

# GUIDESHEET FOR PRINCIPALS

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*Supporting employees who  
are the subject of a child protection complaint*



When a complaint of child protection nature is made against a staff member it can be a challenging situation for the Principal to manage. This guide sheet is designed to assist Principals with information on how to manage the staff member who is the subject of the complaint. It includes guidance on how the staff member may react, what the Principal's role involves, some guidelines for how to best support the staff member and helpful hints for communicating with the staff member. This guide sheet may be used in conjunction with section 6 of the Child Protection Resource Manual which provides detailed information regarding the processes for managing complaints of a child protection nature.

## Reactions to allegations

When a staff member is advised that a complaint has been made about his/her alleged conduct, there may be number of different ways he or she reacts:

- denial – “I don't believe this is happening... or...I didn't do anything wrong, I've never harmed a child.”
- confusion – “Why would someone say this about me?”
- hostility – “How dare they?”
- ambivalence/bravado – “So what? I've seen it all before.”
- self-disclosure – “I was going to tell you about this. I'm glad that you have raised it.”
- distress – “I'm devastated and worried about what will follow.”
- allegation/threat – “I'm sure people would be interested to learn about some of your actions.”
- conflict – “I'm not going to co-operate with you or anyone else involved in the matter.”
- aggression – “You proceed with this and I will sue you for everything.”
- manipulation – “I have a few things that I know about you” or “We've been friends a long time and I supported you when...Can't we just forget it?”
- avoidance – “I don't want to talk about this now”
- blame – “I knew this would happen. I've been trying to tell you for months but you never listened.”

## What is the Principal's role?

In relation to the staff member:

- provide information** about the process being followed to handle the complaint (whether it is being handled by the principal or the child protection team – see section 6 Child Protection Resource Manual)
- help the staff member **understand the process**
- ensure that the staff member is advised of available **support**
- be available** to the staff member for advice, support and guidance during the process
- be aware of possible risks and implement **strategies for managing risk**, (seeking support and guidance when necessary).
- report concerns regarding possible **industrial issues** to the employment relations officer
- maintain **supportive communication** with the family of the child or young person.

Self management and self care are also important:

- manage personal reactions and emotions – **remain impartial**
- be aware of the **emotional impact** the process may be having on you
- don't take it personally – **maintain perspective**
- be clear about your role
- seek advice, support and guidance** from the child protection team and schools consultant
- seek **additional support** for yourself if needed.

# What is not the Principal's role

It is not the Principal's role to:

- ☒ influence or intervene in the process. Even if you are handling a matter at the school level remain objective and impartial
- ☒ make statements of judgment regarding the complaint
- ☒ advocate for the staff member

# How does the Principal support the staff member?

The Principal may support a staff member by:

- listening to the staff member
- acknowledging the staff member's concerns
- providing information about the process or referring the staff member to the child protection team for further information
- remaining impartial and not pre-judging
- being understanding and compassionate
- maintaining confidentiality and ensuring others do the same
- keeping communication factual, accurate and clear
- contacting the staff member at home on a regular basis if he or she decides to take leave or, in rare circumstances, is stood down
- recognising when professional and formal support for the staff member may be required
- encouraging the staff member to use ACCESS (the Employee Assistance Program service provider) for counselling and other support needs

There are some key points in the process when the staff member may be in particular need of the Principal's support:

- when the staff member is initially informed about the complaint and the process to be followed
- when the staff member is formally advised of the details of the complaint
- when the staff member is providing a response to the complaint
- when the staff member is advised of the outcome of the process.

While these markers in the process may be obvious times for checking in, staff members may benefit from the Principal's support at other times in the process. A staff member may not always ask for help. It is therefore important that the Principal remains alert to possible needs and is proactive in offering support.

# Helpful things to say

## WHEN INFORMING THE EMPLOYEE:

- ☞ "A concern has been raised which relates to your interaction with a student (or students). There are particular procedures under the child protection legislation which have to be followed when concerns of this nature are raised. While I understand that it would not feel good to have a complaint made against you, I want to reassure you that a fair and thorough process will be applied in looking into the complaint and you will be given an opportunity to know the details of the concern and to make a comment / provide your response / explain your version of what happened"
- ☞ "No decision has yet been made or will be made until you have had an opportunity to respond"
- ☞ In the vast majority of cases it would also be appropriate to reassure the staff member by saying "This matter is not career threatening"

## ABOUT ACCEPTING THE PROCESS

- “A complaint is simply one perspective about something that has happened. The existence of a complaint does not mean that the conduct complained of has occurred. There is no presumption of guilt. A fair and confidential process that takes account of all the information, including your response, will be followed before a decision is made”
- “It is understandable that you may feel angry/frustrated/confused/stressed. The matter will be dealt with as quickly as possible and at the lowest possible level. I will also support you in whatever way I can and will assist in arranging any additional support that is required”
- “The process is not designed to make your life difficult or stressful. The reason why concerns of this nature are managed differently is to ensure that students are safe and that staff are appropriately supported and developed”

## ABOUT ACCEPTING SUPPORT (at the outset, during and at the end)

- “This can be a very stressful experience. It is a time to use the available resources. You don’t have to manage this on your own.”
- “I am available to answer questions you have and to support you. If there are questions I can’t answer I will refer you to someone who has the answers.”
- “You can nominate a support person to be present at interviews as a witness to the process and as someone to discuss things with. This could be a union representative, your husband/wife, a colleague etc. Whoever you nominate as a support person is expected to maintain confidentiality”
- “If you are feeling distressed/angry/anxious/can’t put it out of your mind/having trouble sleeping, counselling may help to reduce the impact on you and help you through the process. It is completely confidential”.
- “Counsellors are familiar with the investigation process and have helped many staff who have been through this type of experience to manage the associated stress.”
- “Now that the investigation has closed it can be useful to debrief with a counsellor, discuss the findings, look at some possible changes you may wish to make, and move forward. Here is a brochure and the number to call for counselling.”

## MAINTAINING CONFIDENTIALITY

- “Even though you may want to talk about it with other staff members I encourage you not to discuss it with anyone but me, your support person or your close family. Your reputation will be best protected by maintaining confidentiality. You also have a professional obligation to protect the confidentiality of others involved in the process.”
- “All reasonable steps are taken to ensure confidentiality. The importance of this is stressed with everyone involved and their agreement to do so is sought. You are expected to do the same” (Note: Principals may also refer to the staff to the FAQs in section 6 of the Child Protection Resource Manual)

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