CHILD WISE Choose With Care®

Building child safe organisations

CHILD WISE™

AUSTRALIA
DEPARTMENT OF
FAMILY AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES

A Parent's Guide to Choosing Child Safe Organisations

CHILD WISE™

Child Wise is a not for profit organisation which works to prevent, protect and reduce the sexual abuse and exploitation of children in Australia and overseas.

Our work involves:

• providing help, support and advice

• child protection education and training

• identifying and implementing prevention and protection strategies

What is Choose With Care®?

Choose With Care is an innovative prevention program, which aims to minimise the risk of child abuse occurring within organisations working with children.

Purpose of the Parent's Guide

This booklet has been specifically written for parents/caregivers to assist you to make informed decisions by asking relevant questions to establish how "child safe" the organisation, program or club is. The Choose With Care strategies are outlined and a series of questions are listed for your consideration. These questions have been formulated after extensive work with organisations and consultation with parents about the things they wish to know.

We wish to acknowledge the children and parents who completed surveys and gave their ideas and time to this project.

Contents

Introduction

As a parent you will make many choices and decisions about child care and where to send your child for a range of activities as well as their education. You will know what is in the best interests of your children, however there are some things we prefer not to think about such as the possibility of our children being unsafe when in someone else's care. Whilst the majority of children's organisations are safe for your child, we know that children can sometimes be subjected to bullying, isolation, teasing, harassment, verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse. All of these can be prevented when organisations are proactive and do not take safety for granted.

Choose With Care is a child abuse prevention program that aims to create "child safe" organisations by minimising the risk of children being harmed when they are participating in programs or activities. This includes child care, holiday programs, education, after-school care, sports and recreation, youth and church groups as well as health and welfare programs. Staff and volunteers of these organisations are being trained in the Choose With Care strategies all over Australia.

The focus of Choose With Care is the prevention of child sexual abuse. It is now known that child sex offenders choose to work in children's organisations so they can get closer to children. However, the strategies of Choose With Care are equally as effective in the prevention of other forms of abuse and harassment. Organisations have a moral and legal duty of care to provide a safe environment for children. They must do everything possible to reduce the risk of harm to children and to prevent legal action over negligence.

Consultation with children and parents about safety

For the purpose of this parent guide, parents and children (boys and girls aged 5-12 years old) were asked several questions through surveys. These included:

Parents

- How would you know if your child was unhappy at..........(program/activity)?
- Are you aware of specific safety policies/procedures?
- Have you considered child (sexual) abuse as a possible risk?

Children

- What is the best thing about ....(program/activity)?
- Who would you talk to if you were upset at ....(program/activity)?
- Who would you talk to if you were scared at........(program/activity)?
- Where do you feel most safe?

The response from parents revealed that 65% believed that their child would tell them something was wrong at the program/activity and 45% said they would know by their child's behaviour if something was wrong.

In the children's survey only 18% said they would tell their parents if they were upset or scared at the program/activity. The majority said they would tell their teacher/coach at the time if they were upset or scared.

The reason children do not tell their parents is because they do not wish to see their parents distressed. They also worry about "getting people in trouble". This highlights the importance of "safe" people in their lives inside and outside of their family eg. a teacher, a coach, a neighbour, a best friend's parent. Whilst it is important for parents to observe their children's behaviour, this alone is not reliable. Sometimes children do not realise they are being exploited or abused by adults and therefore there will be no visible behavioural changes. Hence, encouraging children to talk to someone else when they are upset, scared or worried is an important prevention strategy.

The majority of parents surveyed believed organisational safety policies and procedures were in place. However, they were unaware of the specific detail contained in them.
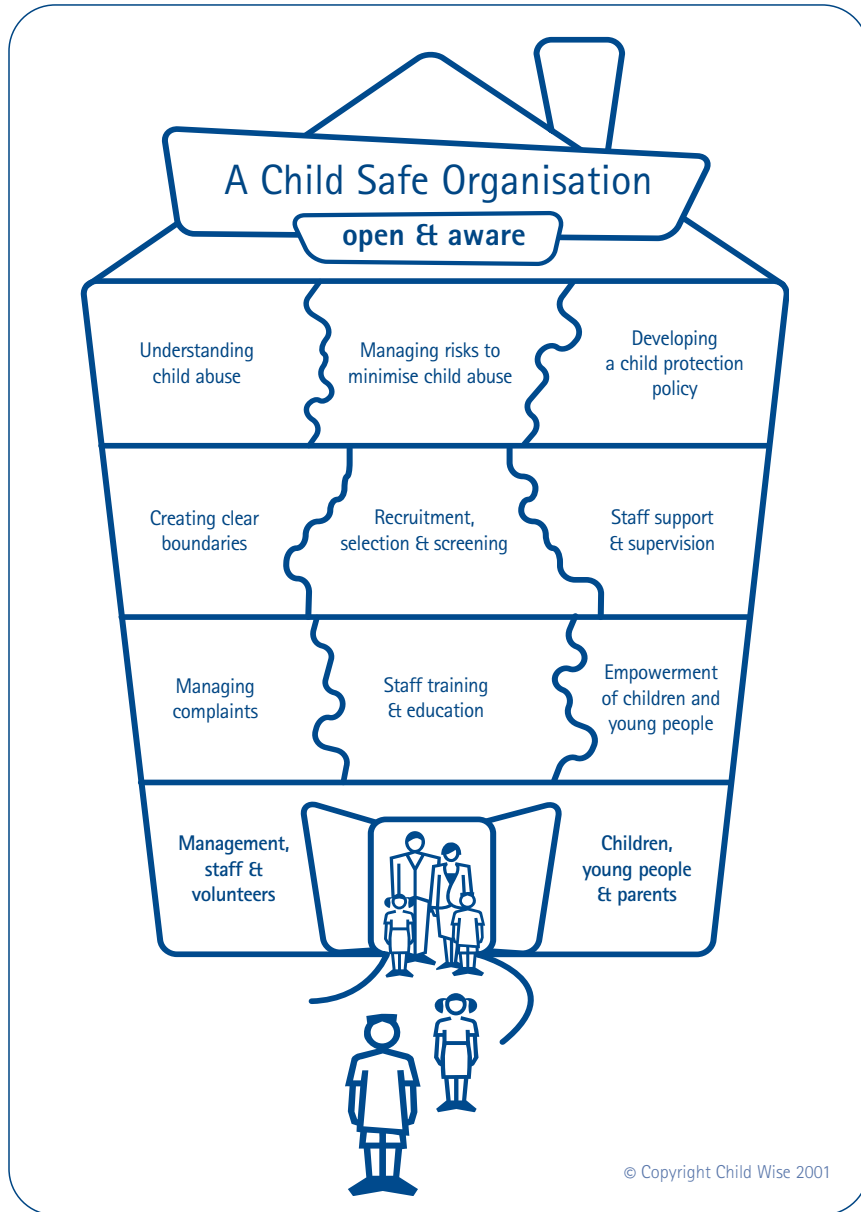
Half of the parents said they were aware of child abuse as a possible risk factor whilst half had never considered it. Of this group several parents "assumed" the organisation was safe and would be doing everything possible to reduce risk to children. For example, they believed police checks were routinely carried out on all staff whilst this is not always the case.

All of the parents surveyed said they felt welcome to attend or participate in the children's activities/programs. This is most encouraging as people who seek to harm children are much less likely to seek work in organisations with high level parental involvement. Parental involvement increases the adult/child supervision ratio and increases the opportunity for close observation and ultimately reduces risk to children.

So what does this mean for parents?

The results of the surveys completed highlight the importance of participation in community activities, sports and recreation programs for children and parents. It also demonstrated that many parents make assumptions about safety policies and procedures that are not routinely in place in all children's organisations. This booklet aims to equip parents with factual information enabling them to ask specific questions to determine how "child safe" organisations and programs are before enrolling their children. The other message for parents is the importance of talking to children about possible risks in a non-threatening way. Children need to be taught that they have a right to feel safe at all times. When children are "connected" to people (within and outside their family) it increases the opportunities for them to tell someone when they are concerned or worried.

A Child Safe Organisation

open & aware

Understanding child abuse	Managing risks to minimise child abuse	Developing a child protection policy
Creating clear boundaries	Recruitment, selection & screening	Staff support & supervision
Managing complaints	Staff training & education	Empowerment of children and young people
Management, staff & volunteers		Children, young people & parents

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What is a Child Safe Organisation?

A child safe organisation:

- welcomes and respects children, young people and their parents/caregivers
- respects staff and volunteers by providing support, training and clear guidelines to do their jobs well
- identifies potential risks to children and works continuously to prevent and reduce them
- encourages parental participation
- values children by asking their ideas and views and also listens to them

A child safe organisation is created by putting in place the above strategies. Individually, each strategy reduces the risk of harm to children, collectively they create child safe organisations and prevent child abuse.

Understanding Child Abuse

In order to prevent child abuse, people working with children need to understand and acknowledge it is a problem that affects children. It can also cause long term physical and emotional harm. The key topics to educate staff, volunteers and parents include:

- definitions of all forms of child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional and neglect)[1]
- physical and behavioural indicators of sexual abuse
- impact of child abuse, in particular sexual abuse
- dynamics of sexual offending
- reporting child abuse to authorities[2]

1 For definitions of child abuse see Appendix A
2 For details of where to report child abuse see Appendix B

Managing Risk to Minimise Child Abuse

Identifying and managing risk is something we all do every day in our lives; mostly this is an unconscious process. For example, putting a seatbelt on to prevent injury, or ensuring that children wear their bike helmets. The possibility of child abuse occurring within children's organisations is not routinely considered as a risk factor. The majority of people working with children are safe. There are however a small number of people who seek to work with children with the specific purpose of sexually exploiting them. There are also people who are not suitable to work with children due to punitive attitudes regarding discipline, e.g. smacking, shouting or they may be very intolerant and emotionally abusive. The task for parents in assessing risk is to know the right questions to ask. For example:

Question to ask:

1. **What steps do you take to make sure the staff or volunteers are safe to work with children?**

The next few sections advise on what to look for.

Child Protection Policy

A child protection policy is a statement of the organisations commitment to child safety. It outlines the strategies the organisation uses to guide decisions and actions on child protection matters. It may be known under a different name, e.g. a Member Protection Policy. Whatever the policy is called, it needs to guide people in dealing with difficult situations such as child abuse allegations, responding to suspicions of abuse and knowing who to talk to within the organisation as well as when to report to outside authorities, e.g. police or statutory child protection services. Staff, volunteers, parents and children need to be aware of the policy and its requirements with staff/volunteers being trained in its implementation. Policies should be reviewed regularly. A progressive organisation will have a nominated "Child Protection Officer" or "Member Protection Officer" for people to report issues to.

Code of Conduct

A code of conduct is a straight forward guide of do's and don'ts to assist staff and volunteers to conduct their work professionally and effectively. A well thought-through and widely advertised code of conduct lets everyone know what behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable within the organisation. We already know that people who want to sexually abuse children are very skilled in blurring boundaries and relationships. Therefore organisations must document and implement clear guidelines which leave no doubt as to the expected behaviour of staff, coaches, caregivers and volunteers when children and young people are in their care or under instruction. The code of conduct also applies to parents, children and young people. When a code of conduct is well established and implemented it is easier for people to respond to inappropriate behaviour. A code of conduct is an extension of a child protection policy and should include rules about touching/physical contact eg. toileting and bathing, not being alone with children, discipline practices, adult/child ratios, responsible use of the Internet, use of photography and mobile phones with cameras and rules about relationships between staff/volunteers and children.

Question to ask:

1. Do you have a Member/Child Protection Policy?

2. Do you have a Code of Conduct?

3. How often are they reviewed?

4. May I have a copy?

Recruitment, Selection and Screening

A good organisation welcomes questions about staff and volunteer selection practice. When done properly, the recruitment process offers the greatest opportunity to attract the best staff and volunteers for the job. It also deters and prevents people who are unsuitable or who wish to (sexually) abuse children. The screening process is also very important and each state/territory has different laws and requirements for screening staff and volunteers. Parents need to enquire what is required in their state/territory. For example, New South Wales and Queensland have a "Working with Children Check"[3] to assess people's suitability to work with children. A police check is the most common screening tool organisations use, however they are only compulsory for some organisations and professions.

Police checks (or criminal history checks) will only provide information on certain criminal convictions. The organisation needs to decide which criminal offences render a person unsuitable to work with children, e.g. child (sexual) abuse, violence and use of child pornography. A 'clear' police check does not guarantee someone is safe, it may mean they have not yet been caught. However, it is a very good starting point and does act as a deterrent to certain offenders.

Child sex offenders target organisations that are unaware of the risks and dangers of child abuse. They will be attracted to organisations who do little or no screening and those that provide opportunities to build relationships and be left alone with children. Child safe organisations promote and advertise their stringent employment and screening processes. Parents need to know how careful the organisation is in recruiting and selecting staff and whether or not police checks are conducted.

> **Question to ask:**
> 1. How do you recruit staff and volunteers?
>
> 2. How do you screen staff/volunteers?
>   Eg. police checks, reference checks
>
> 3. What would rule someone out of working with children?

3 For more information on New South Wales see the website
  for the *NSW Commission for Children and Young people* -
  www.kids.nsw.gov.au/check and for Queensland see the website
  for the *Queensland Commission for Children and Young People* -
  www.childcomm.qld.gov.au

Staff Support and Supervision

A child safe organisation values and respects its staff and volunteers and provides them with supervision and support to do their jobs effectively. This includes adequate staff/child ratios and clear expectations of what is required in the position. The more visibility there is around children's activities the safer it is likely to be. Active parental involvement leads to a transparent and participatory environment that would not appeal to someone wanting private access to children.

Experience shows that child abuse is more prevalent in organisations where staff are not accountable for their actions or behaviour and where there is no formal performance monitoring. Supervisors are responsible for monitoring staff progress, job performance and to ensure staff/volunteers are abiding by the organisation's policy and code of conduct.

Formal staff supervision is not always possible in some voluntary organisations due to a lack of resources. If this is the case, parents need to be assured that new staff/volunteers have some form of induction or orientation, which will explain the values and policies of the organisation. This includes the belief that children should be safe at all times whilst in the organisation's care.

Managing Complaints

If someone wishes to make a complaint or has observed suspicious behaviour there needs to be a reporting procedure in place. It needs to be confidential and fair to everyone involved. Child abusers are much less likely to remain in an environment where staff/volunteers are trained to report inappropriate behaviour. Staff, parents, children and volunteers need to know who to talk to when they are concerned, hence it is important to have a nominated Child/Member Protection Officer to manage the process. If there is no designated person then a senior manager, committee member or more experienced staff member/volunteer could act as the focal point. Children's organisations and their staff and volunteers need to be aware of their legal responsibilities and duty of care to children and service users. The reporting procedure would be an extension of the organisation's Child Protection Policy and must be familiar to everyone. The policy should also include a grievance clause to ensure a fair process for everyone.

Question to ask:

1. How does the organisation supervise/support staff and volunteers?

2. Do you have a reporting procedure for complaints/grievances?

3. Is this policy well advertised?

Staff Training and Education

People who work with children, as in any other job, require ongoing training and knowledge in order to develop and improve their skills. As well as general skills training in the area of child development, and the health, educational and safety needs of children, staff and volunteers need training on child protection as described in the earlier section 'Understanding Child Abuse'. This will ensure they are aware of the indicators of abuse and will know what to do if they ever suspect a child is at risk or they are working with someone they have concerns about.

Empowerment of Children and Young People

The most important people in children's organisations are the children and young people. A child friendly organisation involves children and young people in decisions and policies which directly impact on them. When they feel valued and respected, children and young people are more likely to tell someone they trust if they are concerned or worried about something. Positive and respectful relationships between staff/volunteers and the children and young people they are working with leads to improved participation and good communication. It also reduces the opportunities for children to be isolated by an adult with questionable motivation. When children are empowered they are more confident and assertive and less likely to be targeted by people who wish to abuse them. Educating children about what to do if they feel unsafe (in any situation) is an important empowerment and prevention strategy. The more parents talk to their children about safety in general the more likely it is their children will let someone know if they ever feel unsafe. Children and young people need to be given a voice in the organisation and their ideas and issues listened to and responded to. There are many personal safety, resilience building and empowerment programs available in Australia. Parents may wish to ask if the staff are trained in any of these. When staff and volunteers are aware of the needs and rights of children the more child safe and child friendly the organisation is likely to be.

> **Question to ask:**
> 1. Do staff and volunteers receive regular training?
>
> 2. Are children consulted or involved in decision making?

Talking to your children

A lot of parents ask how to raise the issue of personal safety with children in this context. Many are worried about scaring children or corrupting their innocence. Of course we wish to do neither. Our aim is to assist parents to talk to their children about a whole range of situations (including the possibility of child abuse) in a simple manner when the child is developmentally and emotionally ready. This is important information to "empower" children with. Parents are the best judge on how to communicate at their child's level. The most effective way to talk about risks to children is to include a wide range of possibilities without highlighting any particular topic. What parents need to find out, is how their children might react in certain situations. You need to assess their skills in problem solving and how they communicate their feelings and concerns. You also want to know if they can identify a range of people outside their family they feel comfortable talking to and to assess their ability to be persistent, so they can get help even if their efforts do not work the first time. An approach that works well with all age groups uses the question "What would you do if....". This can include some funny and even outrageous situations so it is easier to talk about. Use examples that are relevant to your children and situations. For example

What would you do if......?
1. You got lost in a shopping centre, at a carnival etc?
2. The adult looking after you fell over and you could not wake them up?
3. A dog was chasing you on your way home from school?
4. Someone at school stole your lunch money?
5. An adult in your family asked you to do something you think is wrong?

Based on their responses, you can educate your child on areas you believe they may be vulnerable and empower them to know they have a right to feel safe at all times. You can assist them to think of a range of possible solutions when they feel unsafe. This assists children to be assertive and confident to get help if they ever need to.

Conclusion

The vast majority of organisations and people who work with children are safe. We cannot assume however, that every organisation has the most effective risk management strategies in place to further minimise the opportunity of child abuse occuring. The suggestions contained in this book will assist parents and caregivers to find child safe organisations and programs for children and young people. If the organisation you are considering for your child does not have all or even most of these strategies in place you can now do something about it. The organisation's willingness to answer your questions honestly and respond to suggestions is a good start in demonstrating their commitment to parental participation and child safety. Remember also, if you or your child ever feel uncomfortable, it is important to talk to someone in the organisation to determine if there is any reason for concern. Many children's organisations, particularly those in the voluntary sector rely on contributions from parents to provide activities and programs just as they will rely on parents to assist with the development and introduction of new policies and procedures. Perhaps you can volunteer to help introduce some of the Choose With Care strategies in your child's organisation or program. For example, you could join the Committee or the Board. Organisations and parents need to be proactive not reactive.

Child Wise staff are available to support organisations in this process and provide templates for policy development. On the last page of this guide is a checklist to use in choosing programs and activities for children and young people. Hopefully there will be more "yes" or "in progress" answers than "no" answers. If you are not satisfied with the responses from the organisation or feel they are not responsive, you may need to consider looking elsewhere. You also may wish to contact the governing body who runs the program or activity for a response. You are entitled to know the legal obligations required of organisations and the funding body's expectations of their performance. Parents are powerful advocates for children. You can make a significant contribution and ensure child safety is a priority for everyone!

We wish you well in finding positive, safe organisations for your children.

Checklist for Parents

Use the following checklist as a guide to help you make informed decisions. The attitude of the organisation and staff will help determine how child safe you 'feel' the organisation may be.

Questions	Yes	No	In progress
Is there a well advertised member/child protection policy which is given to parents/staff?			
Is there a well advertised code of conduct?			
Are staff/volunteers screened? eg. police checks, reference checks			
Do staff/volunteers receive regular training?			
Is there a grievance or complaints policy?			
Are parents welcome any time?			
Are children asked for their ideas and suggestions?			
Are your children aware of any personal safety strategies?			

- Each "yes" answer is contributing to the organisation's commitment to child safety.
- For "no" answers, can you suggest that the organisation considers introducing it?
- Can you offer any assistance to help ensure it does happen?

Definitions of Child Abuse

Child abuse is an act by parents or caregivers which endangers a child or young person's physical or emotional health or development. Child abuse is not usually a simple incident, but takes place over time. (DHS, Victoria, 1999)

Definition of Child — A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.
(Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, Article 1)

Definition of Sexual Abuse — Sexual abuse occurs when an adult or someone bigger and/or older than the child uses power or authority over the child to involve the child in sexual activity. Physical force is sometimes involved. Contact offences include touching and fondling through to sexual penetration. Non contact offences include verbal sexual harassment, indecent exposure, 'peeping' and exposure to pornography.

Definition of Physical Abuse

Physical abuse occurs when a person purposefully injures or threatens to injure a child or young person. This may take the form of slapping, punching, shaking, kicking, burning, shoving or grabbing. The injury may take the form of bruises, cuts, burns or fractures.

Definition of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is a chronic attack on a child or young person's self esteem. It can take the form of name-calling, threatening, ridiculing, intimidating or isolating the child or young person.

Definition of Neglect

Neglect is the failure to provide the child with the basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, shelter and supervision, to the extent that the child's health and development are placed at risk.

To report child abuse please contact the State/Territory authorities listed in Appendix B

State and Territory Departments responsible for protecting children

ACT

Department of Education Youth & Family Services

	Southern	02 6207 1466
	Northern	02 6207 1069
After Hours Crisis Service		02 6207 0720

NSW

Department of Community Services (DOCS)	02 9716 2222
DOCS Helpline	13 21 11

NT

Family and Children's Services		08 8922 7111
	Freecall	1800 700 250

QLD

Department of Families		07 3224 8045
	After Hours Crisis Service	1800 811 810

SA

Family and Youth Services, DHS	08 8226 6815
Child Abuse Report Line	13 14 78

TAS

Department of Health and Human Services

	Child and Family Services	03 6230 7833
		1300 737 639 (24 hours)
	Freecall	1800 001 219 (24 hours)

VIC

Department of Human Services	03 9616 7777
After Hours Child Protection Service	13 12 78 (24 hours)

WA

Family and Children's Services		08 9222 2555
	Freecall	1800 622 258
	Crisis Care Unit	08 9223 1111