

# If you think a child is being sexually assaulted

## Background information

- In 85% of child sexual assault cases, the child knows the perpetrator. Most child sexual assault takes place in the home of the child. (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2009).
- Children who have been assaulted may say something to a family member or a friend, before they tell their parents.
- Some professionals have a **legal obligation** to report suspected assault to the authorities.
- All adults have a moral obligation to ensure that a child is no longer in danger.

## Children who have been sexually assaulted may feel:

- **Scared** about getting the perpetrator into trouble.
- **Worried** that they are to blame for the abuse.
- **Ashamed** that they have been abused.
- **Angry** that they have been abused and not protected.
- **Powerless** to change their situation.
- **Confused** about what might happen if they tell.

*The child may say something to you, or you may notice a change in their behaviour.*

## What to do if a child talks to you about being sexually assaulted

A child may say things like:

- “something happened to me”
- “I don’t like going to (place) now”
- “sometimes my step- dad keeps me up at night”

## An effective, but simple question you can ask is:

Can you tell me a bit more about.....?

*Children disclose what’s happened to them, over time.*

## You need to listen and support the child:

- Let them say what happened in their **own way**, and in their **own words**.
- **Do not quiz them for details** or ask them to repeat their story several times.
- **Allow time** for them to trust that they will be listened to and helped.
- It is your role to **listen** to whatever they tell you, and to **support** them.
- Take time to **soothe** and **reassure** them.

**You do not need to have the full story to discuss your concerns with a professional.**

## You need to give the child your full attention and provide a safe place to talk:

- Children do not think about the best time or place to talk.
- If it is noisy, ask if you can go somewhere else, where you can hear them properly.
- Respect their wishes about the best place to talk. Some places may trigger memories or reminders of abuse, for example being alone with an adult in a quiet, isolated place.
- If you are busy with something when they begin to talk, stop what you are doing and tell them that you are available to listen.

## You need to stay calm:

- You may have strong feelings or feel overwhelmed, when you hear about child sexual assault.
- It will help if you can be patient and appear to be calm, even though this may feel difficult.
- If the assault happened in the past, the child has already survived it. The only thing that has changed is that you know about it now.
- If the child sees you are upset, you can say that you feel sad because they have been hurt, but you are very glad they were able to tell you.

## You need to reassure the child:

- Say: “You have been very brave and strong to talk about this.”
- Say: “What happened is not your fault. You have done nothing wrong.” Even if you have many questions about what has happened, do not ask. It is not your role to investigate.
- Do not worry about knowing the “right” thing to say. Listen and be supportive. This will help the child.

## You need to tell the child what you will do next:

- Do not promise that you will not tell anyone about what happened to them.
- Explain that for them to be safe, and to get the right sort of help, you will need to talk to a professional who deals with these issues every day who will help decide what to do next.
- Explain to the child that they may need to talk to this other person, and that you will help and support them.
- Tell them that they can ask questions as often as they need to.

***Do not confront the perpetrator and do not discuss with them what the child has said.***

***Contact a professional to seek advice.***

***Make a report if you believe that the child may have been sexually assaulted.***

***(See contact details at the bottom of this page).***

## Changes you may see in a child's behaviour

Children who have been sexually assaulted may feel confused and distressed, and may:

- Have physical symptoms such as headaches, tummy pain, problems sleeping, bed wetting and nightmares.
- Touch themselves sexually in front of other people, or try to touch other people in a sexual way.
- Try harder at school as a way of “blocking out” what has happened, or have difficulty at school because they are unable to concentrate due to the abuse they have been experiencing.
- Isolate themselves and stop playing with their friends.
- Behave in ways that can harm themselves or other people.

*Show your care and concern by asking: Are you OK?  
Talk to them about 'body signals' that tell us when we feel unsafe:  
tummy butterflies, jelly legs, sweaty palms, goose bumps, o-oh thoughts, wanting to go to the toilet.*

## Who to contact to seek advice or make a report:

### Child Protection Crisis Line

13 12 78      24 hours, 7 days a week Toll free within Victoria

### South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA)

03 9594 2289      24 hours, 7 days a week

### National Child Abuse Prevention Helpline

1800 99 10 99      [childwise.net](http://childwise.net)

### Kids Help Line

1800 551 800      [kidshelp.com.au](http://kidshelp.com.au)

You may be asked for information such as your contact details and how the child talked with you.