



Fact Sheet: Responding to children talking about sexual abuse

A child or young person is sexually abused when any person uses his or her authority over the child/young person to involve the child/young person in sexual activity.

Child sexual abuse involves a wide range of sexual activity including fondling genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal penetration, anal penetration by a finger, penis or other object, voyeurism and exhibitionism. It also includes exploitation through pornography and prostitution.

It is always important to listen, respect and support children who talk to you about an experience of sexual abuse. There are no formulas for talking to them, but below are some guidelines to understanding and responding.

How do children tell?

Children tell others about their experience of sexual abuse in a variety of ways:

- Through their play e.g. painting, drawing, dolls house;
- Through their behaviour e.g. nightmares, angry outbursts;
- By telling us directly;
- By telling others who tell us;
- By asking us questions about possible sexual assault;
- Or all or some of the above.

Children will tell about the sexual abuse:

- If they trust the person;
- If they feel comfortable with the person;
- If they feel they are in a safe environment;
- If they think this person will understand them;
- If they feel this person will believe them;
- If they believe their future is unsafe and they need to get some assistance.
- Tell them you believe them;
- Demonstrate to them that you are listening to them.

What do you do if a child tells you they have been sexually abused?

- Tell them that you are glad that they told you;
- Tell them that this happens sometimes and that they are not the only one. Let them talk 'at their own pace', don't interrupt them, don't ask them direct questions;
- Be open and clear with them;
- Do not promise them things you cannot achieve e.g. I will make the person go to jail, or I will not tell anyone else;
- Explain in language that is developmentally/age appropriate about any DHS/legal/Police intervention that needs to take place;
- Try to be calm when they are talking to you. Do not express anger or get upset as the child may blame themselves;
- Report to Child Protection, DHS, if you believe that the child is not safe from further abuse and their safety and current situation needs to be legally investigated;
- Don't tell the child to forget the sexual abuse ever happened;
- Don't blame the child for what has happened;
- Find someone for you to talk to about the impact it has had on you.



What might children/young people believe?

- That it is their fault;
- That they could have stopped the abuse;
- That they are a bad person so deserve to be sexually abused;
- That they are better off dead;
- That no one will believe them.

What might children/young person fear?

- That those who they love will reject them;
- That they will be removed from their home;
- That their father/other perpetrator will go to jail;
- That they have destroyed their family;
- That they will lose their family home;
- That they will have to move schools.

What might be the impact of sexual assault on a child/young person?

- That the child/young person could have been threatened by the perpetrator e.g. that they will go to jail or their animals will die;
- That the child/young person is 'groomed' by the perpetrator being given gifts and 'special treats' to develop a relationship with the child/young person so that the perpetrator is a respected and trusted, even loved adult.
- That the child/young person is confused as they like the 'special relationship' but they do not like or want the sexual abuse. They do not know how to keep the special relationship without the abusive behaviour of the perpetrator.

Some possible effects of child sexual abuse

- Low self esteem, describing themselves as stupid, ugly or bad;
- Ongoing learning problems - learning becomes difficult to focus on when children and young people have experienced the trauma of sexual assault;
- Difficulty forming trusting and positive relationships - they trusted once and were abused for it;
- Lack of self-respect;
- Confusion about their own role within the family;
- Ongoing anger that is difficult to resolve - this is one of the most common feelings children/young people experience;
- Soiling and wetting;
- Guilt;
- Self-destructive behaviour;
- Anxiety and depression.