

Responding to children's disclosure of sexual abuse

Content warning:
This material contains information that may be distressing for readers.

This resource focuses on the sexual abuse of children by adults.¹ When we talk about a *child*, we mean a person aged **under 18 years**. We recognise and acknowledge the diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, abilities, and genders of children.



Responding to a child's disclosure of child sexual abuse

Many people don't feel confident in talking to a child and responding to disclosures or acting on signs of child sexual abuse. You may be the first person a child tells or talks to about the sexual abuse experienced, or the child may have told many people but have not felt heard. The child might provide lots of detail, or just small pieces of information to see how you respond.

The way you respond to what a child or young person tells you or tries to tell you can influence if the child continues to share what has happened and receive the support and help needed to be protected from further abuse.

Understanding disclosure 4/4

Asking questions

If you are concerned that a child might have been or is being sexually abused but the child hasn't directly disclosed, asking questions in a calm and supportive way can help.¹ Clear and open-ended questions are a good place to start the conversation. Open-ended questions are those that can't be answered with a yes or no response. They allow for whatever the child wants to say which might include lots of different information. They often start with words like "**Tell** me about", **How** did that happen", **Who** are they", "**What** happened then".

It is critical that adults create opportunities and a safe environment for children and young people to share what is happening in their own words. Try to choose a space where the child is comfortable with minimal distractions. Children and young people are more likely to talk to those who feel safe and trustworthy. The child needs to know and feel that you are capable to hear their story and help.



Reacting and responding

If a child *directly* discloses to you, how you react and respond is important for the child to feel safe and to get the help and support needed.

Here are some things to help you do this:

- try to manage your reaction and focus on listening to the child
- try to remain calm especially if a child or young person becomes distressed
- be mindful of your facial expression, body language and tone of voice
- use short simple language appropriate to the child's age and developmental stage
- ask one question at a time

- try to be patient, allow silence, show interest in learning about the child and what is important to the child
- create time to listen and hear as many times as is needed
- reassure the child that:
 - you believe the child
 - the child did the right thing in telling you
 - the child isn't to blame for what happened
- don't promise to keep secrets – you might need to tell others to help keep the child safe
- be aware that the child may be telling their story in parts
- let the child know you are trustworthy and can talk to you again
- tell the child what you are going to do next.^{1,2,3}

Taking action

If a child discloses sexual abuse to you, it is important to consider the next steps to help protect and support the child. You may need to take appropriate action:

- child sexual abuse is a crime and needs to be reported to the child protection agency in your [state or territory](#)
- if you have concerns about a child's immediate safety, call 000
- report [online](#) child sexual abuse including child sexual abuse material to the [Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation](#).
- if the abuse is happening [online](#), discuss strategies such as removing devices at bedtime or only using devices in shared rooms
- work together with children to identify and put into action strategies to support their safety like using buddy systems and identifying trusted adults
- if you are a mandatory reporter, follow your [state or territory's legislation](#)

- if you are a parent or carer, take actions to protect your child from further harm even when the perpetrator is a family member or family friend. Carefully supervise interactions or consider stopping contact if you can
- ask schools, sports clubs, child-care, local councils and other similar bodies for their child safety policies and practices and let them know if services can improve.

Children who have been sexually abused need ongoing support and care. There are counsellors and psychologists who specialise in providing support to children who have been sexually abused. Ask your GP or health care service for recommendations of therapeutic supports in your area. There are also a range of helplines and online services to support children who have been sexually abused and the supportive adult:

- [Australian Human Rights Commission - Support services](#)
- [Raising Children Network - Child sexual abuse helplines & services](#)
- [Australian Institute of Family Studies - Helplines, telephone and online counselling services for children, young people and adults](#)

Hearing a child's disclosure can bring up different emotions for you. We recommend also seeking professional support for yourself if you feel it is needed.

Find out more

The National Centre has a range of resources designed to support you to understand and respond to child sexual abuse. You can access these at:

[Resources - The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse.](#)

If you need support, please contact:

Lifeline - 13 11 14

13YARN - 13 92 76

1800RESPECT

1800 737 732

Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service

1300 657 380

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800

¹ [Our-Collective-Experience-Project---First-Report.pdf](#) (childhood.org.au)

² [Responding to a Disclosure of Sexual Abuse - Bravehearts](#), accessed March 2024

³ [How to respond to a child sexual abuse disclosure - National Office for Child Safety \(NOCS\)](#), accessed March 2024

⁴ [Our-Collective-Experience-Project---First-Report.pdf](#) (childhood.org.au)