

# PRACTICE GUIDE

## Decision making at intake

At intake, practitioners need to establish:

- Whether the information received from a notifier, and any other professional contacted, indicates a reasonable suspicion a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm if nothing changes for them in the future.
- Whether a child has a parent who is able and willing to protect them from that harm.

Intake matters will be finalised as either:

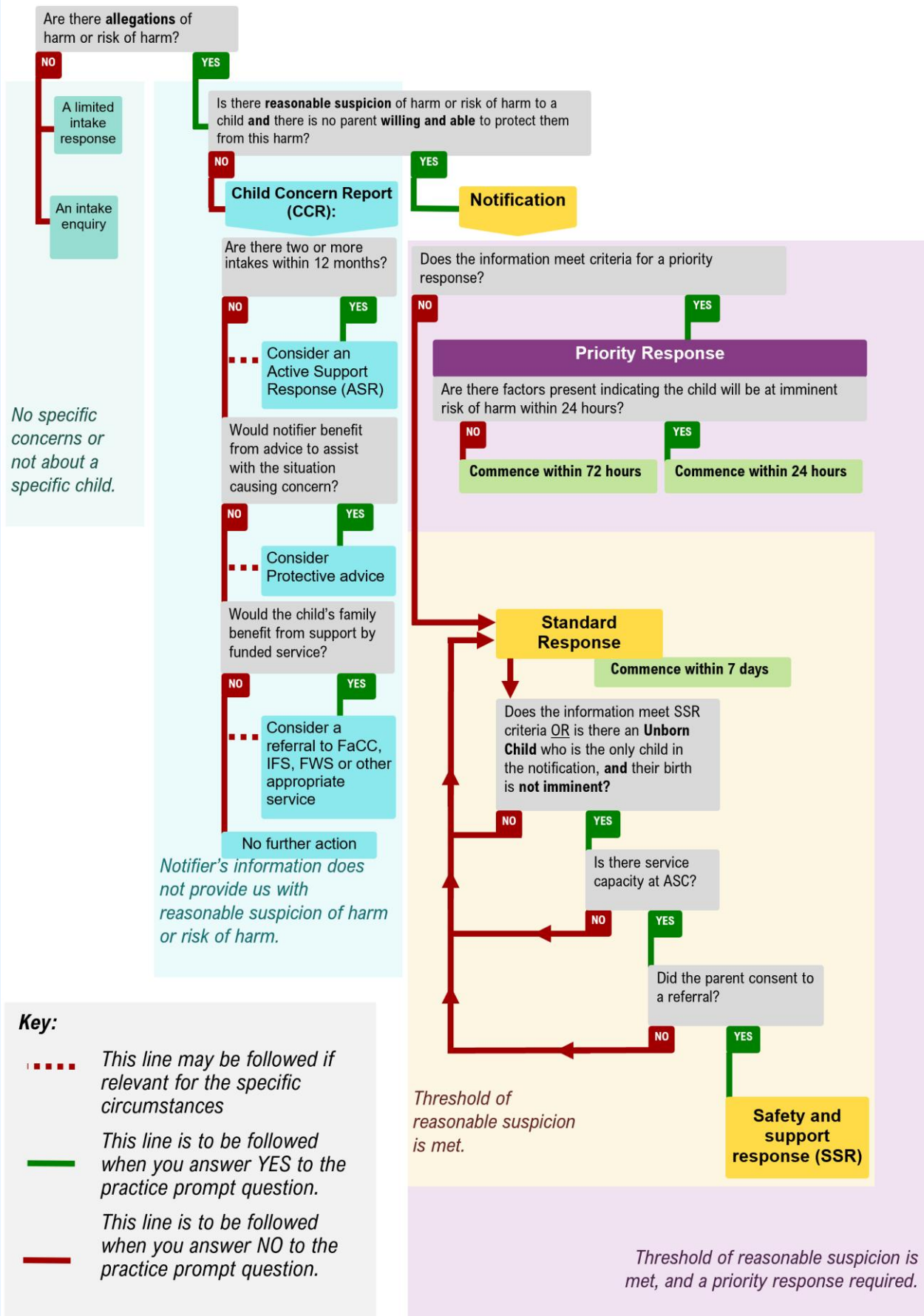
- an intake – limited intake response or intake enquiry
- a child concern report with an active support response, referral for family support, protective advice or no further action
- a notification with a priority response, standard response or safety and support response.

This guide assists practitioners to understand and undertake the intake process:

- receive and gather information
- analyse that information
- form a judgement and
- make a decision about the response needed.

# Intake decision making points

## Intake: Decide the response



## Important definitions

### Child's home

A child's home is where the child lives, with a parent or parental figure (including a person recognised under Aboriginal tradition or Island custom who is regarded as the child's parent).

It is recognised that some children may have more than one place they call home, and some children may have many members of their home who provide care to them. A child's home extends beyond their physical environment/house where they reside or spend their time and may include parents and caregivers who do not live with them. The focus on a child's home:

- helps to ensure that assessments are on the child and their experience, rather than the person who is alleged responsible for the harm or risk of harm and their behaviour
- provides clarity about who the relevant people are for the purposes of assessing the child's safety and wellbeing.

It is important to think about the safety of the child, regardless of where they live and maintain a focus on whether a child has a parent able and willing to protect them.

The meaning of a child's home also requires additional consideration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, where cultural norms can differ from non-indigenous cultures.

### Definitions of abuse

#### Physical abuse

Physical abuse involves the deliberate or reckless use of physical force against a child that causes injury, harm, pain, or trauma, or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, harm, pain, or trauma, where it is clearly not reasonable corporal punishment.

This type of abuse may involve hitting, kicking, shaking, pushing, biting, burning, and choking. It may also involve restraint, prevention of free movement or the use of implements or weapons against a child or young person. To note, any object can be used as a weapon. The focus is about the impact on the child and the potential for future danger.

Physical abuse can also include 'factitious disorder imposed on another' (previously known as Munchausen syndrome by proxy). This is where a parent or carer makes up the symptoms of an illness or causes the child in their care to become unwell.

| Physical indicators of physical abuse                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Behavioural indicators of physical abuse                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broken or fractured bones, dislocations, or unexplained, suspicious, or excessive bruises or injuries</li> <li>• bruising or marks showing the shape of an object</li> <li>• exposure to domestic and family violence resulting in or likely to result in the child experiencing physical injury – this can include direct and indirect harm</li> <li>• female genital mutilation</li> <li>• multiple scars of different sizes or ages</li> <li>• drowsiness, vomiting, abdominal pain, fits, or dehydration</li> <li>• brain damage, skull or bone fracture, or subdural haemorrhage or haematoma</li> <li>• internal injury or poisoning</li> <li>• burns or scalds</li> <li>• bite marks or choke marks<sup>†</sup>.</li> </ul> <p><sup>†</sup> Note: choke marks may not always be physically observable and may include burst blood vessels in the face or eyes and not just marks on the neck.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child seeming to be accident prone</li> <li>• attempts to conceal an injury – for example wearing clothing to cover marks/bruises/injuries</li> <li>• the explanation for an injury seems unlikely or is inconsistent with the injury type</li> <li>• injuries that are inconsistent with the developmental stage of a child</li> <li>• injuries located in unusual areas of the body or there are multiple marks in the same area of the body</li> <li>• several different explanations provided for an injury</li> <li>• family use of different doctors and hospital emergency departments</li> <li>• unexplained delay in seeking treatment</li> <li>• failure to attend appointments</li> <li>• when the child presents for treatment, parents/carers absent without good reason, or uninterested in the injury</li> <li>• reluctance by child, parents/carers to give information or mention previous injuries</li> <li>• child uses unusual amounts of physical aggression in their play with peers or is engaging in bullying behaviour</li> <li>• children provided with alcohol or non-prescribed drugs.</li> </ul> |
| Physical abuse considerations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there an infant or young child who has been shaken or sustained suspicious injuries? For example, bruising on or to a non-mobile infant.</li> <li>• Has the child required medical attention or intervention to address an injury?</li> <li>• Are there any concerns about the child's physical appearance (including any injuries such as location, size, colour, and probable cause)?</li> <li>• Describe the injury and location of the injury (i.e. what part of the child or young person's body?).</li> <li>• What is the physical condition of the child's home? Are there hazards that may contribute to or cause harm?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <p>If the alleged harm to a child may involve the commission of a criminal offence, then there is a requirement under the <i>Child Protection Act 1999</i>, section 14(2) to report the information to the Queensland Police Service.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

## Sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is any act that exposes a child or young person to, or involves a child or young person in, sexual activities:

- they do not understand
- they do not or cannot consent to
- are not accepted by the community
- are unlawful.

Sexual abuse can cause emotional, psychological, and physical harm and have a range of adverse impacts across the life course. (Refer to the practice kit Child sexual abuse, [Impacts on the child](#).)

A form of Child sexual abuse, [child sexual exploitation](#) occurs when an individual or group either attempts or succeeds in coercing, manipulating or deceiving a child into contact or non-contact sexual acts in exchange for something (for example, money, gifts, accommodation or less tangible goods such as affection or status) or for the financial advantage, increased status or other reward for the person exploiting the child. Exploitation can take place in person or via technology, or a combination of both. A child over the legal age of consent may be sexually exploited even if the sexual act appears consensual.

Child sexual abuse can be physical, verbal, or emotional in nature and includes contact and non-contact activities. Sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation may include (but is not limited to):

- sexual touching of any part of the body, either clothed or unclothed
- preparing or encouraging a child to engage in sexual activity
- sex or sexual acts of any kind with a child, both penetrative or non-penetrative (penetration is using fingers, penis or any other object and inserting them into a mouth, anus or vagina)
- persuading or forcing a child to engage in sexual activity, including forcing a child to masturbate, encouraging a child to perform sexual acts in front of a webcam, recording device or other technology
- young people receiving something (for example: food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, or money) in return for participating in sexual activities
- engaging in any kind of sexual activity in front of a child, including watching pornography or sexually assaulting another family member in their presence
- taking, downloading, viewing, producing, or distributing sexual images of children
- possessing images of child sexual abuse
- communicating in a sexual manner by phone or online (including 'sexting')
- grooming a child (or their parent or carer for the purposes of gaining access to the child).

**Sexual grooming** refers to intentional behaviours that manipulate and control a child, as well as their family, kin and carers, other support networks, or organisations to perpetrate child sexual abuse. Sexual grooming tactics act to increase the vulnerability of the child to being sexually abused and to the capacity of non-offending adults to protect the child. It can be difficult to identify because the specific actions may not appear abusive or sexual in nature and can appear to be loving or ordinary care. Sexual grooming can often occur online and can occur for days, weeks or years before contact sexual abuse takes place.

**Sexting** is the act of sending intimate images or sexually explicit messages, most often on technological devices (mobile phones and computers). Its creation may be the result of image-based abuse and coercion and may have criminal implications. (Refer to [Respond to sexting](#) and [Technology facilitated child sexual exploitation](#).)

| Physical indicators of sexual abuse                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Behavioural indicators of sexual abuse                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bruising or bleeding in the genital area</li> <li>• sexually transmitted infections</li> <li>• pregnancy or pregnancy scares</li> <li>• bruising to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen or thighs</li> <li>• stomach aches</li> <li>• bed-wetting</li> <li>• change in appetite or weight loss</li> <li>• nightmares or sleep disturbances</li> <li>• pain or burning when going to the toilet.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health issues (depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder)</li> <li>• suicidal thoughts or suicide attempt</li> <li>• non-suicidal self-injury</li> <li>• alcohol and other drugs misuse</li> <li>• poor physical self-care, a lack of grooming or attention to hygiene</li> <li>• body dysmorphia, including disordered eating or eating disorders</li> <li>• difficulties learning or concentrating or maintaining supportive relationships</li> <li>• engaging in risky sexual behaviour. For example, sexual intercourse at a young age, multiple sexual partners, unprotected sex. Each increases the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and infections including HIV, and sex work or exploitation</li> <li>• engaging in sexually aggressive, or unusual behaviour (for example, trying to 'tongue kiss' carers or family members, removing clothes in view of others and viewing sex as transactional).</li> </ul> |

### Sexual abuse considerations

Sexual abuse rarely occurs in isolation, often occurring alongside other abuse and family dysfunction.

Gather comprehensive information from the notifier about the family's situation and context. This will contribute to the assessment which informs the intake decision.

Identify any power imbalances, as these are integral to the function of sexual abuse. The person engaging in sexually abusive behaviour most commonly holds power, responsibility, or authority over the child they are abusing. Power differentials may include greater social status, wealth or access to resources, physical size, age, or level of ability. This increases the risk for children, who by nature of their age and development are additionally vulnerable.

Due to the shame and stigma associated with being sexually abused, the victim may not want to talk or disclose the abuse to others, both during childhood and as adults.

Experiences of domestic and family violence increase the vulnerability of children to:

- all potential sexual abuse perpetrators
- develop harmful sexual behaviour
- being subjected to harmful sexual behaviour by other children, including their siblings.

Harmful sibling sexual behaviour is one of the most common types of sexual abuse experienced by children (Refer to [Sibling sexual abuse: a knowledge and practice overview](#).)

Non-suicidal self-injury and suicidal thoughts are often indicators of underlying emotional distress, which may be associated with multiple abuse types including sexual abuse. It is important to understand the range of appropriate sexual behaviours for children across the developmental stages. (Refer to [Recognising developmentally expected sexual behaviours](#).)

If the alleged harm to a child may involve the commission of a criminal offence, then there is a requirement under the *Child Protection Act 1999*, section 14(2) to report the information to the Queensland Police Service.

## Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse involves non-physical interactions, which convey to a child they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another's needs. These interactions are typically persistent but may occur in isolation. From these interactions, the child's emotional, social, or cognitive development has, or is likely to be, significantly impaired.

Emotional and psychological abuse is generally ongoing in nature and does not leave physical injuries. Often there is no specific 'crisis or incident' to identify this abuse. Emotional and psychological abuse frequently co-occur with other types of abuse.

Emotional or psychological abuse can have serious short and long-term effects on a child's health, emotional wellbeing, and development, affecting their:

- cognitive and emotional development
- stress responses
- executive functioning skills (how they manage emotions and prioritise tasks)
- ability to form relationships and express emotions.

| Physical indicators of emotional abuse                                                                                                                                                                                   | Behavioural indicators of emotional abuse                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• speech disorders</li> <li>• delayed physical development</li> <li>• substance abuse</li> <li>• ulcers, asthma, severe allergies</li> <li>• non-suicidal self-injury.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• constant feelings of worthlessness about life and themselves</li> <li>• overly self-reliant</li> <li>• difficulty in seeking emotional support from others</li> <li>• deliberately holding back or suppressing emotions</li> <li>• unable to value others</li> <li>• lack of trust in people</li> <li>• lack of people skills necessary for daily functioning</li> <li>• extreme attention-seeking behaviour</li> <li>• obsessively eager to please or obey adults</li> <li>• takes extreme risks, is markedly disruptive, bullying, or aggressive</li> <li>• highly self-critical, depressed, or anxious</li> <li>• persistent running away from home</li> <li>• suicidal thoughts or suicide attempt</li> <li>• non-suicidal self-injury</li> <li>• child may idolise or appear to idolise their abuser excessively</li> <li>• decline in mental health or social and emotional well-being</li> <li>• child may monitor the abuser and their reactions, as a way to increase safety.</li> </ul> |

### Emotional abuse considerations

Emotional abuse can present as a sudden change in the child's demeanour, or a steady decline in the child's emotional presentation over time. Explore any concerns surrounding delayed development or a decline in schoolwork.

The child may present as anxious, distressed, or afraid and may present differently across environments (school, at home, or with friends and family). The child may appear withdrawn, or with a low self-image, self-esteem, or confidence. Explore the child's feelings about their parents and what others have observed or reported about the child's attachment system.

The following table explains different types of emotionally abusive behaviours.

| Behaviour                    | Explanation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
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| <b>Bullying</b>              | This may include verbal humiliation, name-calling and undermining or mocking a child.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Emotional neglect</b>     | This includes a parent being psychologically unavailable, scapegoating, ignoring, or depriving the child of stimulation, not showing affection, or not responding appropriately to a child's emotional needs.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Isolating the child</b>   | A parent puts unreasonable limitations on a child's freedom or restricts or prevents normal opportunities for social interaction.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Manipulation</b>          | <p>This may include coercing or persuading a child to take part in activities that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• they are not comfortable with</li> <li>• are not appropriate for their age or stage of development</li> <li>• are unsafe</li> <li>• encourage the development of false social values, reinforcing antisocial or deviant behavioural patterns. For example, aggression, criminal acts, or substance abuse.</li> </ul> <p>A parent may 'gaslight' to emotionally manipulate the child to doubt their own perception, judgment, or memory.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Rejection</b>             | <p>A parent may tell the child they are not good enough, exclude them from activities, not listen to the child's views, or belittle the child.</p> <p>This may include a parent threatening to relinquish care of their child.</p> <p>A child may also experience rejection if their parent actively rejects their sexuality or gender identity.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Terrorising the child</b> | This may include threatening violence or severe punishment, developing a climate of fear or threat, deliberately frightening or putting the child into a dangerous situation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Parentification</b>       | <p>Parentification describes a set of behaviours that occur in children when there is a distortion or lack of boundaries between children and family subsystems, such that children take on roles and responsibilities usually reserved for adults (Hooper, 2008).</p> <p>Research commonly separates parentification into emotional parentification and instrumental parentification:</p> <p>Emotional parentification is when the child participates in the 'socioemotional needs of family members and the family as a whole' (Jurkovic, Morrell &amp; Thirkield, 1999). The child may be described as a confidant, companion or mate-like figure for their parent.</p> <p>Instrumental parentification is when the child participates in the 'physical maintenance and sustenance of a family' (Jurkovic et al, 1999). The child may do the chores such as grocery shopping, cooking, house cleaning or caring for parents and siblings to a level not expected for their cultural background, age or stage of development.</p> <p>Indicators of parentification can be signs of emotional abuse or neglect.</p> |

## Neglect

Neglect involves the failure by a parent or caregiver to provide the child with the basic necessities of life, as suited to the child's developmental stage, and as recognised by the child's cultural context. Neglect normally involves a pattern of repeated conduct but may be a single omission in severe circumstances.

A child is experiencing neglect if their basic needs (for food, clothing, shelter, medical and dental care, parental supervision, parenting, care and protection) are not being met to the extent that it is negatively impacting the child's growth and development.

| Physical indicators of neglect                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Behavioural indicators of emotional abuse                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• low weight for age</li> <li>• failure to thrive and develop</li> <li>• untreated physical problems such as sores, serious nappy rash, scabies, head lice and urine scalds, dental decay</li> <li>• poor standards of hygiene, for example a child or young person consistently unwashed</li> <li>• untreated health and medical issues that can lead to infections and/or long term health issues</li> <li>• child abandoned or relinquished with no arrangements for care.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• child not adequately supervised for their age</li> <li>• scavenging or stealing food and focused on basic survival</li> <li>• extended stays at school or public places</li> <li>• longs for or indiscriminately seeks adult affection</li> <li>• rocking, sucking, head-banging</li> <li>• poor school attendance.</li> </ul> |
| Considerations for neglect                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <p>Be alert to cumulative harm in cases of chronic neglect, characterised by an unremitting low level of care. It is critical to consider the harm neglect causes (it is no 'lesser problem' than other forms of maltreatment) as evidence clearly demonstrates the consequences can be damaging.</p> <p>When domestic and family violence is also identified, neglect (including medical neglect), may occur as an outcome of economic abuse or control the person using violence exerts over the family.</p> <p>In the context of parents misusing substances, neglect may occur where parents are unable to respond to the needs of the child due to the impairment the drugs or alcohol creates.</p> <p>The child's basic needs (shelter, food, medical) may not be provided as the parents prioritise their drug use or addiction.</p> <p>Although poverty and child neglect are linked, not all children experiencing poverty are neglected. When limited household resources are identified, consider if distribution of those resources is meeting the needs of the child.</p> <p>Neglect arises from the action or inaction of a parent and must be differentiated from poverty, which is a circumstance experienced by a family rather than an act perpetrated against a child.</p> <p>Unsafe or unhygienic households can cause harm and need to be considered for the specific child's vulnerability (including their age, stage of development including any disability).</p> <p><i>Neglect is often portrayed as the 'fault' of mothers, while failing to take into account the role of neglectful fathers (Scott, 2014). Both parents should be held to the same parenting standard.</i></p> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

The following table explains the types of neglect.

| Neglect                    | Explanation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
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| <b>Lack of supervision</b> | <p>Caused by parental absence or inattention and can lead to physical harm (for example injury or sexual abuse).</p> <p>The inattention may be the direct result of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• drug or alcohol use</li> <li>• any related 'crash cycle' as the parent withdraws from the substance</li> <li>• the pattern of drug or alcohol misuse.</li> </ul> <p>For example, allowing children to play on a busy road, not arranging for an appropriate person to supervise the children, or leaving an infant in the care of an adult who is affected by alcohol or other drugs. Each of these, place the child at risk of harm.</p> <p>By law in Queensland, children under 12 years should not be left for an unreasonable amount of time without supervision and care.</p> |
| <b>Physical neglect</b>    | <p>Failing to provide a child with age-appropriate physical necessities including food, clothing, suitable shelter. For example, unstable living arrangements, or unsafe living space (access to needles, broken glass, faeces, weapons, or chemicals) that pose specific risks to the child.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Medical neglect</b>     | <p>Failing to provide required medical care for a child or acknowledge the seriousness of a child's illness, disability, or condition.</p> <p>This can include deliberately withholding appropriate care. This includes circumstances where the parent's religious beliefs inhibiting required medical interventions, for example, withholding blood transfusions.</p> <p>Seek medical advice to determine the impact of medical mismanagement or neglect on the child at Intake, to inform the risk assessment.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Educational neglect</b> | <p>Failing to support a child to receive and participate in the education system. This includes enabling or allowing a child to miss school or preventing their attendance without an appropriate reason.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Abandonment</b>         | <p>When a child is left alone for a significant period and the parent has not put any alternative arrangements in place for the child's care.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Emotional neglect</b>   | <p>Failing to provide the child with adequate nurturing, affection, encouragement, and support.</p> <p>If a parent calls the child names, or actively isolates and demeans the child, this can also be regarded as emotional abuse.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

| Neglect                          | Explanation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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| <b>Failure to protect</b>        | <p>When a parent is unable or unwilling to protect a child who has been harmed, or is at risk of further harm, by allowing access to a child by someone else.</p> <p>This is only applicable where a parent knows of the risk of abuse posed by the other person and have the power or responsibility to reduce or remove the risk but negligently fails to do so.</p> <p>Failure to protect includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• allowing access to a known sex offender</li> <li>• not providing care to a child</li> <li>• not making safe and appropriate arrangements for a child's care.</li> </ul> <p>Please note: this category should not be applied in isolation to a person experiencing domestic and family violence regarding harm or alleged harm caused by the person using violence. In such a circumstance, alternative abuse types which hold the person using violence to account for the impact their behaviour is causing the child. Refer to Exposure to domestic and family violence for more information.</p> |
| <b>Prevented from protecting</b> | <p>When domestic and family violence is also identified, a person using violence may prevent the other parent from protecting the child.</p> <p>Over time the person experiencing violence cannot protect the child from the person using violence.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Unable to protect</b>         | <p>When a parent is unable to protect the child from the presenting harm, despite their best efforts.</p> <p>For example, unable to protect the child from their own self-injury, suicidal distress, or high risk behaviours. Or the parent is unable to prevent another parent (or partner) from threatening harm to the child, or harming the child, despite any attempts to protect the child.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

## Exposure to domestic and family violence

Exposure to domestic and family violence occurs when a child sees, hears, or is impacted by acts of violence towards other family members in the child's home. The acts are typically done by a parent but may also be done by other members of the child's family. Acts of violence are not limited to physical violence and can include emotionally or coercively controlling behaviours.

Exposure to domestic and family violence can affect children's behaviour, schooling, cognitive development, mental and physical wellbeing and is the leading cause of homelessness for children. It is a pattern of abusive behaviour, designed to control the other person/people through fear and intimidation. (Refer to the practice kit [Domestic and family violence](#).)

Domestic and family violence includes:

- physical violence
- sexual abuse or coercion (including reproductive control)
- social and geographical isolation
- verbal abuse
- economic abuse
- emotional or psychological abuse (e.g. gaslighting)
- stalking and surveillance (often via technology)
- identity-based abuse (focused on someone's culture, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity, level of ability)
- threats to harm or kill (the person, a pet or someone they care about)
- property damage.

This abuse type rarely occurs in isolation from other forms of maltreatment and often creates the conditions which enable other types of abuse.

Gather comprehensive information about the child's circumstances, family situation, and broader context. Critically evaluate the information recognising and addressing potential bias, assumptions, and information gaps, including professional observations and notifier's reports. Consider the roles, responsibilities of each parent and recognise a child may be experiencing multiple forms of abuse concurrently, including the impacts of domestic and family violence.

Given the frequent co-occurrence of domestic and family violence alongside other abuse types, practitioners should actively seek to 'rule out' domestic and family violence to ensure accurate assessments.

Domestic and family violence is a gendered issue. Women and their children are disproportionately affected by domestic and family violence. While people of all genders can experience or use violence, coercive control and patterns of abusive behaviour are most commonly perpetrated by men.

### Terminology

This resource uses the terms 'person using violence' and 'person experiencing violence'.

Victim-survivor language is also used across the sector and refers to the person experiencing violence. (Refer to the practice kit Domestic and family violence, [Use of language](#).)

| Physical indicators of domestic and family violence                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Behavioural indicators of domestic and family violence                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headaches</li> <li>• stomach aches</li> <li>• bed-wetting</li> <li>• change in appetite or weight loss</li> <li>• nightmares and sleep disturbances</li> <li>• fear</li> <li>• non-suicidal self-injury</li> <li>• frequent illness or presence of stress-related conditions.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impaired cognitive functioning</li> <li>• hypervigilance to perpetrator's mood and behaviour</li> <li>• parentification</li> <li>• social isolation, and difficulty forming healthy peer relationships</li> <li>• violent behaviour from children in the family home, including increased violence by adolescent children towards the non-offending parent</li> <li>• poorer academic outcomes including learning difficulties</li> <li>• challenges in responding to authority</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• depression, anxiety, and poor mental wellbeing</li> <li>• low self-esteem</li> <li>• low school attendance</li> <li>• bullying (both as victim and perpetrator)</li> <li>• Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)</li> <li>• poor coping mechanisms</li> <li>• eating disorders</li> <li>• suicidal thoughts or suicide attempt</li> <li>• non-suicidal self-injury</li> <li>• substance abuse.</li> </ul> |
| Domestic and family violence considerations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Relationship characteristics between the person experiencing violence and the person using violence:                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What patterns of behaviour exist?</li> <li>• What is the intent of their behaviour?</li> <li>• Who holds and wields the power in the relationship?</li> <li>• Who makes decisions about how resources are used, where people go, who they see, where they live? What happens if someone disagrees with a decision?</li> <li>• Is coercive control guiding their behaviour?</li> <li>• Have they prevented the person experiencing violence from protecting the child?</li> </ul>           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Behavioural and situational factors of the person using violence:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <p>Refer to the practice kit Domestic and family violence <a href="#">Risk factors and identification tools</a>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person using violence may blame substance use for their behaviour to avoid accountability.</li> <li>• The person using violence may weaponize substance use by the victim-survivor.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| The personality characteristics of the person using violence:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are they highly controlling or manipulative?</li> <li>• Are they erratic, obsessive, or fixated on the victim?</li> <li>• Do they believe that their behaviour is justified?</li> <li>• Is there a sudden or recent change in personality or behaviour?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

|                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>The experience for the person experiencing violence:</p>                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Their level of fear of the person using violence.</li> <li>• Their additional vulnerabilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ including geographical or social isolation, mental health issues, drug or alcohol misuse or dependency, financial or physical dependence on the person using violence.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Poor mental health specifically depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder are common responses to the trauma.</li> <li>• How have they promoted safety, nurturance or stability for the child and are these mitigating the risks?</li> <li>• Where women are reported as violent towards their male partner, is it possible this is retaliatory or defensive violence?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <p>The child's experience:<br/>(Refer to practice kit Domestic and family violence <a href="#">Impact of domestic violence on children.</a>)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the impact on child's behaviours, emotions, and thoughts?</li> <li>• What is the impact on the child's learning?</li> <li>• What is the impact on the child's physical health (Refer to the practice guide, <a href="#">Physical and cognitive developmental milestones.</a>)</li> <li>• Is the exposure causing an indirect impact? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ For example, compromised housing (instability, transience, physical damage to the home), medical educational or social needs unmet due to financial abuse by the person using violence.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What additional vulnerabilities exist for the child? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ For examples, under school age, disability or diagnosis, subject to threats or actual physical harm from the person using violence, person using violence is a non-biological adult to the child, parenting orders or shared care arrangements.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Is the domestic violence a distraction from other types of abuse (sexual or physical abuse)?</li> <li>• Are there indicators of, or risk of cumulative harm?</li> </ul> |
| <p>The child's environment:</p>                                                                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there economic impacts such as an overall lack of access to resources. For example, appropriate clothing, transport, extra-curricular activities).</li> <li>• Is the person using violence controlling or withholding available resources from the victims or child?</li> <li>• Has the person experiencing violence been coerced into criminal activity (including theft, sex work or fraud)?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <p>Has anyone sought help previously?</p>                                                                                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was the outcome?</li> <li>• Was the person using violence held to account by anyone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ For example, have there been any domestic violence orders, breeches, or arrests?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

## Process of decision making at intake

At intake, staff are required to:

1. Receive and gather information
2. Analyse that information
3. Form a judgement and,
4. Make a decision about the response needed.

Paying particular attention to each of these elements separately and making efforts to 'delay intuition' (Kahneman, 2011) helps to reduce noise and bias in decision making and increase the accuracy of decisions. (Refer to the practice guide [Bias in child protection decision making](#).)

### 1. Receive and gather information

The ability to make robust decisions at intake largely depends on the quality of information gathering. The scope of information gathering at intake can include but is not limited to:

- notifier information – recontact to clarify/gain further information
- child protection history
  - when there are previous intakes for a family that have either not been assessed or if so, have determined that the child is not in need of protection, do not assume that this case is not one of significant risk as there may be errors in previous assessments.
  - It is critical that all of the information in the history is thoroughly analysed, and practitioners refrain from solely relying on the outcome.
- information about
  - the **child** and their vulnerability
  - the **harm**- type, severity, pattern and likelihood including child protection history.
  - **parent** or caregiver – actions and inactions, repeating or current pattern of concerning behaviours, capacity to meet needs and address harm
  - family, community and **environment** -including the child's culture and connections
  - **strengths and protective** factors.

Refer to the handout [Information gathering prompts](#).

In Queensland, professionals such as doctors, nurses, teachers, early childhood educators, certain police officers and child advocates **are mandated to report** physical and sexual abuse to Child Safety.

Many of these professionals have significant expertise and knowledge which should be recognised when determining reasonable suspicion.

For example, a specialist paediatrician or other medical or allied health practitioner expressing concerns regarding injuries to a child or the impacts of missed health appointments, will meet a reasonable suspicion threshold.

## 2. Analyse the information

Once information is received and gathered it must be analysed to determine:

- Whether the information received from a notifier, and any other professional contacted, indicates a reasonable suspicion that a child has been harmed and/or is at risk of harm if nothing changes for them in the future.
- Whether a child has a parent able and willing to protect them from that harm.

To ensure appropriate consideration of cumulative harm, critically reflect on the child protection history, focusing on the cumulative impact of multiple adverse (abusive or neglectful) experiences on the child over a prolonged period.

If there have been previous intakes for the child that did not meet the threshold for a notification, or previous assessments that did not result in ongoing intervention, challenge these outcomes based on the new information.

Be aware that in the previous intakes and assessments:

- previous adverse experiences and events, when considered in isolation, may not meet the statutory threshold
- episodic assessments may have failed to consider the child's cumulative experience
- there may have been insufficient information gathering and analysis
- the available information may not have been adequate to substantiate harm.

Refer to the practice guide [Cumulative harm](#) for further information about recognising and responding to cumulative harm.

Use the following tables as comprehensive guides to assist analysis.

## The child (consider these factors when analysing the child's vulnerability)

Age, development, and functioning are key factors that may increase the vulnerability of a child. Practitioners must incorporate professional knowledge and research regarding ages and stages of development. (Refer to the practice guide, [Physical and cognitive developmental milestones](#).)

| All aged children                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Specific to infants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What has been the impact on the child to date?</li> <li>• Are there any signs of trauma?</li> <li>• Developmental stage – consider developmental milestones and specific developmental needs. It can be helpful when analysing developmental stage to visually imagine the child in your mind's eye. Imagine them and their characteristics.</li> <li>• What are the likely impacts on the child's development should their circumstances remain unchanged?</li> <li>• Reliance on caregivers – how does the child's age and stage of development impact their reliance on a caregiver? Does the child have a disability which increases their reliance on caregivers?</li> <li>• What is the quality of the parent-child relationship?</li> </ul> <p>Refer to the practice guide <a href="#">Physical and Cognitive Development Milestones</a>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is the child functioning at day care, school and other environments? What does this tell you about their development?</li> <li>• Consider information regarding the child's relationship with siblings, peers, parents, family and others.</li> <li>• Consider any indications that the child may be developing or have developed behavioural issues.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generally, the younger the child is the more vulnerable they are to harm.</li> <li>• Infants are fully dependent on adults to have their daily care needs met.</li> <li>• Infancy is a critical period for development.</li> <li>• Premature babies are particularly vulnerable to harm.</li> </ul> <p>(Refer to the practice guide <a href="#">Infants at high risk</a>.)</p>                                                                               |                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <th data-bbox="767 936 1489 1008">Specific to young people</th>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Specific to young people |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider that the cumulative effect of neglect can present as increased risk-taking behaviour.</li> <li>• Young people may be at increased vulnerability due to factors such as suicide or non-suicidal self-injury and mental health.</li> <li>• Often in this stage of development, young people have increased impulsivity and lowered ability to assess risk to themselves which can result in behaviours that put them at high risk of harm.</li> </ul> |                          |

## The harm

Consider the type and severity of the harm. Harm to a child is the result of the abuse or neglect they experience.

Focus on the child's experience based on the information available.

### Key considerations

- Remember that one or more types of harm may be present for a child at any one time.
- Keep in mind the vulnerability of the child – different types of harm may have a different impact for the child based on their specific vulnerabilities.
- Cumulative harm is usually not visible.
- What is the pattern or history of harm – is the harm escalating (getting worse), chronic (ongoing) or episodic (once off)?
- Patterns of harm are indicators of future harm – if it's happened once then it is more likely to happen again.

Refer to the practice guide [Infants at high risk](#) for risk factors associated with abuse and harm to infants that may result in serious physical injury or death.

## Parents and caregivers

Examine the parents' characteristics to identify any risks and their capacity to meet their child's needs.

### Factors that may increase likelihood of harm:

- parents have caused serious harm to any child in the past
- parent's explanation for the current injury is inconsistent or minimises the harm
- parents deny the abuse or do not allow access to the child
- parents have a history of using violence in or out of the home
- parent has limited parenting skills
- parent is immature or impulsive- consider disrupted attachment and step parenting relationships
- parent has poor attachment to the child
- parental functioning is impaired by alcohol and other drug use, mental health issues, high degrees of stress, acquired brain injury or other circumstances and no supports are in place
- parent has unrealistic expectation of the child or does not understand developmental milestones.

## Family, community, and environment

Examine the child's experiences and wider connections

### Factors that may increase likelihood of harm:

- the physical and social environment is chaotic, hazardous, and unsafe
- poor social networks and isolation from services
- limited food security and employment options
- housing instability and homelessness
- high levels of family stress.

## Strengths and protective factors

Examine the way strengths and acts of protection contribute to a decrease in the likelihood of harm occurring or reoccurring for the child.

All families have strengths. However, those strengths are not always enough to provide protection and mitigate the identified harm. It is important to still identify these strengths so they can be built on and potentially help create future protection and safety.

Protective factors are actions or direct behaviours undertaken by a parent or caregiver which directly address the risk of harm to a child. Practitioners cannot assume that strengths will provide protection for a child. The correct identification of strengths and protective factors can help reduce thinking errors in risk assessment at intake.

Some examples of behaviours that would be considered strengths that do not automatically provide protection for a child include:

- a child attending school or day care
- a parent obtaining a domestic violence order
- a person using violence attending a behaviour change program
- a parent stating they will cease using drugs.

Some examples of protective factors include:

- a parent proactively makes appropriate alternative care arrangements for the child to ensure they are not exposed to parental substance misuse
- parent and family have an effective and responsive safety and support network of informal and formal supports
- adequate income and housing
- connection to culture and community- access to trusted family and community members who offer safe childcare and practical supports such as food and money.

The unique challenge at intake is that if acts of protection are identified, practitioners must ensure there is sufficient information to suggest they can be sustained over time to prevent harm or risk of harm to the child. A stated commitment or intention from the parent to act protectively is not enough. There must be verified or validated information that protective factors have been demonstrated.

## Known risk factors

### ***Domestic and family violence***

When a person using violence commits domestic and family violence in a family with a child, that child is exposed to the violence. This exposure may be direct or indirect with both having the potential to cause significant harm to a child's development, mental, emotional, and physical health, and general wellbeing.

The higher frequency or severity of the violence, both now in past relationships, the higher risk of harm to a child living with a person using violence or victim-survivor.

A victim-survivor may be willing to protect the child from the violence but prevented from doing so because of being a victim. That is, it may be unsafe for both the victim-survivor and the child if the victim-survivor were to act to protect the child from being exposed to the violence.

At intake, focus to:

- the child's experience of the violence
- the perpetrator's patterns of behaviour, both now and in the past
- the victim's ability to protect the child from the violence.

Pay particular attention to the presence of factors that are commonly associated with a high likelihood of domestic and family violence re-occurring with serious injury or death as a result.

For further considerations at intake refer to:

- [Exposure to domestic and family violence](#) (above)
- The practice kit Domestic and family violence, [High risk of lethality factors](#).

### ***Parental mental health***

It is not uncommon for a parent to experience mental health concerns or receive a mental health diagnosis. Each family's situation is different, and a diagnosis of a mental illness may be short or long term and needs to be reviewed by a professional when changes occur. While on many occasions a parent's mental health concerns do not disrupt their parenting, the following may indicate when a parent's mental health concerns are impacting on their ability to parent, including:

- |                                                     |                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| • reduced emotional availability                    | • the family's home environment                                                                            |
| • changed view of their child                       | • parent's medication use                                                                                  |
| • reduced ability to support child development      | • parent's ability to understand the concerns about their mental health and social and emotional wellbeing |
| • the pattern of parental mental health concerns    | • child and family's safety and support network                                                            |
| • the impact of mental health concerns on parenting | • immediate harm versus risk.                                                                              |

Consideration also needs to be given to protective factors for parents when they are experiencing mental health concerns, including:

- parent accessing effective treatment for their mental health concerns
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents accessing cultural healing and supports for social and emotional wellbeing concerns
- access to family support
- supportive safety and support network for the child and family
- other adult caregivers in the home providing care for the children.

Social and emotional wellbeing is a holistic concept of mental health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Further information is available in the following resources:

- Practice kit, Mental health [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing](#).
- [Social and Emotional Wellbeing – Emerging Minds](#)
- [Evolve Therapeutic Services – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People’s Social and Emotional Wellbeing: Domains, Contributing/Risk factors and Protective Factors](#)

### ***Alcohol and other drug use***

Consideration must be given to how the parent’s behaviour impacts on the child. Factors that are useful to consider include:

- The effects of alcohol and other drug use on behaviour, parenting and relationships.
- The role alcohol and other drug use has in the parent’s life (does this issue co-exist alongside other factors for the parent such as past trauma, domestic and family violence or mental health issues?).
- Episodes of alcohol and other drug use – what information is present or can be reasonably inferred about how long the parent’s alcohol and other drug use could impair their ability to care for their child?

When considering the impact of parental alcohol and other drug use on a child, consider:

- the people and places that the child is around
- what the child sees and has access to
- what the child sees, thinks, and feels during their parent’s ‘episode’
- how the parent responds, or does not respond, to the child’s needs
- what the parent’s alcohol and other drug use looks like.

Refer to the practice kit [Alcohol and other drugs](#) for further information.

### **Co-existing risk factors**

Domestic and family violence, alcohol and other drug concerns and mental health concerns can often co-exist and will interact with each other in complex ways. Consider the patterns that may be occurring including frequency of substance use or domestic and family violence, and the impact this may be having on a parent’s mental health and wellbeing (Wright et al, 2021).

Seek opportunities to reduce parental risk factors and increase protective factors, alongside referrals for support services for parents.

### 3. Form a judgement

After analysing the concerns presented, practitioners must form a judgement about the severity of harm and the likelihood of it occurring.

*Is the harm significant or non-significant?*

The consequence of the harm for the child is known as 'severity'. That is, if nothing changes – what will be the impact on the child. Practitioners must consider whether the impact is 'significant' or 'non-significant'.

*Is the likelihood probable or possible?*

Practitioners can never predict with certainty how likely it is that harm will occur for a child in the future. However, practitioners must form a judgement about whether future harm is probable or possible.

If harm is probable, then it is more likely than not to occur.

If harm is possible, then it may occur, but is not likely.

When considering whether a child is at risk of cumulative harm consider:

- how often (the frequency) the child has experienced harm and from your analysis of the history, whether there a pattern of this repeating
- the duration of time the child has experienced these adverse circumstances and events, taking into account their age and developmental stage.

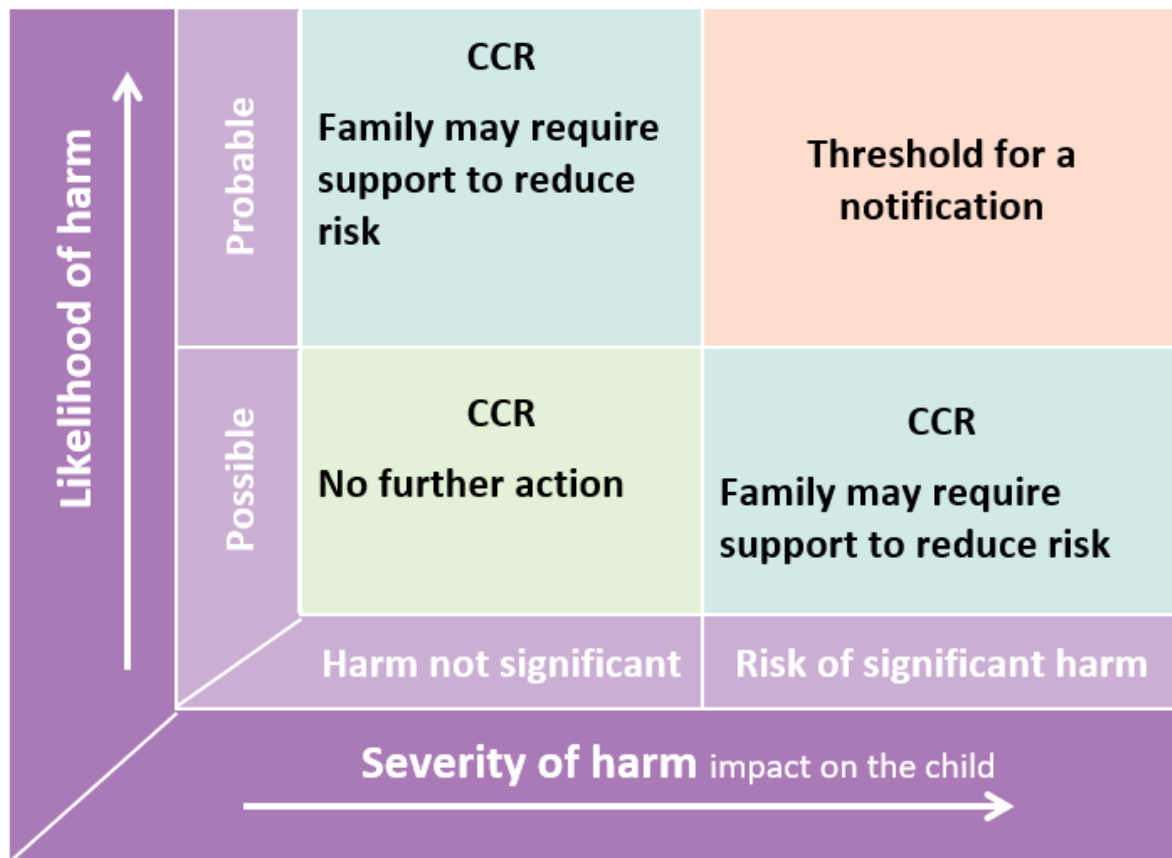
*Does the child have at least one parent able and willing to protect them?*

A parent must be assessed as both **able and willing** to protect their child. A common definition applies, that is, 'able' refers to capacity and 'willing' refers to readiness or motivation.

Consider whether a parent may be willing to protect a child but not have the means or capacity to do so. Conversely a parent may be able to protect their child but not willing to do so because of the child's behaviours or because of personal benefits to themselves.

If the child lives across multiple homes, then for a parent to be **able and willing** to protect their child they must be able to do so across environments.

## Risk matrix at intake



### 4. Make a decision

Does the information reach the threshold for a notification to be recorded?

In circumstances where the severity of harm is significant, and the likelihood of harm is probable, then a notification must be recorded.

If there is no reasonable suspicion of significant harm, a child concern report is recorded.

If no allegations or risk of harm are identified, a limited intake response or intake enquiry is recorded.

## Intake: Decision making process

This table details the decision making process when deciding whether to record a notification.

| STEP 1                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | STEP 2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | STEP 3                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| RECEIVE AND GATHER INFORMATION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | ANALYSIS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | JUDGEMENT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Child<br>Harm<br>Parent<br>Environment<br>Strengths<br>Acts of protection                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Consider what is known about the reported abuse and harm: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ type of harm</li><li>▶ severity of harm</li><li>▶ location of harm</li><li>▶ frequency of harm</li><li>▶ pattern-increasing, escalating or chronic</li><li>▶ cumulative harm</li><li>▶ history of abuse and harm</li><li>▶ individual child experience and impact of harm.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Impact<br><br>Vulnerability of the child and severity of harm come together to make a judgement about impact on the child. The impact of the harm is either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ significant, or</li><li>▶ non-significant.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Consider the factors increasing this child's vulnerability including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ young age and infancy</li><li>▶ prematurity</li><li>▶ developmental delay, disability, or medical needs</li><li>▶ death of a sibling</li><li>▶ child risk taking behaviours</li><li>▶ child non-suicidal self-injury or suicidal intent</li><li>▶ opportunity for harm</li><li>▶ unsafe sleeping arrangements</li><li>▶ isolation from family or community</li><li>▶ limited parental capacity to meet needs and address harm</li><li>▶ parents refusing access or likely to flee.</li></ul> | Significant<br><br>Significant harm goes beyond minor harm. It refers to serious and demonstrable injury or impairment to a child's body or bodily functions, likely to result in substantial and ongoing consequences for the child unless appropriate intervention occurs.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Non-significant<br><br>Non-significant impact refers to minor consequences for a child that are unlikely to result in ongoing effects and can be overcome without intervention. |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Is there a reasonable suspicion the child's physical, psychological, or emotional well-being has been or is likely to be significantly impacted?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Consider factors that increase the likelihood harm has occurred or is likely to occur again: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ prior pattern and behaviour towards the child / child protection history</li><li>▶ attitudes and beliefs of the parents</li><li>▶ behaviours of the parent</li><li>▶ contributing factors:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– mental health issues impacting parental functioning</li><li>– domestic and family violence</li><li>– alcohol and other drug misuse impacting parental functioning</li><li>– young parental age/parents with low maturity/limited parenting skills.</li></ul></li></ul> | Probability<br><br>Is future harm possible or probable?                                                                                                                         |
| Probable<br><br>On the balance of probability, it is more likely than not that the child will experience harm.                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Possible<br><br>Harm may occur, but it is not likely.                                                                                                                           |
| Strengths and protective factors<br>Factors that decrease the likelihood harm has occurred or may occur: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ acts of protection by a parent – does the child have at least one parent who is able and willing to protect them?</li><li>▶ consider child, parental and community strengths.</li></ul> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Is there reasonable suspicion this child does not have at least one parent able and willing to protect them?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| STEP 4 – MAKE A DECISION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Does the information reach the threshold for a notification to be recorded?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| What is the appropriate response?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                 |

## Responses to notifications

Child Safety has an obligation to take appropriate action when it is reasonably suspected that a child may be in need of protection (*Child Protection Act 1999*, section 14(1)). This will be either:

- a priority response, which involves the assessment of the child's need for protection by an authorised officer, or
- a standard response, which involves the assessment of the child's immediate safety and the family's support needs by an authorised officer, as well as support coordination, if necessary, or
- a safety and support response, which involves an assessment of the family's needs by an Assessment and Service Connect provider, and support coordination, if necessary.

These options allow for flexible and proportionate responses to a family's needs, with the ability to escalate to another response, if necessary.

The paramount consideration when deciding the response to a notification is the safety, wellbeing and best interests of the child. Always focus on the most vulnerable child when deciding the response to the notification.

The determination of the appropriate response to a notification requires judgement about the type of harm, severity of harm and urgency of the response required.

### Priority response

A priority response to a notification is required when the concerns indicate the child may be at risk of serious harm and requires an assessment to determine if they are in need of protection. To determine whether a notification requires a priority response, consider the below criteria in the context of the information that has been gathered and analysed. If one or more of the criteria are met, a priority response is the appropriate response to the notification (Refer to [Attachment 1](#) for a detailed explanation of each criterion).

The priority response criteria for notifications regarding a subject child are:

- The concerns relate to:
  - sexual abuse
  - significant physical abuse, including unexplained injuries
  - severe neglect
  - severe emotional abuse with indicators of significant impact.
- The concerns relate to domestic and family violence and one or more of the following apply:
  - the victim-survivor's perception of the risk is high
  - the violence is escalating in frequency or severity
  - the person using violence has threatened to kill the victim-survivor or the subject child (including an unborn child)
  - the person using violence has tried to choke or strangle (including attempts to smother or drown) the victim-survivor
  - the person using violence threatened to use or used a weapon against the victim-survivor.
- A parent or alleged person responsible has previously been responsible for causing the death of or a serious injury to a child.
- A child has died in suspicious or unexplained circumstances, and a response is required for other children in the home.
- There is credible information that indicates a parent would relocate to avoid contact with the department, placing the child at increased risk of significant harm.
- The concerns indicate that the child has experienced cumulative harm to such an extent that it is severely impacting their developmental and emotional wellbeing.

If a child is subject to an order granting long-term guardianship to a suitable person or a permanent care order, decide the response to the notification based on the criteria. If the criteria for a priority response is not met, complete a standard response or a safety and support response – whichever is appropriate in the circumstances.

The priority response criteria for notifications when the only subject child is an unborn child are:

- The birth of the unborn child is imminent and there are one or more priority criteria for a subject child (as above) present.
- A parent or alleged person responsible has previously been responsible for causing the death of or a serious injury to a child.
- A child has died in suspicious or unexplained circumstances, and this response is required to assess other children in the home.
- There is credible information that indicates a pregnant person would relocate to avoid contact with the department, placing the unborn child at increased risk of significant harm after their birth.

## Standard response criteria

A standard response is a response to a notification that involves:

- an assessment of the child's immediate safety
- an assessment of the family's support needs
- support coordination, if necessary.

The intent of a standard response is to offer help and support to a family, to decrease the likelihood of the child becoming a child in need of protection.

The family needs assessment is a proportionate assessment focused on needs that may increase risk to a child if they are not addressed.

A standard response is the appropriate response to a notification when the criteria for a priority response are not met.

## Safety and support response criteria

A safety and support response is a sub-set of a standard response, and therefore similarly the intent is to offer targeted support to a family, to decrease the likelihood of the child becoming a child in need of protection, or an unborn child requiring protection following their birth.

Other than seeking consent to participate in a safety and support response, Child Safety do not engage with the child or parents, and a safety assessment is not completed.

A safety and support response is the appropriate response to a notification when:

- there are identified strengths within the family that could be built on with the help of an early intervention service, to provide for the child's safety or unborn child's safety after their birth
- the child is visible within their family and community, such as at school
- it is appropriate for the service to engage with the family without Child Safety assessing the child's immediate safety.

## Deciding the commencement timeframe for a priority response

If it has been determined that a matter meets criteria for a priority response, a decision needs to be made about how quickly the priority response must commence (i.e., the urgency).

The timeframes for commencement of a priority response are:

- within 24-hours
- within 72-hours.

When determining the appropriate commencement timeframe, consider whether there is concern for the child's immediate safety. When there are multiple subject children in a notification, base the decision on the most vulnerable child.

To decide whether a matter needs to be commenced with 24-hours, review the relevant factors in the table below to decide whether one or more of the urgency prompts in Unify apply. Priority responses that do not require a 24-hour commencement timeframe will be assigned a 72-hour commencement timeframe.

For priority assessments where the only subject child is an unborn child, the commencement timeframe will be within 72 hours.

| Relevant Factors                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Urgency prompt (in Unify)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a credible threat to the child's life, life threatening injuries to the child, or a child with suicidal thoughts and an imminent plan (without a safety plan or a response by a mental health professional).</li> <li>There is a pattern of abuse or neglect that is increasing in frequency or severity and is likely to result in harm in the next 24 hours.</li> <li>The alleged person responsible has easy access to the child within the next 24 hours and the child is at immediate risk of further harm (for example, the alleged person responsible lives in the house, has a care role or contact is scheduled to occur).</li> <li>The living situations is dangerous/unhealthy/seriously chaotic and likely to cause harm within the next 24 hours.</li> <li>The child has been abandoned or relinquished and has no care arrangements.</li> <li>The information indicates that the child is significantly fearful or is experiencing severe emotional distress that needs a response within the next 24 hours.</li> </ul> | <p>Is the child likely to experience harm in the next 24 hours?</p> <p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the child's vulnerability</li> <li>access of the person alleged responsible for the harm to the child</li> <li>the severity of the harm the child may experience.</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The child requires immediate medical attention in the next 24 hours.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Does the child require urgent medical attention?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An ICARE interview is required and cannot be delayed for more than 24 hours without increasing risk to the child's safety and wellbeing.</li> <li>The child is alleged to have visible injuries, including alleged non-accidental or inflicted injuries, that must be sighted to inform the assessment.</li> <li>The child is aged less than five years, or their capacity is limited by physical or cognitive disability, and they are alleged to have observable injuries</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Is immediate contact with the child necessary to gather information about alleged harm, including observable injuries?                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is credible information which suggests a high probability of the family relocating/going missing/fleeing in the next 24 hours to prevent the assessment from commencing.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Is the family likely to flee to avoid contact with Child Safety, placing the child at increased risk of harm?                                                                                                                                                                                            |

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## Attachment 1 - Priority response criteria for notifications regarding a subject child

| Priority response criteria                                    | Explanation / practice prompts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The concerns relate to:                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Sexual abuse                                                  | <p>Select this criterion if the concerns raised suggest sexual abuse of a child is occurring now or there is risk of the abuse occurring.</p> <p>Use the definition of sexual abuse in the practice guide <a href="#">Decision making at intake</a>.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Significant physical abuse, including unexplained injuries    | <p>Select this criterion if the concerns raised suggest severe physical abuse is likely to result in a serious physical injury, or a serious physical injury has occurred which is unexplained, or the explanation is not plausible.</p> <p>Serious physical injuries may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>those which require treatment by a medical professional that if left untreated would result in death, disability, or loss of functioning</li> <li>any injury to a child who cannot walk or move independently (<a href="#">infants</a>, or due to disability or medical conditions)</li> <li>those which have seriously impaired the child's health or well-being such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>brain damage, skull or bone fracture, subdural haemorrhage, or haematoma</li> <li>internal injury or poisoning</li> <li>burns, scalds, severe cuts</li> <li>excessive or significant unexplained bruising</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
| Severe neglect                                                | <p>Select this criterion if the concerns suggest a failure to meet a child's basic needs may result in serious physical injury, death or have serious long-term implications for the child's development and emotional wellbeing.</p> <p>This includes situations such as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>malnutrition</li> <li>untreated medical conditions</li> <li>hazardous living conditions</li> <li>inadequate supervision likely to result in significant harm</li> <li>accounting for the child's age and developmental stage, as well as circumstances where a child is left without any caregiver, such as when a single parent is arrested, and the other parent is deceased, leaving no family to provide care.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Severe emotional abuse with indicators of significant impact. | <p>Select this criterion if the concerns indicate emotional distress that is severely impacting the child's behaviour, development, or ability to function. Key indicators include but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>significant behavioural changes that are disproportionate or misaligned with the alleged harm or context of harm</li> <li>persistent fears or anxieties that go beyond normal developmental responses, such as fear for the life of a parent, pet, or themselves, or fear of returning to a parent's care</li> <li>behaviours which indicate severe emotional harm, such as non-suicidal self-injury or suicidal thoughts, which may indicate underlying emotional distress linked to multiple forms of abuse</li> <li>evidence of serious long-term implications for the child's emotional well-being or development.</li> </ul>                                                                                              |

| Priority response criteria                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Explanation / practice prompts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The concerns relate to:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <p>Domestic and family violence and one or more of the following apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the victim-survivor's perception of the risk is high</li> <li>the violence is escalating in frequency or severity</li> <li>the person using violence has threatened to kill the victim-survivor or subject child (including an unborn child)</li> <li>the person using violence has tried to choke or strangle (including attempts to smother or drown) the victim-survivor</li> <li>the person using violence threatened to use or used a weapon against the victim-survivor.</li> </ul> | <p>Consider both the child protection history and the notified concerns to determine if the child's exposure to the listed domestic and family violence high risk factors apply.</p> <p>Based on the degree of coercive control perpetrated by the person using violence, the person experiencing violence is likely being prevented from protecting the child from the violence, which is why a help and support response is not appropriate.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| The concerns relate to:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| There is credible information that indicates a parent would relocate to avoid contact with the department, placing the child at increased risk of significant harm.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | These matters require a priority response, as they may require the use of powers to ensure the child's safety and assess their need for protection.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| A parent or alleged person responsible has previously been responsible for causing the death of or a serious injury to a child.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <p>These matters require a priority response because the best indicator of future behaviour is past behaviour.</p> <p>A serious injury includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a life threatening injury</li> <li>an injury if left untreated, would cause permanent disability or disfigurement.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| A child has died in suspicious or unexplained circumstances, and this response is required to assess other children in the home.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | These matters require a priority response to assess whether a parent is able and willing to protect the child, given the severity of harm to another child in the home.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| The concerns indicate that the child has experienced cumulative harm to such an extent that it is severely impacting their developmental and emotional wellbeing                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <p>Select this criterion if the information available (notification and child protection history) indicates multiple adverse or harmful circumstances are continuing to occur and the child's experience of harm has become so severe it is likely to have serious and enduring impacts on the child's development and emotional wellbeing.</p> <p>The child's experience of this harm is unlikely to change without intervention (i.e. past offers of help or support have not had resulted in lasting positive change).</p> <p>This may apply regardless of who is responsible or which type of abuse is involved.</p> <p>Refer to the practice guide <a href="#">Cumulative harm</a>.</p> |

## Priority response criteria for notifications where the only subject child is an unborn child

| Priority response criteria                                                                                                                                                                           | Explanation / practice prompts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The concerns relate to:                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| The birth of the unborn child is imminent and one or more priority criteria for a subject child (as above) are present.                                                                              | <p>If a notification is recorded for a pregnant person who is about to give birth, <b>and</b> the concerns indicate one or more of the priority response criteria for a subject child are present, the notification is to be assessed as a priority response.</p> <p>To apply this criterion, use professional judgment drawing on local knowledge of the regionally available help and support services to determine whether to conduct a priority response based on the imminent birth of the unborn child.</p> |
| A parent or alleged person responsible has previously been responsible for causing the death of or a serious injury to a child.                                                                      | <p>These matters require a priority response because the best indicator of future behaviour is past behaviour.</p> <p>A serious injury includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is life threatening</li> <li>• if left untreated, would cause permanent disability or disfigurement.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| A child has died in suspicious or unexplained circumstances, and this response is required to assess other children in the home.                                                                     | These matters require a priority response to assess whether there is a parent able and willing to protect the child given the severity to which another child in the home has been impacted.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| There is credible information that indicates a pregnant person would relocate to avoid contact with the department, placing the unborn child at increased risk of significant harm after their birth | These matters require a priority response, as they may require the use of powers after the birth of the child to ensure their safety and assess their need for protection.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |