



## Responding to disclosures of childhood sexual abuse

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### **Disclaimer –**

In NSW any disclosure of abuse made by a child under 16 years of age, is subject to mandatory reporting. *NSW Children and Young Person (Care and Protection) Act 1998*

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### **Consideration before a disclosure**

Sexual abuse is an act of sexualized violence used to exert power and control over an individual. One of the most important parts of working with people who have been abused, is to never make a survivor feel that you are taking away their power. When a person discloses, there are a lot of things which might make them feel like they are losing their power and control, such as mandatory reporting, or the listener having to follow organizational procedures around reporting and documentation.

One way to help the person to feel like they are in control, is to be transparent around your role. Tell the person what you are required to report or document, who you may have to speak with and whether the information might be used or accessed by others. If you have not been able to have this conversation in advance, do not interrupt the disclosure, but ensure you discuss your role and any concerns they may have before taking next steps.

### **It's a big deal**

Coming forward and disclosing childhood sexual abuse takes a lot of strength and courage. Survivors can spend decades overcoming guilt, shame, fear etc. before they are ready to disclose. There are also many risks that come with disclosing; the risk they may not be believed, the impact on safety, the impact on relationships, the risk their confidentiality will be breached or even the risk that a negative response to their disclosure can lead to increased symptoms of trauma. Never minimise or brush over someone's disclosure, even if they appear to be minimising it themselves. Survivors may be flippant or non-committal in order to protect themselves from a negative experience. Always treat a disclosure as serious and important.

## **It happened**

Being believed is especially important to survivors, and can make the difference between them feeling negative or positive after telling their story. Some survivors, especially when talking about abuse that happened a long time ago, may have trouble remembering exactly what happened. For many, purposefully forgetting or suppressing what has happened is a way to cope with the trauma. This can make it difficult to recall the abuse as an adult and can cause survivors to question their own experience. Others may recall the event in significant detail as if reliving it in the moment. No two disclosures will be the same, as no two experiences are, the important thing is to believe the survivors story, however they tell it.

## **Be present, don't rush**

A person's disclosure needs to be at their own pace. They may wish to share a little or a lot. What is important is that you remain present with them in that moment. Perpetrators of abuse often use isolation and separation from supports, to control their victims. Reassure the client that you are present and able to support them along this journey.

## **This is "need to know"**

A disclosure is not an investigation, a survivor should only be encouraged to share as much as they are comfortable with. You do not need to know every detail and pushing for more information may make the survivor feel as though it is an interrogation or that you don't believe them. If you feel they want to say more but are holding back, you could use a phrase like, "I'm ready to listen if there is more you would like to say?"

## **Seek support when appropriate**

Responding appropriately to a disclosure is very important. People (especially children) who receive a negative response to their first disclosure, have been shown to experience greater impacts of PTSD and other trauma symptoms. If someone begins to disclose, and you don't feel able to adequately support them, make sure they know it is about your capacity and not them or their story. Reassure them that their story is important and should be heard, but by the right person. Offer to accompany them (or support them in locating) the appropriate person to speak with.

You could say something like "What you are sharing with me is really important and I want to make sure you are well supported. I think Sue would be the right person to speak to about this. Would you like me to ask her to come and speak with you, or would you like me to come with you to have a chat with Sue?"

## Reassure and validate

Perpetrators/offenders use a variety of overt and covert strategies to groom their victims and instil a sense of fear and responsibility for the abuse. This can include convincing the victim that no one will believe them or that they are somehow to blame. It is important that you reassure survivors that what was done to them was a crime, it was not their fault and that you believe them.

Additionally, many survivors are aware that sexual abuse is an uncomfortable topic, and they may feel as though they are burdening you with their story. Reassure them that you are ok, and that they are not burdening you by sharing their story.

## Respect

It is important the survivor feels respected. You can show respect by not passing judgement or making assumptions. There are many myths regarding childhood sexual abuse that people still accept as fact. Some common myths are being abused by someone of the same gender will “turn” you gay, being abused means you will become an offender, or men can’t be abused by women (though not as common, it does happen). These assumptions are dangerous and can create a barrier to coming forward. Do not ask a survivor these types of questions or suggest that these should be a concern.

## What comes next

The decision to disclose sexual abuse must remain the survivor’s decision, except in the case of mandatory reporting. While you may provide options, you should never tell a survivor what they should or should not do. Ask the survivor how you can support them best. This may be an offer to support them in finding a counsellor or therapist, and where possible attending the first meeting with them (if they would like). You might inform them of their options for making an official report if they wish to, or you may simply offer some resources for them to read in their own time. Allow the survivor to direct the journey, but don’t expect them to know what options are available to them. If you are unsure, offer to explore the options with them. As stated earlier, if you know that you will be required to report what you hear, always inform the person disclosing before they share their story.

## Don’t make promises you can’t keep

Only offer support that is in your capacity. If you are a support worker, it may not be within the scope of your role to attend the police station to make a statement. If you are a counsellor, you may not be able to offer extended or free sessions on an ongoing basis. To avoid setting unrealistic expectations and having the client feel misled, ensure you are working within your capacity.

## Do not confront the perpetrator

Hearing a disclosure can be difficult, overwhelming, or confronting for anyone. It may stir up feelings of anger or injustice which lead you to feel as though you **MUST** do something. Though this is understandable, this disclosure is confidential and belongs to the survivor. It is not up to you to confront the perpetrator. If the survivor asks you to confront the perpetrator with them, reflect on your personal and professional boundaries and discuss this with your supervisor.

## Check in on supporters

If the person disclosing mentions that they have concerns for family or friends who they have disclosed to, let them know there are resources and supports to help their supporters understand this experience.

## Debrief

Responding to a disclosure can be mentally and emotionally overwhelming. You may feel you need to seek counselling or supervision to debrief on how this experience has affected you or may affect you in the future. If the disclosure has occurred as part of your work role, consider speaking to a supervisor as they may be able to help you to access services paid for by the organisation.



## References

The following resources were referenced in the development of this document:

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