

NCPA practice brief

NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION CLEARINGHOUSE

Responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse

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This paper discusses the topic of children and young people's disclosures of abuse. It outlines what we know through research and practice about how, why, what and when children and young people are likely to disclose. It offers suggestions for parents, family members, friends, professionals or others to help respond to children and young people at the time of disclosure and in the longer term. Most research into children and young people's disclosures has focused on disclosures of child sexual abuse, however, many of the issues canvassed are also likely to be relevant to disclosures of other types of abuse (i.e., physical, psychological and emotional abuse).

The information in this paper is drawn from a range of sources developed through both research and practice.

Who the practice sheet is for

This document contains information that will help family, friends, other adults and professionals to respond to a child's disclosure of abuse. However, the way that individuals respond to abuse will differ according to their role in the child's life.

If you are a parent, family member or friend

Children and young people are most likely to initially disclose abuse to either a parent or same-aged friend (Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Shackel, 2009). Hearing that a child or young person has been abused is distressing, and this will be felt even more acutely if you are a friend or relative. It is also possible that the perpetrator is known to you and may even be a family member. Services that are available for children can also help support family members and friends of victims and guide you through the next steps. Available services can also be found in the NCPC Resource Sheet on *Helplines and Telephone Counselling Services for Children, Young People and Parents* (Lohar & Price-Robertson, 2011) <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs23>.

It is important to remember that whilst it is your role to be a supportive listener, it is not your role to counsel the child or investigate his or her claims. Child protection workers will undertake investigations and professional counsellors may be accessed to provide counselling.

If you work for an organisation

Organisations should ideally have in place a set of protocols to respond quickly and effectively to disclosures of abuse (Irenyi, Bromfield, Beyer, & Higgins, 2006). If you work for an organisation and a child or young person in the care of that organisation discloses abuse that has been perpetrated by someone associated with that organisation,

it is imperative to follow the organisation's protocols as well as make a report to the relevant statutory child protection department in your state/territory. If there are no protocols in place, your management or you should contact the relevant child protection department in your state immediately. Most importantly the needs and welfare of the child or young person must take priority over any perceived threat to the reputation of the organisation or associated individuals (Irenyi et al., 2006).

If a child or young person discloses abuse that is occurring, or has occurred, outside the organisation, you should support the child or young person by believing him or her and reassuring them that telling was the right thing to do. If your organisation does not have protocols in place for such circumstances, you should still inform management and the relevant statutory child protection department in your state. Finally, keep information confidential. Only those people who must know should be informed of the disclosure.

It is important to remember that whilst it is your role to be a supportive listener, it is not your role to counsel the child or investigate his or her claims. Child protection workers will undertake investigations and professional counsellors may be accessed to provide counselling.

If you are a child protection worker

Although the current document is aimed at people hearing initial disclosures of abuse, the information may still be useful to child protection workers but should be considered in conjunction with the appropriate state/territory child protection legislation and your particular organisational protocols. (See NCPC Resource Sheet, *Australian Child Protection Legislation* (Holzer & Lamont, 2009) <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs14/rs14.html> for further details on each state/territory)

Locating the appropriate agency in your state or territory

Up-to-date contact details for the statutory child protection departments with responsibility for receiving and responding to reports of child abuse can be found in the NCPC Resource Sheet on *Reporting Abuse and Neglect: State and Territory Departments Responsible for Protecting Children* (Rosier, 2011) <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs26>. In most cases it is possible to make anonymous reports, although it must be remembered that if an anonymous report is made, authorities cannot subsequently contact the person making the report if clarification or further information is required.

At the point of disclosure

When a child discloses that he or she has been abused, it is an opportunity for an adult to provide immediate support and comfort and to assist in protecting the child from the abuse. It is also a chance to help the child connect to professional services that can keep them safe, provide support and facilitate their recovery from trauma. Disclosure is about seeking support and your response can have a great impact on the child or young person's ability to seek further help and recover from the trauma.

When might a child or young person disclose?

Children and young people can disclose abuse at any time. If the abuse is ongoing over a period of weeks, months or years, they may disclose while the abuse is happening. Others might disclose either immediately after the abuse has ended or years later. Many children do not disclose abuse at all during childhood (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; Ullman, 2003). Delays in disclosure may be linked to a range of factors including concerns regarding the consequences of disclosing. For example, one study found that many children expected negative consequences for themselves and/or another person (usually their mother or sibling) if they disclosed (Malloy, Brubacher, & Lamb, 2011). These expected consequences included physical harm and/or death. Supporting the importance of the initial, informal disclosure, Keary and Fitzpatrick (1994) found that once a child had disclosed abuse to a family member or another adult they were more likely to disclose again during formal investigations by child welfare workers.

The timing of the child or young person's disclosure will influence his or her immediate needs, and this, in turn, will determine the most appropriate response. For a child or young person who discloses that he or she is currently being abused, the immediate priority is safety and protection from further abuse. In this situation some

adults have a legal obligation to notify the appropriate authorities, although these obligations differ between states and territories. For example, in the Northern Territory all adults are required to report their concerns when they have reasonable grounds to believe that a child has suffered or is suffering maltreatment.¹

Sometimes authorities will already be aware of allegations made against a perpetrator and as a result, any children or young people who have spent time with that person might be approached as part of a police investigation. If you are unsure if an investigation is already taking place, any disclosure made by a child or young person should be reported to the appropriate authorities. After disclosure, a child or young person also needs support, advocacy and assistance to recover from the trauma of being abused.²

How children and young people disclose abuse

A child or young person's disclosure is seldom straightforward because they can disclose abuse in several ways. Many of the ways children and young people disclose abuse are indirect or accidental. Children sometimes attempt to alert adults they trust to the fact they are being, or have been abused, by their behaviour or by making ambiguous verbal statements (Collings, Griffiths, & Kumalo, 2005; Shackel, 2009; Ungar, Barter, McConnell, Tutty, & Fairholm, 2009). For example, a child or young person might suddenly refuse to attend the house of a previously loved relative, or could begin saying and doing sexual things that are inappropriate for their age. Older children may indirectly attempt to disclose or cope with their abuse through risk taking behaviours such as self-harming, suicidal behaviour, disordered eating and other sorts of risk exposure (Ungar et al., 2009).

Some children and young people may disclose when asked or after participating in an intervention or education program (Shackel, 2009). Others may initially deny that they have been abused if asked directly, or say that they forget, only to disclose later. Children and young people may disclose, only to retract what they have said later, however this is relatively uncommon. The child or young person might say he or she made a mistake, lied, or that the abuse actually happened to another child. In cases with a higher likelihood of actual abuse, recantations are low (4–9%; London et al., 2005) but for some children the stress of disclosing and receiving potentially negative responses from caregivers may lead them to recant in an attempt to alleviate the stress (Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007).

There are a number of reasons for children and young people to retract or delay their disclosure, including:

- pressure or threats from the perpetrator;
- relationship to the perpetrator;
- expected consequences of telling (e.g., physical injury/death, family separation, parental distress);
- pressure from the child's family;
- fear of negative reactions from parents or family;
- fear of not being believed;
- feelings of embarrassment, shame and self-blame; and/or
- for males specifically: fears of stigmatisation, being labeled a victim or being labeled homosexual (Alaggia, 2004; Alaggia, 2005; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Malloy et al., 2011; Ullman, 2003)

Children may disclose spontaneously (disclosure as an event) or indirectly and slowly (disclosure as a process). The type of disclosure may be impacted by developmental features of the child, such as their age at onset of abuse and/or age at time of disclosure, with preschool children being less likely to spontaneously disclose than older children (Lippert, Cross, & Jones, 2009; London et al., 2005; Shackel, 2009). Understanding disclosure of abuse as a process may help adults to be patient and allow the child or young person to speak in their own way and their own time (Sorensen & Snow, 1991) while maintaining an awareness of any changes in behaviour or emotions that may indicate abuse is occurring or increasing. If you have suspicions that abuse is occurring, even if you are unsure, it is better to report your suspicions than to do nothing.

1 Details of these requirements can be found in the NCPC Resource Sheet on *Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse* (Higgins, Bromfield, Richardson, Holzer, & Berlyn, 2010) <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs3/rs3.html>.

2 See NCPC Resource Sheet on *Helplines and Telephone Counselling Services for Children, Young People and Parents* (Lohear & Price-Robertson, 2011) <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs23>.

What to do during the disclosure

In this section we discuss in more detail things you can do to be supportive while a child is disclosing. It is important to remember, however, that if a child has decided to speak to you, then there is a good chance they trust you. Simply by calmly and empathically listening and offering support, you are helping the child or young person. There are some general tips for responding to disclosure (Bussey, 1996; Office for Children Youth and Family Support, 2006; Queensland Department of Communities, 2004; Victorian Department of Human Services, 2006):

- Always listen to and support the child or young person and thank them for helping you to understand.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.
- Reassure the child or young person it is right to tell.
- Don't be afraid of saying the "wrong" thing.
- Maintain a calm appearance.
- Give the child or young person your full attention.
- Let the child or young person take his or her time.
- Let the child or young person use his or her own words.
- Accept the child or young person will disclose only what is comfortable and recognise the bravery/strength of the child for talking about something that is difficult.
- Tell the child or young person what you plan to do next.
- Do not confront the perpetrator.

These points are discussed in further detail below.

Always listen to and support the child or young person

It is essential that when a disclosure is made that you support and reassure the child or young person. Remember, it is the role of appropriate authorities to investigate the truth of the claim. Your role is to support the child or young person. Quizzing the child or young person for details or asking him or her to repeat their story a number of times can create the impression you doubt what the child or young person has said. This type of quizzing might also be interpreted as "leading" the child and might have unintended consequences if any legal action is taken.

Don't make promises you can't keep

Child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, relies on secrecy. Other forms of abuse are also usually hidden. Children learn at a very young age to hide what is happening to them. Sometimes they fear repercussions for themselves or other family members. In other instances they may fear the consequences for parents whom they love in spite of the abuse. Because of this, a child or young person might ask an adult to promise secrecy before disclosing. Such a promise should not be made. By telling the child: "I can't make that promise, but I can tell you I will do my best to keep you safe" you can reassure the child and encourage him/her to speak out about abuse.

Reassure the child or young person that it is right to tell

A child or young person disclosing abuse needs to be reassured that the adult is not angry he or she has disclosed the information. If the adult exhibits distress, the child or young person must also be reassured that the adult's reaction is because adults want children to be safe. Reassure the child or young person that he or she is not the cause of the distress. Also address any concerns about the child or young person's safety, particularly if he or she fears potential consequences of disclosing. The child or young person may need to be reassured of the same things repeatedly over an extended period of time, especially if legal proceedings follow the disclosure. It is vital that the child or young person knows that the abuse and anything that happens afterwards are the responsibility of the perpetrator for committing the abuse, not the child or young person for disclosing. For example, if parents separate after a disclosure of child abuse, the child or young person needs frequent reassurance it was not his or her fault.

Don't be afraid of saying the "wrong" thing

Children will very rarely disclose a secret if they have decided not to (Bussey, 1996). Therefore, if a child or young person has revealed to you that they have been or are being abused, it is a sign that they trust you and that simply speaking to you will be helpful. Try not to be distracted by needing to know exactly the "right" thing to say. As long as you listen supportively then the child or young person will benefit from talking to you.

Maintain a calm appearance

Inevitably a disclosure of child abuse will evoke strong feelings for the adult hearing it. For some, the news may be overwhelming. Although potentially difficult, it is helpful if you can be calm and patient. Allow time for the child or young person to trust that he or she will be listened to and helped. It can be useful to remember, particularly when the disclosure is of past abuse, that the child or young person has already survived the abuse. The only thing that has changed is your awareness of it. If the child or young person becomes aware of your distress you can explain that you are upset because adults are meant to care for children and you are sad because some adults hurt children.

Give the child or young person your full attention

A child or young person might not always begin talking about what happened to them in the best place. If you are in a busy and/or noisy place, ask the child or young person if you can move to a place where you can hear him or her properly. Whilst remaining sensitive to the child or young person's needs, let him or her know that you want to be able to give him or her your full attention. Respect his or her wishes about where the best place is: some localities may trigger memories or be reminders of abuse (e.g., being alone in a quiet, isolated place with an adult).

Let the child or young person take his or her time

Disclosing is difficult for children and young people and something they may only be able to do a little at a time. Allow the child or young person to take his or her time to speak. Some children may not wish to talk much about the abuse and might want to resume some regular activity soon after disclosing. Others, however, might need to talk for longer about different aspects of their experience. It is important the child or young person does not feel rushed or panicked and that you have plenty of time to soothe and reassure him or her.

As mentioned earlier, some children or young people might not disclose directly and the process of indirect disclosure may potentially take several days or weeks. During this time it is possible to gently and occasionally let the child or young person know that you will listen to anything he or she has to say when they are ready.

While it is important the child or young person has control over the process, this must also be balanced with his or her safety, and the safety of other children or young people. If the child or young person has not disclosed but you have reasonable grounds to suspect abuse, you may need to go to the police or child protection authorities in your state. You do not necessarily have to have a full disclosure to go to the authorities and can discuss concerns without making a formal report.

Helpful information for what you can do if you suspect child abuse but the child or young person has not disclosed to you, can be found in the NCPC Resource Sheet on *Risk Assessment in Child Protection* (Price-Robertson & Bromfield, 2011) <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs24>.

Let the child or young person use his or her words

Children and young people have their own way of describing their experiences. It can be useful to clarify what they mean by asking: "Are you saying ...?". It is important not to assume you and the child or young person mean exactly the same thing. It is also important not to ask questions that suggest the "right" words to a child or young person, or in a way that can be seen as putting words in the child's mouth. If your conversation with the child or young person is later used during legal proceedings, it is important that the child or young person's

account is not seen as having been distorted by your questioning (Powell & Snow, 2007). Any questions asked should be relatively general and aimed at eliciting just enough information in order to work out what action is required and which authority should be contacted.

Allowing the child or young person to use his or her own words is important so that their discomfort is minimised. Let the child or young person know it is okay to use any words they want to or to say whatever they need to. It is also important that the child or young person use his or her own words in case there is a subsequent court case.

Accept that the child or young person will disclose only what is comfortable and recognise the bravery/strength of the child for talking about something that is difficult

It is important that children and young people disclosing abuse feel in control of their situation. This is to counter the experience of violation and loss of control caused by the abuse. It is also important to acknowledge the child's bravery and strength in talking about something that is difficult. Understanding that a child or young person may reveal only minimal details of abuse will help you to accept the disclosure under the child's or young person's terms. It is possible to gently prompt with questions such as: "Can you tell me more about that?" but it is best not to press the child or young person for details.

Let the child or young person know what you will do next

When explaining to a child or young person what you will do next, it is important to ensure he or she understands. Try to avoid speaking about organisations and authorities that the child or young person may not be familiar with without explaining the organisation's name, its purpose and what its staff will do. Advise the child or young person that in order for them to be safe they will need to talk to another person (police or child protection) about their experience and that you will support him or her through that experience. Let the child or young person know he or she can ask about what will happen next as often as he or she needs to.

In an overwhelming situation, information can be hard for children to retain and they may need reminding. Only reveal the disclosure to those absolutely necessary. If you believe you need to discuss the disclosure with others outside the police or child protection authority (e.g., a school counsellor, Principal etc.) let the child or young person know. Child abuse often leaves children feeling disempowered and lacking control in their own life. Making sure the child or young person is fully aware of each step can make the process less intimidating and can help return a sense of power and safety.

Do not confront the perpetrator

It is imperative you do not confront the perpetrator of any type of abuse or discuss the child or young person's disclosure with him or her. This could create a potential risk for the child or young person's safety. Also, perpetrators of child abuse can work hard to shift responsibility from themselves to others and some kinds of child abusers (specifically sexual abusers) are charismatic people who can concoct plausible excuses for their behaviour and seek to shift the blame to others (van Dam, 2001). Confronting an alleged perpetrator of sexual or other types of abuse should only be done by professional child protection workers or the police.

Summary

An adult's response to a child or young person's disclosure of abuse can be central to a child or young person's ongoing safety and their recovery from the trauma of abuse. If an adult does not take action when there are suspicions that a child is being abused, it may place the child at serious risk of ongoing abuse and prevent the child's family from receiving the help they need. In summary, it is important to:

- listen to and support the child or young person;
- reassure the child or young person he or she did the right thing;
- don't make promises you can't keep; and
- contact the appropriate authorities.

Having accurate information about child abuse can help adults to support a child or young person who has disclosed and to feel less overwhelmed. Further information and support to help children, young people and the families in which young people have been abused can be found in the NCPC Resource Sheet on *Risk Assessment in Child Protection* (Price-Robertson & Bromfield, 2011) <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs24>.

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