.

This legislation respects the inherent right of Indigenous communities to provide their own services to children, youth and families under Indigenous child and family service laws.



Child and family services in B.C. now operate within a multi-jurisdictional system. To learn more about Indigenous jurisdiction and self-determination over child and family services, please visit [this website](#).



Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect

According to the law, child abuse and neglect can happen in different ways. It may be physical, sexual, emotional—or it may happen when a child’s basic needs for safety, care, and support are not met. The child or youth may also be harmed by witnessing family or intimate partner violence.

Physical Abuse by a Parent

Physical abuse is when a child or youth has been or is likely to be hurt by a parent. It can include actions like hitting, kicking, slapping, shaking, burning, pinching, biting, strangling, throwing, shoving, whipping or using too much force to punish or control a child or youth.

Injuries from physical abuse can range from small bruises and burns to broken bones—and in rare, severe cases, even death.

Emotional Abuse by a Parent

Emotional abuse happens when a parent uses words or actions that seriously impact a child or youth's emotional well-being over time. This kind of abuse can cause serious harm and difficulties with anxiety, depression, low self-esteem or self-destructive behaviour.

Examples of emotional abuse include:

- Constant blaming or scapegoating
- Rejection or isolating the child
- Yelling, name-calling, or verbal attacks
- Threats or intimidation
- Insults or humiliation

The effects and emotional harm can be hard to spot. As a result of experiencing neglect or abuse by a parent, a child or youth may show some of the following signs:

- Significant changes in behaviour
- Sudden mood swings, anger, fear, or anxiety
- Depressed mood and low energy
- Withdrawal from friends or activities
- Self-destructive or aggressive behavior

Sexual Abuse by a Parent

Sexual abuse is when a child or youth has been or is likely to be sexually harmed or exploited by a parent. It includes:

- Sexually touching of a child or youth or asking them to touch someone else
- Sexual acts, including vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse
- Threats of sexual acts, stalking, or making sexual gestures or comments
- Making sexual comments or gestures about a child or youth's body or behavior
- Asking a child or youth to expose their body for inappropriate reasons
- Exposing a child or youth to sexual activity or sexually explicit material

Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation occurs when a child or youth is pressured or manipulated into sexual activity in exchange for money, drugs, food, shelter, or other motivations.

Examples of sexual exploitation include but are not limited to:

- Being sexually abused by an adult
- Feeling pressured to have sex in exchange for a place to sleep, food, or a ride
- Being offered money, drugs, alcohol, gifts, or services in return for sexual acts
- Being trafficked for sexual purposes
- Being manipulated or forced to take sexual pictures or videos of themselves, especially when shared online

Some youth may not realize they are being exploited. They may believe they chose to exchange sexual acts for things they need or want. But sexual exploitation is never a job or a choice, it is a form of sexual abuse.

Neglect

Neglect happens when a child or youth's basic needs are not met by a parent, and they are—or could be—harmed as a result. This may include not providing:

- Enough food
- Safe and stable housing
- Medical or dental care when needed
- Proper supervision (including when a child is left alone or no care is arranged)
- Emotional support and attention
- Protection from dangerous situations or people

Neglect can seriously affect a child or youth's health, development, and emotional well-being.

Family and Intimate Partner Violence and the Harm to Children and Youth

Children and youth are harmed when they are exposed to family and intimate partner violence. It is important to understand that children and youth who experience family and intimate partner violence are impacted directly.

Family and intimate partner violence can include but is not limited to:

- Physical assault or threats of violence, such as hitting, slapping, pushing, strangling, or using a weapon
- Threats to family members and pets
- Locking someone in/out of the home
- Manipulation, humiliation and isolation
- Controlling behaviour toward someone in a close relationship

Children may be hurt physically and/or emotionally by what they see and hear. Their safety and well-being may be at serious risk.

We all have a legal responsibility to report if it is believed that a child or youth is or could be harmed.

Additional circumstances to those noted above include the following:

- They aren't receiving medical or dental care when needed
 - Their development is at serious risk because of a treatable condition, and the parents are unable/refuses to get help
 - The parent is unable or unwilling to care for them and hasn't made proper care arrangements
 - They are missing and their safety is at risk
 - The parent has died, and there are no proper care arrangements
 - They've been abandoned or left without care
-

Being Alert to Potential Signs of Harm

Children and youth who are being abused or neglected often show signs—both physical and behavioural—of what they are experiencing. These signs don't always mean abuse or neglect is happening, but they should be taken seriously.

If you notice any of the following, consider whether you should report your concerns. Please note this is not an exhaustive list.

Potential physical indicators:

- Injuries or bruises on a baby who isn't yet crawling or walking—especially on the head or face
- Injuries with no clear explanation, or where the story keeps changing
- Injuries that look like they were caused by an object or with a pattern (e.g., hand, stick, buckle, stove element)
- Bruises in unusual places like the ears, neck, upper arms, back, thighs, or buttocks
- The child or youth looks unwell, complains of hunger, or appears thin or malnourished
- Poor hygiene (e.g. dirty clothes, body odor, unwashed hair)
- No medical, dental, or other care when needed
- Genital or anal injuries that can't be explained
- Ongoing pain, bleeding, or unusual discharge in the genital or anal area
- Sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy— especially in a young child
- Sudden bed wetting or frequent diarrhea
- Frequent complaints of headaches, nausea, or stomach pain
- Developmental delays with no known cause (e.g., not holding head up at six months, not walking by 18 months)
- Clothing that's not suitable for the weather
- Delayed or avoided medical care
- Injuries caused by lack of supervision

Potential behavioral indicators:

- Changes in school performance or attendance
- Running away or not wanting to go home
- Talking about being or appearing to be left home alone often
- High-risk behaviors like substance use, theft, or setting fires
- Sexual play or behavior that's not appropriate for their age
- Stealing, hoarding, or searching for food
- Extreme aggression or withdrawal from family, friends, or activities
- Sudden mood swings, anger, fear, or anxiety
- Regression in development (e.g., toileting issues in a child who was previously toilet-trained)
- Low self-esteem (e.g., saying they're bad, believing they deserve punishment, being very withdrawn)
- Suicidal thoughts or self-destructive behaviour (e.g., cutting, self-harm, suicide attempt, dangerous risk-taking)
- Involvement in sexually exploitive activities (e.g., performing sex acts in exchange for money, drugs, food, shelter, or other motivations)
- Forcing or pressuring another child into sexual play
- Sexual behavior directed toward adults
- Constantly seeking attention in extreme ways
- Severe anxiety or excessive worrying
- Appearing very quiet, passive, or undemanding (e.g., rarely crying)
- Showing little interest in surroundings or movement (e.g., lying still in a crib)

These signs don't always mean that abuse or neglect is happening.

However, they signal the need to better understand the child or youth's situation. For this reason, if you suspect that a child or youth may be experiencing abuse or neglect, it is your legal and ethical duty to report your concerns to a child welfare worker.



Responding to Child Abuse and Neglect

If a child or youth tells you they've been abused or neglected, or witnessed family or intimate partner violence, how you respond to them matters.

Here's how to support them in a trauma informed way that helps:

Stay calm and listen

Even if you feel shocked or upset, staying calm helps the child or youth feel safe. It shows them it's okay to talk about what happened.

Let them speak at their own pace

Hold space for them to share their story in their own way. You can gently ask, "Can you tell me more?"—but don't push for details.

Be supportive and reassure them

- They did the right thing
- They were brave to tell you
- You're sorry this happened

Get only the basic facts

You don't need every detail—just enough to understand what happened. They may need to tell their story again to a child welfare worker or police, which can be difficult.

Explain what will happen next

- Let them know you'll be contacting a child welfare worker, and possibly the police.
- Answer their questions honestly. If you don't know something, say: "Let's ask the child welfare worker."
- Don't promise to keep it a secret. Explain that getting help means involving people trained to protect and support them.



If you are a child or youth and need someone to talk to, call the Children's Helpline: 1-877-631-8282 (toll free)

**Help is available—
you are not alone.**

What to do if you believe a child or youth may be at risk?

If you believe they may be at risk, you should respond by first reporting it. When you know something is wrong, under the law we all have a collective duty to that child or youth to respond and act.

Whether they're our own children, or someone else's, we all have a role in keeping children and youth safe.

Call the Ministry of Children and Family Development at **1-800-663-9122** (toll free).

For people who are deaf, hard of hearing or speech-impaired use Video Relay Service (VRS) at **1-800-663-7867** (toll free).

You can call any time, day or night. You do not need to be certain. Just share what you know.

If you're unsure whether a parent or caregiver can protect the child or youth or meet their basic needs, report your concerns. It starts with a conversation. The child welfare worker will listen to your concerns and is trained to evaluate the situation. They can decide if further action is needed and choose the best options to keep the child safe.

Report even if you:

- Aren't sure what's happening
- Think someone else already reported it
- Believe a child welfare worker is already involved



If the child or youth is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local police.

Abuse and neglect are crimes under the Criminal Code of Canada. If a child or youth is in immediate danger, the police respond first or when someone has, or is likely to have, committed a crime.



Making a Report

What to Expect

When you call the Ministry of Children and Family Development to make a report, you'll speak with a child welfare worker, someone trained to respond to concerns about child abuse and neglect. The child welfare worker may also ask for your name and phone number, and how you know the child or youth.

The information you share will be kept confidential, and every effort will be made to protect your privacy. These professionals care deeply about the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families. It's their job to help when problems arise.

The child welfare worker may ask you:

- The child's or youth's name, age, and location
- Any known information about the child or youth's Indigenous identity and/or the Indigenous communities they belong to, if applicable
- Any other details about their cultural background or community ties
- Any immediate safety concerns
- Why you are worried
- What the child or youth said
- Information about the child's or youth's parents or caregivers
- Whether other children or youth may also be affected
- Whether the child or youth has any support needs or speaks a language other than English
- The names of other people or agencies involved with the child, youth, or family
- Whether the family has have any supports in place
- What your connection is to the family/child
- Whether you can provide any support to the family/child

You don't need to have all the answers, just share what you know. If you're unsure, it's still important to call—**children and youth are depending on us to use our voice.**

Confirming Indigenous Identity

A child welfare worker will ask if you are aware of the child or youths' Indigenous identity when you make a report. It allows the child welfare worker to determine if there are Indigenous communities that should be involved collaboratively in the planning and provision of services. It also enables the child welfare worker to determine if an Indigenous authority should be assessing the report and providing services under an Indigenous law.



To learn more about Indigenous jurisdiction and self-determination over child and family services, please visit [this website](#).

What Happens After You Report

After you make a report, a child welfare worker reviews the information to see if there are concerns under the law.

- If there are concerns, the child welfare worker will work with the family and their support network, including friends, relatives, and community members, to find the best way to keep the child or youth safe.
- If there are no concerns, MCFD or an ICFSA may close the file or offer support services to the family.
- If the child or youth is Indigenous, the report may be referred to an Indigenous authority to be assessed under Indigenous law.

In alignment with the law, children and youth are only removed from their homes when there is no less disruptive option to ensure their immediate safety.

If removal is necessary:

- The child or youth will first be placed with extended family or close family friends, if possible.
- If those options aren't available, a ministry care home will be chosen to provide care and support.





Working Together to Keep Children and Youth Safe

Our Collective Responsibility

It is everyone's responsibility—parents, caregivers, family members, and community members—to help keep children and youth safe and well cared for. Being a good neighbour goes further than just a wave hello, it means caring about one another and offering support when families need it.

Collaboration is key. Whether it's recognizing, reporting, or responding to suspected child abuse or neglect, or offering support and services that build on families' strengths and help create safe, caring homes.

How You Can Help

Even small acts of support can make a big difference for a parent who's struggling and can lead to better outcomes for children and youth. Maintaining a connection to that family or child demonstrates that the community cares for the safety and well-being of B.C. families.

Here are some ways you can help:

- Offer practical help. Babysit, run errands, or simply be there when a parent needs a break.
- Be a listening ear. Invite them for a walk or coffee and give them space to talk about what's going on. Continue to check in on their well-being and needs.
- Share helpful resources. Learn about local supports and let them know it's okay to ask for help; there are people and services ready to lend a hand.
- Follow up with the ministry if the situation doesn't improve.
- Ask: How can I help you?

Supports for Parents

Parenting is deeply rewarding, but it also comes with challenges—especially in today's tough economic climate. Families are facing a range of issues, including the lack of affordable and stable housing, rising costs of food and medication, limited access to reliable transportation, and fewer employment opportunities.

At times, it can feel overwhelming, as though there's no way forward and no one truly listening. Here are a few ways parents can support their children, and themselves:

- **Know your limits.** Everyone gets stressed. If you need a break, ask someone you trust to care for your child and take time to recharge, even a short walk or chat with a friend can help.
- **Community or Cultural connection:** Reaching out to your Indigenous community, Elders, and leaders where appropriate.
- **Ask for help.** If family or friends aren't available, reach out to someone you trust, like your support worker or health professional. You can also call the ministry at **1-800-663-9122** to speak to a child welfare worker any time, day or night.

Parent Support Services Society of BC

A non-profit organization that connects parents and caregivers with support, information, and learning opportunities.

- parentsupportbc.ca
- 1-877-345-9777

BC Council for Families

The BC Council for Families is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that provides resources, supports, education and training to strengthen family relationships.

- bccf.ca
- Vancouver: 604-678-8884

Learn Positive Parenting Strategies

Explore healthy ways to guide, support and discipline your child. MCFD and ICFSAs offer helpful resources:

- **Family and Social Supports in B.C.:** gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports
- **Indigenous Child Family Services Agencies in B.C. overview:** gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/data-monitoring-quality-assurance/reporting-monitoring/icfsa.pdf
- **Indigenous Early Childhood Funding Information:** gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/indigenous-people/supporting-communities/child-family-development/aboriginal-early-childhood-development-funding





More Information

Here are other places you can contact for support, legal advice, or more information:

211 by United Way BC

211 is a free and confidential service that connects people to helpful and vital resources in their community. They provide information and referral to a broad range of community, government, and social services.

Parent Legal Centers

If a child welfare worker contacts or visits you, call **Parent Legal Centre (PLC) at 1-888-522-2752** to see if you qualify for a free lawyer and advocate.

PLC helps parent and guardians respond to child protection concerns and find solutions for their families. PLC has eight locations across B.C.

legalaid.bc.ca/services/parents-legal-centres

VictimLink BC

Call toll free 1-800-563-0808, 24-hours a day, seven days a week. Multilingual and VRS accessible, province-wide telephone service to locate a victim services program in your community or visit: victimlinkbc.ca

Helpline for Children: 1-877-631-8282

For children and youth who feel scared, unsafe, or are experiencing abuse or neglect at home, and would like to talk to someone, they can dial the Helpline at 1-877-631-8282 (toll-free). The phone line is available 24/7 across B.C.

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868

Children and youth can call the Kids Help Phone to speak to a counsellor day or night at 1-800-668-6868. Counsellors are available to speak anonymously about concerns with abuse and can help children and youth call the police or child protective services. For more information about the resources and support available, visit: kidshelpphone.ca

Representative for Children and Youth (RCY)

The RCY helps young people in B.C. by making sure they get the services they need. They speak up for children and youth, check how well services are working, and investigate serious injuries or deaths to help prevent future harm.

- rcybc.ca
- 1-800-476-3933 (confidential for all of B.C.)

Complaint Resolution

MCFD

If you're not satisfied with the services, actions, or decisions made by MCFD, you have the right to file a complaint. Start by:

- Talking directly with your child welfare worker
- If that doesn't resolve the issue, ask to speak with their team leader
- If you're still not satisfied, contact a complaints specialist at:
 - **Toll-free: 1-877-387-7027**
 - **Local (Victoria): 250-387-7027**

Indigenous Child and Family Service Agency (ICFSA)

Each ICSFA has its own complaint process. Contact the ICFSA directly for more information.

You can find contact details online: gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/data-monitoring-quality-assurance/reporting-monitoring/accountability/indigenous-child-and-family-service-agencies

Ombudsperson of British Columbia

The Ombudsperson listens to concerns and complaints about how public agencies deliver their services. Although not an advocate, the Ombudsperson can carry out fair and confidential investigations to see whether a public agency is treating people properly.

- bcombudsperson.ca
- 1-800-567-FAIR (3247)

The Public Guardian and Trustee of British Columbia (PGT)

Helps people who can't protect themselves. They manage legal and financial matters for children, support adults who can't make decisions, and handle estates when no one else is available.

- trustee.bc.ca
- 1-604-660-4444
- For more information on responding to child welfare concerns, visit: gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/public-safety/protecting-children/reporting-child-abuse



For more information on responding to child welfare concerns, see our website at:
gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/public-safety/protecting-children/reporting-child-abuse

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