Responding to abuse and neglect

Education and care induction session for volunteers

Explain that this information session will refer many times to the site’s “nominated staff person.” As part of their induction to a site, volunteers should be told the name of the staff member with whom they should discuss any child welfare concerns if it is not the individual presenting.
This information session covers some sensitive and challenging issues. For your and others’ wellbeing

- We all have different backgrounds and life experiences – look after your own wellbeing during this session.
- Talk about individuals anonymously - don’t name children or adults or discuss your personal experience. Other avenues of opportunity for personal discussion will be provided at the end of the session.
- Recognise the value of hearing all points of view - and agreeing to disagree.

If a participant needs to leave the room ask them to wait to talk with one of the staff before they leave the premises or talk with the facilitator after the induction is concluded.

If a participant makes a personal disclosure at some later point in the session, remind them of this opening slide’s message about not discussing personal experience. Ask the participant if they would be happy to stay for a few minutes at the end of the session to discuss their information. Then talk about the importance of other participants respecting the confidential nature of what has been disclosed and resume the session.
Aims

This information session aims to introduce volunteers to:

- some of the circumstances that may make children and young people vulnerable to harm
- what volunteers are expected to do if they have concerns about the safety or wellbeing of children and young people
- the process of making a mandatory report of child abuse and neglect and
- the boundaries of appropriate ways of relating with children and young people.

Reinforce to participants that it is important that volunteers who work in environments with children and young people are aware of the contribution they can make to helping keep children and young people safe - hence this particular induction.
You will be looking at what being a mandated notifier means a little later but first it is important to understand a little about the issues that can affect the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.
What should volunteers expect to see in children and young people’s behaviour?

Generally children and young people should be:

- **Happy** – appearing pleased to be at the site once settled, participating willingly in most activities and happy to see parents/caregivers at the end of the day.
- **Healthy** – adequately clothed for weather conditions, clean, provided with enough food for recess and lunch, and any health issues are appropriately managed by parents/caregivers.
- **Socialising normally with adults and peers** – interacting comfortably with adults in their life, and having mainly positive interactions with peers.
- **Doing what is expected of them developmentally** – similar cognitive and physical abilities to their peers, or in keeping with the level of disability which may be present.
- **Attending regularly** – Irregular attendance and unexplained absences are issues the site must respond to.

Summarise by explaining that if children and young people are not generally and regularly showing the above then it is a sign that something may be wrong – it may be a minor or a major problem but the critical point is that staff at the site need to take some kind of action. The volunteer plays an important role in discussing their concerns about individual children/young people with the site’s nominated staff person so that appropriate action is taken at the appropriate time.
Point out that family violence is now seen as a form of child abuse and is responded to as such. Previously it was considered an adult problem and the impact on children was sometimes ignored.
Mention that children who are placed under the care and protection of the Minister (often referred to as children under guardianship) are almost always children who have been emotionally or physically harmed and are therefore deserving of high levels of support and understanding.
When being a mandated notifier is significant.

Sometimes people’s concerns about children and young people’s situations will mean they form a suspicion on reasonable grounds that abuse or chronic neglect is occurring.

In these situations the Children’s Protection Act 1993 outlines our responsibilities.
Distribute the Handbooks at this point in the induction.

Ask participants to read this section.

Point out that volunteers are mentioned under 2(j)

Point out that 5) refers to the fact that notifiers, particularly where they have contact with children every day, are expected to take a range of actions to support children and young people – not just make a notification.
Give participants time to ask questions about the definitions.

Use this as an opportunity to discuss how exposure to pornography has become a greater danger and problem for children and young people since the internet and other electronic media such as iPhones and mobile phones.

Take this opportunity to explain to volunteers what rules apply at your site regarding mobile phones, internet safety, etc.
Give participants time to look at the *behavioural* indicators p. 6.
Ask participants to consider how many of these indicators could be explained by factors other than abuse and neglect.
Almost all of the indicators, *on their own*, could be explained by factors other than abuse and neglect and many will not be a cause for alarm *on their own*.
(Those that should be cause for alarm, *on their own*, are inappropriate sexual behaviour, suicidal thinking, harming others, running away, chronic absenteeism, offending)

The key message to get across is that patterns and clusters of indicators are what should cause us concern.
Reinforce that the best way for clusters to be appreciated is for everyone working with a child/young person to share the concerns they have – that way clusters are more likely to be recognised.
Allow time for questions.

The main messages are that proof of abuse is not required and that people must not try to get proof. This is the job of other agencies such as the police and Families SA.
How should volunteers respond to their concerns about children and young people?

Core Message -

You are not expected to act alone.

You are volunteering within a professional community whose job it is to support you in your role. This includes giving you guidance on how to respond to your concerns. Always seek guidance from the staff person nominated at your site.

Explain that the next two slides summarise the two main situations where volunteers will be expected to talk with the nominated staff person or you if this is the case.
Situation 1 – general concerns

You may have observed one or more of the indicators discussed earlier or you may have heard something from the child/young person or their parent/caregiver that causes you concern.

Volunteer’s Action = Talk with the nominated staff person

They will listen to your concerns and advise you about who will do what, next.
Situation 2 - You suspect on reasonable grounds that you need to make a mandatory report about abuse or neglect.

Volunteer’s Action = Talk with the nominated staff person (same as Situation 1)

Your role as a volunteer means you are supported by professionals at the site in meeting your responsibilities as a mandated notifier.

Explain that this process will now be discussed in more detail.
Why are volunteers advised not to act alone?

Making a notification about abuse or neglect is a serious action that has repercussions for everyone concerned –

- the child/young person
- their parents/caregivers
- the staff at the site (who must continue to support and work with the child/young person, their parents/caregivers as well as liaise with Families SA) and
- the volunteer, who may also continue to support the child/young person and relate with their parents/caregivers

Ask participants what complications they think might arise if a volunteer acted alone without discussing their concerns with anyone at the site. Share thoughts together.

Some examples to offer (if participants do not make many suggestions of their own.)

The volunteer will not know what actions the site is currently taking in supporting the child and family or what involvement Families SA may already have based on previous notifications. Making a report without any of this kind of background could result in the following:

- On its own, the information the volunteer reports may not be enough to gain a response from Families SA. Had it been combined with other observations and information held by others at the site the notification may have reached a higher threshold and resulted in a Families SA response.
- Sometimes parents punish children when they become aware that reports have been made to Families SA. If the site isn’t aware that a report has been made they will not be as alert to signs of this happening and may miss what would be important further evidence of abuse. (for example a period of non attendance, change to behaviour, physical signs etc)
- All children about whom reports have been made are in need of emotional support from the people working closely with them. This can’t happen if the volunteer keeps this information secret.
- Occasionally a report may be very obvious to parents in terms of its origin. Also, children may tell parents who they have spoken to at the site. If the site is unaware of a report made by a volunteer they will not be as alert to the possibility of a parent coming on to the site and perhaps accusing or threatening staff, other parents, children or the volunteer. Once alerted sites can act to provide a ‘barrier’ between aggressive parents and other members of the site community.

Reinforce that the aim of making a notification is to intervene in the abuse and neglect of children/young people. The most effective notifications are those that bring together all the information that people have about a child/young person’s situation. If volunteers bypass staff at the site they put themselves and others at risk.
Working as part of a team means

- the mandatory notification will be the most accurate and detailed description of the child/young person’s situation possible and therefore will be more likely to result in appropriate intervention
- everyone can receive the emotional support or guidance they need, *most importantly* the child/young person
- the site can protect its community if it anticipates some kind of backlash from parents/caregivers
- the site can ensure that proper records are kept and shared about a child/young person’s situation so that their needs continue to be met sensitively.

Provide explanatory information about any of these points and encourage participants to ask questions.

Explain that a particular record is kept in a confidential file by the site leader when mandatory reports are made and will be looked at in slides a little later.
How should a volunteer respond if a child/young person approaches them and begins to talk to them directly about abuse or neglect?

Explain that this next section is in their handbook on pages 9 and 10 and that they will be referring to it.
Leading Questions
- can usually be answered by a ‘yes’ or ‘no’
- they tend to offer information
  (put words in people’s mouths)

Open Questions
- invite information and allow the individual to say what they wish to say
- keep the conversation open and are rarely able to be answered with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’

Try to allay fears about asking the “wrong” questions. Point them towards the safe question styles – for example “tell me more about...” on p.10.

Allow participants time to ask questions - particularly about what children and young people may be feeling.
Under the do’s
Reinforce that “respecting the enormity” includes respecting the confidentiality of what they’ve heard. Talking with the nominated staff member is appropriate, talking with other volunteers or other parents is not.

Make sure volunteers appreciate the importance of seeking support for themselves if necessary. Where would they seek support? (nominated staff member, family member, pastor, personal counsellor etc.) Seeking support does not mean that the identity of the child/young person needs to be disclosed, only the nature of the information and the emotions it has raised.

Writing down what the volunteer has heard should happen after the child/young person has finished and is under someone else’s supervision. This is to help remember details which are easily forgotten or confused in the emotion of the situation.

Under the don’ts
Reinforce that showing shock or horror will not help the child/young person. Once the volunteer becomes aware that abuse or neglect is being disclosed or hinted at, they must put aside any curiosity, disbelief or outrage and leave all the questioning to the child protection agency or police.

Look now at what a leading question is.
Sometimes people want to know how to finish a discussion like this with a child or young person.

If the child/young person has directly disclosed abuse consider saying

“Thank you for talking with me, I’m really pleased you’ve told me about what’s happened. I’m going to get someone to help us decide what to do next.”

If the child/young person hasn’t disclosed anything directly consider saying

“Thank you for talking with me. If you ever feel worried or unhappy or afraid it’s important to talk with me again and if I’m not here you should talk to...[suggest a staff member you think the child/young person knows]”

Allow participants to suggest responses of their own if they wish but make sure you point out if examples are inappropriate.

For example, if they suggest things that are in the don’t list such as making promises or expressing alarm or horror about what they’ve heard etc.
Can anyone stop a volunteer from making a mandatory report?

No.

No one can compromise or interfere with the volunteer’s responsibility to report suspected abuse or neglect.

Remember, for the reasons discussed earlier, it is highly recommended that the volunteer works with the nominated staff member at their site.

Reinforce that *not* informing the nominated staff member can put the volunteer and others at the site at risk.
What happens when a report is made?

- After you and the nominated staff member have discussed your concerns the site leader will be informed that a mandatory report is going to be made.
- The site leader will refer to checklists that help ensure the site has all the information required by Families SA.
- Once all the relevant information is gathered and noted the call will be made to the Child Abuse Report Line. This may be done by the volunteer on their own, or with the nominated staff member or the staff member may act on the volunteer’s behalf.
- Once the report is made it is recorded on a specific form and kept securely in the site leader’s office.
- Volunteers can keep their own personal record of their report if they wish but not the official site record.

Reinforce to participants that they will not be expected to undertake this task unassisted.

Point out that the number for the Child Abuse Report Line is on p. 3 of the document in bold in the opening paragraph. 131478.
Remind participants that this is an official record and it is **kept at the site**. Give participants a copy of the report to look at so they can see that the site leader signs the report and that other people’s names are added as contributing to the report if this is the case.

Volunteers can make a personal record of their own, as well, but if they do they must respect the confidentiality of this kind of sensitive information and ensure that the record can’t be accessed by others.

Good practice if volunteers are keeping records is to only use the child/young person’s initials as this helps protect their identity from prying or accidental eyes!

Participants may want to know if the information on the official record can be requested through other official processes. These below answers are provided on the DECD website.

In the event of a Freedom of Information request in relation to mandatory notification documentation, the identity of the notifier will be exempt from access and so will be removed, unless the notifier gives consent for their identity to remain on the document.

In the event of a subpoena in relation to mandatory notification documentation, the identity of the notifier will be removed unless either the notifier gives consent to be identified or the court grants permission for the information to be adduced to the proceedings. In this case the court must be satisfied that the evidence is of critical importance in the proceedings and that failure to admit it would prejudice the proper administration of justice.
Participants may ask whether they are protected from civil liability.

As long as the report is made in good faith mandated notifiers are immune from civil liability. Again, working with the nominated staff person makes certain that the report is an appropriate action and the volunteer is supported at all steps of the process.

Participants may also ask if they can be called to give evidence.

Mandated notifiers can be called to give evidence to the Youth Court or Criminal Court but this is a rare occurrence. All the actions of working with the site leader and nominated staff member will greatly assist a volunteer should they be required to give evidence.
In summary

The responsibility of volunteers is to **share their concerns** about children and young people with the **nominated staff member**, so that

- action can be taken at the site to support the child and family, and/or
- the volunteer can be supported in making a mandatory report to Families SA if abuse or neglect is suspected.

Use this as another opportunity to identify who the nominated staff member is at the site, if it is not the presenter, and make sure participants know how to access the staff member.

Let participants know that the next (and last) part of the training covers expectations regarding adults’ behaviour towards children and young people.
Inform participants that they can access the full document from the DECD website listed on the top of page 12 their handbook. The site should also have copies of the document available.

This document describes the appropriate use of protective and caring touch when working with children and young people.

It also describes the relationship boundaries expected of staff and volunteers in government and non-government education and care environments and their responsibilities to report inappropriate adult behaviour.
Allow participants time to ask questions about these boundaries, particularly as they could relate to the kind of volunteering they will be undertaking.
- Students report that the teacher has given some of them presents. These range from sweets to sets of pens and CD vouchers.

- One of the students often cuddles the teacher and sits in his/her lap.

- The teacher has initiated a move to a different room in the school that is less visible to others.

- The teacher has organized with the parents of one of the students to provide extra tutoring at home.

Tell participants that this is a teacher of an upper primary special class (children with mild intellectual disabilities)
Ask whole group to consider together

How serious is each observation on its own?
How serious are the observations when combined?
What is the value of all observations and concerns of this kind being forwarded to the site leader?
Refer them back to the professional boundaries chart (p 12 and 13) so they can see where these are examples of a breach of those boundaries.
Every adult working in an education and care environment is expected to report any inappropriate behaviour involving adults and children/young people.

This must happen no matter what position or authority the person has at the site – teacher, deputy principal, grounds person, canteen manager, school support officer, volunteer adult visitor etc.

Point out that the volunteer’s responsibility is to inform the nominated staff person who will liaise with the site leader (principal or director). If the concern is about the principal, the nominated staff member follows a process whereby they refer the problem to the regional director.

If the concern is about their nominated staff person they should inform the principal or their delegate.
One of the ways safety is maintained on education and care sites is by requiring that all staff and volunteers undertake criminal history screening.

If you are unaware of this requirement or the process involved you should speak with the site staff ASAP.

Participants will receive information from the site leader about the criminal history screening process. Volunteers do not pay for criminal history screening.

All education and care screening is now done through the Department for Communities and Social Inclusion (DCSI) rather than DECD.
In conclusion

• If children or young people share concerning personal information with you, do your best to respond in a supportive way. Showing you care and taking action is the most important thing. (You are not expected to be an expert at asking open questions!)

• All concerns about children, young people or adults at the site should be referred to the nominated staff member asap. He/she is your expert.

• Confidentiality is critical. Respect the sensitivity of the observations or information you have by not discussing them with other members of the site community.

Allow participants to ask final questions about these points. Use this opportunity to share any other information relevant to the way your site responds to concerns about children and young people.
Ask participants to go to page 14 of their handbook and record the name of their nominated staff member. This ensures that they have identified the nominated staff member during the training. If they do not know the name of their nominated staff member, advise the participant to seek them out.

If participants are using a handbook printed before September 2013, ask them to write down the contact on the slide in the notes page of their handbooks for future reference. New handbooks have these contact numbers printed on page 14. These are support services for adults not children.

Providing these links is a way of ensuring that any participants who are affected by the induction will have a source of support after the session.
Any final questions?

Enjoy your volunteering with children and young people and the contribution you make to their safety, wellbeing and learning. It is hugely appreciated.