



Responding to a disclosure of abuse

For most children, discussing abuse is extremely challenging and emotionally stressful. They may suffer a high level of anxiety and distress from fear of repercussions.

They may have made a disclosure in the past and nobody believed them or acted to protect them from that abuse. In some instances, children and young people might not even recognise or understand that they are being abused.

Why might a child disclose?

Children may decide to disclose abuse for a number of reasons, including:

- Learning that the abuse is wrong.
- Unable to continue coping.
- The abuse is escalating.
- A desire to protect their siblings or friends.
- Feeling safe enough to disclose.

For some children it might be years before they feel safe enough to disclose abuse they have suffered. Others may never talk about what has happened to them. When a child is ready to reach out and tell someone about abuse, it is important that every effort is made to adequately support them.

How do I support a child who is ready to disclose?

Listen

Give your full attention and be patient. Make an effort to withhold your own feelings or opinions on what is disclosed. Try to remain calm. Be mindful of your facial expressions and body language. Looking panicked and shocked, or appearing like you don't believe what you are told, may cause the child to stop disclosing and withdraw what they have said.

Support the conversation

Disclosing abuse can be very tough for a child and they might find it difficult to put into words what has happened. Resources such as 'Feelings' or 'emoji' charts and 'Body Parts' diagrams can be useful tools to help a child explain what has happened. It is important to let them use their own words – try not to ask leading questions. Silence is good, it allows time and space for the child to process what they want to say to you. Consider the environment in which the conversation takes place, making sure it is comfortable, private and free from distractions.

Reassure

It is important to affirm to the child that telling you was the right thing to do. Thank them and acknowledge how much courage it must have taken to come forward. Reassurance is critical in validating their decision to disclose, especially if the abuse has been occurring for some time.

ABUSE IS NEVER A CHILD'S FAULT

It is crucial for children to know that the abuse is never their fault and that you are not upset or disappointed with them.

They need to hear this from adults they trust, so be sure to use the words, "It's not your fault".

Believe

It is worth bearing in mind that the child may not have disclosed the abuse earlier because they feared the consequences or felt they would not be believed. It is important for them to know and understand that you are someone they can trust and receive support from. Make sure you tell them that you will take them seriously.

What do I do after I have received a disclosure of abuse?

Explain the next steps

It is important to tell the child what you are going to do next. Leaving things open ended can result in the child experiencing high levels of anxiety which can increase the effects of the trauma already experienced. Explain that you are going to need to report the abuse to someone who can help. For this reason, it is important you don't make promises about information sharing that you can't keep.

Report

It is vital that you report the abuse as soon as possible to the relevant state or territory child protection agency (see details at end for relevant contact information). Do this while the information is fresh in your memory so that it can be acted upon quickly. It might help to make some notes immediately after speaking to the child. Try to be as accurate as possible and also mindful of the need for privacy and confidentiality if the alleged offender lives in the same household. Don't start to investigate the allegations or confront the alleged abuser. Doing so could make the situation worse and might undermine any investigation by the relevant authorities.

Mandatory reporting

Each Australian state and territory has its own specific requirements relating to the reporting of abuse, so it is important to understand what this means for you. For further information on mandatory reporting visit <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/mandatory-reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect>.

Look after yourself

Being on the receiving end of a disclosure can be extremely challenging, especially if it is your own child disclosing the abuse. Such disclosures may be unexpected, causing you to experience extreme emotions and feelings ranging from shock and upset to anger and nausea. While it is important to ensure that the child making the disclosure gets ongoing help and support, it is also vital that you consider what support you may need. Reach out for help with your own emotional needs. Having the opportunity to off-load to a close friend or a more formal support – counsellor or therapist – can significantly influence your own ability to cope with what you've heard and your subsequent capacity to provide ongoing support to the child involved.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call the Police or triple zero (000)
- If you suspect that a child has experienced abuse or is at risk of harm you should contact the relevant state or territory child protection agency. The Australian Institute of Family Studies has an up to date contact list <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/reporting-abuse-and-neglect>
- Parentline - **1300 30 1300** provide free telephone counselling and advice to parents and carers. Resources are available at <https://www.parentline.com.au/> to support parents and carers to understand a wide range of issues related to raising children and young people
- Kids Helpline - **1800 55 1800** provide a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 on **1800 55 1800**. Resources and webchat are available at <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>

Need support of more information?

- If you believe a child is in danger call **Police 000**
- Resources to teach child safety skills to children and young people are available from **Daniel Morcombe Foundation**

1300 326 435

DanielMorcombe.com.au