



# Recognising and responding to abuse

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## Introduction

It can be very hard for children and young people to speak out about abuse. Often, they fear there may be negative consequences if they tell anyone what's happening to them.

Some may delay telling someone about abuse for a long time, while others never tell anyone, even if they want to.

It's vital that children and young people are able to speak out and that whoever they tell takes them seriously and acts on what they've been told.

Even if a child doesn't tell someone verbally about what's happened to them, there may be other indicators that something is wrong. People who work with children need to be able to recognise the signs and know how to respond appropriately.

This procedure outlines best practice for recognising and responding to abuse and some of the issues which may arise when working with children who have been abused.

## Identifying concerns

### Disclosure

Disclosure is the process by which children and young people start to share their experiences of abuse with others. This can take place over a long period of time – it is a journey, not one act or action.

Children may disclose directly or indirectly and sometimes they may start sharing details of abuse before they are ready to put their thoughts and feelings in order.

Not all disclosures will lead to a formal report of abuse or a case being made or a case being taken to court, but all disclosures should be taken seriously.

It takes extraordinary courage for a child to go through the journey of disclosing abuse.

It's vital that anyone who works with children and young people undertaking this journey is able to provide them with the support they need.

## **How disclosure happens**

Children and young people may disclose abuse in a variety of ways, including:

- Directly – making specific verbal statements about what's happened to them
- Indirectly – making ambiguous verbal statements which suggests something is wrong
- Behaviourally – displaying behaviour that signals something is wrong (this may or may not be deliberate)
- Non-verbally – writing letters, drawing pictures or trying to communicate in other ways.

Children and young people may not always be aware that they are disclosing abuse through their actions and be aware that they are disclosing abuse through their actions and behaviour.

Sometimes children and young people make partial disclosures of abuse. This means they give some details about what they've experienced, but not the whole picture. They may withhold some information because they:

- Are afraid they will get in trouble with or upset their family
- Want to deflect blame in case of family difficulties as a result of the disclosure
- Feel ashamed and/or guilty
- Need to protect themselves from having to relive traumatic events.

When children do speak out it is often many years after the abuse has taken place (McElvaney, 2015).

## **Barriers to disclosure**

Some children and young people are reluctant to seek help because they feel they don't have anyone to turn to for support.

They may have sought help in the past and had a negative experience, which makes them unlikely to do so again.

They may also:

- Feel that they will not be taken seriously
- Feel too embarrassed to talk to an adult about a private or personal problem
- Worry about confidentiality
- Lack trust in the people around them (including parents) and in the services provided to help them
- Fear the consequences of asking for help
- Worry they be causing trouble and making the situation worse
- Find formal procedures overwhelming

(Mental Health Foundation and Camelot Foundation 2006).

Not all children and young people realise they have experienced abuse, for example if they have been groomed.

## **Spotting the signs of abuse**

Children and young people who have been abused may want to tell someone, but not have the exact words to do so. They may attempt to disclose abuse by giving adults clues, through their actions and by using indirect words (Allnock and Miller, 2013; Cossar et al 2013).

Adults need to be able to notice the signs that a child or young person might be distressed and ask them appropriate questions about what might have caused this.

Child protection training can help increase adults' confidence in recognising the indicators of abuse and understanding the different ways a child might try to share what they have experienced.

You should never wait until a child or young person tells you directly that they are being abused before taking action. Instead, ask the child if everything is OK or discuss your concerns with your designated safeguarding lead, or the NSPCC helpline.

Waiting for a child to be ready to speak about their experiences could mean that the abuse carries on and they, or another child, are put at further risk of significant harm (Cossar et al, 2013).

Not taking appropriate action quickly can also affect the child's mental health. They may feel despairing and hopeless and wonder why no one is helping them. This may discourage them from seeking help in the future and make them distrust adults.

## Responding to disclosures

There are three interpersonal skills that help a child feel they are being listened to and taken seriously (Baker et al, 2019):

- **Show you care, help them open up:** Give your full attention to the child or young person and keep your body language open and encouraging. Be compassionate, be understanding and reassure them their feelings are important. Phrases such as 'you've shown such courage today' help.
- **Take your time, slow down:** Respect pauses and don't interrupt the child – let them go at their own pace. Recognise and respond to their body language. And remember that it may take several conversations for them to share what's happened to them.
- **Show you understand, reflect back:** Make it clear that you're interested in what the child is telling you. Reflect back what they've said to check your understanding – and use their language to show it's their experience.

If a child tells you they are experiencing abuse, it's important to reassure them that they've done the right thing in telling you. Make sure they know that abuse is never their fault.

Never talk to the alleged perpetrator about the child's disclosure. This could make things a lot worse for the child.

## Non-biased approach

It's vital that any child who is trying to disclose abuse feels that they are being listened to and taken seriously.

But there can be a risk that if professionals just believe the child's account without thoroughly investigating the situation, this can lead to unfair bias against the alleged abuser as formal investigations progress (Child Protection Resource, 2018; Transparency Project, 2018).

This means it's important to maintain an unbiased approach when responding to disclosures and follow your organisation's procedures to ensure each case is treated in a fair and transparent manner and that the child gets the protection and support that they need.

## Making notes

It's important to keep accurate and detailed notes on any concerns you have about a child. You will need to share these with your nominated child protection lead.

Include:

- The child's details (name, age, address)
- What the child said or did that gave you cause for concern (if the child made a verbal disclosure, write down their exact words)
- Any information the child has given you about the alleged abuser

## Information sharing

### Why information sharing is important

Sharing information about a child's welfare helps professionals build a clearer picture of the child's life and gain a better understanding of any risks the child is facing.

Information sharing helps to ensure that an individual receives the right services at the right time and prevents a need from becoming more acute and difficult to meet (DfE, 2018a).

General principles of best practice for information sharing are outlined below. Refer to your organisation's procedures as well as local multi-agency arrangements to ensure you are following the information sharing processes that are most appropriate for your role.

### When to share information

Timely information sharing is key to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.

People who work with children, whether in a paid or voluntary role, may need to share information about the children and families they are involved with for a number of reasons. These include:

- You are making a referral to arrange additional support for someone in the family
- Someone from another agency has asked for information about a child or family
- Someone in the family has asked to be referred for further help
- A statutory duty or court order requires information to be shared
- You are concerned that a child or a member of their family may be at risk of significant harm

- You think a serious crime may have been committed or is about to be committed which involves someone in the family.

You must always have a clear and legitimate purpose for sharing a child's personal information. Keep a record of the reasons why you are sharing or requesting information about a child or their family.

You should also make sure you are not putting a child's safety and welfare at risk by sharing information about them.

Some professionals have a legal duty to share information relating to safeguarding concerns. More information about this is available in the Mandatory reporting tab.

Always seek consent to share information about a child and their family. However, if consent isn't given, you can still share information with relevant professionals under certain circumstances, for example if you are protecting a child from significant harm.

## What information to share

You need to decide what specific information is appropriate to share and who to share it with.

- Prioritise the safety and welfare of the child and anyone else who may be affected by the situation.
- Make sure you share the information quickly and securely. The sooner you report your concerns the better. This means the details will be fresh in your mind and action can be taken quickly.
- Identify how much information should be shared. This will depend on the reasons for sharing it.
- Use language that is clear and precise. Different agencies may use and understand terminology differently.
- Make sure the information you are sharing is accurate. Make it clear what information is factual and what is based on opinion (yours or other people's).

## Facts and opinions

When working with children and families you will gather information from a variety of sources. How you interpret this information can depend on:

- any previous information received
- your knowledge of research and theory
- your own frame of reference.

When recording information you should be as factual as possible. If you need to give your own or somebody else's opinion make sure it is clearly differentiated from fact. You should identify whose opinion is being given and record their exact words.

## Consent

Children should be given the opportunity to decide whether they agree to their personal information being shared. If a child doesn't have the capacity to make their own decisions ask their parent or carer (unless doing so would put the child at risk of harm).

The [Gillick competency and Fraser guidelines](#) help professionals to assess whether a child is mature enough to make decisions.

Never promise a child that you will keep the things they're telling you a secret. Explain that you need to share what they've told you with someone who will be able to help.

If a child or young person needs confidential help and advice direct them to Childline. Calls to 0800 1111 are free and children can also contact Childline online.

## Reporting concerns

If a child is suffering or at risk of suffering significant harm, you can share information with appropriate agencies or professionals without the child's or their parent's consent

**If a child is in immediate danger, call the police on 999.**

**If a child is not in immediate danger:**

- **Report to Jishan Choudhury (nominated child protection lead).**
- **Contact your local child protection services.** Their contact details can be found on the website for the local authority the child lives in.
- **Contact the police.** They will assess the situation and take the appropriate action to protect the child.
- **Contact the NSPCC Helpline** on 0808 800 5000 or by emailing [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk). Our trained professionals will talk through your concerns with you, give you expert advice and take action to protect the child as appropriate. This may include making a referral to the local authority.

If you have made a verbal referral to local children's services you should follow this up with a written referral as soon as possible, ideally within 48 hours.

## Mandatory reporting

### Female genital mutilation (FGM)

It is illegal to carry out FGM in the UK. It is also a criminal offence for UK nationals or permanent UK residents to perform FGM overseas or take their child abroad to have FGM carried out.

In England and Wales, regulated health and social care professionals and teachers must make a report to the police, if, in the course of their duties:

- they are informed by a child under the age of 18 that they have undergone an act of FGM
- they observe physical signs that an act of FGM may have been carried out on a child under the age of 18.