



SECONDARY SERVICES WORKING TOGETHER

A Guide on Information Sharing for Secondary Family Support Hubs

FOREWORD

Increasingly, approaches to the protection of children are conceptualised in a similar way to the public health services model of primary, secondary and tertiary levels of intervention. This serves to illustrate the relational aspects in child protection service delivery (see Table 1.1 below).

Most people require access to a broad range of services to support wellbeing, and some people require additional services to address particular vulnerabilities and need. Families generally are able to identify their own service needs and negotiate the system particularly in the primary or universal services domain.

A relatively small percentage of the population, require specialist/intensive secondary services to address their needs and either prevent the need for tertiary services, or they may require secondary services at the same time as tertiary services or upon leaving the tertiary system. Finally there is the very small minority of families who require tertiary statutory child protection services.

Table 1.1 Levels of Intervention to Protect Children.

Intervention	Target Group	Definition
Primary or Universal	Whole communities and families generally	Services/interventions that build capacity in communities and families to address common needs and prevent problems from arising
Secondary	Families who are vulnerable or in crisis Families at risk of child abuse or neglect	Targeted services that support families and children to address identified risks and prevent them from escalating.
Tertiary	Families in which child abuse or neglect has occurred	Services to prevent abuse or neglect from re-occurring and to alleviate the impacts of abuse or neglect.

Secondary family support services are provided to families, children and young people who are at risk or facing the likelihood of immediate crisis. They are the services aimed at averting the need for a tertiary or crisis response or in some cases supporting families or individuals to re-establish themselves following tertiary or crisis intervention.

Families needing secondary family support services present high levels of need and risk. These families may be affected by one or more of the following:

- violence or threats of violence in the home;
- misuse of alcohol, drugs and/or other substances;
- recurring financial crises due to low income and/or limited budgeting skills;
- homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless;
- serious family conflict or problematic family relationships; or
- difficulty in parenting well.

The Secondary Family Support State Plan 2010-2013 provides for the development of a state-wide network of high quality, integrated services that support children, individuals and families to address the risks and crises that they experience, through the establishment of Secondary Family Support Hubs.

The development of expanded and better integrated secondary family support services will assist these families to address any identified needs, while keeping them out of the child protection system when their involvement is not necessary.

INTRODUCTION

Secondary Services Working Together - a Guide on Information Sharing for Secondary Family Support Hubs has been designed to give services confidence in sharing information appropriately with each other.

This guide is to be used in conjunction with the Department for Child Protections guide on information sharing for government and non-government agencies - *Working together for a better future for at risk children and families* (attached). That document contains detail around mutual exchange of information, confidentiality and consent, and reporting child protection concerns.

Information sharing enables multiple services to work together to ensure an integrated and seamless response is provided to children, young people and families. It is critical to enable services to intervene early, manage risk appropriately and deliver coordinated and effective services to families.

All agencies working within the Hubs operate under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that outlines protocols and shared practices between signatory agencies, to achieve best possible outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and families. Upon signing the MOU agencies agree to follow the information sharing protocols outlined in *Secondary Services Working Together*.

Secondary Services Working Together will be used by all Western Australian Secondary Family Support Hubs ensuring a consistent approach to information sharing. It will outline processes for sharing information:

- within Hubs;
- between Hubs;
- with the Department for Child Protection; and
- with other external government and non-government agencies.

The goal of *Secondary Services Working Together* is to emphasise the importance of working together in a coordinated way across agencies for the safety and wellbeing of children, young people and families.

INFORMATION SHARING PRINCIPLES:

- Safety and wellbeing of children, young people and families is paramount within the context of sharing information across agencies.
- Information shared between agencies should be necessary, relevant, accurate, timely and secure.
- Obtaining informed consent from children, young people and families to share information is the ideal and recommended practice, except where to do so would place the child, young person or family at increased risk of harm.¹
- Consent must not be assumed to be open-ended. Confirmation of continued consent should be sought at case review.
- Agencies will be open and honest with the child, young person or family about relevant information being shared about them with other agencies, unless to do so would place the child, young person or family at increased risk.
- When information is shared about children, young people and families it is done so respectfully in both verbal and written communication.
- Shared information is to be recorded and stored, safely and securely.

¹ Section 23 of the ***Children and Community Services Act 2004*** enables the exchange of relevant information relating to the wellbeing of a child or the performance of a function under the Act. Information may be disclosed in good faith under subsection (2), or in compliance with a request under subsection (3), despite any written law relating to secrecy or confidentiality.

Current relevant legislative provisions

Secondary Services Working Together has been informed by the following legislation:

Children and Community Services Act 2004

The *Children and Community Services Act 2004* allows relevant information about a child to be shared, provided that it is done in good faith. The Act allows for the protection of children to be the paramount consideration that overrides client confidentiality.

Confidentiality and protection

Secondary Family Support Hubs employees are protected from civil or criminal liability under section 129 of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* if they give the CEO or other officer information about a child's wellbeing, or make a report or notification, in good faith. This protection is extended to include any breach of professional ethics or standards to the person's employment or to have engaged in unprofessional conduct.

If a report is made to the Department of Child Protection, the identity of the notifier or reporter must not be disclosed without consent, except under the circumstances set-out in section 124F(2) or section 240(2) of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004*.

Exchange of relevant Information

Section 23 of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* provides for the exchange of relevant information relating to the wellbeing of a child or group of children between the Department for Child Protection and a public authority, a Commonwealth agency, a corresponding authority, a service provider or an interested person. The 'best interest of the child' is the paramount principle for information sharing practices.

Section 24A of the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* enables the exchange of information that is, or is likely to be, relevant to the wellbeing of a child between the CEOs of certain public authorities prescribed under regulation 20A of the *Children and Community Services Regulations 2006*. Note that information may only be exchanged between officers of these prescribed public authorities if they have been delegated that power by their relevant CEOs.

The Parental Support and Responsibility Act 2008

The *Parental Support and Responsibility Act 2008* allows the sharing of relevant information between government and service agencies, for the purpose of making parental responsibility agreements and orders. Information must be shared in accordance with the *Parental Support and Responsibility (Disclosure of Information) Guidelines 2009*.

Further Information

Both the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* and *Parental Support and Responsibility Act 2008* can be accessed on the Department for Child Protection's website or the State Law Publisher's website at www.slp.wa.gov.au.

Purpose of Information Sharing Guidelines

Mutual exchange of information, also referred to as information sharing, is an important strategy to strengthen coordinated planning and service delivery, and to ensure best possible outcomes for children, young people and families. Coordinated service delivery is particularly critical when children, young people and families receive services from more than one agency.

The purpose of *Secondary Services Working Together* is to provide guidance for Hub agencies and other secondary family support services in order to promote safety and wellbeing for children, young people and families. By sharing relevant information between agencies, a more holistic assessment of a child, young person or family's situation can be made.

Confirmation of identity

If the identity of the person/organisation requesting the information has not previously been verified, it must be verified prior to providing the information. Identity may be verified by:

- Contacting the organisation to confirm that the person requesting the information is employed by them.
- Requesting a business card or other similar documentation stating the name of the person requesting the information and the organisation for which they work.

Confirmation of identity should be recorded in the child, young person or family's case file.

Consent to share relevant information

Sharing of information is, wherever possible, based upon obtaining informed consent for collection, use and disclosure of sensitive and personal information from the child, young person and/or family.

Informed consent means the child, young person or family giving consent understands why information needs to be provided by them, to what purpose it will be put, and the implications of its provision. The child, young person or family giving consent must be able to demonstrate that they have understood.

Wherever possible there is an expectation that all agencies operating within the Hub will seek consent from the child, young person and/or family to share

relevant information with each other provided that it does not place the child young person, family or another person at further risk.

Consent to share information should be obtained at the earliest opportunity, preferably in writing using the *Consent to Share Information Form*, when working with children, young people and families. Consent to share information will therefore usually always be obtained during Initial Screening.

In most instances Initial Screening will be conducted over the telephone. Therefore, consent may be received verbally and must be recorded using the *Consent to Share Information Form*. Written consent should be sought as soon as practicable following this.

What if it is not possible to obtain consent?

The decision about whether or not to obtain consent will be a matter of professional assessment weighing up the level of risk to the child, young person or family at the time.

There are a number of circumstances where it may not be possible or appropriate to inform or seek consent, these could include:

- The child, young person or family may be placed at further risk or harm;
- Reasonable efforts to obtain consent have failed;
- The child poses a risk to themselves or is a risk to others;
- The referrer may put themselves at serious risk or there may be an imminent threat to their health or safety.

Services must record the reason it was not possible or appropriate to obtain consent to share information. If information is shared without consent, services must also record why the decision to share information without consent was made. This information should be recorded using the *Unable to Obtain Client Consent* form (see the Operational Guidelines and Resource Kit).

When will it be necessary for Hub agencies to share client information?

The Secondary Family Support Hub model relies on services to operate in a coordinated and integrated manner when working with children, young people and families. It is therefore necessary for information to be shared at a number of different points in the assessment, planning and service delivery continuum.

Case Allocation Process

After the Initial Screening and Assessment has been completed it will be necessary for the common entry point to share this information with members of the local case allocation process. Following this the case will be allocated to the most appropriate service/s.

The common entry point team will ensure that the '*Client Consent to Share Information Form*' is provided during the local case allocation process.

Information provided to the case allocation process will include:

- *Client Consent to Share Information* form;
- Initial Screening information;
- Stage One Assessment information;
- Stage Two Assessment information (if a Stage Two Assessment was undertaken);
- Initial Case Plan;
- Consultation with the community based child protection worker;
- Any information relevant to the safety and wellbeing of staff and the community; and
- Any other relevant information held by the common entry point team relating to the case.

Referral to member agency/agencies

The case allocation process will decide which agency/agencies will receive the referral from the common entry point for each case presented.

The referral from the common entry point (following the case allocation process) to the receiving member agency/agencies will include all of the above mentioned information relevant to the case.

Referral to other external agencies

Initial screening and/or assessment may identify the need for a child, young person or family to access a service that is provided outside of the Hub. Referrals to external services should be made with consent. Referrals should include any information that is relevant to the case and will assist that service to work effectively with the child, young person and/or family.

Sharing information with another Hub

Sharing information across Hubs may be necessary if a child, young person or family moves into another Hub district and requires services from that Hub.

In these cases consent should be obtained before sharing information with another Hub.

Case Coordination / Case Management

There will be a need for ongoing information sharing and collaboration where there are multiple agencies working with a child, young person or family (this may include the Department for Child Protection).

Where there are multiple services working with a child, young person or family a case manager will be nominated to coordinate service delivery. The case

manager, with the support of the other services involved, should plan for ongoing communication and coordination.

Sharing information with the Department for Child Protection

Information can be exchanged between Hubs and the community based child protection worker and/or the Department when there is a legitimate purpose to do so, which could include:

- discussing concerns for the wellbeing of a child.
- protecting a child from being abused or neglected;
- protecting groups of children from potential harm;
- diverting a child from harming himself/herself;
- helping a professional to provide more effective services;
- avoiding duplication or compromising of services;
- assisting with a child protection investigation;
- contributing to decisions about the placement of, or planning for, a child;
- ensuring appropriate services for a child in the care of the CEO, or providing case-specific information about a child in the CEO's care;
- providing positive feedback on a child/family you are working with; and

Family Support Hub requests relevant information

When the Family Support Hub requests "relevant information" via the community based child protection worker and/or the District directly, the decision to release information requested will be assessed on the following basis:

- The requesting agency should confirm if the client has provided consent for the release of information.
- The Department's current or previous level of involvement with the family, as well as the requesting agency's role and current involvement will influence the nature of the information provided.
- Prior to releasing information the Department has a responsibility to ensure the validity of the information provided.
- What is relevant information and what is an agency's legitimate purpose can be the subject of an ongoing dialogue between the agency and the Department to ensure that information is provided appropriately.

The Department or community based child protection worker requests relevant information from the Hub

When the Department and/or the community based child protection worker is requesting information from the Family Support Hub, the Department will provide the following information to assist the agency in determining what "relevant information" is:

- nature of the Department's involvement (such as assessing concern or planning reunification);
- the Department's role; and
- the type of information that the Department is seeking.

Feedback from the Department or community based child protection worker to the referrer.

Wherever possible and appropriate, referrers will be provided with feedback on the Department's planned actions.

The level and details provided through feedback will be guided by:

- the nature of the relationship of the referrer with the child and family
- the referrer's ongoing involvement with the case, including the Department's case planning.

If the Family Support Hub does not receive feedback from the Department, they should contact the Departmental worker who originally requested the information or the community based child protection worker.

Refer to *Working together for a better future for at risk children and families* for detailed guidelines on information sharing between non-government agencies and the Department for Child Protection.

Seeking information from external agencies

In some cases it will be necessary for Hub agencies to seek information relating to children, young people and families held by agencies outside of the Hub. The following process should be followed when seeking information from an external agency:

- A request for information should be made in writing.
- The written request should include a signed *Consent to Share Information* form.
- Proof of identity for the person making the request should be provided with the request.
- The request should include a description of the agency's role with the child, young person or family, detail what information is required and explain why it is necessary for the information to be shared.

Accuracy of Information

Agencies should take all reasonable steps to ensure that information collected and shared about clients is necessary, relevant, accurate, complete and up to date. Agencies should take action to correct information if it is found to be inaccurate, and should take reasonable steps to notify agencies which have received the information from the disclosing agency, that the correction is necessary.

Record of Information Shared

Consent to share information as well as any information shared regarding a client must be recorded into the Hub IT system.

Hub agencies must record what information was shared with whom, when and why.

Hub agencies must also record whether consent was obtained to share the information or not. If consent was not obtained, the reason for this must be recorded.

If information was shared without consent, Hub agencies must record why this occurred.

All hard copy documentation relating to a child, young person or family must be stored in a secure and confidential location.

Any information sent in the form of an email requires adherence to your agency's electronic document management system

Timeframes

The timeframe within which information is shared should be clearly negotiated between agencies based on the needs of the child, young person or family. Due consideration should be given to the need for urgency and speed in situations of high risk.

Dispute Resolution

When the release of information by either party is refused, and the requesting party believes that they have reasonable grounds for having the request acceded to, then they need to approach the manager or director of that service to resolve the matter. The organisation who owns the information is responsible for deciding whether or not the information will be released.

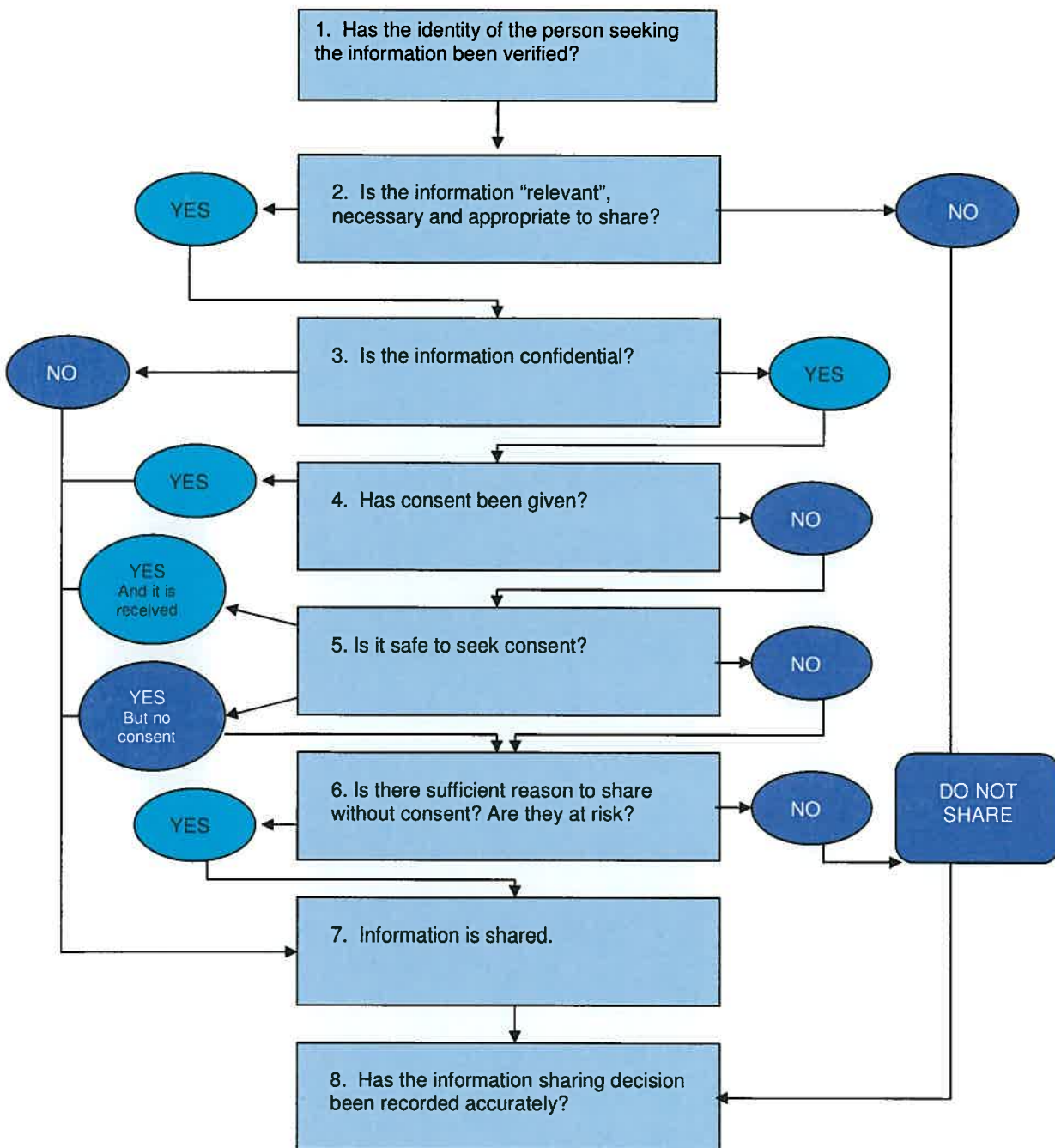
Refusal to release information needs to be recorded along with the reason for the refusal in the appropriate case notes. Outcomes from disputes will also need to be recorded.

Freedom of Information Application

If a person makes an application to access information under the *Freedom of Information Act 1992*, the existing agency principles about accessing information apply.

Decision Making Steps for Information Sharing

The following flow chart should be used by support workers to assess whether it is appropriate to share client information with another agency. If you are unsure at any stage about what to do, consult your line manager/supervisor.



Is a notification to the Department for Child Protection required?