

Sexual abuse

How to respond helpfully to a child who discloses sexual abuse

Disclaimer: The information and advice in this section should only be used in conjunction with the Child Protection guidelines and policies of your own organisation which you must implement in all circumstances.

Child Sexual Abuse

- In a recent major study in the UK one in six young adults said they had been sexually abused before they had reached the age of 16.
- It is thought that only a quarter of children who have been abused tell anyone about it.
- The abuser is usually a family friend, a neighbour, a member of the child's family or someone working with the child. The abuser is rarely a stranger.
- Sexual abuse can cause a range of serious mental health and emotional problems which can have lifelong or in some cases fatal consequences (suicide attempts are common amongst those who have been abused).
- The nature and extent of any long term effect that abuse has on a given child will depend on a number of factors. These factors include the child's resilience prior to the abuse, the quality of support they receive from their families and others important to them, and their knowledge of what happens to the abuser.
- Children who disclose abuse are thought to have a better chance of long term psychological recovery than those who do not. The accuracy of this assumption cannot be tested through research because those who do not disclose remain a hidden group.
- If a child or young person's sexual behaviour is very unusual or abnormal for their age this can sometimes be an indication that they have been abused.

Things to think about

Disclosure and hinting at disclosure

- Remember that most children do not disclose sexual abuse because they are afraid.
- Remember that most children think (and have been told to think) that no one will believe them.
- Be aware that most children will have been threatened about the adverse consequences of disclosure. They might have been told that they will not be believed, that they will be harmed, that others close to them will be harmed or that they will be taken into care.

- Be aware of the consequences of disclosure for the child/young person's family. They may know the abuser and may well not believe the child/young person.
- Be aware that children and young people are often abused by someone they know and trust. They will often feel some responsibility for the abuse and feel confused as to where the guilt lies.
- Be aware that a child/young person will very often drop hints as a first stage towards a disclosure in order to test a worker's reaction. This is partly to test if the worker is strong enough to cope with a full disclosure and partly to see if the worker is likely to believe them.
- Be aware that a disclosure could lead to you being asked to give evidence in court.
- Evidence obtained from interactions occurring within a formal therapeutic relationship can sometimes be legally discredited as being 'contaminated'. Be careful that your discussions with the child/young person could not be interpreted in this way.

Think about yourself

It is important to tune into exactly what you are being told. A disclosure or hint of disclosure can evoke all sorts of emotions in you the helper, especially if you, or someone close to you has experienced abuse in the past. Because of this it is easy to imagine that the child/young person has said more than they have.

If you find yourself having to respond to sexually inappropriate behaviour you might also find that the intensity of your own emotions are difficult to cope with. It is important that you try and stay calm so that you can keep a clear head and make the right decisions about how to protect children/young people who you have discovered may be at risk. You should also try to be non-judgemental as the children/young people who are being sexually inappropriate towards others may themselves have been abused by others.

Finally remember that you have to look after yourself. It is normal for a worker to feel the need to talk to an experienced colleague or child mental health professional to help them to make sense of their emotional response after dealing with the issues being discussed in this section. You may also need some time to rediscover your emotional strength in much the same way as someone suffering from shock after a car accident. This is quite normal and does not in any way reflect on your competence as a worker.

What you can do if a child or young person is hinting that they have been abused

- Make sure that you are aware of and follow the child protection policies of the organisation you work for.
- Make sure that you fully understand your obligations to report disclosure and the likely immediate consequences for the child/young person of reporting disclosure.
- Remain calm.
- Be aware of your own emotions.

- If necessary ask the child/young person to repeat what they have said.
- Be prepared for further hints and possible disclosure. Show an interest and make it clear that if a child wants to say more, you are willing to listen and that you can make a quiet private space available.
- Give the child/young person your full attention.
- Make good eye contact. Get into a position (ideally where you are both seated) in which your faces are level.
- Show in your body language that you are open and receptive. This would normally mean adopting an open posture with legs and arms unfolded. Smile sufficiently to convey warmth. For more information, see section on counselling techniques, but remember this is not formal counselling or therapy.

What not to do if a child or young person is hinting that they have been abused

- Do not ask leading questions - remember the child/young person must decide whether or not to finally disclose if they want to.
- Avoid touching the child or young person if possible. If you suspect that something abusive has happened to them, allow them their personal space.
- Do not show any signs of disbelief.
- Do not rush them.
- Do not make unrealistic promises, for example that you can make everything better.

What you can do if a child or young person is disclosing that they have been abused

- Make sure that you are aware of and follow the child protection policies of the organisation you work for.
- Make sure that you fully understand your obligations to report disclosure and the likely immediate consequences for the child/young person of reporting disclosure.
- Explain to the child/young person as clearly and calmly and supportively as you can that because they and possibly other children are at risk you need to tell others about what they have said.
- Remain outwardly as calm as you can.
- Make a conscious effort not to show any signs of shock, disgust or disbelief as this may inhibit the child/young person who might then not be able to tell you what they want to tell you.
- Be aware of your own emotions.

- If necessary ask the child/young person to repeat what they have said.
- Reassure the child/young person that you think what they say is very serious and that it needs to be taken very seriously.
- Let them know that you think they are brave to be disclosing.
- Show an interest and make it clear that if a child wants to say more, you are willing to listen and that you can.
- Make sure that you have a quiet private space available to talk, which is free from interruptions and distractions.
- Give the child/young person your full attention.
- Make good eye contact. Get into a position (ideally where you are both seated) in which your faces are level.
- Show in your body language that you are open and receptive. This would normally mean adopting an open posture with legs and arms unfolded. Smile sufficiently to convey warmth. For more information, see section on counselling techniques, but remember this is not formal counselling or therapy.
- Get help from senior colleagues and contact your local child protection specialists and/or child mental health specialists for further advice.
- Record in the child's own words what has been said.
- Take all necessary action to protect the child - remember, child protection is everyone's job.

What not to do if a child or young person is disclosing that they have been abused

- Do not ask leading questions - remember the child/young person must be allowed to disclose what they want to disclose.
- Do not ask too many questions.
- Do not delay listening to the child or passing on your concerns.
- Do not rush the child/young person – allow them to disclose to you at a pace that they are comfortable with.
- Avoid touching the child or young person if possible and try not to encroach on their personal space.
- Make sure you have tissues handy but be careful how you use them. Moving in too quickly to mop up tears can give the message that the child/young person should not be crying whereas it may be an important release for them.
- Do not show any signs of disbelief.

- Do not rush them.
- Do not make unrealistic promises, for example that you can make everything better.
- Do not interpret what the child is saying to you - just record and report.
- Do not carry out an investigation into the allegation - this is not your responsibility. Report to senior colleagues and your local child protection specialists.

When to contact a mental health specialist

For further details, see the following sections of General information (sexual issues):

Examples of sexual behaviours which might give cause for concern.

Examples of sexual behaviour which should lead you to seek immediate further advice.

How to contact a mental health specialist

You should get in touch with your local health centre or hospital to obtain a contact number for the appropriate children and young people's mental health specialists.

Remember - you can contact your local mental health specialists for a number of reasons, for example:

- For advice on how to make a referral about a named child.
- For advice about whether or not to make a referral (it is normal practice to seek this advice without naming the child in the first instance).
- For advice about what to do (once again there should be no necessity to name the child).

By not naming the child you are protecting their right to confidentiality. This method of seeking advice also has the advantage that you do not need to get anyone's consent in advance of your contact phone call.