

Noticing Signs of Hurt or Distress

Children don't always use words to tell us when something's wrong. Sometimes, their behaviour, emotions, or body language are the only clues. This tip sheet helps you notice the signs that your child (whether a baby, child or teen) might be feeling unsafe, or impacted by a distressing or harmful experience.

When we're looking for signs a child may have been hurt, the **biggest clue is change**. You know your child best, so if you notice shifts in their behaviour, it could be their way of saying, "I need help." These changes don't always mean harm, but they're always worth noticing.

Changes in how they **Feel**

- Fearfulness or anxiety
- Sadness, hopelessness, or numbness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Big mood swings

Changes to their **Body**

- Unexplained bruises or injuries in places unlikely from normal play.
- Complaints of pain or discomfort
- Avoiding certain activities (e.g. swimming)
- Frequent tummy aches or headaches
- Significant, unexplained changes in weight

Changes in how they **Develop**

- Missing milestones or falling behind
- Reverting to earlier behaviours
- Loss of confidence or self-esteem

Changes in what they **Share**

- Acting out concerning scenarios
- Drawing or talking about unsafe situations
- Asking unusual questions about bodies, secrets, or safety
- Showing that they know more about adult concepts before they should

Changes in how they **Respond & Relate**

- Avoiding specific people or places
- Unusual attachment to one adult
- Secretive behaviour or reluctance to talk
- Loss of trust in previously safe relationships

Changes in how they **Act**

- Sudden withdrawal or clinginess
- Aggression or angry outbursts
- Frequent crying
- Changes in sleep or eating habits
- Sudden changes in behaviour towards places or people
- Self-harm like hair pulling, pitching, burning or cutting their skin

Always trust your instincts. If something doesn't feel right, it's okay to ask for help.

If you notice changes, here's how to approach your child with care.

1. Stay Calm

Being calm helps your child feel safe enough to open up. Children often watch your reaction closely to decide if it's safe to keep talking.

2. Create Space to Talk

Use gentle, open-ended questions: "You seem a bit different lately, is something bothering you?" or "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

3. Don't Push

Let your child set the pace. Avoid asking too many direct questions. If they're not ready to talk, that's okay. Let them know you're there when they are.

4. Seek Support

If you're concerned, talk to a GP, teacher, or child protection service. You don't have to figure it out alone.

5. Report

Report If you think your child has experienced abuse, it is important to report this to your local Child Protection Agency.

When Your Child **Shares Something Worrying**

If your child shares something that makes you concerned, whether it's about their safety, wellbeing, or something that's happened to them - your response matters. Children often test the waters when they disclose, and how you react can shape whether they feel safe to keep sharing. This tip sheet helps you respond in a way that supports your child and gets them the help they need.

Use the **S.A.F.E.R** approach

How to respond to your child with care.



STAY calm & listen. Your child needs your calm presence. Take a breath and focus on listening.



ASK open-ended questions to learn more, and avoid leading or yes/no ones. Try: "Can you tell me more?" or "What happened next?"



FOCUS on their safety. Reassure them: "You're safe now. I'm here to help you."



EXPLAIN what happens next. Let them know you'll help and that some adults may need to be involved to keep them safe.



REPORT to authorities using your child's exact words. You don't need to investigate, just share what you've heard.

Things to say....

These words help your child feel heard, believed, and supported:

"Thank you for telling me."

"I believe you."



"It's not your fault."

"You were really brave to share."

"I'm here to help you."

What not to do....

Even with the best intentions, some reactions can make things harder for your child:

Don't promise to keep it a secret.

You may need to share the information to keep them safe.

Don't confront the person involved.

This can escalate the situation or put your child at risk.

Don't ask lots of direct questions.

Let professionals handle the details. Your role is to listen and support.

Next steps....

If you're unsure what to do, contact:

The Police

Report a crime with your local police on **131 444**.

Your local Child Protection Agency

Each state in Australia has a Child Protection Agency you can report to. Find more information at: www.childsafety.gov.au/make-report

A Support Service

A local support service like Act for Kids, or one that is in your area.

Caring for Yourself

When Your Child's Been Hurt or at Risk

When learning that a child has been hurt or unsafe, it can feel overwhelming. Even after the reports have been made and the immediate danger has ceased, you still may be dealing with shock, fear, guilt, or confusion, and still trying to be strong for your child. This tipsheet offers practical tips, emotional support strategies, and resources to help you navigate this incredibly difficult time.

It's okay to feel what you're feeling....

You might feel:

- Numb, angry, or helpless
- Guilty or unsure what to do
- Overwhelmed by decisions or emotions

These feelings are normal. You don't have to have all the answers straight away. What matters most is showing up with love and safety for your child.

You matter too....

Your wellbeing helps your child feel safe. Taking care of yourself isn't selfish, it's part of helping your child heal.

If you need support, you can contact:

- Your GP or local health service
- A trauma-informed counsellor
- A local support service like Act for Kids, or one that is in your area.

Talking with your child....

Keep it simple and safe.

Use calm, clear language.

Reassure them:

- "You're safe now."
- "I'm here to help."
- "You can tell me anything."

Follow their lead.

Let your child set the pace. You don't need to have a big talk all at once. If they're not ready to talk, that's okay. Let them know you're there when they are.

If your child is really young or not using many words:

- Calm, soothing activities such as playing, cuddling, and reading together help your child feel safe.
- Maintain consistent daily routines like mealtimes, bedtime, and playtime. Familiar routines help children feel secure.
- Introduce safety chats into daily routines.

Acknowledge Your Emotions

You're allowed to feel upset, confused, or exhausted. Naming your feelings helps you process them.

Reach Out For Support

Talk to someone you trust – a friend, GP, counsellor, or support service. You don't have to go through this alone.

Create Calm Routines

Familiar routines like meal time, bedtime, and play help children feel safe, and help you feel grounded.

Be Kind To Yourself

Guilt and blame are common, but misplaced. Focus on what you can do now, not what you wish you'd known.

Avoid Common Traps.

- Oversharing your own distress
- Pushing them to talk before they are ready
- Obsessing over "what ifs" or replaying events