

# Helping the child victim of sexual assault

## What might they be feeling

<b>Guilty</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children often blame themselves for the abuse.</li> <li>• Children often feel guilty for telling someone about the abuse.</li> </ul>
<b>Ashamed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children are often ashamed about the abuse itself, particularly sexual abuse.</li> </ul>
<b>Confused</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children are often confused about their feelings for the perpetrator.</li> </ul>
<b>Scared</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children are often fearful of the repercussions of telling. They may be scared of the perpetrator, scared that the abuse may recur, or that the family will break up.</li> <li>• The child will need reassurance and support.</li> </ul>

## Talking to your child

- **Deal with your own feelings and reactions first;** you need to manage your own feelings before you can help your child and those around you.
- **Let the child know you are there if they need you.** Focus on their feelings. Be available when they want to talk, and learn to be a good listener.
- In relation to the issues of whether to go through the Court process or not, understand that they may be reluctant, that they may wrongly believe that they somehow cause it to happen and fear that the offending person may retaliate. **Remember that it takes a great deal of courage to report a sexual assault.**
- **Don't surround the child with silence or reproach** as you may confirm their worst suspicions, that they are guilty and that the sexual assault is their fault.
- **Never blame the victim** for the sexual assault.
- **Never blame yourself for the sexual assault.** Seek counselling support to help in overcoming negative feelings and thoughts – the assault is not your fault, any more than it is the child's fault.
- **The child may get angry and may displace their anger onto you by** shouting/swearing at you, or even attempting at times to strike you. Try not to take this personally. Continue to treat the child with caring, understanding and kindness, but offer some other solutions for venting anger such as hitting a mattress or a pillow. Still reinforce boundaries and rules.
- **Don't berate the child for the situation and don't dwell on things that are beyond their control.** Do not say "you shouldn't have let him do it" – "you should have told me (earlier)" – "you shouldn't have been playing there anyway". Remember that children are not powerful enough to prevent adults or older/bigger children from abusing them.
- **Don't dwell on the sexual aspects** of the sexual assault. Seek counselling to assist, and to answer any worries that you may have.
- **Offer unconditional, non-judgemental affection.** Ask the child what they want. Only do what the child asks for. Physical acceptance (eg gentle cuddles) may help the child overcome feelings of loneliness, of feeling "dirty", "different" or of being "unworthy" of being cared for.
- Let the child decide when or if they want to **talk about their thoughts or feelings.** Reinforce their feelings, help them know that it is okay to feel that way, and emphasise that they are **in no way** responsible for what happened. **Reassure the child:** 'I'm glad you told me. It must have been awful to have such a secret and not be able to tell anyone'.

- Remember, sexual assault involves a direct attack on a person's **psychological and physical boundary**. While the child is learning to re-establish an appropriate boundary for themselves, it is important that **you**, as their carer, continue to **set appropriate limits for the child**. For example, maintaining appropriate rules for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour; continue to set appropriate rules aimed at protecting the child and others within the household.
- Be **consistent** and **dependable**.
- Make sure you give your children a **clear** message that they don't need to protect you from **their** feelings or help you with your feelings – let them know that you can have counselling support too.
- **Strengthen their self confidence**: Include them as far as possible in decision making but do not ask them to make decisions beyond their ability.
- **Don't make promises you can't keep**. With the unpredictability of the Court and other systems it is impossible to predict outcomes. Just let your child know that you will support them throughout and that you will arrange for them to see a specialist counsellor.