

Ten tips for supporting birth parents

For friends and family

If you have someone in your life who is currently going through child protection matters, you may wonder what you can do to support them. Here are some tips put together by parents who have worked with child protection and child and family services in Victoria

1. Understand how much this person trusts you.

By sharing this sensitive information with you, parents are letting you know that you are an important person in their life and that they trust you. If they have not been the one to tell you about their situation, consider how you can best protect their privacy during this time.

2. Understand that parents might be overwhelmed and need help.

Parents who have been contacted by child protection have told us that they felt:

- Scared
- Ashamed
- Anxious
- Like a failure
- Misunderstood
- Alone

How are you feeling?

I am here to listen, and I promise not to judge.

It is important for parents to know that you are on their side, and that you want to understand how they are feeling. You could try to ask them directly how they're feeling; reassure them that these feelings are normal, and that you are not there to judge them, only to provide support.

3. Ask how you can be supportive.

Parents who are feeling scared or overwhelmed might not know how to ask for help. Only they will know what is practical and safe for them to have help with. It's also important to remember they might not want help – for example, they might just want to talk.

Ask parents what might be helpful. If they can't think of anything, you could suggest:

- being available to listen,
- helping with daily tasks like shopping, cooking, and cleaning,
- helping parents with school runs,
- watching the kids (for example, during a meeting, or so they can have a break),
- supporting the family to stay connected to their culture throughout the process,
- helping parents to find support through services and programs.

4. Try to keep personal opinions to yourself.

Parent suggestion: Try to avoid saying things like “If it were me, I would do this...”

When a loved one tells you they have been contacted by child protection, you might also have feelings or opinions that come up. This is normal and nothing to be ashamed of. It is not always helpful, however, for you to share these opinions with the parent.

You may want to reach out to your own support network during this time – if you do, just remember to respect the parents' privacy.

5. Don't go in blind. It can really help if you understand a bit about the process parents go through when they are in contact with child protection. There are lots of reasons why a family might be involved with child protection, and it can sometimes be very complicated. Consider learning more about the reasons why child protection gets involved, and try to do your own research to understand the system and the experience for families. Ask questions, but try not to overwhelm your loved one.

Be aware of resources that might be supportive or helpful for parents going through this process. Some good examples include:

- [The Orange Door](#) (for adults and children experiencing family violence),
- [Safe Steps](#) (Victoria's family violence response centre),
- [Legal Aid](#) and other advocacy programs (for example, Independent Family Advocacy Support),
- the Victorian [Child Protection Manual](#),
- [Ask Izzy](#) (a website that lists support services for families).

6. Acknowledge that it's a hard situation

Let parents know that you can see it's a really difficult time for their family. Help them to remember their value as a person and as a parent, and remind them of their strengths.

7. Reassure your loved one that they are deserving of support.

When parents are in contact with child protection, they do not get a lot of messages that they, as well as their child, are deserving of support. Remind them that they are worthy of love and support, even if they have made some mistakes or had some difficult times along the way. Help them to see there is a way forward from here, and that there is support available for them.

8. Know your own boundaries and limits.

Knowing your own boundaries and limits will help you to remain healthy and able to support your loved one. It is okay if you also feel overwhelmed. Make sure you also get the support you need if you take on this supportive role. Some of things that are talked about in child protection situations can be mentally draining. You might ask yourself questions like:

- Am I able to support this parent through this journey?
- How much am prepared to do to support this parent?

9. Encourage parents to stay on track.

Some parents might find this situation so overwhelming that they will want to go back to old habits. For some, this behaviour might not help their situation, for example if they start drinking a lot or using substances to try and help themselves feel better. Encourage your loved one to stay on track and participate in the process for the sake of their children. The best outcomes for themselves and their children will happen when parents are engaged, when they understand what is happening to them and what is expected, and when they can play an active role in making positive changes.

10. Help parents to not have to repeat their story, if they don't want to.

It can be upsetting and even traumatising for some parents to have to tell their story over and over. This is something that they will have to do with all of the different workers and services they engage with. Try not to avoid asking them to repeat this story; follow their lead and be guided by what they want to share with you and what they don't want to talk about.