

Help..



**How can I support
a child who has
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No-one working with children or young people relishes dealing with an allegation of abuse, but most understand the necessity of doing the right thing for all concerned – especially the child or young person involved. This not only means responding appropriately when an allegation is made but also supporting those involved throughout any official investigation in a way that will not affect the outcome of a criminal prosecution and during the months, maybe years ahead.



Children first

Don't forget abuse, whether physical, emotional or sexual is a serious crime and can do lasting damage. For the sake of all involved however, it is important to try to keep a sense of perspective about the abuse. The child concerned is a child first, even though they may have had some very distressing and painful experiences. Seeing the child as a whole calls for great wisdom and sensitivity on the part of those adults around them. An adult's reactions when abuse is disclosed, especially in the case of younger children, is likely to have a significant bearing on their healing.

Setting the Scene

So it's happened! A child or young person makes a disclosure of abuse. You are careful to listen and respond as follows:

- Show acceptance of what they say, however unlikely it seems
- Emphasise they have done the right thing in telling you and you are treating what they have said seriously
- Do not push for information because they may have been threatened or bribed not to speak
- Do not promise to keep the information a secret, explaining clearly (and gently!) that you may have to share what they tell you with others but this will be done on a need to know basis only.
- Explain what you intend to do and don't delay in taking action
- Ensure the immediate safety of the child / young person

- Write down what the person said, how you responded and the circumstances in which the conversation took place, as soon as possible, preferably within an hour, include dates, times etc., sign, date and store securely

It is so important the worker knows what the safeguarding policy says in relation to passing on concerns (e.g. the safeguarding co-ordinator's role). The CCPAS 24 hour helpline is available to give advice in such situations – 0845 120 4550 and in an emergency Children's Social Services / Police should be contacted immediately. Where abuse has taken place then the statutory authorities will need to be contacted to protect the child or young person.

Keep control of your emotions

Shock, horror, disgust and panic- although natural reactions to the sexual abuse of children- are not helpful to children who will not be able to understand what has happened to them. A calm acceptance together with a strong commitment to support that child or young person through whatever turbulent times may lie ahead is what caring adults should aim for. Your pre-existing relationship with the child or young person will help because, no matter what has happened, you can still be a caring friend.

Supporting the child or young person

Once a child has given information it is important not to question further. The worker can always acknowledge what is being told to them by saying something like, 'Thank you for telling me, I have passed on the information'.

Children and young people who have experienced abuse need a compassionate, caring response from all, particularly in the days after a disclosure has

been made to the authorities (i.e. police and/or social workers). They are likely to feel nervous and fearful though they may experience some relief that at least some things are now out in the open. If they sense that those who interact with them such as leaders, helpers, counsellors or carers, will listen non-judgementally and accept what they are saying, then they are likely to confide further if necessary and share any difficult feelings.



If a child does make further disclosures of abuse then the information should be received without questioning, recorded in writing and passed to the authorities. The same would apply once an investigation has been concluded if more information comes to light. It is not uncommon for this to happen when the child / young person becomes more settled and they feel they can begin to deal with what has happened.

Supporting the child or young person is vitally important because following a legal investigation there could be a number of different outcomes that may leave the child trying to cope with and ultimately resolve many conflicting issues and emotions.

- The case may not go to court because it is not in the interests of the victim or because there is insufficient evidence
- Even if the case reaches the court, the alleged abuser may be found 'not guilty' because the evidence is insufficient to establish guilt beyond all reasonable doubt

- The emotional impact of a guilty verdict may well be equally distressing for the child or young person

Support could be needed for a prolonged period. Whatever the outcome you can always reassure the child or young person that many people believed them and did their best to stop it happening again.

Be balanced in your approach

There can be a danger of two opposite extremes. On the one hand, adults may fear that they are getting out of their depth and cannot cope with an issue that is as serious and difficult as sexual abuse. The tendency then is to draw back from the victim of abuse and leave everything to the professionals. By doing this the child or young person may be denied the support, reassurance and continuity that you could offer. The other extreme is to dive straight in without thinking things through and try to elicit details of their experiences when this is best left to professionals with the appropriate training and experience. Your role may be limited, particularly in the

early stages whilst the child protection investigation is ongoing, however you can still be there alongside the child or young person as a supportive and prayerful presence.

Pastoral Care

Pastoral carers can offer a listening ear within the boundaries mentioned above as well as practical support. Their more informal role means that when supporting children and young people who have disclosed abuse, they should be careful not to say or do things unwittingly which would hinder an investigation - especially in the early stages of an investigation. This is because police and other

statutory agencies will be endeavouring to achieve best evidence (ABE) which could include a series of interviews and medical examination. This may be traumatic for the child so questioning or expressing opinions might cause further distress the child.

If you are a children's / youth worker or leader, then a child or young person is more likely to talk to you because you are someone they know and trust. If they divulge further information this should be written down and passed to the investigating team via the Safeguarding Coordinator. Written records can be used as a witness statement in court and are therefore extremely important. When serious sexual

offences are disclosed for the first time there is a likelihood the person receiving this information will have to give this as evidence to a court.



The Role of the Counsellor

Firstly, anyone contemplating counselling a child or young person who has been abused requires specific training and an appropriate qualification. In circumstances where an investigation or court proceedings are in progress the police should be contacted before counselling is offered. Where possible, discuss the purpose and boundaries of counselling with the police officer in charge of the case. To avoid misunderstanding you should record the name of the officer and the result of the discussion including the date and time. This will help to lessen the risk of contaminating the child's evidence through inappropriate questioning. The Crown Prosecution Service has published guidelines on providing therapy in such circumstances. It means the counsellor cannot discuss the allegations of abuse being investigated. They can however listen, help the child deal with their feelings and give reassurance. If any new information is disclosed during the therapeutic process, the counsellor cannot promise complete confidentiality and would need to pass this information on to the investigating authorities. If there is a Safeguarding Co-ordinator, they should be kept informed as well as the counsellor's supervisor.

Taking Care of Touching

Touch can evoke all sorts of memories of abuse. It can be both frightening and confusing particularly if the child or young person has been sexually abused. The following guidelines may help:

- Keep everything in public. A hug in a group context is different from a hug behind closed doors.
- Touch should be related to the child's needs, not the worker's.
- Touch should be age-appropriate and generally initiated by the child rather than the worker.
- Children are entitled to determine the degree of physical contact with others except in exceptional circumstances when, for example, they need medical attention.
- Team members should take responsibility for keeping each other in check where physical contact is concerned and challenge colleagues if necessary.
- There may be times when you will need to ensure that you take particular care if a child or young person is unable to respect appropriate boundaries of touch and is sexually provocative or abusive in their behaviour.

Eating Disorders and Self Harm

Abuse has much to do with exerting power and control through threats, bribes and/or deception. One way a child or young person may try to find comfort and regain control over their life is through self harm. This can take the form of cutting, scratching, burning, drinking heavily or using drugs. They might decide not to eat or, conversely, overeat or binge. Sometimes a child or young person will not want to eat or touch foods of certain shapes, colour or texture because they associate them with the abuse they have suffered. Their behaviour may be sexually provocative. Because they have such low self-esteem they are prepared to let anyone do anything they want to them. They may associate sexual interest with love because that is all they have known – any kind of “love” is better than nothing! Sometimes the way to blot out the misery they are feeling is by using drugs or alcohol. This obviously places them at further risk of harm.

These issues need sensitive handling and, in some cases, specialist help. It is important

workers are able to share their concerns with a supervisor so that appropriate help can be offered. This may include contacting Children’s Social Services or health professionals for advice.

Anger and Forgiveness

Children and young people need to know it’s OK to be angry about what has happened to them and it is not their fault. They should never be coerced into forgiving those who have abused them. It can take a long time before they understand and appreciate the full impact of what they have been through, particularly if they have suffered physical and emotional damage. They may or may not decide to forgive in the future. Right now they need to understand that what happened was very wrong. If the child has a faith it may be helpful to say that God also views abuse in this way - see Matthew 18 v6-9.



Saying 'No!'

When a child has been abused, they can find it difficult to say 'no'. Children can be taught healthy respect for adults and what they're asked to do unless they sense it is wrong or makes them feel uncomfortable. Workers can help an abused child or young person realise they can say 'no' in certain situations and if necessary check

it out with a trusted adult. This will help rebuild personal boundaries and prevent further abuse happening.

Other Behavioural Issues

Abuse suffered by children and young people can cause changes in behaviour. They may become attention-seeking, aggressive or withdrawn. Some may find concentrating on schoolwork difficult because they are focussing their energies on surviving from day to day. Others will excel at school because they feel valued by teachers.

Spiritual Issues

Where an abused child or young person is part of a faith community there may be additional issues impacting them.

The Christian faith places a strong emphasis on the family structure. An abused child/ young person may experience difficulties in relating to God as a benevolent Father because those in power and authority (e.g. parents, teachers and leaders) have abused their position of trust. Reinforcing the positive aspects of the father/child relationship may well help rebuild trust in adults and cause their faith to grow.

One question which many survivors of abuse will ask is "Why did God let it happen?" Rather than feel that you have to have an answer for such questions you can acknowledge their pain, confusion and anger. You might say something about freedom of choice – that sometimes people make wrong choices, they may deliberately hurt others.

When working with police/ social workers it is important to remember that a child has a right for their faith to be recognised, respected and appropriately accommodated.

How Can Faith Leaders Help?

Children, young people and adult victims are helped when faith leaders:

- Put effective safeguarding measures in place
- Take allegations and suspicions seriously and respond appropriately
- Repudiate any teaching or preaching that is contrary to safeguarding principles and apologise for any failings to protect the abused
- Affirm and support all those affected by abuse and seek to provide on-going pastoral care, engaging with outside agencies where appropriate
- Ensure confidentiality. The child needs to know that their business will not be discussed within the church. Victims should never be identified - only those named in the child protection policy should be told.

Don't underestimate a child's coping mechanisms. Children will often make sense of things that we cannot. Where they feel affirmed by those close to them, they are likely to recover more quickly.

Some practical points when seeing children

- If you are planning to meet with a child in a pastoral care or counselling role, you should seek parental consent. However, there are exceptions to this if an older child can demonstrate 'sufficient understanding to make informed decisions' (Gillick v West Norfolk health Authority -1986). You can contact CCPAS for further advice.
- Ensure another adult is in the building
- Explain that you may need to pass information on to other people who have a responsibility to care for children if you are concerned about their or another child's safety.
- There may need to be some flexibility, but as far as possible stick to the maximum of an hour for each meeting
- In recognition that the balance of power within the child – counsellor/pastoral carer relationship is unequal you need to be careful not to say or do things that abuse your position
- Avoid the blurring of roles that could result in you being in demand 24/7. You should not allow yourself to be freely available to everyone at all hours.

Look After Yourself

It can be emotionally draining for workers caring for those who have been abused, especially listening calmly to things that may evoke strong feelings such as anger and disgust. It is important that workers look after themselves. Writing down and/or sharing feelings and reactions with

someone else, perhaps a line manager or supervisor can be not only therapeutic but also bring perspective to situations that are emotionally highly charged. The organisation may need to have formal arrangements in place to ensure pastoral care and support is available to all workers.



Useful resources

In addition to the resources available from the organisations listed on the back page, CCPAS can offer advice on support for those affected by abuse. We have a 24 hour helpline - 0845 120 4550. We also have relevant material, articles from past editions of Caring and downloadable versions of other 'Help' leaflets which might be relevant. www.ccpas.co.uk

Anorexia and Bulimia Care - national Christian charity working with all who suffer because of eating disorders
www.anorexiabulimiare.co.uk

Adullam Ministries - Christian organisation offering support to those who self harm – www.adullam-ministries.org.uk

Selfharm.co.uk is a charity offering support, information, resources and training to young people and those supporting them. www.Selfharm.co.uk

Hope UK offers drug awareness training for church leaders and youth workers www.hopeuk.org

Association of Christian Counsellors – provides advice on training and support for counsellors. Also has a list of member organisations and individual counsellors.
www.acc-uk.org

This is one of an expanding series of Help... booklets published by CCPAS.

See CCPAS website for more details www.ccpas.co.uk

CCPAS

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