News analysis

# Why independent oversight matters when agencies disagree

## New triage panel to resolve disagreements in child abuse cases can act as neutral body



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The new independent panel set up to resolve disagreements in child abuse cases could be a game changer for Singapore's child protection system.

Until the formation of the Triage Assessment Panel (TAP), which starts work on May 1, community agencies had no neutral body to turn to when they disagreed with the Ministry of Social and Family Development's Protective Service (PSV) or another child protection agency.

Such differences usually centre on how much danger a child faces and which agency should manage the case.

These decisions carry serious consequences for children and their families, as they determine the intensity and nature of resources and interventions deployed.

The formation of TAP also signals that expressing differing views should not be discouraged, and that varying perspectives may help surface blind spots.

TAP member Lee Seng Meng, who is also the executive director of SHINE Children and Youth Services, said the panel would ensure that decisions on child safety are assessed "consistently, fairly and with an additional layer of professional oversight".

Mr Kevin See, director of Integrated Family Service at Montfort Care, said TAP provides a platform for all parties to be heard, rather than decisions relying largely on a single agency's assessment of the case.

"It strengthens professional accountability and ensures that decisions are more collectively deliberated," he said.

In Singapore's child protection system, the PSV handles high-risk cases, such as those involving sexual abuse or serious injuries inflicted by a parent. The PSV has the statutory power to remove children from their abusive parents, if necessary, to keep them safe.

Community agencies such as family service centres (FSCs) and child protection specialist centres manage the low- and moderate-risk cases.

On April 30, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) announced that TAP will act as the final arbiter when designated child protection case management agencies cannot agree on which agency should handle a case and the level of risk a child faces, even after discussion.

From May 1, only these designated child protection case management agencies, such as FSCs, child protection specialist centres and children's homes, will be allowed to manage child abuse cases.

Each TAP meeting will be co-chaired by a representative from MSF's Professional Services Group – set up to enhance policy development and service delivery – and one independent professional.

They will be joined by two independent members who have relevant experience in social work, child protection, psychology and other fields.

Their varied backgrounds allow cases to be considered more holistically, taking in perspectives beyond a single discipline. This can surface considerations that those directly involved may not have thought of.

Members will not be involved in the cases they review to ensure neutrality. The panel must provide a clear rationale for its decisions within six working days.

The move comes after the review of the Megan Khung case, where the four-year-old girl was abused to death by her mother and her mother's former partner.

Released in October 2025, the review found multiple lapses across agencies, with the formation of TAP among seven recommendations made by the panel.

For example, Beyond Social Services, which ran the pre-school Megan attended, called the Child Protective Service (CPS) twice. CPS failed to probe further to better assess the risk Megan faced and also did not register the call, which was a breach of procedures.

Hence, the case was not raised to the supervisor on duty, who might have probed further.

Another agency that Beyond called for help, which also did not take up the case, was Heart@Fei Yue, a child protection specialist centre.

The review noted that while MSF has tools to guide assessments and referrals, differences in professional judgment can arise over whether a case meets the threshold for escalation.

The review said that such differences are "not a bad thing" as they avoid blind spots and the pitfalls of rote assessments.

One common area of disagreement is when a community agency believes a case should be managed by the PSV, while the PSV assesses that the agency can handle it.

Differences also emerge in less clear-cut situations like those involving psychological abuse or neglect, where harm is often less visible.

Mr See, who has worked at the PSV, FSC and the National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline, said disagreements over risk levels or case ownership are "not uncommon" and are usually resolved through discussions.

However, differences can still arise, often shaped by staff experience and their judgment of how a child's safety could be affected without certain interventions, he said.

Social workers note that child abuse cases are often complex and dynamic, and risk levels can change quickly.

An unspoken challenge for agencies has been how far to press their concerns when they disagree with the PSV, given that their work is funded by MSF.

TAP's role as an independent appeals body helps ease this tension, providing a neutral avenue when agencies find themselves at odds with their paymaster.

The panel will also provide a "clear rationale" for its decision within six working days, and this is critical given the urgency of child protection work.

TAP member Katherine Baptist, an accredited social worker with over 30 years of experience, said that clear explanations make it easier for parties involved to accept the decision.

The formation of TAP signals that raising differences should not be frowned upon. Rather, it reinforces that safeguarding children is a shared responsibility, a collective duty, and that no single agency has all the answers.

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# Caseloads expected to remain relatively stable, says ministry

FROM A1

MSF has yet to release figures for 2025, but noted an uptick in new high-risk abuse cases in the initial weeks following the release of the review panel report in late October.

Going forward, CPCM agencies will take the lead in child protection cases.

The 82 designated agencies include family service centres (FSCs), child protection specialist centres, children's homes and fostering agencies.

Anyone who suspects abuse can call the 24-hour National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline (NAVH).

If NAVH determines there are child protection concerns, including abuse, the case will be transferred to a CPCM agency, which will gather information to verify concerns, do risk assessments and develop safety plans.

Non-CPCM agencies such as pre-schools and youth service providers that report the abuse do not handle the abuse aspects of the case. Instead, they will continue to support the family in areas such as parenting skills and caregiving.

If there are no child protection concerns, the non-CPCM agency will continue working with the family and alert NAVH if new concerns arise.

Responsibilities and decision-making processes will be clearer with this move, said Mr Martin Chok, deputy director of family and community services at Care Corner Singapore. Care Corner runs FSCs and a protection specialist centre, which are CPCM agencies.

"Previously, multiple agencies might be involved with a family, but responsibilities could sometimes feel fragmented," said Mr Chok.

For example, a pre-school may observe the child is happy in school, but the child may be experiencing difficulties at home that another agency working with the family hears about. Having a lead agency coordinate this information will paint a fuller picture of what is actually happening, he said.

Noting that CPCM agencies may face more cases, the review panel had previously recommended that MSF ensure they get the resources they need.

Mr Chok said support for case workers could include "smaller and more realistic" caseloads.

MSF told ST that caseloads are expected to remain "relatively stable" as the threshold for abuse remains unchanged.

Between 2022 and 2024, the average caseload hovered at between 18 and 21 cases per worker at CPCM agencies. The MSF spokeswoman said it is aware that the caseload is higher in certain centres and is working with them to address the issue.

"We will continue to monitor caseloads closely and review resourcing needs where necessary," she said.

The panel's report had also recommended an appeals mechanism to resolve differences between agencies and the MSF's Protective Service (PSV) on handling child abuse cases.

The PSV, established in May 2025 by integrating CPS and other protective services, provides state intervention for high-risk abuse cases involving children and vulnerable adults.

An example of disagreement is when an FSC considers referring a case to PSV as it feels the child's safety risks are serious enough for state intervention, while MSF may assess that the situation can still be managed with community support, said Montfort Care's director of Integrated Family Service Kevin See.

He said: "In such situations, TAP can serve as a neutral platform to bring the different perspectives together, review the information collectively and assess whether a higher level of intervention is indeed necessary."

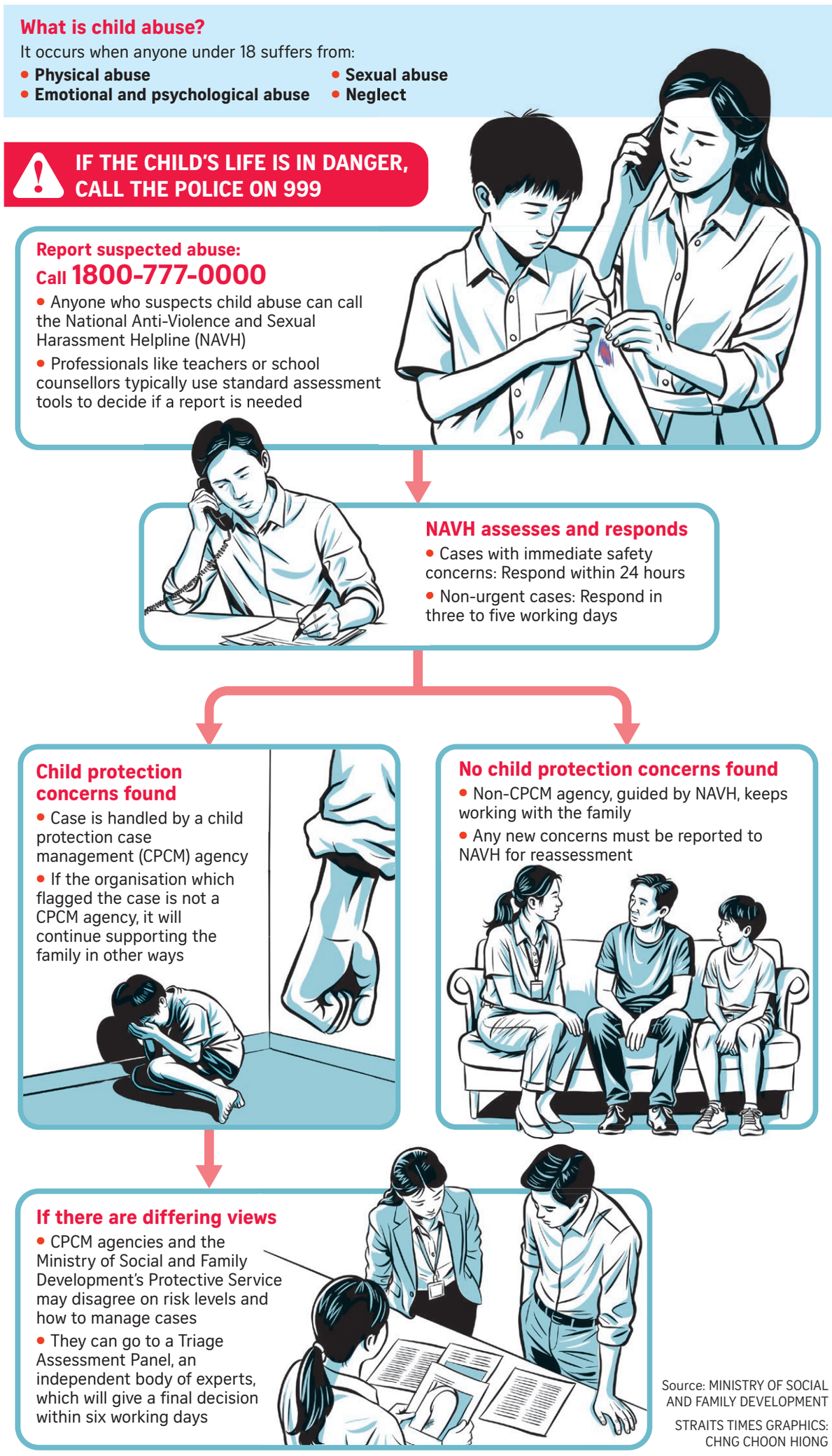
Each TAP meeting will be co-chaired by a representative from MSF's Professional Services Group and one independent professional, and will include two independent members. All members have experience working with families or have expertise in child protection.

MSF has implemented several recommendations from the review panel report, such as the Protection Practitioners' Care Fund to better support professionals handling domestic violence cases.

Other plans, like a new social services coordination centre to better identify and coordinate child abuse cases, will be completed by end-2026.

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## What happens when child abuse is suspected?




Source: MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS: CHNG CHOON HIONG

# Pre-schools must now report all abuse cases directly to anti-violence hotline

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Pre-schools will now be required to report all cases of child abuse or suspected abuse directly to the National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline (NAVH), in an updated protocol which took effect on March 5.

Previously, based on the type and severity of abuse, pre-schools either notified NAVH – a 24-hour hotline to report family violence – or the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), the regulatory body for the early childhood sector.

Pre-schools were informed of the change in February, a Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) spokeswoman told The Straits Times on April 30.

The update comes after a review panel report on four-year-old Megan Khung's case, which examined the series of events leading up to her death at the hands of her mother and her mother's ex-boyfriend.

Released in October 2025, the review found multiple lapses across agencies. One recommendation was for MSF to review ECDA's role in assessing reports of child abuse.

The panel felt that ECDA licensing officers are not trained child protection specialists, and may not have the expertise to guide pre-schools in managing cases in the interim.

Under the new protocol, pre-schools that discover or suspect that one of their children has been sexually abused have to make a report to NAVH within two hours.

Pre-schools are also expected to look out for other types of abuse, such as physical violence, using a tool called the Sector-Specific Screening Guide.

For example, if the guide shows a "red" outcome – indicating an immediate threat to the child's safety or noticeable injuries – the pre-school must also report the case to NAVH within two hours.

They also have to keep ECDA notified, said MSF.

Overall, the number of calls to NAVH has risen since its launch in 2021, alongside a growing share of calls related to child abuse.

In 2024, the national helpline received 11,100 calls, up from 8,400 calls in 2021. Child abuse and neglect accounted for about 40 per cent of calls in 2024, up from 26 per cent in 2021.

On April 30, MSF announced that from May 1, only designated child protection case management (CPCM) agencies, such as family service centres, child protection specialist centres and children's homes, will be allowed to manage child abuse cases.

Organisations not on this list but that interact regularly with children, such as pre-schools and youth outreach services, will continue to support families in other areas.

PCF Sparkletots Preschool's chief operating officer Marini Khamis said the new designation of CPCM agencies provides clearer avenues for educators to seek guidance or escalate concerns.

"With clearer roles across agencies and mechanisms to facilitate timely decision-making, we are better assured that cases can be assessed and acted on without unnecessary delays," said Ms Khamis.

Beyond Social Services president Alvin Yapp said there will be greater clarity of roles for the different agencies that work with a child and his family.

Beyond, which ran the pre-school that Megan attended, is not a CPCM agency, but it can still work with CPCM agencies to support the child's well-being in other ways, such as offering childminding, meals or emergency financial aid to their families.

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