

Understanding 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.



What do we mean by 'disclosure'?

We know that child sexual abuse is alarmingly common in Australia. One in three girls and almost one in five boys experience sexual abuse before the age of 18¹ and this is likely an underestimation.

This means that adults need to be alert to its possible occurrence and actively tuned in to signals from children that they are being sexually abused. One of the ways to know it's occurring is by children 'disclosing' their abuse.

When a child 'discloses' sexual abuse, it means they tell someone else about their experience of abuse or talk about what is happening. A child might talk about the abuse to different people at multiple times throughout their life or only tell one person.

Who do children disclose to?

There is consistent global evidence that younger children (up to about 14-years-old) are most likely to initially tell a parent or parent-like figure and are more likely to tell mothers than fathers.² Children also sometimes tell other family members, like siblings or grandparents.

As children get older and friends become more important, older teenagers are more likely to first tell a friend rather than adults like parents or teachers.³ These friends may then tell an adult about the information because they are worried and want to help keep their friend safe.



How do children tell?

Disclosure is a process not a one-off event. Sometimes disclosure happens many times throughout a person's life⁴ and some children will never disclose their abuse.⁵ Disclosures by children and young people can look different depending on their age and developmental stage.

It is very common for children of all ages to delay disclosing their abuse for a long time, especially if the perpetrator is someone they know, trust, and love. It can take decades for some people to disclose,^{6,7} especially boys.⁸

Most children disclose their sexual abuse slowly, over time. Some might provide lots of detail, while others might share just small pieces of information to see how someone responds. Older children often try and anticipate the reaction of other people and then decide how much information to share.⁹ If a negative reaction or response is received, they are less likely to keep disclosing.

Sometimes children 'recant' or 'retract' (take back) what they said about abuse. This is very common and does not mean that children are lying or making up stories about their abuse.



Disclosing sexual abuse can have devastating consequences for children and young people and their families. It can lead to children and young people feeling unsafe; loved ones feeling sad, angry or panicked; or family breakdown and lots of arguments.¹⁰ This is particularly true when the perpetrator is someone known and loved to the family, or is someone who is part of the family. Children often feel responsible for what has happened. From their point of view, an easy way to 'fix' this is to 'take back' their disclosure and hope that it all goes away.¹¹

It is critical that children are believed when sharing information about their sexual abuse, even if disclosure was not immediate or if attempts are made to retract it. It is also important not to question the intention or reason behind their disclosure.



Indirect telling

Younger children (under about 6-years-old) are less likely to directly disclose being sexually abused compared to older children. Instead, younger children are more likely to indirectly show signs of abuse through their behaviour which gives 'clues' about what happened.^{12,13}

This is sometimes called 'accidental', 'unintentional' or 'incidental' disclosure. These signs may be the same or similar for children living with disability who may be non-verbal in their communication.

These behaviours might include wetting the bed, acting out their abuse in play, or drawing pictures depicting the abuse. They may present with physical symptoms such as swelling or redness around their genitals or pain when going to the toilet. Children might be afraid to see certain people or go to particular places.¹⁴

Young people may, to help cope with their sexual abuse, indirectly communicate their abuse by taking more risks like using drugs or alcohol, harming themselves or others, or withdrawing from school and friendship groups.

Adults need to be tuned into childrens' behaviour, aware of the signs of child sexual abuse, and take the signs seriously if they occur.

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 [Prevalence of child sexual abuse across all Australians - The Australian Child Maltreatment Study \(ACMS\)](#)

² [Recipients of children's and adolescents' disclosures of childhood sexual abuse: A systematic review - Child Abuse & Neglect](#)

³ [Recipients of children's and adolescents' disclosures of childhood sexual abuse: A systematic review - Child Abuse & Neglect](#)

⁴ [Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) Disclosures: A Research Update \(2000–2016\) - Trauma, Violence, & Abuse](#)

⁵ [Recipients of children's and adolescents' disclosures of childhood sexual abuse: A systematic review - Child Abuse & Neglect](#)

⁶ [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse \(Royal Commission\)](#)

⁷ [Adult disclosure of child sexual abuse: A literature review - Trauma, Violence, & Abuse](#)

⁸ [Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) Disclosures: A Research Update \(2000–2016\) - Trauma, Violence, & Abuse](#)

⁹ [How to respond to a child sexual abuse disclosure - National Office for Child Safety \(NOCS\), accessed March 2024](#)

¹⁰ [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - Royal Commission](#)

¹¹ [Webinar - Understanding and responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse from children and young people](#)

¹² [Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) Disclosures: A Research Update \(2000–2016\) - Trauma, Violence, & Abuse](#)

¹³ [How to respond to a child sexual abuse disclosure - National Office for Child Safety \(NOCS\), accessed March 2024](#)

¹⁴ [Signs of sexual abuse in children & teens - Raising Children Network, accessed March 2024](#)