

PROTECT children AND HELP THEM heal



Information for parents and caregivers of children who have experienced trauma and abuse



PROTECT CHILDREN AND HELP THEM HEAL

Information for parents and caregivers of children who have experienced trauma and abuse

All children have the right to be protected and cared for. Even so, children sometimes experience trauma and need extra support. We hope this booklet will give you this support.

The booklet is divided into sections. It talks about trauma, healing, and a person's circle of care. It shares information about the childcare and protection system in South Africa. And it guides you and your child on the road to healing.

The booklet has a lot of information. You can read it from beginning to end, or you can just pick the sections you need to read at any given time.



The Storm

Your child is dealing with some difficult things right now. You are probably dealing with some difficult stuff too. With everything that's going on, you may feel like you are in a storm you were not expecting. The storm has brought wind, rain, lightning, and maybe even hail. You don't know exactly how big the storm will be or when it will end. Or if you and your child will ever stop hurting.

Healing from trauma is like being in the middle of this storm. Horrible times feel like they won't end. Some things feel like they will never get better. It is difficult for your head, your heart, and your body.

What helped in other storms may not be helpful in this one, an old rain jacket that worked well in other storms doesn't keep you dry anymore. In this storm you may experience new things like a community member that shines their torch in the dark so you can see where to walk.

And then, at some time the storm finally passes, and you and your child may see beautiful rainbows again.



Section 1

Child Trauma

Care, Protection, and Responsibilities

So, what is trauma?

Child abuse is when someone involves a child in sexual activity, physically hurts their body or treats them badly emotionally.

Violence is when a child's body is being beaten or hurt, or the child sees someone else beaten or hurt.

Neglect is when someone can protect and care for a child but does not do this.

Abuse, violence, and neglect can happen to boys and girls of any race, culture, religion, and age. It can happen in any family or community.

Who is a caregiver?

All people responsible for taking care of children. This could be biological parents, extended family, safety parents, foster parents or caregivers in a children's home.

Care, Protection, and Who is Responsible?



All children – big children, small children, those with disabilities, have the right to be cared for and protected. They have a right to support and justice if something wrong happens.

Caregivers like you play a very important part in helping a child heal after trauma. Being strong, patient, understanding and supportive isn't always easy, but it will give a child the best chance of healing. Sometimes you may need other people's help. We refer to these people as our circles of care.

Wherever possible—immediately after a traumatic event, a little later, or when going through the child protection system – ask for support from your and your child's circle of care: A friend, family member, religious leader, neighbour, counsellor, child's teacher, elders in the community, child and youth care worker, employer, etc.

Who are the people in your circle of care?

Who are the circles of care for your child? Take a moment to think about who this circle of care could be.

When you and your child go through the child protection system, it also helps to have the support of people who are specifically trained to care for and protect children – social workers, counsellors, police, doctors, prosecutors, magistrates, etc.

Even though the personal stuff (like taking care of your child) and the other stuff (like the child protection process) are in different sections in this booklet, they are all part of one big thing: to help children heal from trauma. It is important also to understand that everything can be happening at the same time, like a child might be going for counselling while the child protection system is getting ready for all the other things, like a medical examination, preparing for the legal stuff.

Let's now meet the main people in the childcare and protection system and walk together towards the rainbow on the other side of this storm. To get there, we will pass through three main processes:



- Protection and care of children.
- Criminal court/legal process that deals with the people who commit crimes against children.
- Healing for children and families.



Section 2

The Child Protection System

Protecting and caring for children - who is responsible, what do they do?

All parents, caregivers, teachers, neighbours and community members are responsible for caring for their children. If children are vulnerable and need protection, the adult must ask for help from one of the people following. These people must help children:

Child and family social workers work with the children's court to put together a plan of action to protect the child.



Child and family social workers.

They investigate cases of suspected abuse, neglect, etc., to make sure children are safe and properly cared for. They provide services to help families stay together by working with the family. They can develop plans to help the family's needs, e.g. support services such as counselling, parenting skills, or mediation. They work with the children's court to put together a plan of action to protect the child, for example a parent can be ordered to go to a drug-rehab programme.

The magistrate must listen to all the facts about a case to see what is best for your child.



The presiding officer (also known as a magistrate or judge).

If a child needs care or protection, the Children's Court must be involved to make sure the best plans are put in place for the child. The magistrate must listen to all the facts about a case to see what is best for your child. Children and caregivers will have a chance to tell the magistrate their concerns and their side of the events. The social worker will also give a report. The magistrate will then decide and issue a court order that must be followed by all the people in the system, including the social worker, the family, and the child or children.



Alternative caregivers help take care of children when their parents are not able to.

Alternative care.

It is best for children to stay with their own family. But, if it is not safe for a child to remain with their parents (or whoever is taking care of them, e.g. grandparents), then children can be placed with other people who have been screened and can care for the child. The court will review this decision at different times to see if it is now safe for the child to return to their family. Alternative care includes:

- **Place of safety parents** look after the child for a short time, usually not longer than 3 months, while the investigation is still going on.
- **Foster care parents** look after the child for up to two years after the investigation is complete. These cases are monitored to see what support and services should still be given to the child and their caregivers. After some time, there will be a re-evaluation and the child may stay in foster care, go to a children's home, or return home to their family.
- **Kinship caregivers** are people from the child's extended family (e.g., aunties, grandmothers) who take the child into their care for safety care or foster care.
- **Child and Youth Care Centres** or children's homes care for the child when no other care arrangements are possible. Child and Youth Care Workers take care of the children in these centres. This arrangement is also re-evaluated every two years.

Child and Youth Care Workers help children at Child and Youth care Centers and in communities to ensure children are cared for and safe.



Teachers can help others understand a child better and monitor a child's progress.



- **A teacher may be a safe person for a child** to share with when something is wrong. Teachers can help others understand a child better, monitor a child's progress (to understand if a child is improving), and provide a caring relationship for the child during a difficult time.

- **Child and Youth Care Workers** may also be working within schools or other life-spaces of children. They work with other people in the process to ensure children are cared for and safe.

Section 3

The Criminal Justice Process

All the legal processes to deal with a perpetrator (the person who committed a crime against a child) takes place in a criminal court, which is different from the children's court. The job of the criminal court is to look at the evidence to see if the person accused of hurting a child did or did not hurt the child (is guilty or not guilty of a crime).

Crimes against children include abuse, neglect, abandonment and trafficking, child labour, prostitution, violence, or crimes on the internet (cybercrime).

The people you may meet and what their job is:

Forensic social workers are not on anybody's side. They want to get to the truth in a safe and caring way for children.



Social workers

Forensic social workers help the criminal court to speak with children to hear them say what happened during the trauma in their own words. They also help the court decide if children are ready to testify in court. Social workers are not on anybody's side. They want to get to the truth in a safe and caring way for children.

Police investigate crimes against children and make sure they are safe



Police

When you first report the matter to the police, they must give you a case number to help you follow up on your case. The police person at the station who helped you will probably not be the person who will be investigating the crime. Get the name and number of the investigating officer (detective) working on the matter. The police should let you know what is happening with the case and when you and your child need to go to court.

Police officers must speak to all the people (witnesses) who may have information about the crime and write it down (take a statement). When the crime involves a child, the police will ask your child to tell them what has happened to them. You can ask to be with your child every step of the way.

If your child has been injured or sexually abused, the police will have the child medically examined as soon as possible and refer them to the services focused on keeping children safe.

Police must also make sure children are safe. This may include working with social workers to remove the child from home, issuing a protection order to keep the child safe from whoever harmed them, or removing the person who harmed the child from the house.

When the police have done their investigation, they will take the file (docket) to the prosecutor (lawyer) at court. They may also be asked to testify in court hearings.

The FCS Unit (Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences) are police specially trained in working with children and families.

The Hawks are a special unit that deals with online crimes and child trafficking.

Doctors or nurses with special training will do the medical examination.



Doctor / nurse

A doctor or nurse may examine a child, look at any injuries, and give them treatment. They will collect evidence that can be used in court if needed.

Your child has the right to have a support person with them during the examination. Your child cannot be forced to have an examination. If they do not want an examination, try to explain to them why it is important.

The examination should not be painful for children. But sometimes, they might get an injection that could be sore, or they might be given medicine that is not nice to take. Children and caregivers need to follow the instructions about taking medicine and go to all follow-up visits. Ask the doctor or nurse to explain the results of the examinations and tests to you and your child.

The prosecutor is a lawyer working for the state to help the child through the court process.



Prosecutor

The prosecutor is a lawyer working for the state to help the child through the court process. You and your child should meet with the prosecutor at least once before your child testifies.

The criminal courts' have a special unit to deal with sexual abuse cases. Other cases like domestic violence, protection orders and when children have committed crimes will be heard in different courts. The social worker or police officer will explain where you need to go and what process to follow.

The intermediary sits in a separate room away from the courtroom with your child to help them feel safe.



Intermediaries

Some courts have specially trained people (called intermediaries) who can help your child to understand the questions asked in court. The intermediary sits in a separate room away from the courtroom with your child to help them feel safe.

If a crime has been committed, the magistrate in the criminal court will listen to all the facts about the case and make the final decision if the person is guilty or not.



Magistrate/presiding officer/judge

The magistrate who works in children's court is not the same as a magistrate who works in a criminal court.

If a crime has been committed, the magistrate in the criminal court will listen to all the facts about the case and make the final decision if the person is guilty or not. If the person is guilty, they will receive a sentence decided by the magistrate. If the person is found not guilty, this means there is not enough evidence or facts to say they are guilty. It does not mean that something bad did not happen.

A child with a disability has the same rights as all other children.



Children with disabilities

A child with a disability has the same rights as other children. They will often need more support to make sure that their rights are upheld. The people in the process that you meet need to understand your child's disability and needs.

Your child may need help in understanding words and language, they may need to have support people with them when they are interviewed to help them better communicate (e.g. sign language). Think about who may be helpful support persons for your child during the process



Things that are **important** for you **to know**

Be prepared

It is helpful for children to be prepared for each step. They must be given information about what will happen, who they will be meeting and what they need to do. This helps children cope better with the process.

How to prepare yourself and your child for the process

For every case, every child and caregiver, the child protection process will be different. Even if you have a lot of information about the next step, there may be other things you don't understand or that you were not expecting, and that may be difficult for you and your child. Ask the people in the process for information and support. Remember also to use your circles of care.

You can ask to speak in your home language

Sometimes it is very difficult to explain things in a language that is not your home language. You can ask to speak to someone in a language of your choice.

Write it down

Sometimes when we are very stressed, we do not always remember all the details of discussions or events. It is best to write the most important things down:

- Who you spoke to (name, title, organisation, contact number).
- The date, time, and place you talked to them (also write down what was discussed even for telephone conversations).
- The file/docket/reference number for your case. Each part of the system (e.g., police, social worker, doctor, magistrate, etc.) will have a different case number.
- What is the next thing you need to do?
- When can you check in with the person again or expect to hear from them?
- If you cannot get hold of the person you have seen, what is the name of another contact person (or their supervisor) at their organisation or department?

Be aware

- Some people in the process may be asked to testify in court, e.g., the police, social worker, and doctor or nurse.
- Some people may tell you that your child cannot have counselling before they testify in criminal court because it will change the

things they say. This is not true, and no law says this. If your child needs counselling, then you must act in their best interests. Counselling may be important to help your child cope with the trauma and help prepare them for court.

- You and your child need to be treated with sensitivity, care and understanding in a child-friendly and private space where you feel safe. The people in the system should not create further trauma for you or your child.
- Your child may need help in understanding words and language. They may need to have support people with them when interviewed to help them communicate better.
- Your child can also take a toy or object like a blanket with them if it helps them feel comforted.
- If your child has a disability, the people in the process need to be told so they can understand the child's disability and needs. Explain how to best communicate with them. Some children may not be able to use words to explain how they feel. But they still have the same feelings and experiences from the trauma as other children. The trauma may be shown through their behaviour.

People in the process may have different roles, but they should all provide the best care and protection for the child.

How to **make things easier**

As you can see, there are many people to help you and your child. Parts of the child protection and legal processes may be confusing. Below we give you some more information to make things less confusing.

Important

Each time you meet someone new in the process, do four things:

Ask for their name and contact number.



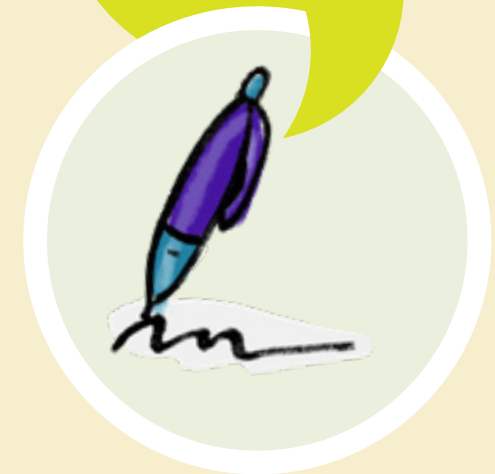
Ask them to explain their role in the child protection system.



Ask how they will help you and your child.



Write everything down.



You and your child have rights, and the people in the process have responsibilities

You and your child have the right to ask questions, be given information, share your views, be listened to and taken seriously. All people have these rights, no matter their age, ability or disability. The people in the child protection system must make sure these rights are respected.

Talking about the problem over and over again

Many children and caregivers are frustrated and upset by having to tell different people in the process what happened, again and again. This can be very difficult and traumatic for you both.

Sometimes criminal cases can take years before going to court, and you may forget details. Writing things down as you talk about them can help you remember and keep track of the information.

What happened to your child is confidential (not for everyone to know about)

This means that the people in the process cannot tell other people about your child's abuse and trauma unless the other people are involved in the child protection system.

People in the child protection system work in this environment every day

This means they sometimes forget how alone or scared a caregiver or child may feel. For you, it may be the first time dealing with these things.

Don't be scared to ask for information so you and your child can feel more powerful and prepared.

Try to build a relationship with the people in the process

It can be very helpful to build a good relationship with the people in the process you meet. Be kind, patient and respectful, as this helps to get the best service from the people. However, if you disagree with them, you can let them know.

The people in the process are not always the same

You may start the process working with one social worker or police officer, and the next time meet with a different person, so it helps to write things down each step of the way, including everyone's name and contact details.

Making contact

Sometimes it may be difficult to get hold of the police officer, social worker or prosecutor working on your case. So, try to get more than one telephone number from their office and find out who the supervisor or head of their team is.

You may need to follow up to get feedback

It is your right to get feedback on the case or process. However, this feedback is not always given to you. You should get in touch with your contact person to ask what is happening. You may need to do this several times before you get an answer. Please keep on trying. Write down the date, time, and people you speak to each time and what they said.

People in the child protection system need to work together

All the people in the process need to work together to help your child. Unfortunately, this does not always happen as it should. Share the names and contact details of the people in the process you have with all the others to make it easier for them to get in touch with one another.



Sometimes the steps take time. They may have a big caseload or not have the things they need to do the job in the best way.

Sometimes things take a long time or they go wrong

- Some parts of the process, especially those within courts, can take a long time to be finished. You may be asked to attend court many times, as cases may be postponed to another date. This is very difficult for families. It is helpful to take a snack, some water and something to do (book, games for children, their favourite teddy) for the days when you attend court.
- The child protection system sometimes works well. Other times there are problems. You may feel that some people in the process are not putting in the hard work you feel is needed. This can be frustrating. Sometimes the steps take time. They may have a big caseload or not have the things they need to do the job in the best way. However, you and your child should still expect things to be done properly.
- If you have a problem with the people in the process, try to work it out by talking openly and honestly with them. Tell them what your concerns are and what you need. Try to do this in a calm and reasonable way, using facts to help you explain your concerns.
- If you cannot work out your problems with this person, you may ask to speak with their supervisor. Share the facts with the supervisor and ask for their help and suggestions about what to do next.
- If this still does not work, you can make a formal complaint. Every department will have their own helplines or complaints procedures. **You can phone Childline at 116 (toll-free)** or the Gender-Based Violence Command Centre on **0800 428428** to ask for further help.

Even if the system is not working in the best way, remember that you will continue to play an important role in your child's life and healing. You know what is helpful for your child's healing. Keep on doing this. Keep on trying.

Section 4

Counselling and Healing

Counselling

Just as you need medical help for the pain and injury of a broken leg, you also need help for the emotional pain and injuries of trauma. Children (and adults) need to have counselling to heal this pain.



Healing from hurt is like a journey. It takes time, and there may be bumps along the way. One of the most important things children need to heal is a safe and supportive relationship with you (and other people too). When children feel safe and supported, the healing can begin.

- **Social workers or other helpers** may assist in providing counselling to children and their families after trauma. This may include play therapy sessions with children, family discussions, information on coping with trauma, and support programmes for children and caregivers. Other people who help in the healing process are psychologists, counsellors and child and youth care workers.

- **Traditional and religious leaders** may be helpful for you and your family to find healing. Also, if your child has been abused, a traditional or religious leader can assist you in reporting to the police and child protection services. But they are not allowed to investigate the matter. They can only support you.

Children need:

- Someone they can trust, who takes time to listen to them and cares for them
- Someone who tries to help them understand what is happening around them and who helps them cope in difficult times by being caring, patient and supportive.

How you can support your child's healing

- Each child copes with trauma in different ways.
- Keep regular routines, e.g., attending school when possible, homework time, playtime, doing chores, etc. Daily rhythm helps children feel safe and secure.
- Do not keep asking your child about the details of their trauma. If your child wants to speak about the trauma, listen to them and show you care (with words and actions). For example, "I know what happened changed many things in our family, but it is not your fault," or "Sometimes a hug makes me feel better. Would you like a big hug?"
- Do not talk about the details of the trauma or difficulties your child is having with other people in front of your child, even if you don't think your child understands what you are saying.
- Try to stay away from things, people or places that make your child feel unsafe.
- Answer questions and share information so your child can understand. Sometimes it is OK to say "I don't know" if you don't have the answers.
- Children feel more in control when they know what will happen next. Take time to prepare your child for each meeting. Tell them who will be there and why the meeting is important.
- Listen to your child and let them know that it is OK to have difficult feelings. Encourage them to share their feelings with you even if they find it hard.
- Know where your child is all the time because it helps your child feel and be safe.
- Spend time with your child in meaningful and fun activities, including reading together, singing, exercising, playing games, etc.



Help your child cope with their BIG feelings

We all have feelings. Sometimes they are little; at other times overwhelming, big and difficult to cope with. All feelings are OK to have. It is important to think about what we do with these feelings.

When children are traumatised, they may have BIG feelings afterwards and not know how to cope with these BIG feelings. Sometimes there may be things that remind your child of the trauma, making them feel afraid. For example, walking past the field where your child was hurt. Sometimes trauma can change your relationship with your child. For example, your child may be angry with you or keep to themselves, or they may cling to you even more closely than before. They need your help in learning ways to cope with these feelings.

Dealing with your child's BIG feelings can feel overwhelming for you and leave you worried and exhausted. It is OK to let your child see some of your feelings as well. This helps children see that whatever happened to them was not right and is hurtful. If we let children see some of our feelings, it gives them permission to show or share their feelings. By showing our feelings, we can model for children how to cope with their feelings in ways that are not hurtful to others.

Children with disabilities will need extra support. Try to find the best way to explain the information to your child in a way they understand. Ask for help if you need it.

Tips to help you manage BIG and out-of-control (overwhelming) feelings

You may also have BIG feelings about your child's trauma. Please pay attention to these feelings and try to find ways to deal with them, so it does not hurt you, your child or family. You might have a whole lot of feelings jumbled together.

You and your child may also struggle with physical things like headaches, stomach aches and sleeping difficulties. These reactions are real, and it is normal and OK to have them. What is important is to try to find ways to deal with these feelings and find people who support you.

You need to calm yourself first as best you can.

Ideas to help you calm your body down quickly

- Stop what you are doing.
- Take a few slow deep breaths and breathe slowly.
- Squeeze your fists or palms together as tight as you can for a few seconds, and then relax them.
- Count backwards from 20.
- Yell your angry feelings into a pillow or your sleeve.
- Stretch all the muscles in your body.
- Focus on relaxing your shoulders and breathe.
- Repeat a positive saying to yourself:

- **"Emotions are like waves, they come, and they go."**
- **"I know I can do this."**
- **"This too shall pass."**

If you are calm, you can focus on your child, communicate better and help your child feel calmer.

How we communicate is important. When children are afraid or upset, they will see our body language before they can listen to our words. So:

- **Speak slowly and in a calm voice.**
- **Make eye contact with your child by getting down to their level.**
- **Do not move your body too quickly or in a threatening way as it may make children feel more scared.**

Calmly say something like:
 “I’m here for you.
 I love you. You’re safe.”



Try this:
 keep the muscles in your legs tight...



...then relax them.



When you stop squeezing, all your muscles should feel more relaxed.

- Do something physical using your whole body like walking, dancing, skipping, playing soccer, playing clapping games, swinging, running, or any other exercise you enjoy.
- Safe touches: Some children (and adults) like being physically touched or held, as it helps them feel calm and safe. This could be giving children a big hug, rubbing their feet, or holding their hand. Just remember to ask for their permission before you touch them. We want to teach children they are the boss of their body to help keep them safe from abuse.
- Sing together or sing for your child.
- Pray or do something spiritual.
- Have fun together. This may sound difficult for you right now but laughing together changes how our bodies feel on the inside. Tell each other silly and funny jokes, jump around pretending to be different animals. Even by pretending to laugh, you will end up laughing for real.

Ideas to help your child feel calmer

- Hug them (with their permission).
- Sing softly to them.
- Rocking or swinging.
- Help them focus on things they can see, smell, hear, or touch.
- Play with water or sand–this can be very calming.
- Calmly say something like: “I’m here for you. I love you. You’re safe.”
- Use kind words to build children up.
- Sometimes children just want us to sit with them and be with them.
- Cook or garden together

More ideas for you and your child

- **Breathe deeply:** Take in deep and slow breaths through your nose (slowly counting 1...2...3), hold your breath for three seconds, and then breathe out through your mouth, again counting to three. Try to do this several times in a row.

For children, you can add some fun to help them learn deep breathing by playing that their breath can move the clouds, or they can blow soap bubbles in water.

- **Relax your muscles:** This can be done in lots of ways, it is important to squeeze your muscles tight, hold for a count of 5, and then relax them.

Try this: sit on a chair, put your hands under the chair and ‘pull’ the chair seat upwards, holding tight for a few seconds and then relaxing. You can also lift your legs off the ground while sitting; keep the muscles in your legs tight and then relax them.

Try to do some of these things regularly. The more we do these such things, the more helpful it becomes.

Remember that your relationship with your child is a very important healing space for them where they can feel safe, understood, and supported.



The Storm is Ending

Once, in a big dark storm stood a little child and their parent. The storm was thundering around them, and the wind was howling. The little child was scared and asked, "Please can we find a place to hide away from the storm and wait until it passes?" The parent bent down and said to the child: "The only way to get out of this storm is to keep going. We have to go through it."

Even though the small child was holding his parent's hand, he was still afraid. Sometime later, the little one asked again, "Please can we go and hide from the storm. I am wet and cold and scared!" The parent again patiently explained: "I know it is cold and wet and you are afraid. But we must keep walking through the storm. We cannot stop."

They walked and walked, and every so often, the child would ask the same question, and the parent would explain again. This continued for a long time. At some point, the little one was tired and said, "I am tired. I am wet. I can't do this anymore! Please can we stop!"

The parent slowed down, bent down to the child and said: "Look around, little one, we are no longer in the middle of the storm. The rain and wind are gone, and the sun is rising, which will warm us up. Little one, look back from where we came. What do you see?" The little one turned around and saw the dark storm still raging but far away at the bottom of the mountain.

The parent picked up the little one and held him close to his heart. The parent whispered in his ear, "Little one, you are so brave. You kept on walking, even in the middle of the huge storm. And because we kept on walking, even when we were scared, we are now no longer stuck in the storm. If we had chosen to hide somewhere from the storm, we would still be right in the middle of it."

The little one kept this lesson of walking through the storm close to his heart for future storms that may come.



thank you...