



# Responding to Children telling you they have experienced Sexual Abuse, Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment

Children sharing experience of sexual abuse (CSA), sexual violence and sexual harassment need to be responded to sensitively. Often it has taken the victim/survivor a lot of courage to share what has happened to them, and they can be concerned about how others will react.

The experience of sharing can be helped or hindered by the way in which a professional engages with the victim/survivor. It is crucial that the child feels supported without judgement. How a professional responds to a child telling them about experience of sexual abuse can impact how the survivor recovers and whether they feel able to share further details or access further support.



## What to know:

- Child sexual abuse can happen to any child, of any age, sex, race or socio-economic background. These acts can be incited by a single adult or child, or groups of adults and children.
- Sexual abuse, sexual violence and sexual harassment happen on a continuum and can cross over. These events may take place online and offline (both physically and verbally) and both are never acceptable, to be tolerated or dismissed.
- Children who are survivors of sexual abuse, sexual violence and sexual harassment may often find the experience to be traumatic, stressful and distressing.
- Children that have experienced sexual abuse are three times more likely to make suicide attempts<sup>1</sup>.
- It is essential that victims/survivors are protected, believed and provided with sufficient support from the beginning.

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<sup>1</sup> Childhood maltreatment and adult suicidality: a comprehensive systematic review with meta-analysis. Psychological Medicine, 2019; 1 DOI: 10.1017/S0033291718003823

- Trauma can greatly impact the process of recalling information. Detail may be vague or absent, and it may be hard for the young person to share in chronological order.
- Children are often groomed to believe that they should never tell anyone about the sexual abuse they are victim to.
- Communities, faith and cultural factors can add additional complexities to sharing experience of sexual abuse. For example, the survivor may feel anxious over feeling they are choosing personal safety over their wider community.
- Societal or familial taboos around sex and sexuality can make children believe that sexual acts are shameful, and that they are bringing shame on themselves by sharing what has happened to them.
- Gender stereotypes can further delay males sharing their experiences of sexual abuse<sup>2</sup>.

## What to consider:



- Does the child have sufficient support for their mental health in place?
- Could there be other factors impacting how the child is sharing their experience, such as those relating to gender, ethnicity, culture or disability?
- Where the child has Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
  - Consider if communication difficulties are preventing you from understanding what the child is sharing with you.
  - Be mindful to not overlook signs of potential abuse such as behaviour, mood and injury through assuming that they are direct consequences of the child's disability.
- What level of sex education may the child have had and how might this impact the way the child describes what has happened to them?
- Has the child grown up in an environment where there is significant shame and/or taboos around sex and sexuality? Speaking out about sexual harm could make the child feel shameful and as though they have done something wrong.
- Could the child have grown up with ideology that women's 'honour' and 'purity' is linked to their sexual experiences? This could increase the likelihood that a survivor may retract what they have shared or be hesitant to share the full details. The survivor may be pressured into feeling a strong responsibility to protect both their family's reputation and their own.

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<sup>2</sup> The Disclosure Experiences of Male Child Sexual Abuse Survivors. J Child Sex Abuse. 2016;25(2):221-41. DOI: 10.1080/10538712.2016.1124308.

## When responding to children sharing experience of sexual abuse:



### Do

- Show the victim/survivor that you care, and that you are listening.
- Take it at their pace, let them take their time and offer breaks.
- Allow them to start and finish what they are sharing where they want to.
- Give them options and allow them to have control over what they share and when they share it.
- Make a written record of what was said as soon as practicable.
- Be aware of your body language; be relaxed and open to help them to feel at ease.
- Be conscious of the language you are using and ensure that it is not victim-blaming.
- Ask open questions for clarification only.
- Check that what you have heard is correct and show them that you have understood what they have told you.
- Be non-judgmental, calm and patient.
- Clearly explain what will happen with the information that they share and what will happen next.
- Be cautious about how you speak about the abuser. They could have an emotional attachment to them. Focus on understanding what happened, without making judgement.
- Be curious, without making assumptions.
- Consider cultural factors.
- Be respectful to people from all backgrounds, but don't be respectful to abuse. Protection is paramount, regardless of a person's culture.
- Listen to what they want. Some may be concerned with their immediate safety; others may wish to hear about the options available to them. Respect what they need.
- Let them know that they have done the right thing by sharing what has happened to them.

## Don't

- Don't push the victim/survivor to talk. Give them options and allow them to have control over what they share and when they share it.
- Be mindful of how you respond to what they are saying, try to put your feelings aside and do not act surprised or shocked, or show anger.
- Avoid asking 'why' questions, as these can imply blame.
- Don't make or express assumptions that you know how the person feels.
- Don't expect a logical or linear story.
- Don't ask specific timeline questions, let them recall the information as they remember.
- Don't ask questions such as "did you try to stop it?" or "why did you go there?" or use phrases that insinuate the child put themselves at risk.
- Avoid anything that could make you seem distracted or distant, such as having a mobile phone or radio on loud.
- Don't discuss with the victim/survivor how the harassment or abuse could have been prevented – the survivor is not responsible for any harm they have come to.



## Remember

- The victim/survivor may be fearful of how the outside world will respond.
- What happened to them was forced/coerced upon them.
- Trauma impacts memory and so detail may be vague or absent.
- Everyone is different.
- It is important for the survivor to feel that they are being believed.
- The responsibility of the abuse lies with the perpetrator and not the victim.

