



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 responding to children and young people at the time of disclosure and in the longer term. The information in this paper is drawn from a range of sources developed through both research and practice. These sources are listed at the end of this paper.

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 help keep the child safe, get justice and to recover from the trauma. But having a child reveal that he or she is being, or has been, abused can be confronting and upsetting. It is even more so if the child is close to you and/or if the perpetrator is a person you know.

In this article we talk about when and how children or young people might disclose abuse and ways in which you can support the child or young person, whether you are a parent, a family member, friend, or a professional. Most research into children's and young people's disclosures has focused on disclosures of child sexual abuse, however, most of the issues canvassed are equally relevant to disclosures of other types of abuse.

Later we talk in more detail about what to do when a child or young person discloses abuse, but the most important and immediate things you can do are:

- believe the child;
- reassure the child that telling was the right thing to do;
- don't make promises you can't keep; and
- contact the appropriate authorities (you will find links to these later in this article).

It is important to remember that it is never the role of the person hearing the disclosure to investigate what the child or young person has said. You should never approach the perpetrator with the claims. This creates a potential risk for the child's or young person's safety. Also, some kinds of child abusers (specifically sexual abusers) are often charismatic people who can often concoct plausible excuses for their behaviour and seek to shift the blame to others (van Dam, 2001). This may lead you to feel confused or uncertain about what the child or young person has told you. The best way to respond to a disclosure is to support and comfort the child or young person, and report the allegations to the statutory child protection authority in your state or territory to investigate.

Locate 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 on the Clearinghouse's 'Reporting incidences of child abuse' [<http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/state.html>]. 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.

When might a child or young person disclose?

Children and young people can disclose abuse at any time. If the abuse is on-going 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. The timing of the disclosure is often connected to the catalyst for disclosure. For example, in one study of case file analyses of confirmed cases of child sexual abuse 28% of children disclosed abuse after they were asked directly because they were known to have been exposed to a perpetrator (Sorensen & Snow, 1991). In the same study, 10% of the children were only able to disclose after the abuse had been ended by the departure of the offender and the child felt safe enough to disclose (Sorensen & Snow, 1991). Another study showed that children who had already disclosed abuse to a family member or another adult were more likely to disclose again during formal investigations by child welfare workers (Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994).

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 and in Tasmania all adults are required to report their concerns when they have reasonable grounds to believe that a child has suffered or is suffering maltreatment. Details of these requirements can be found in the National Child Protection Clearinghouse's Resource Sheet on Mandatory Reporting (Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005). 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 authorities are not already aware, however, it is important for the safety of the child or young person who has disclosed and other potential young victims that the child's or young person's disclosure is reported. After disclosure, a child or young person also needs supportive resources and advocacy to achieve justice and to recover from the trauma of being abused.

How children and young people disclose abuse

A child's 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. Children sometimes attempt to alert adults they trust to the fact they are being, or have been abused, by their behaviour or by hinting that there is something they want to be asked about (Sorensen & Snow, 1991). 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. Some children and young people initially deny that they have been abused if asked directly, or say that they forget, only to disclose later. Others disclose abuse but offer details that minimise either the abuse or its impact (Sorensen & Snow, 1991). Some children and young people disclose, only to retract what they have said later (as discussed below).

Understanding that disclosure of abuse is more of a process than an event can 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). Disclosure may occur over days or weeks, even years.

Why might a child or young person retract a disclosure?

It is not uncommon, after having disclosed abuse, for a child or young person to retract their disclosure. The child or young person might say he or she made a mistake, lied, or that the abuse actually happened to another child. Some children become adamant that no abuse happened (Sorensen & Snow, 1991).

There are a number of reasons for children and young people to retract their disclosure. These include:

- pressure from the perpetrator;
- the consequences of telling (e.g. family separation, parental distress);
- pressure from the child's family;
- fear of telling their parents or family;
- discomfort of going through investigations or court proceedings;
- discomfort of being videotaped early in the disclosure process; or

- negative personal consequences such as feeling guilty or bad for telling (Sorensen & Snow, 1991).

A child or young person is more likely to retract their claim when he or she did not make a deliberate disclosure but instead accidentally revealed something or responded to direct questions (Sorensen & Snow, 1991). In one study involving proven child abuse cases 22% of the children retracted their disclosure at some point (Sorensen & Snow, 1991). Most children do not, however, maintain their denial and they return to their initial claim. This shows that disclosure is a *process* rather than a one-off event (Sorensen & Snow, 1991). The rest of this paper will deal in more detail with how to be supportive of children and young people during a disclosure of abuse.

What to do during the disclosure

In this section we talk in more detail about 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 listening and believing, you are helping the child or young person. These are some general tips for responding to disclosure. They are:

- Always believe the child or young person;
- Don't make promises you can't keep;
- Reassure the child or young person it is right to tell;
- Don't be scared of saying the 'wrong' thing;
- Maintain a calm appearance;
- Try to provide a comfortable, private space;
- 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 tell you as much or as little as they want to;
- Tell the child or young person what you plan to do next; and
- Do not confront the perpetrator.

(Sources: Bussey, 1996; Office for Children Youth and Family Support, 2006; Queensland Department of Communities, 2004; Victorian Department of Human Services, 2006).

These points are discussed in further detail below.

Always believe the child or young person

It is essential that when a disclosure is made that you reassure the child or young person you believe him or her. 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 siblings. 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, but telling the child: “I can't make that promise, but I promise to do my best to keep you safe” can reassure the child and encourage them to speak out about abuse.

Reassure the child or young person that telling is alright

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. 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 also 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 believed. 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.

Find a comfortable, private space

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 away from other people where you can hear him or her properly. Let the child or young person know that you want to be able to give him or her your full attention, so somewhere quiet is best. If you are not somewhere quiet

and where privacy is assured, let the child or young person know you want him or her to be able to speak comfortably.

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 or young people might not want 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. This might mean cancelling plans for a few hours, or arranging care for other children. 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 some days or weeks. A child or young person might reveal information that raises suspicions but refuse to elaborate for weeks or months (Sorensen & Snow, 1991). 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 strong suspicions, 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. When making a notification of your concerns to the authorities, your privacy is protected. 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 on the Clearinghouse's 'Getting Help' page [<http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/gettinghelp.html>].

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 you are *not* seen as having influenced the child or young person in either making the disclosure or in the content of the disclosure (Monahan, 2005).

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

It is important for children and young people disclosing abuse to feel in control of their situation. This is to counter the experience of violation and loss of control caused by the abuse. 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. 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 (for example 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's or young person's disclosure with him or her. Perpetrators of child abuse can work hard to shift responsibility from themselves to others. Confronting an alleged perpetrator of sexual or other types of abuse can potentially place the child at risk and should only be done by professional child protection workers or the police.

If you are a parent, family or friend

Hearing that a child or young person has been abused is distressing. When the child or young person is someone you have a relationship to, or friendship with, the distress will be felt even more acutely. It is also likely 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. Such services can help support you through an emotionally traumatic time and guide the steps you take next. Available services can also be found on the Clearinghouse's 'Getting Help' web page [<http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/gettinghelp.html>].

If you work for an organisation

When a child or young person discloses abuse, the points listed above are vitally important regardless of where and when the abuse occurred and who the perpetrator was. Primarily, the child or young person should always be believed and reassured he or she has done the right thing by telling. However, for organisations there are a number of additional issues that also need to be considered.

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. If there are no protocols in place, your management or you should contact the relevant child protection department in your state immediately. Organisational protocols should address the eventuality of allegations being made against a member of the organisation's management. If the disclosure involves claims against a person in a management role in your organisation you should follow protocols if they exist. If none exist you should speak to the next most senior person as well as the relevant child protection authorities in your state. 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, Bromfield, Beyer, & Higgins, 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. In cases where the perpetrator is a parent, the non-offending parent should be advised at the same time as the appropriate authorities. You could also provide information to the parent about where he or she can get help/advice. Finally, keep information confidential. Only those people who must know should be informed of the disclosure.

Summary

An adult's response to a child's or young person's disclosure of abuse can be central to a child's or young person's recovery from the trauma of abuse. In summary, it is important to:

- Believe 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 their families in which young people have been abused can be found on the National Child Protection Clearinghouse's Getting Help page at [<http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/gettinghelp.html>].

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