Child abuse and neglect

Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all forms of physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation that results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. Within this broad definition, five subtypes can be distinguished: physical abuse; sexual abuse; neglect and negligent treatment; emotional abuse; and exploitation.[1,2] The terms "child abuse and neglect" and "child maltreatment" are often used interchangeably.

It is the position of the Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation that:

1. It is essential for anyone working with children or young people to recognise their vulnerable status and the special protection they may require if they appear to be at risk.

2. Child abuse and neglect can adversely affect a child or young person's emotional, psychological health and physical development, learning and self-esteem. These affects can be lifelong and may be detrimental to their future wellbeing.

3. Nurses and midwives play an important role in the prevention, identification, and intervention in the case of child abuse and neglect and in the ongoing care, education and support of the children and their families.

4. Nurses and midwives working with children, adolescents, young adults and families should have the necessary skill to assess, identify, report and implement early intervention strategies in the management of any case of suspected child abuse and/or neglect.

5. Nurses and midwives have a duty of care to children, adolescents, young adults and families and, statutory obligations under relevant State or Territory law, for mandatory notification of any case of suspected child abuse or neglect.[3]

6. Employers must have policies, protocols and reporting guidelines in place that support a culture of reporting when children, adolescents and young adults are at risk of abuse or neglect. Employers should support nurses and midwives to fulfil their mandatory reporting obligations.

7. Employers should provide nurses and midwives with the necessary education in relation to their legislative and organisational obligations in reporting child abuse and/or neglect.

8. Nurses and midwives who report child abuse and/or neglect should be given support and feedback on the process. Counselling for nurses or midwives should be readily available if it is required.

9. Established screening practices for child abuse and/or neglect in hospitals and health facilities where children or young people attend for care may assist nurses and midwives to identify children at risk.

10. Education, training and support should be available to parents identified as vulnerable or 'at risk' of abuse and/or neglect.

11. Community education should be provided to raise awareness of the impact of child abuse and neglect and to promote and enhance the safety and welfare of children and young people.

12. State and Territory legislation requires criminal history checks for those working with children. The cost of such checks should be the responsibility of the organisation or employer.

13. Governments should provide sufficient funding for services investigating child abuse and neglect.

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References
1. World Health Organisation. 2016. Available at https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/child/en/
2. Australian Institute of Family Studies. Child Family Community Australia Resource Sheet. September 2018. Available at https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/what-child-abuse-and-neglect
3. Australian institute of Family Studies. Child Family Community Australia Resource Sheet September 2017. Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect at https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/mandatory-reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect