

Managing aggression, alcohol and drug use in the home:

A guide for those concerned
about children 5-12 years

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(former Family and Community Services)
Alcohol and Drug Information Service (NSW)
Network of Alcohol and other Drugs Agencies

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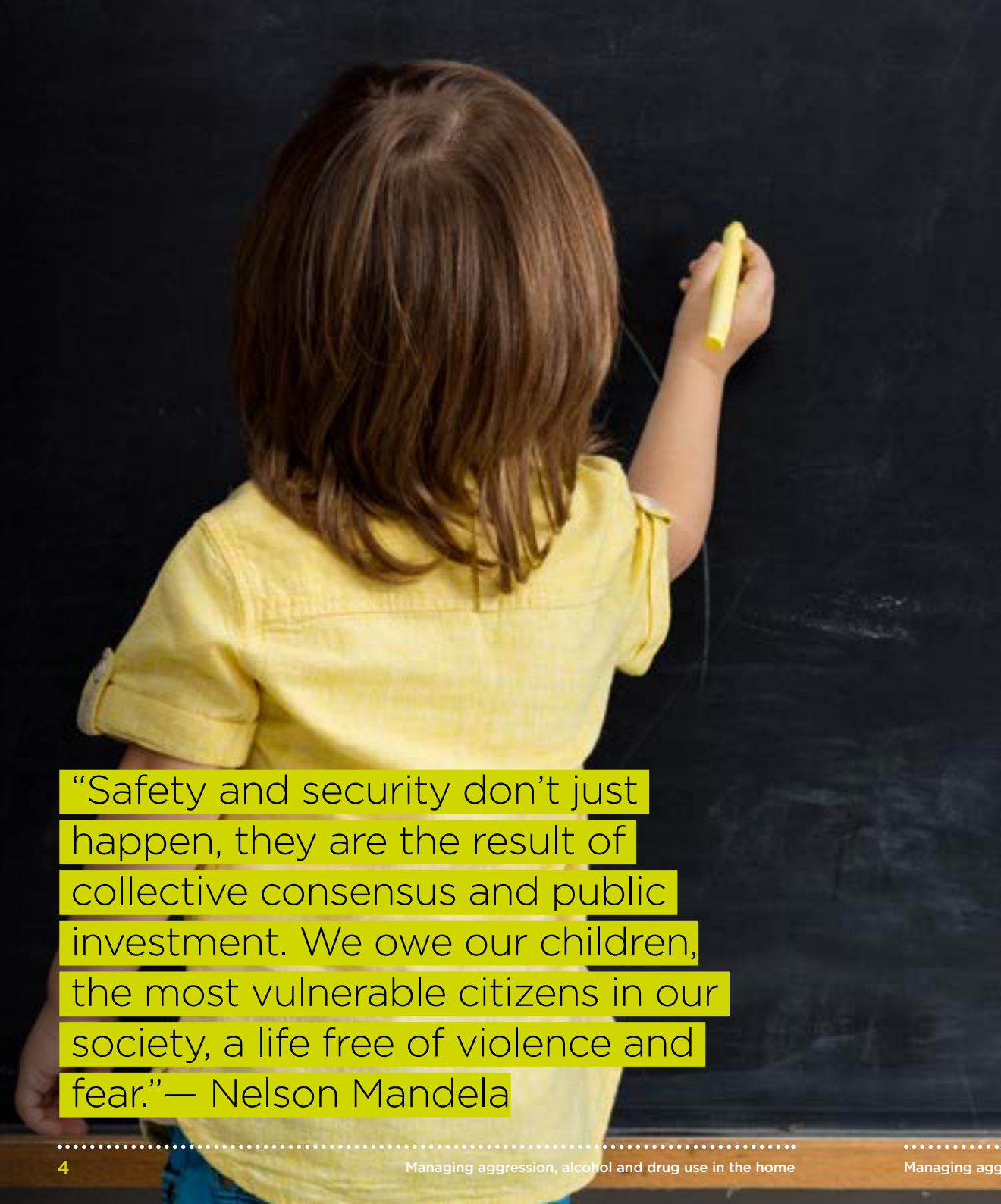
What is this guide about and who is it for?

Some children you come into contact with in your personal or professional lives may be part of a family environment where harmful alcohol or drug use puts them at risk of aggressive or violent behaviour.

Even if the child or children are not the direct target of aggressive behaviour, its presence in the home can impact their physical and emotional wellbeing and development¹. These issues need to be addressed swiftly and with assistance from professionals where appropriate.

This guide will help you to discuss this issue with the child, help them to feel safe, and find appropriate support for them.





“Safety and security don’t just happen, they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear.” — Nelson Mandela

Is aggressive and violent behaviour ever acceptable in the family?

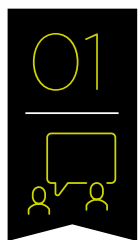
No. Children have a right to feel safe all of the time. They also have a right to be protected from violence, abuse and neglect². Violence is not acceptable in the family home and children should not be subject to it.

Some children may have lived with aggressive behaviour or violence for a long time, to the point where it may feel normal for them. They may not be aware that what is happening is unacceptable, unsafe or unhealthy. It can be helpful to explain to children:

- We all have the right to feel safe all of the time
- Parents need to look after you at home and make sure you have enough food to eat and a safe place to live
- It’s not OK when somebody hurts you or causes you pain
- Being scared or unsafe at home is not OK – like people calling you names or yelling at you or shouting and hurting each other in front of you
- No one should ask you to keep secrets about drug or alcohol use or anything that makes you feel bad or unsafe
- What’s happening at home is not your fault and you won’t get in trouble if you tell someone
- Nothing is off-limits to talk about
- You can get help to feel less worried and be safer at home.

How can I tell if a child may be experiencing violence in their home life?

Sometimes a child will talk about the issue, other times you might observe something in their behaviour that raises concern. When discussing the issue with a child you might like to use the following frameworks:



Ask open ended questions about their home life

- What is your family like?
- What do you enjoy about living with your family?
- What worries you about home?
- If something at home was wrong or worrying you, who would you tell?
- If you needed to go somewhere safe, where would you go?



Ask specific questions about their home life

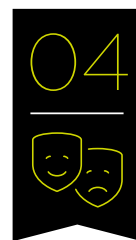
- Does something feel not quite right at home?
- Are you always feeling hungry? Is there no food to eat?
- Is the washing or cleaning being done at your house?
- Is your family taking you to school?
- Does someone at home look after you?
- Are Mum and Dad always fighting? Do things seem to be getting worse?
- Is someone in your family asking you to keep a secret about alcohol and drug use?



Physical signals

Often when people feel unsafe their body sends out signals. You might like to ask the child about what physical signs of stress they have at home.

- Does your heart beat faster?
- Do you feel butterflies in your tummy when things are happening at home?
- Do your body and muscles get tense? (sometimes people create a fist with their hands)



Worry dial

The Worry Dial is an interactive tool that can be used to help children communicate how worried they are, without necessarily discussing what they are worried about. It can be used to get a sense of how unsafe or worried the child is feeling and the difference between big worries and little worries.



[Visit Your Room, Resources, Publications page 'For Families' to download a template of the Worry Dial.](#)

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How can I talk to children about safety and responding to violence?

When you talk to a child about aggressive or violent behaviour, or alcohol or drug use in their home, there are some key issues to consider.

Firstly, it might not be clear to the child what is considered safe, so you may need to explain what safety is, what is OK, and what is not OK. This is defined in government legislation as an environment free of violence and exploitation and care that fosters their health, developmental needs, spirituality, self-respect and dignity.

Please also consider explaining the following to the child:

- What you are going through doesn't need to be a secret
- You are not to blame for anything that happens after talking about the issue, even if a family member goes away
- Adults are responsible for their behaviour and the decisions they make/and what is going on
- It is not your job to control or stop your parent or family member from using drugs or drinking alcohol
- You don't need to sort out these problems by yourself, help is available

After explaining their right to safety and stressing that they are not to blame, ask them how they are feeling about what's going on and acknowledge their feelings.

If appropriate, give them information that helps them understand their parent's dependence, behaviours and thoughts. See the links in the *Help and support services* section of this guide for more information.

What activities can I do with children to help them feel safer?

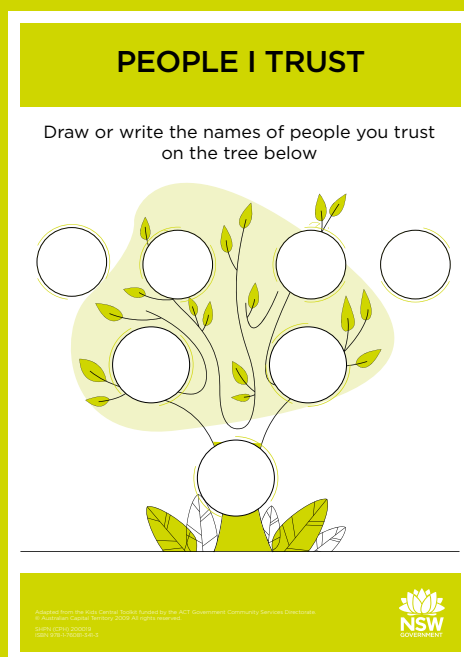
There are a number of activities you can do with a child that focuses on the importance of identifying people who make them feel safe, as well as help them express what's happening and how they feel.



People I trust

Help children to come up with five adults for their safety network. Get them to draw an outline of their hand and add names on the five fingers.

You can help them to affirm with a statement like, "These are five adults I can trust. I can tell these people anything and they will believe me. If I feel worried, scared or unsure I can tell someone in my safety network how I am feeling and why I feel this way."



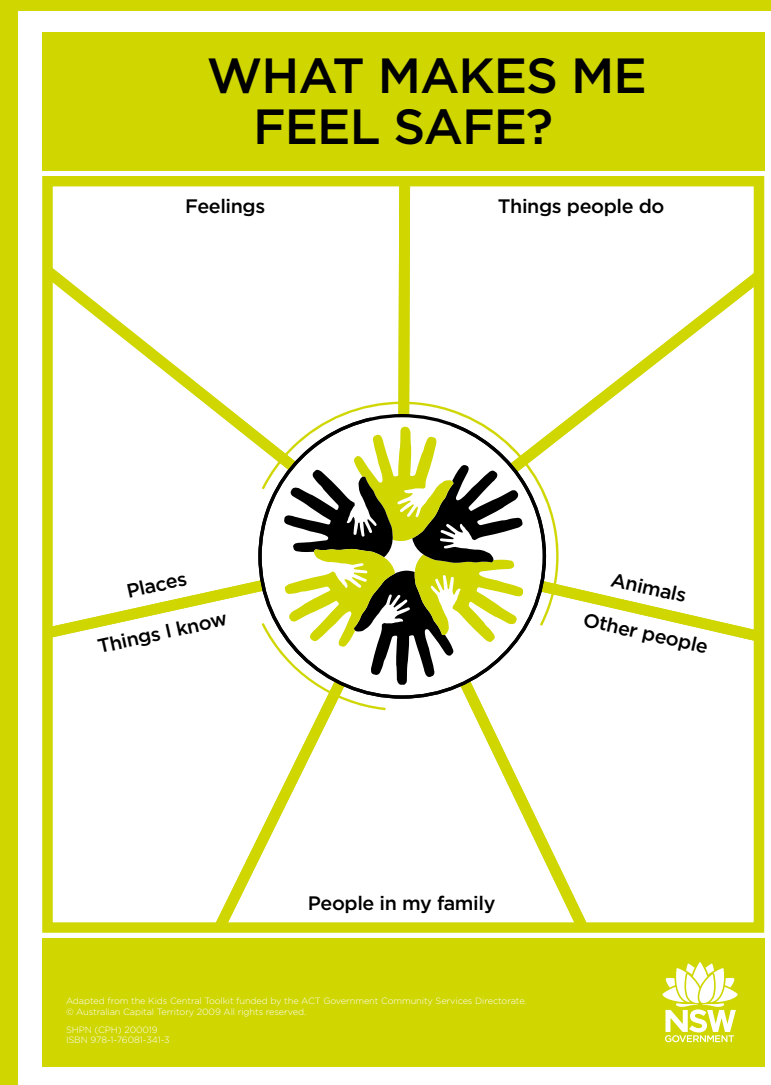
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What makes me feel safe?

Children name things that make them feel safe like pets, places and people. This activity can help families understand what each child needs to feel safe.



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Role play activity: Calling Police or Kids Helpline

This activity can help children (and also teenagers) alleviate anxiety and build confidence to seek help when they need it.

a) Stage a pretend call to emergency services

- Make sure they know they can call the police on Triple Zero (000). Show them how to do this from a mobile phone, even if the phone is locked
- Make sure they know their address and phone number so they can tell emergency services
- Explore situations where you would call Triple Zero (000) for police or an ambulance:
 - Mum, Dad or someone in my family is not responsive/ can't be woken
 - Someone is threatening violence
 - I'm feeling scared for my safety or someone else's safety

Note: The key messages in this resource on when to call Triple Zero (000) may be useful: kids.triplezero.gov.au/Teachers_Guide.pdf

In addition to emergency services, it's also helpful if they have the name and number of someone else they can contact during an emergency.

b) Making a call (or webchat) to a helpline

- Discuss when or why they may want to call a helpline (e.g. feeling worried, unsafe, physical signs in their body)
- Let them know that if they call a helpline the call is anonymous and confidential (e.g. Kids Helpline or Alcohol and Drug Information Service)

Mandatory reporting and limits of confidentiality

Mandatory reporting of children at risk of harm and abuse is a legal requirement by law and should be conveyed with awareness, sensitivity and informed consent. Mandatory reporters in NSW should use the *Mandatory Reporter Guide* (MRG) if they have concerns that a child or young person is at risk of being neglected or physically, sexually or emotionally abused.

In explaining the role of confidentiality, the organisation or practitioner should take great care in conveying the message that it is limited and not absolute.

For more information visit NSW Department of Communities and Justice. [*What to do when there is violence or abuse.*](#)



Help and support services



The following helplines and websites provide further information on where to get support or guidance for a child that may be at risk of harm through alcohol and drug use in the family home.

Emergency Call Service – Police, Fire, Ambulance

☎ 000

🌐 triplezero.gov.au

000 (also known as Triple Zero) is the primary national emergency number in Australia. The website includes information on what to expect when you call.

Child Protection Helpline

☎ 132 111

🌐 facs.nsw.gov.au/families/Protecting-kids

24 hours a day, 7 days a week state-wide call centre staffed by professionally qualified caseworkers to receive and screen all reports about suspected abuse or neglect of a child or young person or those at risk of harm from abuse or neglect.

NSW Domestic Violence Line

☎ 1800 65 64 63

The NSW Domestic Violence Line 24 hours, 7 days a week state-wide telephone crisis counselling and referral service is for women and persons who identify as female.

1800RESPECT

☎ 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732)

🌐 1800respect.org.au

1800RESPECT is the national sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service; confidential service available 24 hours, 7 days a week.

Kids Helpline

☎ 1800 55 1800

🌐 kidshelpline.com.au

Kids Helpline is a free, private, and confidential 24 hours, 7 days a week telephone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25.

Lifeline

☎ 131 114

🌐 lifeline.org.au

Lifeline is a 24-hours, 7 days a week free crisis support and suicide prevention service.

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

☎ 1800 250 015

🌐 yourroom.health.nsw.gov.au/getting-help/Pages/adis.aspx

ADIS is a 24-hours, 7 days a week free, confidential and anonymous telephone service, providing counselling, support, referrals and information for those affected by alcohol or other drugs.

ADIS also provides Web Chat which is free, anonymous and confidential for people with concerns about alcohol or other drug use. Web Chat is available Monday to Friday 8.30am – 5pm (including public holidays).

Family Drug Support (FDS)

☎ 1300 368 186

🌐 fds.org.au

FDS provides a 24-hours, 7 days a week free telephone support line for families and friends affected by alcohol and drug use.

Open Arms Veterans & Families Counselling

☎ 1800 011 046

🌐 openarms.gov.au

Open Arms provides support for current and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel, their partners, families and children with free, confidential counselling, group treatment programs including a community and peer network.



Parent Line

☎ 1300 1300 52

🌐 parentline.org.au

Parent Line is a state-wide telephone counselling, information and referral service for parents of children aged 0 to 18. The line operates week days 9am-9pm and weekends from 4pm-9pm.

NSW Mental Health Line

☎ 1800 011 511

NSW Mental Health Line operates a 24 hours, 7 days a week mental health telephone access service. Anyone with a mental health issue can speak with a professional and be directed to the right care for them.

CatholicCare Family Recovery services (CCareline)

☎ 13 18 19

🌐 catholiccare.org/family-and-individual-services/counselling-and-relationships/drugs-alcohol-and-gambling

CatholicCare supports people impacted by alcohol and other drug or gambling use in their family including children (from 5 years), adolescents, parents, partners, grandparents and significant others. Support is available for individuals or families.

Headspace

☎ 1800 650 890

🌐 headspace.org.au

Headspace has centres located throughout Australia staffed with people who are trained and ready to help. They also provide eheadspace, a free online and telephone support and counselling service for young people aged 12 - 25 and their families and friends.

ReachOut

🌐 au.reachout.com

ReachOut is Australia's leading online mental health organisation for young people and their parents. They have a supportive, safe and anonymous forum space where people care about what's happening to you, because they've been there too.

Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI)

🌐 copmi.net.au

COPMI is an organisation promoting better outcomes for children and families where a parent experiences mental illness.

Family Referral Services and Child and Family Health Services

🌐 familyreferralservice.com.au

Family Referral Services (FRS) assist children, young people and families with the most appropriate support services in their local area.

Educate2Empower Publishing

🌐 e2epublishing.info

Educate2Empower Publishing produce free resources that combine illustrations with key educational concepts teaching children about their development and safety (My Body Safety Rules, My Early Warning Signs, Child Safe Organisation, Child Safe Home).

The Protective Behaviours Consultancy Group of NSW Inc.

🌐 protective-behaviours.org.au

Protective Behaviours is a not-for-profit community organisation whose primary objective is to reduce the abuse of children and young people in the community.

Health Promotion Agency and Skylight NZ – storybook for children dealing with family alcohol misuse

🌐 Ruby's Dad children's book with guidelines for schools – order.hpa.org.nz/products/ruby-s-dad-schools

🌐 Ruby's Dad children's book with guidelines for parents – order.hpa.org.nz/products/ruby-s-dad-parents

Ruby's Dad – is an illustrated book by Frances Rabone. This is a story for children aged 6–11 years whose parent or relative has a drinking problem.

Kids Central Toolkit

🌐 acu.edu.au/about-acu/institutes-academies-and-centres/institute-of-child-protection-studies/kids-central-toolkit

The Kids Central Toolkit provides workers and services with information, resources and tools to use child-centred approaches in their work with children, young people and families.

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