

JULY 31 2016

What to do if you suspect child abuse



Rachel Browne



277 SHARES

Reporting suspected child sexual abuse is hard but staying silent is worse.

That's the verdict from child protection experts who spoke to Fairfax Media about how to act on suspicions a child is being abused.



Silence is not golden, says Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive Joe Tucci.

Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive Joe Tucci said adults need to be open to the signs of abuse and follow their instincts.

"In a lot of cases children don't make direct disclosures," he said.



Cathy Kezelman, president of advocacy group the Blue Knot Foundation, says child safety should be the priority.

"They might say, 'This happened to a friend' as a way to test the reaction of the person they want to tell. They want to assess whether they will be believed and whether the adult will stand up for them.

"Trust your gut. If you feel that something is not right, seek out support. It is difficult but it's worse to do nothing."

Manager of the [Child Wise](#) helpline and community training Linette Harriott said people are often reluctant to contact the authorities due to a misguided fear of breaking up a family unit.

"If you have an inkling that something is wrong, it's better to call than not call," she said.

"You don't know who else might have made a report – it could be a teacher, a doctor, a neighbour. All those accounts help child protection specialists understand the full picture. You are adding your piece of the puzzle to that picture."

The child's safety needs to be a priority, according to Cathy Kezelman, president of advocacy group the [Blue Knot Foundation](#).

"This is everyone's business," she said. "As a society we have moved away from the idea that the family unit is somehow a sacrosanct, closed space which we're not allowed to enter. If we believe a child is at risk, we must act."

Dr Kezelman said the onus was on all the community as children are often scared to speak up, despite improved awareness about child abuse.

"For children, there is a lot of good education in schools now about approaching a trusted adult, a teacher or a school counsellor," she said.

"When there is abuse in the home it can be very hard for a child to go forward to anyone because they are worried about breaking up the family or being punished. Often the child feels as if they are to blame."

In NSW, a number of [professionals](#) such as teachers, health care workers and police have a legal obligation to report suspected abuse.

NSW Family and Community Services Child Protection Helpline (24 hours): 132 111

Kids Helpline (24 hour service specifically for young people: 1800 551 800

Child Wise National Child Abuse Helpline: 1800 991 099