

How to support a child who has made a disclosure of sexual abuse

When a child tells you something has happened to them, you might feel overwhelmed but remember – your response matters

How to respond when a child tells you about their experience

1. Stay calm
2. Tell them you believe them and it is not their fault
3. Reassure them that they are safe and you will support them
4. Listen to what they choose to tell you or show you
5. Thank them for telling you
6. Seek support for them and yourself

What to say

- I'm so glad you told me
- I believe you
- This is not your fault
- You are not in trouble

What to avoid

- Avoid asking direct or leading questions
- Avoid blame or asking 'why' questions
- Avoid making promises you can't keep
- Don't force them to talk about it or share more than they are comfortable with
- Avoid changing their routine or having big reactions (shock, disgust, panic, anger) in front of them

When a child has chosen you as their safe adult

When a child discloses to you, they have chosen you as one of their safe adults. They need to know that you have heard and believed them, and that you are taking action to keep them safe.

Avoid making promises such as "I won't tell anyone" – In many situations, disclosures of child sexual abuse need to be reported to police or Child Protection. You can seek advice about what steps to take.

Being a parent or caregiver of a child who has been sexually abused

Maintain normal routines as much as possible – children look to their safe adults to make sense of the world and how they should be feeling.

Once a child knows you are taking action to keep them safe, they may not wish to talk about it anymore and they may not display any obvious signs of trauma. Try to be patient and provide reassurance where required.

Some children are "okay" for years after a disclosure before something may re-trigger them. During that time, parents and carers may feel a range of emotions.

Make sure that you reach out for help for yourself as you navigate this time. Your world has also changed and you will very likely be deeply impacted by the information. You may have lots of appointments with Child Protection or police, counsellors and other services. It is okay to ask for help and support – see the next page for a list of support options.

Respect your child's boundaries – some children may withdraw from physical contact for a time.

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Why didn't my child tell me?

Many children and young people do not choose their parents or caregivers to disclose to. This doesn't mean that you have done anything wrong in your role as parent or caregiver. What matters most is how you respond when they do tell someone.

- Children can delay disclosing out of fear, confusion or shame
- They may be unsure how to talk about what happened
- They may worry about getting in trouble or getting someone else in trouble
- They may not understand what happened
- They may only disclose once they feel it is safe to do so

Children's responses to trauma

Children may show changes in their behaviour, mood or development. Some children may not show obvious signs of trauma. Some reactions will change over time. Below is a list of potential signs of trauma – **this is not an extensive list and should not be used as a checklist to confirm whether a child has been sexually abused.**

Indicators of child sexual abuse

- Disclosing either directly or indirectly (for example, through play or art work)
- Seeking more close contact or touch
- Withdrawing from touch or displaying fear of being touched
- Regressing e.g. bed-wetting, wanting to be treated like a baby
- New fears such as being left alone, being in crowds, visiting a specific place
- Showing knowledge or demonstrating sexual behaviours above their developmental age
- Zoning out, difficulty concentrating
- Being quieter or more distant than before
- Aggression, angry outbursts or striking out at others
- Withdrawing from their friends and family
- Refusing to go to school or visit a friend or family members house
- Talking about secrets, special games, asking questions or telling stories about their 'friend' and describing adult or sexual behaviours
- Physical trauma to their genitals, chest area or mouth

Where to get help

If someone is in immediate danger, call 000.

- Child Protection South Division Intake: **1300 655 795**.
- Other trusted adults, friends, teachers and informal support networks
- The Kids Helpline (24/7 for 5 to 25 year olds) **1800 55 1800** | Lifeline (24/7): **13 11 14**
- SECASA Intake can speak to you about options to support you and your child, which may include counselling. Call **8769 2200 – opt 1** to speak to an intake counsellor/advocate.
- *If you are not in the south-east, contact your local Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA):* Find your nearest service at: <https://peak.sasvic.org.au/servicemap> and enter your postcode or suburb
- *After hours, weekends and public holidays, call the Sexual Assault Crisis Line (SACL) on **1800 577 011***
- If you are not in Victoria, Call **1800 RESPECT** or **1800 737 732** or find a local support service at: <https://www.nasasv.org.au/support-directory>