

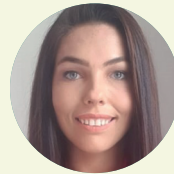


Webinar Snapshot

Courage and responding to disclosures of sexual abuse from children and young people

In this important conversation about children and young people's disclosures of sexual abuse, Dr Leanne Beagley CEO of the National Centre, spoke with Amanda Morgan, Toni Cash, Noel Macnamara and Professor Patrick O'Leary.

The panel explored how parents, carers, professionals and practitioners can demonstrate **courage** in the ways they **understand** and **respond** to disclosures of sexual abuse from children and young people.



Amanda Morgan
Child sexual abuse survivor
advocate, activist, speaker
and writer.

"If you're given a disclosure you're in a position where you can be a courageous person. I don't think we talk enough about courage...it doesn't matter what profession you belong to or what the law says or what community you come from, child sexual abuse can happen to any child, and anyone can receive a disclosure"



How we can be more courageous for children and young people when they disclose or try to disclose child sexual abuse:

Challenge attitudes about children and young people

People, organisations and the community continue to hold attitudes towards children and young people that stop them from being visible and safe to disclose sexual abuse. Myths exist about child sexual abuse that influence the way we behave and respond to children and young people.

Attitudes you can challenge include that children and young people:

- are not as equal to, or important as adults
- are not credible and cannot be believed
- are unreliable witnesses
- are not able to articulate their needs.

Myths that surround child sexual abuse you can challenge include:

- very young children cannot or do not want to let us know that they've been sexually abused
- adolescents often lie and make up stories, or can't be trusted
- boys cannot be sexually abused
- it's not sexual abuse if a child or young person accepts gifts, money, alcohol or other means perpetrators use to induce or persuade
- that child sexual abuse occurs as a one off.

Overcome barriers to disclosure

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse shift the responsibility for their abuse onto the child or young person. When you understand the barriers, you can intervene earlier.

Reasons children and young people might not disclose sexual abuse include:

- they are told that no one will believe them
- the perpetrator manipulates people and systems close to the child to silence them
- the perpetrator lives in their community and/or has a place of power and authority
- sex and child sexual abuse is not discussed
- they may not have the words to share their story, for example if they are non-verbal or have additional needs such as ADHD or ASD
- attitudes and stereotypes around child sexual abuse (for example, boys may be afraid of how they will be perceived if they disclose).

See, hear and believe disclosures

Children and young people *do* disclose sexual abuse, but people don't want to hear it, see it, or believe it is true. Early disclosure helps to minimise opportunities for children and young people to be further abused and to receive the support they need to heal and recover.



Professor Patrick O'Leary
Director of Violence Research
and Prevention Program,
Griffith University

“We all, regardless of our position, have a responsibility to be informed ...and be a safe person for children to disclose...they're inviting us to be brave as well”

Some important do's and don'ts:

Don't:

- assume that children and young people will deliberately and spontaneously tell their story of being sexually abused, and that it will have a beginning, middle and an end
- dismiss a child or young person if they have told you something already, or if they tell you about something that happened some time ago
- expect that a child or young person will tell their story about their abuse in one go
- expect that a child or young person will be able to give you every detail about what happened to them – most adults can't do this
- expect that a child or young person will be able to provide a fully accurate account about their abuse.

Do:

- always believe a child or young person if they disclose sexual abuse
- look for changes in behaviour, or behaviour that is not expected for their age or developmental stage
- show children and young people that you're up to hearing difficult things so they can trust and tell you
- listen for clues about what is happening to them – they might be telling parts of their story
- remember that there is no right or wrong way for a child or young person to share their story
- trust your intuition if it is telling you that something is not right with a child or young person, or with how an adult is interacting with a child or young person
- be a trustworthy person – lean in, be curious, look for things and take action, even when they are difficult or complex.

The decision to disclose is a difficult one for children and young people, and a negative response to disclosure can cause more harm and lead to significant long-term impacts. When children and young people are not believed, this can feel like a second assault to them.

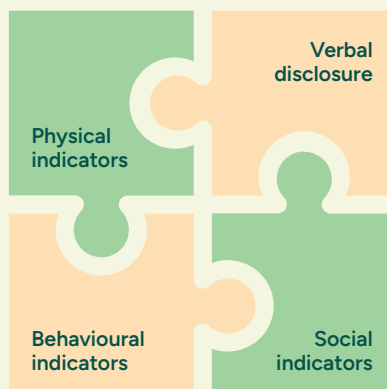


Toni Cash
Principal Advisor Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation,
Youtown

“Do that simple but complex thing of being a believing adult”

Put pieces of the disclosure puzzle together

Children and young people rarely disclose sexual abuse deliberately and with all the details. It's up to adults to put together pieces of the story as they share it over time. It's by putting these pieces together that adults can form a reasonable belief.



As you connect the pieces of the puzzle together, you don't need the whole story with all the evidence or proof before taking action.

It can be helpful to consult or speak with others that know the child and their family. This could be the child's teacher, services they are engaged with, or your colleagues or supervisor.

If you are a mandatory reporter, you only need a child or young person to tell you that they are being abused to form a reasonable belief. If a child or young person discloses sexual abuse to you, it is *your* responsibility to make a report, not the responsibility of your organisation.

Understand the purpose of recanting (or withdrawing) disclosure

Children and young people rarely lie about being abused, particularly sexually abused. Sexual abuse relies on secrecy and silencing.

When a child or young person withdraws the information they have shared, it is often due to the weight and pressure they feel now that their story is out in the world. The consequences for children and young people who disclose can be high. Recanting can happen because they are worried about potential and actual consequences, which can significantly impact relationships, family and other parts of their life.

If a child or young person recants or withdraws, it does not mean that the abuse did not happen.

If a child or young person recants their story, it is important to tell them that you still believe what they have already told you.

Provide ongoing support

When a child or young person makes a disclosure, responses are often focused on immediate protection, such as notifying police or child protection. This can make them feel that their story was too shameful and difficult for the adult they told. It is important to reassure them that they did the right thing in telling you. Support for children and young people who have disclosed sexual abuse needs to be ongoing, particularly as disclosure can happen at multiple points and times throughout a person's life.

Healing from child sexual abuse is a journey that happens over a person's life. It is not linear; it is not a straight line. For many people, the experience of child sexual abuse will impact them in different and significant ways throughout their lives.

Your response to disclosure at *any* point in time can have a profound impact on a person's healing and recovery.



Noel McNamara
Executive Manager of Policy,
Research, and Advocacy,
Australian Childhood
Foundation

“As soon as child sexual abuse comes up, everybody wants to pass it to everybody else...[but] every adult should be responsible for their own practice and...also for the safety and the broader wellbeing of that child as well”

Advocate for change

System level changes are needed to better meet the safety, healing and recovery needs of children and young people who have been sexually abused.

Professionals who engage with children and young people have an obligation to advocate for change, particularly in the child protection and justice systems.

What needs to change in the child protection system:

- Consider the significant short-and long-term impacts of removing a child or young person from the family home as part of assessing risk. Placing a young person in residential care can contribute to additional risks for them and others.
- Ensure children and young people have immediate access to appropriate therapeutic care and support.
- Allow for disclosure as a process, where further and additional information may become known over time.
- Support children and young people to remain engaged in services and relationships through processes and systems that help them feel safe to disclose in their own time, and at their own pace.

- Assess a parent or caregiver's capacity to protect and support a child or young person, considering other factors such as coercive control, power imbalance, family violence, sexual violence, or financial abuse, as well as legislative requirements that may impact decision making.

What needs to change in the justice system:

- The ability to discredit a child or young person and influence the court outcome using 'leading questions' asked by family, caregivers or professionals.
- Shift the onus from children and young people to prove they were sexually abused, which can result in them feeling they are the ones on trial.
- Reconfigure the system to be less adult centric. Offer additional supports, reduce the use of formal language, and start by believing the child or young person, rather than requiring them to 'prove' themselves to be honest.



Amanda Morgan
Child sexual abuse survivor
advocate, activist, speaker
and writer.

"It's better to be wrong than to not be that safe person. You might be that difference in the survivor's life... so be courageous. Don't be afraid to be wrong. It's ok to be wrong"

[Click here to access a recording of our Understanding and Responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse from children and young people In Conversation Webinar.](#)
