

Supporting Young People for Professionals

A young person who has experienced sexual assault or family violence may not be able to clearly communicate what has happened to them.

Children and young people may tell us that something has happened through changes in their behaviour, wellbeing and engagement.

You are not expected to have all the answers. Your role is to provide them with a safe, consistent and supportive initial response.

How trauma can show up in young people

- Having difficulty concentrating or engaging (e.g. at school or during activities)
- Becoming withdrawn or avoiding certain people or situations
- Regressing behaviours such as bedwetting or wanting to be treated as a younger child or baby
- Showing strong emotional reactions (e.g. anger, distress)
- Appearing “shut down”, disengaging or dissociative
- Seeming to be constantly on edge or alert
- Substance use

A Trauma-Informed Approach

Understanding trauma behaviour

A trauma-informed approach considers that behaviour may be a response to feeling unsafe. Young people often don't have the words to explain what is happening to them, or don't feel safe enough to disclose.

Responses such as anger, withdrawal or avoidance can be protective. Avoid assuming behaviour is intentional or “attention-seeking”.

Supporting young people

Simple, consistent actions can make a difference. Young people need you to be calm, predictable and respectful in your communication with them. Use clear and simple language.

Allow time and space – avoid pressure or asking detailed questions.

Do not make promises that you cannot keep. Ensure you follow through on whatever promises you do make.

Respect boundaries, including physical, emotional and professional.

Supporting choice and control

Where possible, offer the young person choices, even small ones. This can include choosing which chair to sit in on when they enter your professional space.

Check in with what feels comfortable for the young person. Allow them to set the pace and decide what they share and when.

Supporting choice can help the young person rebuild a sense of control.

Creating a safer environment

Maintain clear and appropriate physical boundaries.

Be aware of power dynamics in your role

Respond consistently and fairly

Minimise situations that might feel overwhelming or unsafe

Working with families and carers

Working with families can be complex and the dynamics can make responding even more difficult. You should always aim to prioritise the young person's safety and wellbeing.

Defer to your organisation's policies or professional obligations when deciding whether to engage carers and to what extent.

Even when you do need to involve parents, carers and families, it is important to let the young person know that this is part of your obligations and your responsibility to keep them safe.

Looking after yourself

Receiving a disclosure can be challenging and emotionally taxing. It can also be rewarding. Make sure you are taking care of your own wellbeing throughout the process.

Be sure to seek advice or guidance from a supervisor or colleague where required. Professionals can contact SECASA Intake team for specialist secondary consultation on **8769 2200 – option 1**.

SECASA has additional resources online to support professionals, survivors and support people. Professional development training can help to build confidence in responding to disclosures.