

Implementation of Children First in Disability Services

Key Message

The revised “Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children” was published by Minister Frances Fitzgerald in July 2011, followed by a companion “Child Protection and Welfare Practice handbook” published by the HSE. The Children First Guidance and the Practice Handbook are intended to assist in the identification and reporting of child abuse and to clarify and promote mutual understanding among statutory and voluntary organisations regarding the contributions and responsibilities of all staff in child protection. Children First outlines:

- a) What organizations need to do to keep children safe?
- b) What various bodies and the general public should do if they are concerned about a child’s safety and welfare.
- c) The specific protocols for HSE Social Workers, Gardaí and other front line staff in dealing with suspected abuse and neglect.

The scope of Children First extends beyond reporting to statutory bodies. It emphasizes the importance of multi-disciplinary, inter-agency working, training and sharing of information in the best interests of children in the management of concerns about their safety and welfare. It also highlights procedures and practices that should be in place in organizations working with children to safeguard children from abuse (DCYA).

Why is a specific group necessary to lead the implementation of Children first for children & young people with a disability?

Children with a disability are children first and foremost and have the same rights to protection as any other child. However, children with a disability are up to 3.7 times more at risk of abuse and neglect than non-disabled children (Jones et al, 2012). People supporting and working with children with a disability need to be alert to the signs and symptoms of abuse as there can be a lack of recognition by professionals and carers that a child is being abused with signs or symptoms of abuse being ‘explained away’ as part of the child’s normal behaviour. It is important to document and review all incidents that occur.

What do organisations need to do?

First, we must assume our responsibility as employees, managers and leaders who are trusted to preserve the right of every child in this State to be respected, valued and loved. Organisations must understand the legislation, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and the responsibilities each impose. CEOs and Managers must ensure that all members of the organisation are supported and fully informed regarding their responsibilities. Understanding the roles and responsibilities of personnel, such as the Designated Officer or Social Worker, will help the organisation ensure it has the required policies, guidelines and plans in place.

Role of the National Disability Steering Group for the Implementation of Children First

The purpose of this group is to lead the effective implementation of Children First across state funded Disability Health services for children and young people with a disability.

Terms of reference of the Steering Group

1. To develop and recommend a standardised framework for a Child Protection & Welfare Policy, Procedures and Practices, specific to Disability Services and consistent with Children First 2011 for adoption by all Disability Services
2. To develop and implement a robust Children First Communication Strategy and Plan to support the implementation of Children First across Disability Services
3. To develop and recommend a standardized Children First training strategy to be adopted by all Disability Service Providers
4. To develop and recommend a standardized quality assurance template and monitoring system for effective implementation of Children First appropriate to the range of Disability Services
5. To monitor the national Children First statistical returns for trends, issues and obstacles to implementation of Children First in Disability Services and advise the National Disability Governance Group

Steering Group Membership:

Ann Bourke (Chair)	Social Care Division, HSE
Fiona Duignan	Inclusion Ireland
Toni Gleeson	Disability Federation of Ireland
Laura Keane	Not for Profit Business Association
Clodagh O'Brien	Not for Profit Business Association
Jillian Sexton	National Federation of Voluntary Bodies
Bernie Nyhan	HSE Dublin Mid-Leinster
Fearghal Gray	HSE West
Penny O'Connell	HSE Dublin North East
Carol Moore	HSE South

For further information: visit www.hse.ie/childrenfirstdisabilityservices to see

1. *Children First in Disability Services – A Guide to Policy Formation and Development*
2. *Children First – National Guidance on the Protection and Welfare of Children*
3. *Children and Family Agency's Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook*
4. *Children and Family Agency's Children First Frequently Asked Questions*

See also:

- *Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information on Offences against Children and Vulnerable Adults) Act 2012:*
<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2012/en/act/pub/0024/index.html>
- *National Vetting Bureau (Children & Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012:*
<http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2012/a4712.pdf>

References:

Jones L, Bellis M.A, Wood S, Hughes K, McCoy E, Eckley L, Bates G, Milton C, Shakespeare T, Officer A. (2012) "Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies" *The Lancet* accessed 23/7/12 at http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/notes/2012/child_disabilities_violence_20120712/en/index.html