



Guidance document: When is a child at risk of significant harm?

Under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection Act) 1998 (NSW) (CAP Act), certain persons who work with children are under an obligation to make a report to the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) if they have reasonable grounds to believe a child is at risk of significant harm.

This document provides some guidance as to what constitutes a risk of significant harm.

Overview

A child is at risk of significant harm if current concerns exist for their safety, welfare or well-being because of the presence, to a significant extent, of any one or more of the following circumstances, which fall into the broad categories of neglect, abuse and psychological harm:

Neglect

1. the child's basic physical or psychological needs are not being met or are at risk of not being met;
2. the child's parents or other caregivers have not arranged and are unable or unwilling to arrange for the child or young person to receive necessary medical care;
3. in the case of a child who is required to attend school, the parents or other caregivers have not arranged and are unable or unwilling to arrange for the child to receive an education;

Abuse and psychological harm

4. the child has been, or is at risk of being, physically or sexually abused or ill-treated;
5. the child is living in a household where there have been incidents of domestic violence and, as a consequence, the child or young person is at risk of serious physical or psychological harm; and
6. a parent or other care giver has behaved in such a way towards the child that the child has suffered, or is at risk of suffering, serious psychological harm.

Related documents

1. Protocol: Reporting a child who is at risk of significant harm to the Department of Family and Community Services
2. Flowchart: Reporting child protection concerns
3. Fact sheet: When is a child at risk of significant harm?

Specific descriptions

Possible signs a child's basic needs are not being met

Signs in children include:

1. low weight for age and/or failure to thrive and develop;
2. untreated physical problems;
3. poor standards of hygiene;
4. poor complexion and hair texture;
5. child not adequately supervised for their age;
6. scavenging or stealing food and focus on basic survival;
7. extended stays at school, public places, other homes;
8. longs for or indiscriminately seeks adult affection;
9. rocking, sucking, head-banging; and
10. poor school attendance.

Signs in parents and/or caregivers include:

1. inability or unwillingness to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, safe home conditions;
2. leaving the child without appropriate supervision;
3. abandoning the child;
4. withholding physical contact or stimulation for prolonged periods;
5. inability or unwillingness to provide psychological nurturing;
6. limited understanding of the child's needs; and
7. unrealistic expectations of the child.

Possible signs of physical abuse

Signs in children include:

1. bruising;
2. lacerations and welts;
3. drowsiness, vomiting, fits or pooling of blood in the eyes, which may suggest head injury;
4. adult bite marks and scratches;
5. fractures of bones, especially in children under three years old;
6. dislocations, sprains, twisting;
7. burns and scalds (including cigarette burns);
8. multiple injuries or bruises;
9. explanation of injury offered by the child is not consistent

with their injury;

10. abdominal pain caused by ruptured internal organs;

11. swallowing of poisonous substances, alcohol or other harmful drugs;

Signs in parents and/or caregivers include:

1. frequent visits with the child in their care to health or other services with unexplained or suspicious injuries;
2. explanation of injury offered by the parent is not consistent with the injury;
3. family history of violence;
4. history of their own maltreatment as a child;
5. fear of injuring the child in their care; and
6. use of excessive discipline.

Possible signs of sexual abuse

Signs in children include:

1. describing sexual acts; and
2. sexual knowledge or behaviour inappropriate for the child's age.
3. adolescent pregnancy;
4. sexually transmitted infection; and
5. unexplained accumulation of money and gifts.

Possible signs of psychological harm

Signs in children include:

1. constant feelings of worthlessness about life and themselves;
2. inability to value others;
3. lack of trust in people;
4. lack of people skills necessary for daily functioning;
5. extreme attention-seeking behaviour;
6. obsession with pleasing or obeying adults;
7. taking extreme risks;
8. being highly self critical, depressed or anxious;
9. persistent running away from home;
6. anorexia or over-eating;
10. risk taking behaviours - self harm, suicide attempts.

