

Dealing With Child Abuse

A Handbook for Child Welfare Workers in Sierra Leone



Government of Sierra Leone

Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs

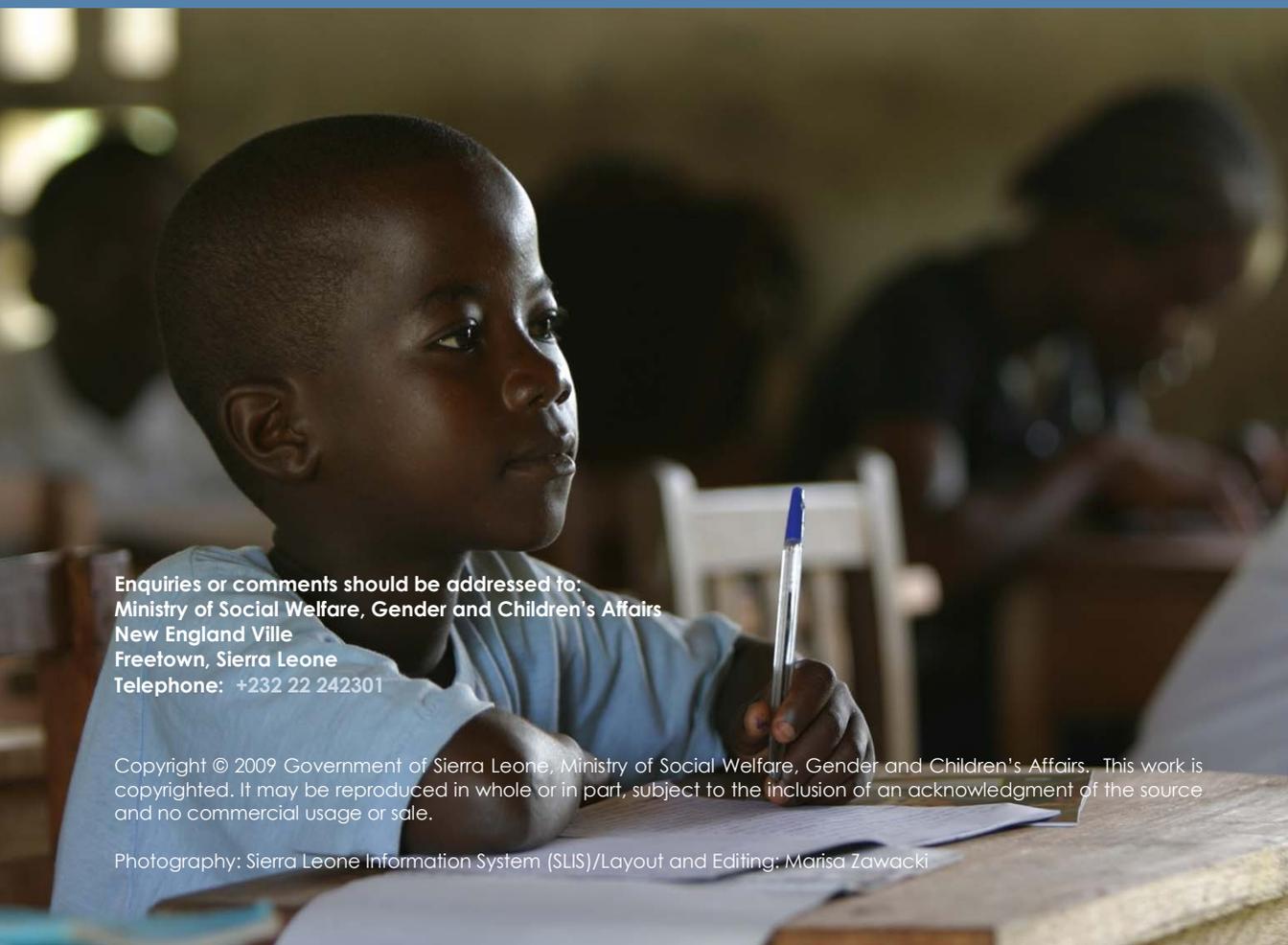
Acknowledgment

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The National Child Justice Strategy for Sierra Leone recommended the development of guidelines for defining abuse and the conditions that identify children to be at risk of abuse.

The contents of this document are based upon consultations with various stakeholders: Ministry of Social Welfare and Children's Affairs, UNICEF, Goal – Ireland, International Rescue Committee, Defence for Children International, Family Support Unit/ Sierra Leone Police, District and Local Councils, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Children's Forum Network, Inter-religious Council of Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone Market Women's Association, Sierra Leone Drivers' Association, Child Welfare Committees and Search for Common Ground.

The content has also been inspired from the international conventions (Convention on the Rights for the Child - CRC) and national legislations (Child Rights Act, Anti-Human Trafficking Act 2005, Domestic Violence Act 2007).



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Introduction

Child abuse is prevalent in Sierra Leone.

Of all abuses reported to the Family Support (FSU) of the Sierra Leone Police, child cruelty is ranked the second highest at 30% of all cases reported. Emphasis needs to be placed on preventing and responding to such occurrences and protecting children at risk of abuse.

The Ministry of Social Welfare Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA) is the lead agency for Child Protection in Sierra Leone. In 2007, the Child Rights Act (CRA) was passed into law, which provides a legal framework to address the rights and well being of children. In line with the CRA, the government of Sierra Leone is committed to strengthening the capacity of Child Welfare Workers to respond and prevent child abuse in a coordinated manner and that is in the best interest of the child.

This manual is intended to provide Child Welfare Workers in Sierra Leone a basis for understanding what is child abuse, recognising symptoms of abuse and knowing where to report abuse. The CRA mandates all Child Welfare Workers to report cases of child abuse to the appropriate authorities to ensure the safety and well being of the child and that the appropriate action is taken.

Child Welfare Workers are a crucial link in strengthening a child protection system at levels of the country. It is the intention that the more Child Welfare Workers are informed about what constitutes abuses, they will be in a better position to protect, prevent and respond if a child is abused.

In Sierra Leone, agencies that have statutory (legal) mandate and responsibilities to respond to abuse are Local Councils (Social Services Departments), Police /FSU, MSWGCA, the Judiciary, child protection service providers and child welfare institutions.

This handbook strives to standardise definitions of child abuse and set general guidelines for prevention and response. The contents are based upon outcomes from consultations with stakeholders and based on national commitments to international conventions (CRC) and national legislations (CRA, Anti trafficking Act, Domestic Violence Act 2007).

Who is considered a Child Welfare Worker?

This handbook is intended for Child Welfare Workers in Sierra Leone. The list below, although not exhaustive, provides examples of types of Child Welfare Workers in Sierra Leone:

Child Care Providers	✓
Police Officers/FSU	✓
Social Workers	✓
Doctors, Nurses & Community Health Care Workers	✓
Teachers	✓
Lawyers	✓
Local Council Members	✓
Employees of Child Welfare NGOs	✓
Employees of Child & Youth Serving Agencies	✓
Residential Home & Foster Care Workers	✓
Government Employees	✓
Volunteers	✓

What to do if you suspect child abuse

Report to a social worker at the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA), visit your local Family Support Unit (FSU) of the Sierra Leone Police or the District Council's Child Welfare Department.

The important action here is that the case is referred to an appropriate authority, which can refer the case to a trained social worker to assess the case.

The social worker will determine the appropriate action, which could include:

- Determines whether the child can benefit from family enhancement services or protection services;
- Contacts the police if a criminal investigation is required; and
- Co-ordinates a response with other agencies, if necessary.

What is the most important thing to remember?

Children may be abused in a family, within an institutional or community setting by those known to them or more rarely, a stranger. Report any reasonable suspicion of abuse immediately. A list of resources can be found in the back of this handbook to help you manage a child abuse case.

We hope this handbook will help you understand what, when and how to report child abuse, so that we can respond effectively to the problem and ensure the children of Sierra Leone lead safe and healthy lives.

2 What is Child Abuse?

Definition of Child Abuse within the Sierra Leonean context.

Behaviour that harms or is likely to cause harm to the safety, health and well being of the child (person under 18 years of age).

Child Abuse can occur in a family by a parent, family member, guardian, care giver, by an institution or in a community setting. The perpetrator may or may not be known to the child.

Who abuses?

Child abuse is not confined to any one group or social class, but cuts across all ethnic, religious, social and economic backgrounds. Not only adults abuse children sometimes older children and young people can and do abuse younger children.

Recognising Child Abuse

Experienced Child Welfare Workers likely have seen all forms of child abuse at one time or another. They are alert to signs like these that may signal the presence of child abuse.

The Child

- Has not received help for physical or medical problems brought to the parents' attention
- Lacks adult supervision
- Appears frightened of the parent/guardian/care giver
- May act in a way that is inappropriate to his/her age and development
- Shows sudden changes in behavior

The Parent or Caretaker

- Pays insufficient attention to the welfare of the child with regards to education, food, recreation and shelter
- Persistently avoids treatment of the child's illnesses
- Expects more than possible of the child with regards to work and behaviour
- Frequently complains about the child and may fail to provide attention or praise
- Engages in domestic violence against the child and in the home
- Asks the classroom teacher to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves
- Sees the child entirely bad, worthless, or burdensome

Parent or Caretaker - Child Relationship

- Rarely touch or look at each other
- Consider their relationship entirely negative
- State that they do not like each other

None of these signs prove that child abuse is present in a family. Any of them may be found in any parent or child at one time or another. But when these signs appear repeatedly or in combination, they should cause the Child Welfare Worker to take a closer look at the situation and to consider the possibility of child abuse.

What are the signs?

Signs and symptoms of child abuse can be emotional, behavioural or physical depending on the type of the abuse. *Section 3 of this handbook defines the different types of abuses and the signs associated with each.*

3 Types of Abuse

Understanding what child abuse is, and knowing how to take appropriate action is critical to ensuring the safety and well being of children.

This section describes the types and symptoms of child abuse. While the symptoms might indicate abuse, they might also indicate other problems. By themselves, they do not prove abuse but do indicate a need for attention. This list does not cover all factors since each situation is unique. In some situations of apparent abuse, the damage might be the result of an accident.

P hysical Abuse

Physical abuse is the **intentional use of physical force against a child** that results in harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity.

Physical Signs

- Bruises and wounds especially on the head, face, hands, back, feet and buttocks
- Burns
- Fractures
- Dislocations
- Fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an abuse
- Delays in seeking medical attention

S

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. It includes **penetrative** (i.e. vaginal or anal sex) and **non penetrative acts** (i.e. touching of breast, smacking of buttocks, touching of private parts 'soibui'). According to the Child Rights Act, a child is anyone under the age of 18 years, sex with a minor is considered statutory rape with or without consent.

It may also include **non-contact activities**, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of pornographic materials, watching sexual activities (in video houses and cinemas) or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways (encouraging children to expose sexual organs).

Physical Signs	Emotional & Behavioral Signs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Difficulty walking or sitting■ Wearing torn, stained or bloody underwear■ Pain, swelling or itching of genitals■ Bruises, cuts or bleeding on genitals or anal area■ Pain when urinating or defecating■ Discharge from the vagina or penis, or a sexually transmitted disease■ Becomes pregnant	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Withdrawal from play and social activities■ Sexual behavior, play or conversation inappropriate to the child's age■ Exhibits excessive or unusual touching of genitals■ Tells you that he/she has a secret he/she is not allowed to tell anyone■ Shows unusual dislike for a particular adult■ Reports sexual abuse

Children of all ages may be sexually abused and are frequently scared to say anything due to guilt and/or fear and generally find it particularly difficult to talk about. Recognition tends to be difficult unless the child discloses and is believed.

E Motional Abuse

Emotional involves **persistent attacks on a child's sense of self**. It can take the form of habitual humiliation, continuous shouting, threat of doing harm or being driven out of the home, public shaming, constant criticism, name-calling (rebel child, bastard, piss- a- bade, tiffi tiffi, rotten bele, foolu munku, duti columbo), belittling, excessive teasing, ignoring a child, punishing normal social behaviours, exposure to domestic violence, rejection, or the constant reiteration that a child is stupid or bad and withholding praise and affection.

Other emotionally abusive acts include: forced isolation, intimidation, discrimination, exploitation, unappreciative comments used on a child, terrorizing or routinely making unreasonable demands on a child and not allowing children to join other children in play.

Emotional abuse includes clusters of both **physical** and **behavioral symptoms** and occurs **over a period of time**. It destroys a child's self-image and may be difficult to recognize as the signs are usually behavioural rather than physical.

Emotional Signs

- Timidity and nervousness
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Sleep disturbances
- Physical complaints with no medical basis (headache, nausea, pain)
- Behaviour inappropriate to age (acting younger or older than their stage of development)
- Aggressive behaviour towards others
- Depression
- Developmental delay
- Low self esteem and lack of confidence
- Anxious for attention
- Scapegoat/always blamed within the family (boy-boy, John bad ade, Cinderella- type)

N eglect

Neglect involves **failing to meet the child's basic needs** for adequate supervision, food, clothing, shelter, safety, hygiene, medical care, education, love and affection and failure to use available resources to meet those needs.

Indicators:

- Child is underweight or small for age; is always hungry; is not kept clean; is inappropriately dressed; does not receive needed medical care)
- Child seen to be listless, apathetic and unresponsive with no apparent medical cause
- Child thrives away from home environment (not worried about returning home/ happy to be away from home)
- Child frequently absent from school
- Child left with adults who are intoxicated or violent
- Child abandoned or left alone for excessive periods
- Inadequate supervision and monitoring
- Poor performance in school and inappropriate behaviour at home
- Reports that there is no one at home to provide care



Other Forms of Child Abuse

1. Child Labour

Child labour is the **engagement of children under 15 years of age in full time employment** (CRA Act 2007). It can also be defined as labour performed by children who are too young in the sense that by doing so, it deprives the child of primary education. It should be noted that the Child Rights Act 2007 states that the minimum age for the engagement of children in 'light work' is 13 years. Light work constitutes work that is not likely to be harmful to the health or development of the child or does not affect the child's attendance at school.

2. Harmful Traditional Practices

Early/forced marriage of a Child

A 'forced' marriage is one, which is conducted **without the valid consent of at least one of the parties** and where **duress is a factor**. Duress cannot be justified on religious or cultural grounds.

Early/forced initiation into secret societies

Secret societies are part of the Sierra Leonean culture. It is regarded as abusive when **children are forced into it**, when the child is **under the age of 18** and when it **affects the child's education and health**. Signs can be both physical and emotional.

3. Child Trafficking

The **illicit movement of a child for the purpose of exploitation**.

Indicators:

- Involvement in prostitution
- Exposure to forced labour (may be used as domestic servant, street selling, stone breaking, etc.)
- Irregular attendance in school
- Adoption (national or international)

4. Child to Child Abuse

Older children can also abuse younger children. There are two forms of child to child abuse: (1) **sexual** and (2) **bullying**.

Main forms of bullying:

- Physical:** hitting, kicking, theft
- Verbal:** name calling, tribal comments, other demeaning remarks
- Indirect:** spreading rumours

5. Abuse of Power/Authority

People in positions of power have a responsibility to ensure the dignity and respect of children. However, there is evidence that some Child Welfare Workers **take advantage of their positions of authority** by abusing and exploiting the children they are suppose to protect (e.g. teachers abusing students, police abusing children in custody).

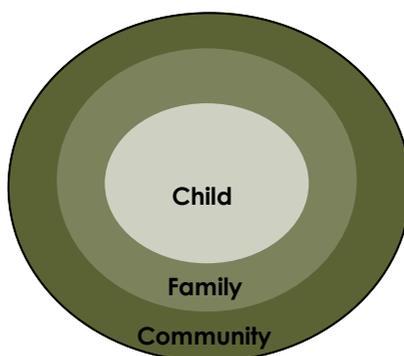
Those in positions of authority in child welfare institutions could include:

- Teachers
- Police officers/FSU
- Care givers of children's homes
- Humanitarian agency staff

4 Risk Factors

There is no single known cause of child abuse nor is there any single description that captures or identifies families in which children are victims of abuse.

Position of Children in Society



Risk factors in Sierra Leone can be grouped into the following domains:

C hild Factors	F amily Factors	E nvironmental/Community Factors
<p>Children are not responsible for being victims of abuse. Certain factors make some more vulnerable to abusive behaviour:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Age ■ Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Physical ◆ Mental ◆ Emotional ◆ Social 	<p>Life situations of some families may increase the likelihood of abuse. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Parental histories and the cycle of abuse ■ Marital conflict and domestic violence ■ Single parenthood ■ Unemployment, financial stress and poverty ■ Poor parent-child interaction (limited, unaffectionate) ■ Difficulty controlling emotions 	<p>Environmental factors are often found in combination with parent, family and child factors. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Poverty ■ Dangerous neighbourhoods ■ Lack of awareness about children's rights

The factors that may contribute to abuse in one family may not result in child abuse in another.

Social workers who manage child abuse cases must recognise the multiple, complex causes and base their assessments on a case by case basis and not generalise or use standard approaches.

5 Reporting

Purpose of Reporting

The primary purpose of reporting is to **protect the child**. Reporting may also result in protecting other children in the home or in residential care facilities.

Making a Report

Any person can make a report to the FSU, Local Council (Department of Social Services), MSWGCA, and other child protection service providers if they have concerns about a child.

Child Welfare Workers are mandated to report suspected cases of child abuse. **However, it is not the responsibility of the person reporting abuse to prove that abuse has occurred.**

Confidentiality

When reporting child abuse cases, Child Welfare Workers must respect the rights and dignity of the child and family at all stages. They must recognise that discussion of sensitive information and release of information might have a negative and long-term impact on children and their families. This can lead to the child and the family being stigmatised in school and the community and can put the child's and/or families' safety at risk.

Reports of suspected child abuse to MSWGCA, FSU, Local Councils, the court and child protection service providers must be confidential and used only for the purposes for which it was given.

Although cases must be dealt with on a case to case basis, instances where information may be shared among other professionals:

- People likely to be affected by the information if they consent
- Disclosure is required under a court order or any other legal obligation

All professionals involved with children have a duty to ensure that necessary measures are taken to ensure that the child is protected from any form of abuse, potential or actual. Nevertheless, no professional/staff employee should disclose information obtained in confidence without consent from the child and parent/caretaker unless it is necessary to ensure the protection of a child at risk.

Child Welfare Workers may want to discuss number of reported cases or policy procedures, but should not share identifying information about the victims.

Note: If **confidentiality, safety or respect** are breached or compromised in some way by those who are helping, then the helpers will actually be harming the victim. This must never happen.

Case Management

After reporting a case of child abuse, the child will be referred to appropriate authorities. Depending on the nature of the case that is reported it can be either a **Child Welfare Case** or an **alleged Criminal Case**. In both scenarios a social worker/probation officer is assigned to manage the child's case.

The case manager will consider the following in developing a care plan for the child:

- Whether a child is safe
- Who should see the child and where
- Which family member or trusted adult should be present
- Who should communicate with the parents

Referral

In cases where an alleged criminal act is reported the social worker/probation officer will refer cases to the FSU, which can make the appropriate referrals for medical, legal, safety and psychosocial services.

In cases where child welfare abuses are reported the social worker/probation officer will work with families, community and other child protection service providers to ensure the child's needs are met.

Physical Examination of Child

In cases of physical and sexual abuse, a fully documented and thorough physical examination should be completed **within 72 hours** of concerns being raised by medical personnel.

Physical examination of the child **must only be undertaken by a Pediatrician/ Nurse** or other approved medical personnel (**Community Health Officer**). Medical personnel should obtain written **consent** from an **adult** with parental responsibility for the child, and from the **child** in a manner appropriate to the age and development of the child.

6 Resources

Tools to help you report Child Abuse Cases



“Every child has the right to life and to survival and development to the maximum extent possible.”

- Sierra Leone Child Rights Act 2007: Section 23:1

Child Abuse Resource List

Enter information and contact numbers for local services below:

Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs

Name: _____

Telephone: _____

Ministry of Health

Name: _____

Telephone: _____

Ministry of Justice – Child Justice

Name: _____

Telephone: _____

District Council

Name: _____

Telephone: _____

Family Support Unit (FSU) – Sierra Leone Police

Name: _____

Telephone: _____

Service Provider

Type of service: _____

Name: _____

Telephone: _____

Service Provider

Type of service: _____

Name: _____

Telephone: _____

Service Provider

Type of service: _____

Name: _____

Telephone: _____

Framework for Reporting Child Abuse Cases

4-Step Response for Child Welfare Workers

1	Identify	You may be concerned because you have: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Observed signs of child abuse, such as physical, emotional or behavioural symptoms2. Received a report of possible child abuse3. Consider the level of immediate danger to the child
2	Report	Report case to the FSU, MSWGCA, Local Council, other child protection service provider immediately. Confidentiality, safety and respect for the child and their family must be ensured at all times.
3	Case Management	Depending on the nature of the case that is reported it can be either: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Child Welfare Case◆ Alleged Criminal Case In both scenarios a social worker/probation officer is assigned to manage the child's case, which will take into account: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ The child's safety◆ Contact with family members
4	Referral	In cases where an alleged criminal act is reported the social worker/probation officer will refer cases to the FSU, which can make the appropriate referrals for medical, legal, safety and psychosocial services. In cases where child welfare abuses are reported the social worker/probation officer will work with families, community and other child protection service providers to ensure the child's needs are met. In cases of physical and sexual abuse, a fully documented and thorough physical examination should be completed within 72 hours of concerns being raised by medical personnel.

Your involvement

Children continue to be hurt every day. For these children there is no hope unless each one of us realises that our most important duty is the protection, welfare and growth of our children.

Without individual and community concern and involvement, there are really two “victims” of child abuse: the child, and the community. Therefore, each of us may make a valuable contribution to the protection of children and the prevention of abuse. Our concern and involvement are critical — it may save a life.

Our ultimate goal as adults is to protect the Sierra Leonean child and help them grow up healthy and happy.

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