

Consent for school social work services: Guide for students and parents/carers

This guide provides information about the Department of Education's social work services and must be read and understood by any person who provides consent for a student to receive services from a school social worker.

What is a school social worker?

Social workers are allied health professionals who help people who need support. School social workers provide students with counselling, information and referrals to other services. School social workers help students face life's challenges, improve their wellbeing, and do their best at school and in life.

The student or their parent/carer must provide their consent for the student to receive a service from the school social worker.

Services provided by social workers

School social workers work with students and their families to support students' educational, developmental, social and emotional needs. Social workers provide interventions to support students' mild to moderate mental health concerns. These interventions may include individual student counselling, working with students' families and/or other support staff, and running group sessions with students at the school.

Social workers operate as part of the student support team to provide holistic support for the young person within the school setting.

During a counselling session, the social worker may ask the student to complete questionnaires as part of an assessment. This will allow the social worker to gather information to inform the support they provide the student. Prior to using a questionnaire, the social worker will explain what it is designed to do and what they will do with the results.

Students do not have to share information about themselves with the social worker or complete questionnaires, but choosing not to do so may impact what the social worker learns about the student and decisions about the best treatment plan to support the student's needs.

Consent

A student and/or their parent/carer must provide informed consent for the student to receive a service from the school social worker. Consent must be provided either at or before the student's first appointment. If consent has not been provided, the social worker will not be able to provide a service to support the student.

Consent is usually provided by a student's parent/carer, but if the school social worker, using their professional judgement, has assessed the student to have sufficient maturity and understanding to decide to receive a service, they may be able to provide consent themselves.

Consent must be voluntary, informed, specific and current. The consent provided will confirm that the student or parent/carer providing consent has either read the information in this guide or has had the information read to them, and has had the chance to ask questions about the service being delivered.

- Consent will be valid for the duration of the service agreed to through the student's referral or based on the social worker's advice.
- Consent will be updated annually if the student sees the social worker for more than 12 months.
- Students or parents/carers are able to withdraw their consent at any time by notifying the social worker and the service will be discontinued.

A social worker will develop a more comprehensive understanding of a student's needs if they can request, receive and share information with a professional or agency who is already providing, or who has provided a service in the past to the student (e.g., a Health Practitioner). The social worker will seek additional agreement or consent to do the following if required as part of providing a service to a student.

1. *Share information with department staff*

If the social worker would like to share information about the student gained through providing a service with other school or department staff, the social worker will ask the student or their parent/carer for their agreement.

Sharing this information may:

- allow for supportive strategies to be developed and put in place for the student in the classroom or school environment;
- ensure safety plans for the school context are put in place for students who are at risk of harm; and/or
- allow the social worker to attend and advocate for a student during stakeholder meetings.

2. Share information with external agencies or health professionals

If the social worker would like to discuss or gain information about the student they are seeing with an external agency or health professional who is currently or has previously supported the student, they will seek the student's or parent/carer's consent.

Consent to contact the agency or health professional will be sought through the [Consent form to share student personal information with third parties](#). Information gathered would be directly related to the social worker's assessment and treatment plan for the student.

3. Refer a student to external support

If the social worker decides that a student's mental health needs are high or complex, they may talk to the student or the parent/carer about referring them to an external social worker or health professional with specialist expertise in the area of the student's mental health concern. The social worker would seek consent from the student or the parent/carer before making a referral for additional support.

Use of assessment tools

A social worker may carry out assessments to determine a student's individual support needs at school. These assessments involve using tools or questionnaires that may relate to a student's behavioural, social and emotional functioning, or their mental health and wellbeing.

Consent to conduct assessments is requested on the *Consent for school social work services – 2024* form. If the social worker believes an assessment is needed, they may also discuss the use of assessment tools with the student and, if required, their parent/carer prior to it being administered.

Confidentiality

When providing a service to a student, social workers take notes and keep records about:

- their observations of the student;
- what they discuss with the student;
- the goals of the service being provided; and
- discussions or contact with the student's parent/carer or school staff about the student.

Information collected by the social worker while providing a service to a student will be kept confidential, unless certain circumstances apply. If the social worker considers any of the information should be shared with another person, they would usually discuss this with the student or parent/carer first.

However, a social worker may have to share a student's personal information without their consent in the following circumstances:

- the social worker forms a genuine belief that the student or another person may have been harmed or may be at risk of harm;
- if disclosure of the information is required or authorised by law, for example, if information is required to be disclosed under a subpoena or in line with mandatory reporting provisions; or
- the social worker believes it is appropriate because they suspect unlawful activity or misconduct of a serious nature.

Collection, storage and sharing of personal information

A social worker's records can include sensitive and personal information about the student, which is why social workers take great care with how the information is collected, stored and managed. Information the social worker collects about the student will be stored securely in the department's online student management system (OneSchool). Access to these records is restricted to authorised staff only.

It is important to note that these authorised staff (that is, a school psychologist or guidance officer) are able to access information the social worker stores about the student on OneSchool. School staff (other than the social worker) who have access to the information would only access the information if necessary to support the student's wellbeing and mental health needs, or if otherwise required or authorised by law.

There may be circumstances in which the social worker may store a student's confidential personal information in a hard copy file. Any hard copy will be stored securely in a locked cabinet.

Where an external agency or health professional has provided information about the student to the social worker (with the student's or parent/carer's consent), this information would be stored securely within the student's existing records.

Use of web-based service providers: transfer and storage of information offshore

The use of web-based resources in schools is increasing. The department makes decisions about using safe and secure technology to meet the needs of its students in line with robust department and whole-of-government procedures designed to ensure the protection of student personal information (see the department's [Information Assets and Record Keeping](#), [Information Privacy and Right to Information](#) and [Information Security](#) procedures).

At times the department will utilise services delivered by third-party web-based providers, some of whom may transfer and store data on servers located outside of Australia. When this occurs, the department will inform students and their parents/carers about what happens to their personal information and seek their consent before the student's information is transferred, in line with section 33(a) of the *Information Privacy Act 2009* (the IPA).

In the course of an assessment, information collected by the social worker will be entered into web-based resources, including some personal information about the student. To help safeguard students' identities, only limited personal information is used for each assessment (i.e. the student's EQID, year level, date of birth, primary language and gender). The social worker's name and the date of testing are also entered into the system.

The web-based resources process the assessment information, analyse the data and generate reports for interpretation and use by the social worker. During this process, information may be transferred and stored in secure cloud-based servers located outside Australia. When data is transferred it is encrypted and remains encrypted during storage. Administrative, physical and technical safeguards have been implemented to protect personal information and ensure only authorised staff have access to the encrypted data.

Personal data transmitted to and stored in cloud-based servers will not be disclosed, made available or used for purposes other than the purpose intended by the application, unless with the explicit consent of the individual, or as required by all relevant and prevailing laws. The department provides approval for the use of specific web-based resources to ensure they are compliant with the Information Privacy Principles in the IPA, ensuring that the standard of protection provided for personal information is consistent with the department's own and will be maintained in all dealings with student personal information.

If parental consent to transfer student information overseas for the purpose of an assessment is not provided, the social worker will not use web-based resources. If a student or their parent/carer would like to know more about how the student's information will be managed in the administration of an assessment, they are encouraged to speak with their social worker. The results of each assessment will be shared with the student, their parent/carer, and school staff who are involved in supporting the student's educational program.

Access to student information

A student or their parent/carer may request access to the information that is recorded by the social worker. The request should be made in writing to the principal of the student's school and will be dealt with in accordance with the department's [Access to records held in schools](#) procedure.