

Responding to a disclosure of abuse

If a child or young person has been abused, they are more likely to disclose this when they start feeling safe. Disclosures could be about themselves or about things they have seen.

It is important to think about the possibility of a disclosure and how you would respond, before such a situation arises. This will help you be prepared and respond as well as possible, because when a child or young person discloses to you, they will be very aware of your immediate reaction. If you respond with shock, they will feel this.

It helps to stay calm and accepting of the child or young person's story, listen and comfort them. There are a number of things you can do if a child or young person discloses to you that they have been abused.

Do:

- listen to them and let them tell you in their own words
- stay calm and be patient, and allow the child or young person to talk at their own pace
- reassure the child or young person that you believe them and that telling you is the right thing to do
- reassure them that it is not their fault and they are not responsible for the abuse
- tell the child or young person what you need to do next, such as inform child protection or the agency (if involved), and that you will support them if anything needs to be done following this
- tell the child or young person that the agency (if involved) will contact child protection, which will help make sure they are safe
- tell the child or young person it is likely the police will need to be contacted (for sexual and physical abuse)
- reassure them there are people they can talk to, such as the Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) for sexual abuse
- be truthful
- be respectful to the sensitive nature of the information and only talk to those who need to know.

Do not:

- show signs of panic, shock or anger
- go over the information or put your own interpretation on the information
- pressure the child or young person into telling more than they are ready to disclose
- keep asking questions to elicit more information
- tell them you can keep their disclosure a secret
- make promises you cannot keep
- be surprised if children or young people retract their statements
- confront the person alleged to be the abuser.

If the child or young person in your care discloses abuse, you will need to call their case manager as soon as possible – especially if the child or young person will be placed at further risk. Be ready to give as much information as possible about the disclosure. Every bit of information is vital if the matter is to go to court.

If you suspect abuse, but the child or young person has not told anyone, be aware of the emotional distress that they may be experiencing. Approach them in a caring and sensitive manner, and assure them that you are willing to listen and to help if there is a problem.

These types of conversations can be very confronting. It is not an easy topic and you will be forced to think about it as you go on caring for the child or young person. The experience could leave you feeling angry, sickened and sad, or you may tap into unresolved memories of your own. Talk to people, call the child or young person's case manager or call CASA for support.

Useful resources

Australian Institute of Family Studies (Australian Government) – a guide to responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse. It outlines what we know about how, why, and when children and young people are likely to disclose and suggests actions to take at the time of disclosure and in the longer term

<https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/responding-children-and-young-peoples-disclosures-abuse>

Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) – there are 15 CASAs across Victoria. The CASA Forum is the peak body that works with all of the CASAs. The **CASA Forum** website has contact details and website links for the CASAs <https://www.casa.org.au/>

Sexual Assault Crisis Line (Victoria) – a statewide, after-hours, confidential telephone crisis counselling service for victims and survivors of past and recent sexual assault. Call 1800 806 292 or visit <https://www.sacl.com.au/>

1800 RESPECT (Australia) – a national 24-hour phone counselling service for sexual assault and domestic violence. Call 1800 737 732 or visit <https://www.1800respect.org.au/>

Reportable Conduct Scheme – <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/reportable-conduct-scheme/>

The Orange Door – The Orange Door (formerly child FIRST) provides help for women, children and young people who are experiencing family violence. It is also the entry point into family services, for families who need assistance with the care and wellbeing of children to access the services they need to be safe and supported.

<https://www.orangedoor.vic.gov.au>

The information contained in this factsheet is based primarily on information from the Manual for Kinship Carers, published by the former Department of Human Services (now Department of Families, Fairness & Housing) in 2017.