

# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment

Of Vulnerable Persons



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*



# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

Victim	Witness	Prosecutor	Advocate	Perpetrator
The vulnerable person who has allegedly been abused or maltreated.	The person who holds information that an act of abuse or maltreatment has taken place. Can be a vulnerable person.	The state-sanctioned official who presides over prosecution – assuming police have been involved, have laid charges, and the case proceeds to court	The person who stands up for the vulnerable person as a victim, or as a witness. May or may not be authorized to do so, and may or may not have state-sanctioned status.	The person, who it is alleged, is the person who has abused or maltreated a vulnerable person. This may be by commission (abuse) or omission (neglect) = maltreatment
Seniors, people with dementia, cognitive or mental disability, stroke, inability to communicate.	PSWs, DSWs, vulnerable people themselves, co-victims, victims or even co-perpetrators.	Crown Attorneys, assistant crown attorneys, lawyers acting for the victim or the state.	PSWs, DSWs, lawyers or others appointed by the court or acting for the victim, or “friends of the court”.	A person found guilty of abuse or neglect. Innocent until proven guilty; “alleged” perpetrator until then.

# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

Considerations before taking action are:

- clarifying suspicions
- gathering sufficient evidence to go further
- consulting with specialists and others knowledgeable of the witness, and most importantly
- avoiding premature action** which may result in trauma to the witness or spoil the opportunity for successful detection and prosecution of maltreatment.



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*



# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

- Discuss with supervisors,
- Report to child welfare officials or
- Report to the police, or
- Gather more information first from other sources under strictest confidentiality



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*



# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

The sensitive caregiver must be prepared at the time maltreatment is suspected, to give the matter highest priority, without appearing overly eager, disbelieving, alarmed, judgmental, or personally ill-affected.

Composure can positively affect the likelihood that the individual will tell the story again, in significantly more detail, if the caregiver first "passes" the "trust test".



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*

**shrtn**  
collaborative

# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

A successful investigative interview following an allegation can be affected positively by an excellent first response.

Similarly, all subsequent evidence, no matter how reliably obtained, may be invalidated, "contaminated" by improper first responses.

Improper or insensitive investigations may also traumatize and even "re-victimize" sensitive and vulnerable victims.



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*



# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

## Do:

- 1. Let the person know that you are really listening
- 2. Reassure the person that s/he has done nothing wrong
- 3. Take your time listening to the person
- 4. Use the person's words if you have to speak at all to clarify points

## Don't:

- 1. React with horror, alarm, or disgust; this may be misconstrued by the person to be a personal criticism
- 2. Criticize the alleged perpetrator; the person may still care for them or have conflicting feelings about them
- 3. Tell the person you won't tell anyone or that you will keep it a secret
- 4. Ever ask a person why s/he let it happen to them



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*

**shrtn**  
collaborative

# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

## Do:

- 5. Briefly find out who, what and when so that risk can be assessed (e.g. does the alleged perpetrator have current access to the person)
- 6. Find out what the person wants to happen
- 7. Deal with unrealistic expectations
- 8. Explain that you have to report. This is a legal and ethical responsibility

## Don't:

- 5. Ask leading questions - never mention something in a question that hasn't already been mentioned by the witness and never allow a question to be asked that contains an answer in it.
- 6. Put words in the person's mouth - let them use their own words and way of communicating
- 7. Make promises you can't keep
- 8. Attempt to assess the truth of the report by yourself



# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

## Do:

- 9. Continue only far enough to determine that a plausible allegation is being made.
- 10. Include another trusted and "safe" person (relative, friend or staff) of the witness
- 11. Determine whether the maltreatment is recent or historical - responses to historical abuse allegations will usually be significantly different from allegations of current or ongoing abuse.

## Don't:

- 9. Attempt to interview. Just listen, observe and remember to take precise notes immediately afterward
- 10. Forget that if a child is a potential victim, it is YOUR responsibility to ensure Children's Aid is notified



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*



# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

- ❖ At the time of reporting, ascertain or predict any physical or emotional trauma experienced by the witness, and the emergency and followup therapeutic effort required.
- ❖ Remember - physical injuries may be life threatening without obvious external signs (i.e. head injury, internal organ damage or bleeding).
- ❖ Initial disclosure may determine there is potential of obtaining physical evidence (through medical examination).



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*

**shrtn**  
collaborative

# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

Clear documentation is an essential professional standard:

Future prosecution, even on another case

Civil action is also possible (suing for damages)

Sensitivity to confidentiality (all parties) but very detailed and precise, comprehensive (can be sealed)



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*



# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

An allegation, even a potentially false one, needs to be reported and acted upon swiftly by authorities when:

- a. An alleged perpetrator is named or identified in some manner that suggests the person exists, associated with
- b. Information which is sufficient to warrant investigation on a criminal charge or child protection concern as set out in the various acts of legislation.
- **Following the "least dangerous assumption" principle (refer to Ethics), when in doubt, a report should be made.**



P • S • N • O  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*



# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

- Especially, reporters should be aware of "practical deadlines" such as school or program dismissal times, when victims or witnesses may be returning to the high risk situation.
- ***Reporters should report faster when allegations come closer to these "practical deadlines", even though the allegations might be vague or unclear and subject to some doubt.***



P•S•N•O  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

The Voice of PSW Professionals

shrtn  
collaborative

# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

Especially a sudden change to:

- Overly compliant, passive, undemanding behaviour
- Withdrawal, unresponsive, sad, depressed
- Fears of certain situations and people

And/Or:

- Dressed inappropriately to cover bruises
- Injuries with no adequate matching explanation



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*

**shrtn**  
collaborative

# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

- Lack of basic treatment for injuries
- Extremely poor hygiene, parasites, sores/ulcers
- Persistent non-compliance with medical orders
- Pale, listless, unkempt, thin, undernourished
- Lack of supervision and monitoring
- Unattended needs (glasses, dentures, etc.)



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*

**shrtn**  
collaborative

# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

- Odd approaches to caregivers (i.e. from side or behind)
- Exaggerated fright reactions when approached by caregivers from behind or out of line of vision)
- Fear of the dark, of being alone, of strangers, of new situations
- Other symbolic phobias (i.e. washroom fears)
- Intrusive negative thoughts (i.e. about death, injury, etc.)
- Fear of going to/staying home i.e. from programs
- Fear of certain people or types of people
- Wary of physical contact with adults or caregivers



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*

**shrtn**  
collaborative

# Spotting and Dealing with Possible Abuse and Maltreatment of Vulnerable Persons

- 1. Is the person's behaviour within the range of regular coping behaviour used by persons in the appropriate developmental phases?
- 2. Has there been a marked, gradual or sudden change in the person's behaviour?
- 3. Are a number of behavioural signs present at the same time?
- 4. Is the intensity of these behaviours excessive for the circumstances?
- 5. Are the behaviours transient or enduring?
- 6. Are there developmental or situational crises (within or outside the family) affecting the person which account for the behaviour?
- 7. Are there specific physical problems which may account for the behaviour?



**P·S·N·O**  
• PERSONAL SUPPORT •  
NETWORK OF ONTARIO

*The Voice of PSW Professionals*

**shrtn**  
collaborative