

Child Protection Policy

Statement of policy

The Irish Play Therapy Association aims to safeguard the welfare of all children who attend for therapeutic intervention by protecting them from neglect; verbal, physical, sexual and emotional harm.

- The welfare of the child is paramount importance.
- The Association acknowledges that parents/guardians are the primary carers/educators of their children and respect the rights and needs of families. However where there may be a conflict of interest the Childs welfare will come first.
- The Association is guided by the *“Children First –National guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children”* in drawing up its procedural plan on child protection which follows.
- A copy of this policy is kept by the Chairperson of the Association, is available on the Website- www.ipta.ie - and is accessible to all members, parents and interested bodies.
- The Irish Play Therapy Association is committed to the U.N.Convention on the Rights of the Child - ratified by Ireland in 1992.

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How Policy will be implemented.

The Irish Play Therapy Association will ensure that its child protection policy will be safeguarded and implemented by the following principles of good practice.

- The designated person on Child Protection issues will be the Chairperson of the Association. He/she will have responsibility to act as a resource to any member or who has child protection concerns. She will liaise with parents and outside agencies if necessary. Individual play therapists will be responsible for reporting allegations or suspicions of abuse to the Health Services Executive Social Services and/or Garda Síochána.
- Individual Therapists have a responsibility to protect and promote the rights of children in their care by fully adopting the Associations **Code of Ethics** in their work practice.
- The Association expects of its members to build a foundation of understanding between the professional therapist and parents /carers of the child.
- Confidentiality will be a primary concern-and any child protection issues or concerns will only involve personnel on a “*need to know*” basis.
- All Therapists will be required to state that there is no reason why they would be unsuitable to work with young children, and declaring any past criminal convictions or cases pending against them.
- The Association expects that all Therapists will undergo Garda Vetting Procedures in order to attain membership of the Association.
- All members of the Association will be required to sign up to this Child protection policy when registering for membership.

Recognising Child Abuse

***“Children First Guidelines”* advise that the ability to recognise child abuse depends on a person’s willingness to accept the possibility of its existence as it does on their knowledge and information.**

- The Irish play Therapy Association commits to the responsibility of ensuring that all members have received training in the recognition of signs of abuse and on how to report it.
- The Association acknowledges that child abuse is not always readily visible and the following procedures will occur in the context of recognising child abuse:
 - **Considering the possibility-** if a child has a mark, bruise or injury for which there is no reasonable explanation, or if she or he is behaving unusually or seems fearful or anxious in the presence of anybody.
 - **Looking out for signs-**a cluster of signs is likely to be more indicative of abuse than a single one. Sometimes children will hint at or directly tell that they are being harmed- these disclosures should always be listened to and the information accepted as true in the first instance.
- Individual Therapists in their own work practice will keep written data of any information deemed to be grounds for concern. Observations by therapists will be recorded and will include dates, times, names, locations and context and any other information which could be considered relevant or which might facilitate further assessment/investigation.
- **See appendixes for definitions of Abuse.**

Response to Suspicion of Abuse

- Therapists who may have suspicions or grounds for concern about abuse must report same to an official child protection official, i.e. a Social Worker or Member of Garda Síochána.
- Concerns re behaviour and/or physical signs of abuse e.g. unexplained marks, bruising will be recorded, signed and dated by the therapist. These records to be kept in a confidential file.
- Parents will be asked to informally comment on any issues of concern a therapist may have. This will be done in an informal and non-accusatory way -reasonable explanation will be accepted. In the event of a serious concern parents will be informed that a written record will be kept in the interest of child health and safety and statutory obligations. Parents must be reassured that this is standard practice and not made to feel victimised or threatened in any way.
- In situations where there is no specific allegation but there is some concern based on the emotional behaviour and/or physical presentation; it is recommended that the therapist make an informal consultation with either their own supervisor or a suitably qualified person in the child protection and welfare field in order to assess whether or not a formal report is warranted.
- All Members of the Association will be made aware of signs to look out for. If they have suspicions about child abuse, it is recommended that they consult the relevant sections of “CHILDREN FIRST”, and draw the matter to the attention of their own supervisor.

Response to a Disclosure of abuse from child

In the event of a child disclosing or hinting at abuse to a therapist; it must be handled very sensitively and in the following way;

- *Stay calm and listen- give the child time to say what he or she wants*
- *Don't ask leading questions or details or make suggestions.*
- *Don't stop the child recalling significant events, but don't make him or her repeat the story unnecessarily.*
- *Do not show signs of distrust, anger or disbelief. Avoid expressing any judgement on, or anger towards the alleged perpetrator while talking to the child.*
- *Reassure the child, but don't promise to keep it a secret.*
- *Explain what needs to be done next taking into consideration the age of child and the nature of the incident.*
- *Be aware that disclosures can be very difficult for the child.*

DON'T MAKE PROMISES THAT CANNOT BE KEPT.

- The Therapist must consider whether there are reasonable grounds for reporting it to the health board in consultation with her supervisor. Support in reaching this decision may be made by informal consultation with a Health Services Executive Professional e.g. Public Health Nurse, Social Worker.
- A record in writing of what the child has said will be kept. Care will be taken to use, as far as possible, the exact words utilised by the child. This written record will be signed and dated by the therapist and kept in a confidential file.
- The therapist will make every effort to contact the parents/guardians to discuss the disclosure made by the child. A written record will be kept of this meeting with the parents. Parents will be informed of any decision to make a report to the Health Services Executive, unless such an action could place the child in further risk.
- Once agreed that a report needs to be made, the therapist will contact the Duty Social Worker in the Health Services Executive, by telephone and in writing.

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Response to allegations made against a member of the Association.

In the event of an allegation of abuse being made against a member of the Irish Association of Play Therapists the following procedure will occur-

The procedure for dealing with the therapist:

- If an allegation is made against a therapist - the Chairperson of the Association will be informed. A record will be kept of what was said and/or what was observed.
- The Chairperson of the Association will inform the accused member that an allegation has been made against him/her and the nature of the allegation.
- The name or any identifying information of the reporting adult is not to be given to the person against whom the allegation has been made.
- The therapist against whom the allegation has been made will be offered the opportunity to respond to the allegations. They should also be informed of their right to the adjournment of the meeting until such time as they can seek appropriate representation, (e.g. Legal rep). The agreed procedures and the rules of natural justice will guide the action.
- A written record of all matters relating to the allegations, including the response of the alleged member will be kept and sent to the relevant statutory body.
- Parents/guardians of the child will be informed of proceedings being taken.
- *The accused therapist will be withdrawn from the Association's membership until an investigation has been completed.*
- The name of the accused therapist should be known only by the person reporting the incident/s, the Chairperson and Secretary of the Association and the investigating statutory personnel. Therapists must be reminded of their obligation to confidentiality and be offered support.

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Response to Therapist's concerns/ reports and acknowledgement of Parents rights.

The Irish Association of Play Therapists recognises that the area of child protection can be an emotive issue for members. Association will offer support to its members in dealing with this issue by:

- Providing appropriate training around the issue.
- Continuous monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of such provision.
- By acknowledging therapists concerns and suspicions of abuse-giving them time to discuss and feel comfortable and ensuring effective implementation of agreed reporting procedures.
- By feeding back what actions have been taken in the light of a report being made-bearing in mind the obligation to confidentiality in issues of child protection.

The Irish Association of Play Therapy also recognises the rights and needs of parents /carers in relation to child protection. It will aim to safeguard these by:

- Alerting all parents of the Association's child protection policy.
- That Association members will be expected to treat all parents (regardless of their own personal prejudices) with the same respect and regard.
- All members are required to have supervision in their practice.
- Parents will be reassured that any information re child abuse or suspected abuse will be bound by the Irish Association of Play Therapists confidentiality policy and that only involved personnel will have knowledge of facts.
- Parents will be informed of any accident or injury that happens to their children whilst in play sessions with a therapist.