Information for Youth Workers regarding Managing Disclosures

Adapted from the National Child Protection Clearing House, Responding to Children and Young People’s Disclosures of Abuse (2011)

Always listen to and support the young person

It is essential that when a disclosure is made that you support and reassure the young person. Remember, it is the role of appropriate authorities to investigate the truth of the claim. Your role is to support the young person. Quizzing the young person for details or asking him or her to repeat their story a number of times can create the impression you doubt what the young person has said. This type of quizzing might also be interpreted as “leading” the young person and might have unintended consequences if any legal action is taken.

Don’t make promises you can’t keep

Child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, relies on secrecy. Other forms of abuse are also usually hidden. Children learn at a very young age to hide what is happening to them. Sometimes they fear repercussions for themselves or other family members. In other instances they may fear the consequences for parents whom they love in spite of the abuse. Because of this, a young person might ask an adult to promise secrecy before disclosing. Such a promise should not be made. By telling the young person: “I can’t make that promise, but I can tell you I will do my best to keep you safe” you can reassure the young person and encourage him/her to speak out about abuse. Be sure to make it clear to the young person exactly what you will do with the information they have provided and specifically who you will share it with.

Reassure the young person that it is right to tell

A young person disclosing abuse needs to be reassured that the adult is not angry he or she has disclosed the information. If the adult exhibits distress, the young person must also be reassured that the adult’s reaction is because adults want young people to be safe. Reassure the young person that he or she is not the cause of the distress. Also address any concerns about the young person’s safety, particularly if he or she fears potential consequences of disclosing. The young person may need to be reassured of the same things repeatedly over an extended period of time, especially if legal proceedings follow the disclosure. It is vital that the young person knows that the abuse and anything that happens afterwards are the responsibility of the perpetrator for committing the abuse, not the young person for disclosing. For example, if parents separate after a disclosure of child abuse, the young person needs frequent reassurance it was not his or her fault.

Don’t be afraid of saying the “wrong” thing

Young people will very rarely disclose a secret if they have decided not to (Bussey, 1996). Therefore, if a young person has revealed to you that they have been or are being abused, it is a sign that they trust you and that simply speaking to you will be helpful. Try not to be distracted by needing to know exactly the “right” thing to say. As long as you listen supportively then the young person will benefit from talking to you.

Maintain a calm appearance

Inevitably a disclosure of child abuse will evoke strong feelings for the adult hearing it. For some, the news may be overwhelming. Although potentially difficult, it is helpful if you can be calm and patient. Allow time for the young person to trust that he or she will be listened to and helped. It can be useful to remember, particularly when the disclosure is of past abuse, that the young person has already survived the abuse. The only thing that has changed is your awareness of it. If the young person becomes aware of your distress you can explain that you are upset because adults are meant to care for young people and you are sad because some adults hurt young people.
Give the young person your full attention

A young person might not always begin talking about what happened to them in the best place. If you are in a busy and/or noisy place, ask the young person if you can move to a place where you can hear him or her properly. Whilst remaining sensitive to the young person’s needs, let him or her know that you want to be able to give him or her full attention. Respect his or her wishes about where the best place is: some localities may trigger memories or be reminders of abuse (e.g., being alone in a quiet, isolated place with an adult).
Let the young person take his or her time

Disclosing is difficult for young people and something they may only be able to do a little at a time. Allow the young person to take his or her time to speak. Some young people may not wish to talk much about the abuse and might want to resume some regular activity soon after disclosing. Others, however, might need to talk for longer about different aspects of their experience. It is important the young person does not feel rushed or panicked and that you have plenty of time to soothe and reassure him or her.

As mentioned earlier, some young people might not disclose directly and the process of indirect disclosure may potentially take several days or weeks. During this time it is possible to gently and occasionally let the young person know that you will listen to anything he or she has to say when they are ready.

While it is important the young person has control over the process, this must also be balanced with his or her safety, and the safety of other children or young people. If the young person has not disclosed but you have reasonable grounds to suspect abuse, you may need to go to the police or child protection authorities. You do not necessarily have to have a full disclosure to go to the authorities and can discuss concerns without making a formal report.

Let the young person use his or her words

Young people have their own way of describing their experiences. It can be useful to clarify what they mean by asking: “Are you saying ...?” It is important not to assume you and the young person mean exactly the same thing. It is also important not to ask questions that suggest the “right” words to a young person, or in a way that can be seen as putting words in the young person’s mouth. If your conversation with the young person is later used during legal proceedings, it is important that the young person’s account is not seen as having been distorted by your questioning (Powell & Snow, 2007). Any questions asked should be relatively general and aimed at eliciting just enough information in order to work out what action is required and which authority should be contacted.

Allowing the young person to use his or her own words is important so that their discomfort is minimised. Let the young person know it is okay to use any words they want to or to say whatever they need to. It is also important that the young person use his or her own words in case there is a subsequent court case.

Accept that the young person will disclose only what is comfortable and recognise the bravery/strength of the young person for talking about something that is difficult

It is important that young people disclosing abuse feel in control of their situation. This is to counter the experience of violation and loss of control caused by the abuse. It is also important to acknowledge the young person’s bravery and strength in talking about something that is difficult. Understanding that a young person may reveal only minimal details of abuse will help you to accept the disclosure under the young person’s terms. It is possible to gently prompt with questions such as: “Can you tell me more about that?” but it is best not to press the young person for details.

Let the young person know what you will do next

When explaining to a young person what you will do next, it is important to ensure he or she understands. Try to avoid speaking about organisations and authorities that the young person may not be familiar with without explaining the organisation’s name, its purpose and what its staff will do. Advise the young person that in order for them to be safe they will need to talk to another person (police or child protection) about their experience and that you will support him or her through that experience. Let the young person know he or she can ask about what will happen next as often as he or she needs to.

In an overwhelming situation, information can be hard for young people to retain and they may need reminding. Only reveal the disclosure to those absolutely necessary. If you believe you need to discuss the disclosure with others outside the police or child protection authority let the young person know. Child abuse often leaves young people feeling disempowered and lacking control in their own life. Making sure the young person is fully aware of each step can make the process less intimidating and can help return a sense of power and safety.
Do not confront the perpetrator

It is imperative you do not confront the perpetrator of any type of abuse or discuss the young person’s disclosure with him or her. This could create a potential risk for the young person’s safety. Also, perpetrators of child abuse can work hard to shift responsibility from themselves to others and some kinds of child abusers (specifically sexual abusers) are charismatic people who can concoct plausible excuses for their behaviour and seek to shift the blame to others (van Dam, 2001). Confronting an alleged perpetrator of sexual or other types of abuse should only be done by professional child protection workers or the police.