



What prevents and helps children disclose 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.



People tend to think that children will readily disclose sexual abuse, especially to parents, close family and friends. But that is not the case. Many children do not disclose (or tell) for a long time. Sometimes it takes decades to disclose.^{1, 2}

What prevents children from disclosing?

The significant power dynamics and structures that exist within society, relationships and family, contribute to and enable child sexual abuse to occur. Children inherently have less choice and control than adults, including over their surroundings and with adults. When a child or young person experiences sexual abuse within the family, the situation can have additional challenges for the child or young person and other family members.

Children are usually sexually abused by someone known and trusted.³ Children, and often their families can be groomed by the perpetrator. This can lead to the child feeling overwhelming shame and blame for the abuse,⁴ which can prevent the child from disclosing.

Children are discouraged from questioning authority, particularly their parents and adults in positions of power, such as teachers, religious leaders and sporting coaches. When children do raise a safety concern or disclose sexual abuse, it is often ignored, dismissed, minimised or not believed. This is especially the case for children with a disability. The person that holds the choice and control, most often an adult, is more likely to be believed over a child. These power structures and dynamics exist across the world. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse use and exploit this to sexually abuse children.⁵

Some children don't know that what is happening (or has happened) is abusive⁶ and should be told to another person. For abuse that happens within the family, the child may not understand that the behaviour is different to what happens in other families.

There are other factors that make a child feel it is not safe to disclose. For example, children may be in families or situations where other forms of abuse and family violence are experienced. The child might be exposed to very rigid gender roles,⁷ where fathers and sons are expected to be dominant and mothers and girls are expected to be submissive.⁸ Children may also be in families or situations where secrets are made and kept.

Children may also not know *how* to disclose, or don't have the language or words to describe their experience.^{9,10} Some children don't have the ability to verbally communicate, such as very young children and children with communication difficulties.



The consequences of disclosing

The consequences for children and young people when disclosing can be profound and forever change their life, family and relationships. Children may not disclose because of fears about losing the close emotional bonds, love and affection with the person who is the abuser, especially when the perpetrator is a family member or other loved one.¹¹ The child or young person may be concerned that it will lead to a breakdown of their family, removal from their parents or carers, or an inability to see the perpetrator again.

Some children have been coerced, threatened or blackmailed not to disclose. Others may be afraid of the perpetrator.¹² For children, it is not easy to tell someone what has happened particularly when children are commonly told to listen to, obey and respect the person that is the abuser. There may also be cultural or religious factors that create additional barriers to children disclosing, such as:

- keeping family matters private
- attitudes towards virginity, sex and sexuality
- what behaviours are considered sexual abuse
- bringing shame on the child's family or wider community
- mistrust of authority, which might be especially relevant for First Nations peoples or those displaced by conflict.^{13, 14, 15}

When children do disclose, there is a risk of not being believed, being dismissed or ignored, or being told it is their fault or that the child did something wrong.

The tendency to not believe children is a worldwide problem that needs to be addressed to be able to prevent and disrupt child sexual abuse.

Given all of this, adults need to recognise that it is very brave for children to disclose sexual abuse. It is especially so for children to disclose more than once if the previous attempt had a negative response or reaction.

What helps children to disclose?

Disclosing sexual abuse is important because often there are not physical signs of abuse, and other signs, like changes in behaviour, can be unclear. When children are able to directly disclose, it helps adults to take steps to protect children from further harm, such as not allowing contact with the perpetrator, and seeking professional support to help the child heal and recover.^{16,17}

One of the most important factors that helps children to disclose sexual abuse is having safe and trusting relationships with others, including friends, family members and other adults such as teachers, coaches and health professionals. When trusted adults notice changes in a child's behaviour and ask what's wrong, this can help children to disclose.^{18,19}

Some children decide to disclose after hearing or seeing child sexual abuse being talked about,^{20,21} for example on social media or during a school session on respectful relationships. Hearing others talk about their experiences can help the child feel less alone, and to realise that what happened was sexual abuse, and reassure the child that it is not their fault.

Children also need to know what appropriate and inappropriate behaviours are so they can identify and have words to disclose what is happening. This learning should occur at home, school, and in other settings and services that children engage with.

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

² [Adult disclosure of child sexual abuse: A literature review - Trauma, Violence, & Abuse](#)

³ [Child sexual abuse by different classes and types of perpetrator: Prevalence and trends from an Australian national survey - Child Abuse & Neglect](#)

⁴ [How to respond to a child sexual abuse disclosure - National Office for Child Safety \(NOCS\), accessed March 2024](#)

⁵ [Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) Disclosures: A Research Update \(2000–2016\) - Trauma, Violence, & Abuse](#)

⁶ [How to respond to a child sexual abuse disclosure - NOCS, accessed March 2024](#)

⁷ [Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) Disclosures: A Research Update \(2000–2016\) - Trauma, Violence, & Abuse](#)

⁸ [What's Gender Got to do With It? Sexual Exploitation of Children as Patriarchal Violence - Child Sexual Exploitation: Why Theory Matters](#)

⁹ [How to respond to a child sexual abuse disclosure - NOCS, accessed March 2024](#)

¹⁰ [Child sexual abuse - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(AIHW\), accessed March 2024](#)

¹¹ [Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) Disclosures: A Research](#)

[Update \(2000–2016\) - Trauma, Violence, & Abuse](#)

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

¹³ [Child sexual abuse and disclosure: What does the research tell us? - NSW Family & Community Services](#)

¹⁴ [Bringing them Home Report - Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

¹⁵ [The effects of war, displacement, and trauma on child development - Humanities and Social Sciences Communications](#)

¹⁶ [Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) Disclosures: A Research Update \(2000–2016\) - Trauma, Violence, & Abuse](#)

¹⁷ [Recipients of children's and adolescents' disclosures of childhood sexual abuse: A systematic review - Child Abuse & Neglect](#)

¹⁸ [Child sexual abuse and disclosure: What does the research tell us? - NSW Family & Community Services](#)

¹⁹ [Our-Collective-Experience-Project—First-Report.pdf \(childhood.org.au\)](#)

²⁰ [Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) Disclosures: A Research Update \(2000–2016\) - Trauma, Violence, & Abuse](#)

²¹ [Recipients of children's and adolescents' disclosures of childhood sexual abuse: A systematic review - Child Abuse & Neglect](#)