

Supporting boys and men to disclose child sexual abuse



Boys and men are often hidden victims and survivors. For example:

- Approximately 1 in 5 boys report child sexual abuse¹. This percentage is likely an underestimate, as boys and men face unique challenges and barriers in disclosing child sexual abuse. While girls are more likely to report child sexual abuse, men are significantly less likely to disclose their experiences. Research indicates that 42% of men who were sexually abused as children disclose their abuse, compared to 60% of women². Many describe important gender-related barriers to telling others about their abuse.
- Research on child sexual abuse is 15 times more likely to be centred on girls compared to boys or mixed-gender samples, leaving significant gaps in our understanding about boys and men who are victims and survivors³.
- Due to limited public recognition of boys and men as victims and survivors, many boys and men struggle to understand and label their experiences as abusive. The lifelong impacts of their abuse are often minimised, underestimated or overlooked. This lack of recognition is reflected in the limited supports and resources available for boys and men who have experienced child sexual abuse.

Support boys and men in breaking the silence

Professionals can facilitate the disclosure process by recognising and challenging societal norms, reducing stigma and creating gender-sensitive safe spaces that can support victims and survivors in their recovery and healing.

Every victim and survivor of child sexual abuse needs a safe space to share their story and access the support they need to heal.

Many of these barriers stem from gender role norms, assumptions about victims and survivors and cultural stigmas about abuse.

Gender norms hinder disclosure

Masculine ideals of strength and control exacerbate self-blame, stigma and shame, often making it hard for boys and men to see themselves as victims.

Fear of negative responses leads to silence

Worries about disbelief, minimisation or being falsely seen as perpetrators can stop boys and men from speaking out, especially after past negative experiences.

Confusion about sexual identity can be a barrier

Abuse by male perpetrators may cause self-doubt. In contrast, abuse by female perpetrators is often dismissed or even celebrated, preventing boys from recognising harm.

Cultural and social expectations add complexity

Some boys and men fear that disclosure will bring shame to their families or communities, especially in cultures where discussions of sexual abuse are taboo.

¹ Mathews B, coordinating author. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study: National prevalence and associated health outcomes of child abuse and neglect. *Med J Aust* 2023; 218 (6 Suppl): S1-S51.

² Mathews, B., Finkelhor, D., Collin-Vézina, D., Malacova, E., Thomas, H. J., Scott, J. G., ... & Lawrence, D. (2025). Disclosure and non-disclosure of childhood sexual abuse in Australia: Results from a national survey. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 160, 107183.

³ Zarchev, M., Ruijne, R. E., Mulder, C. L., & Kamperman, A. M. (2021). Prevalence of adult sexual abuse in men with mental illness: Bayesian meta-analysis. *BJPsych Open*, 8(1).

Practical tips for professionals

It is important to tailor your approach to each victim and survivor's unique context. We recommend the following:

Recognise your personal, as well as cultural and societal attitudes, biases and expectations about masculinity.

Use these questions as prompts for facilitated discussions during team meetings or self-reflection. Encourage team members to share their thoughts and experiences openly, remembering we are all impacted by cultural and societal attitudes and biases.

- What are your expectations about masculinity? How would these expectations impact or shape who you think are victims and survivors of child sexual abuse?
- How do your personal, cultural and societal attitudes and biases shape the way you respond to child sexual abuse?
- Is your organisation/school a safe place for boys or men to disclose child sexual abuse? How would boys or men know this?

Consider the possibility of abuse in boys and men

- Look for possible signs of child sexual abuse when engaging with boys and men. Some signs include social withdrawal, difficulties connecting with other boys or men, sexuality conflicts or confusion, descriptions of shame and/or low self-esteem, and risk-taking behaviours, including substance abuse or violence.
- Ask direct questions if you suspect that a boy may be at risk of or experiencing abuse.



Build trust through language and validation

- Use gender-sensitive language that avoids stereotypes and acknowledges the possibility and impacts of sexual abuse in people of all genders.
- When asking or talking about child sexual abuse, explicitly refer to the fact that boys experience abuse. Consider sharing resources (e.g., websites or flyers) that depict boys and men as victims and survivors.
- Take disclosures seriously. If you are told about any unwanted sexual behaviour, ask questions, be mindful not to minimise experiences and highlight the seriousness of the offence.
- Reassure victims and survivors that child sexual abuse is never their fault.
- Validate feelings and experiences. If you are told about child sexual abuse, follow up after the initial conversation. Demonstrate that you are a safe person who cares, is consistent, and is there to offer support.

Draw on facts and evidence

- Be aware of the prevalence of child sexual abuse and be prepared to communicate this information to help combat feelings of shame and isolation.
- Understand contexts where abuse is more prevalent (e.g., religious institutions, institutional care) and vulnerable groups (e.g., boys with physical and intellectual disabilities, who lack support, who are experiencing mental ill-health).
- Dispel myths about boys and men who experience child sexual abuse. This involves challenging false beliefs such as:
 - Boys who are abused will become abusers themselves.
 - Experiencing abuse will 'make' boys homosexual.
 - Physical responses like arousal mean boys consented.
 - Boys and men cannot be abused by women.
- Seek opportunities to learn more about how gender impacts child sexual abuse.

Address stereotypically masculine norms and shame surrounding abuse

- Challenge societal myths that equate masculinity with toughness and invulnerability.
- Encourage thinking about other ways to demonstrate strength and resilience. Provide alternative role models who demonstrate flexible displays of masculinities, rather than strict adherence to traditional norms.
- Emphasise the immense courage it takes to disclose child sexual abuse.
- Highlight mental health statistics to normalise vulnerability.
 - 1 in 8 men suffer from depression.
 - 1 in 5 men will experience anxiety.
 - 7 out of 9 suicides every day are men. (Beyond Blue)



Be culturally sensitive

- Ask with curiosity about victims' and survivors' cultural backgrounds and communities. Consider a range of intersecting identities that may impact their understanding of sexual abuse.
- Recognise and respect cultural factors that may influence (and limit) disclosure, including how safe it is to disclose within some contexts.
- Partner and collaborate with culturally relevant organisations to facilitate referrals.

Create safe spaces

- Ensure boys and men know what support is available and who is welcome.
- Ensure boys and men who are victims and survivors do not feel alone. Connect victims and survivors to gender-specific support groups like [SAMSN](#).
- Recognise that many boys and men may feel unsafe or uncomfortable with seeking help. Take steps to find safe spaces (either online or in-person) to have conversations about child sexual abuse.
- Be aware that some boys and men may have tried to tell others about being abused in the past and received unhelpful, unsupportive and stigmatising reactions.
- Where possible offer boys and men opportunities to connect with and hear stories of recovery from, other boys and men who have experienced abuse.