

## Responding to Child Sexual Abuse

Why is it important to see, understand and respond to child sexual abuse?

Children who have been sexually abused can be silenced in many ways. They may face challenges in how much they can say (developmentally or because they are worried about what might happen if they speak out) and they may be seen as less credible when they do speak out. These difficulties are compounded when the child has a disability or is marginalised.

This fact sheet will provide you with information, practical ideas and strategies to help you notice and respond when children tell you about their abuse.

See the fact sheet [Child Sexual Abuse: An Overview](#) for information about:

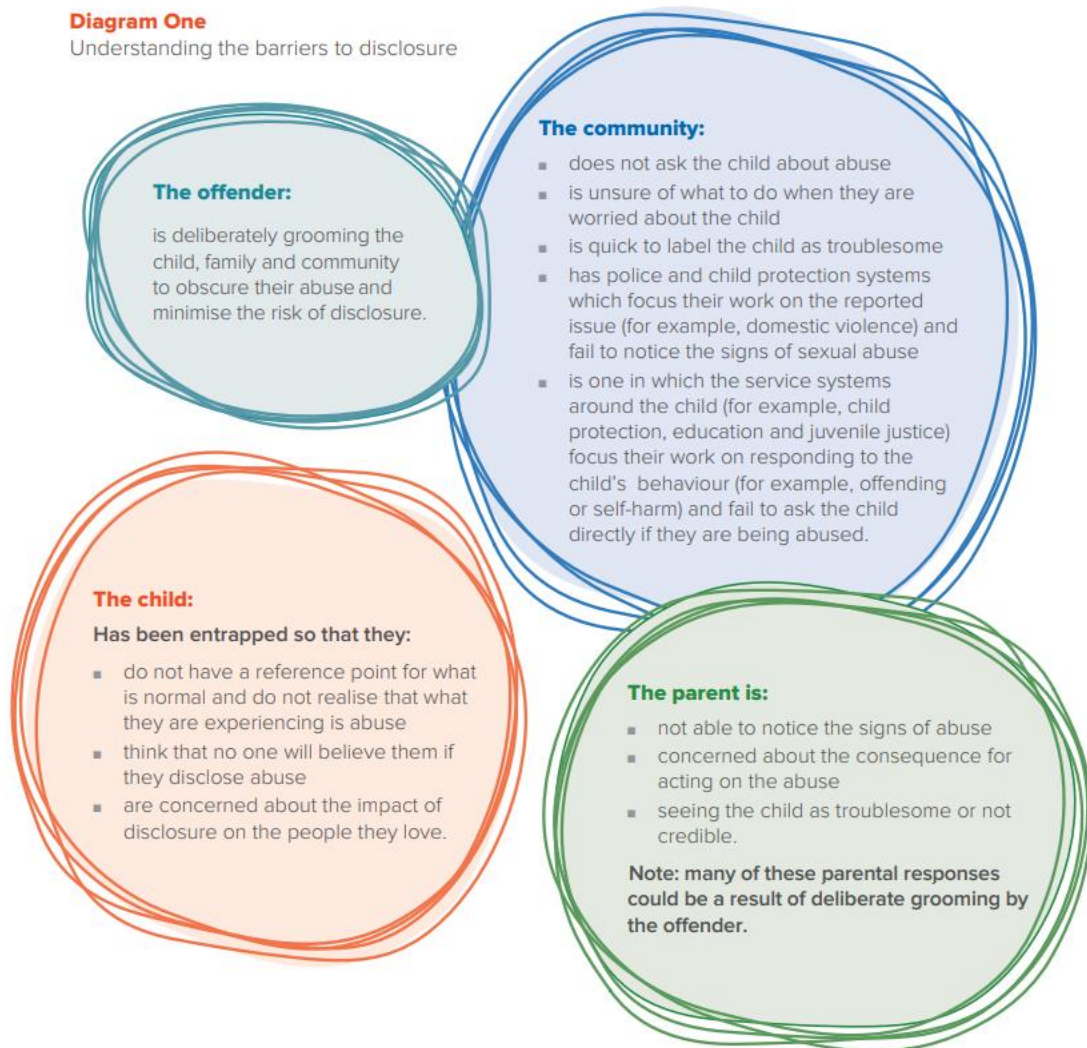
- what child sexual abuse is
- grooming tactics used by offenders and their impact on the child
- risk factors that can increase a child's vulnerability to being targeted for sexual abuse
- the impact of sexual abuse on children
- common myths and facts about child sexual abuse.

Information for these fact sheets is taken from DCJ's practice [See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse](#)' (2016), which is available on the DCJ website.

### Understanding the Barriers to Disclosure

The below diagram has been adapted from Allnock and Miller's 2013 article 'No-one Noticed, No-one Heard'.

**Diagram One**  
Understanding the barriers to disclosure



Allnock, D., & Miller, P. (2013). No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse. London, NSPCC.

Common feelings or worries that stop children disclosing include:

- feeling fearful about what their disclosure could mean for themselves and their family
- feeling fearful of the offender
- feeling like the abuse was their fault

- feeling worried they will not be believed

Most victims of sexual abuse in childhood are abused by people they are close to, people trusted by the child, their family, carer and community. This makes it incredibly hard for children to speak out about their abuse.

When the offender is an authorised foster, relative or kin carer, the child may face an extra set of challenges when thinking about disclosing, including:

- the offender may discredit the child by focussing on their perception or fabrication of the child's 'deficits' or concerns about their well-being
- confusion because the child has been told they've been placed with the carer to be 'safe'
- worry about needing to move elsewhere if they tell someone about the abuse
- being threatened by the offender about what they would do or tell the child's caseworker if they disclose
- self-blame about the abuse due to what the offender has told them during coercion and grooming
- normalising the sexual abuse if the abuse has occurred within their family as well in the carer's home
- reluctance to disclose if a previous disclosure has resulted in disbelief or being placed with another offender
- less trusted adults around them to disclose to, particularly if they are in a new placement
- the offender may use his respectable status as a carer, to groom the adults in the child's life, including the child's parents, teachers, DCJ and PSP service provider practitioners.

For more information on how offenders groom adults in the child's life, see [Working with the Suspected Offender](#) and [See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse](#).

Whether a child chooses to disclose and how they disclose, can be acts of resistance. Resisting is their way of defying or striving against the abuse and maintaining their dignity.

For example, a child may choose not to disclose the abuse to avoid negative judgement by others, or because they think they are protecting their siblings from being abused.

The way we respond to a child's resistance can contribute to their sense of worth and dignity as well as impact on how likely they are to report abuse in the future, work with authorities and recover from their experiences.

For more information on resistance and social responses, see [Understanding Resistance in Practice](#) and [Dignity-Driven Practice – Recognising Resistance Practice Tips](#).

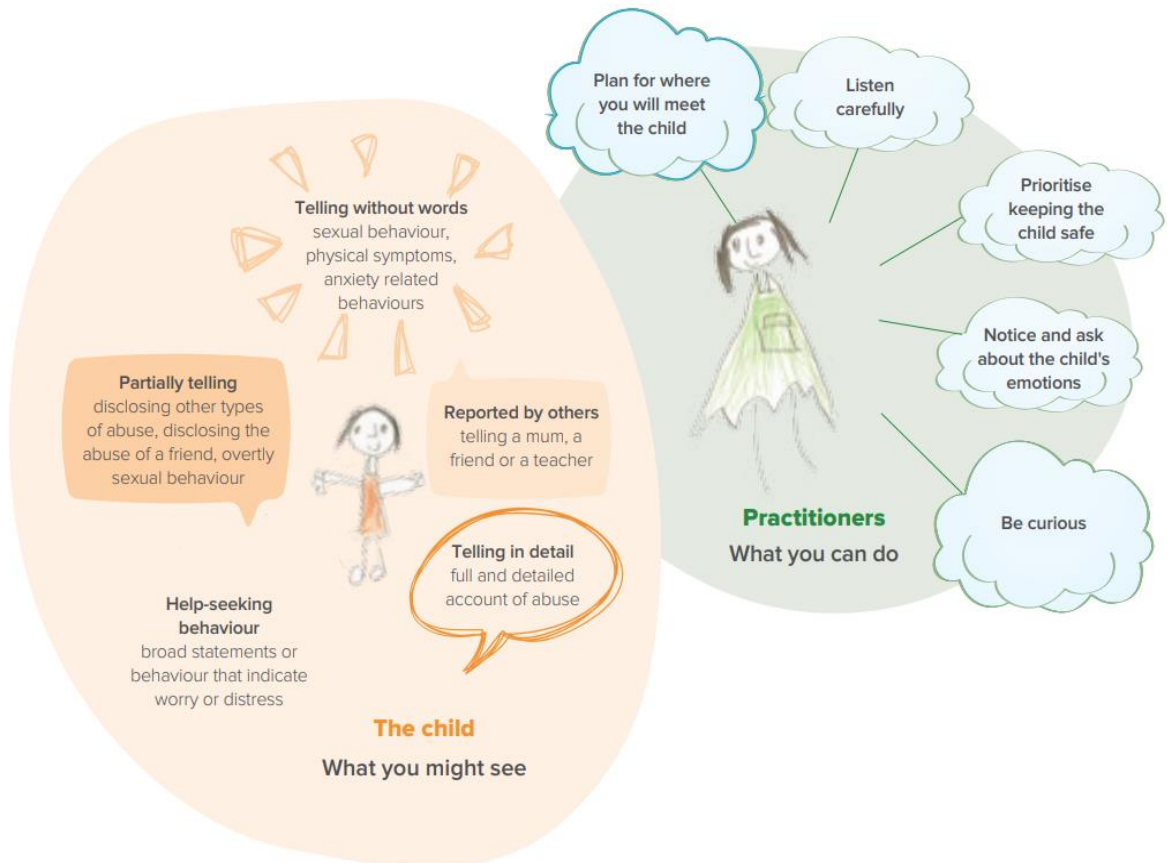
## Recognising Disclosure and Responding to Children

Children who have experienced sexual abuse need us to notice their distress, recognise when they are telling us about the abuse and show them that we are interested, concerned and capable of listening to their story.

This diagram provides a brief summary of the different ways a child may try to tell you about their abuse, as well as the things you can do to support them to feel able to speak out.

**Diagram Two**

Recognising disclosure and responding to children



Helpful ways you can respond to children when they convey abuse include being:

- warm, open and approachable
- interested in them and express genuine care
- able to notice their emotions
- capable of hearing their story
- able to remain calm and child focussed.

If a child discloses, they were or are experiencing sexual abuse, reassure them and:

- respond by being calm and listening carefully
- let the child tell their story freely in their own way
- take their word seriously
- let them know you believe them and that telling someone what happened was the right thing to do
- thank them for coming to you and acknowledge how difficult it may have been to disclose
- tell a child that it is not their fault
- notice how they tried to protect themselves and others and resisted the abuse
- identify and name a child's strengths, including their acts of resistance
- identify and name protective factors in the child's life, including trusted adults, and other relationships that can be built on
- tell them what will happen next.

Children do speak out about their abuse, but these disclosures may not be noticed, believed or responded to appropriately. If they are not noticed or are met with a negative response or indifference, children may not talk about the abuse again for some time. This research shows how important it is for us to recognise when a child is disclosing and respond in a way that supports and validates the child.

[DCJ's Child Sexual Abuse Literature review](#)

For other practical resources, tips and advice to help you have conversations with children to support them to tell their story, see [Working with Children](#) and [Working with Young](#)

[People at Risk of Sexual Exploitation](#) from [See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse](#).

## Children with Disabilities

Sexual abuse of children with disability often goes undetected and they struggle to tell people about the abuse, more than children who do not have a disability. According to DCJ's OSP Child Sexual Abuse Literature review, researchers have suggested the reasons for this may include:

- problems communicating
- feelings of guilt
- feeling worried about being abandoned or separated from family
- a reliance on the offender to meet their daily needs
- a willingness to tolerate abuse in order to be accepted
- limited understanding of protective behaviours and a lack of knowledge and skills needed to escape unsafe situations.

Researchers also found that even when children with disability were reported to child protection authorities, they were responded to less often. They suggested this is because practitioners:

- tended to empathise with the stressors experienced by parents or carers of children with disability
- believed that children with disability had positive support networks in place
- lacked the skills and confidence to communicate and work with children with disability.

Go to chapter three of [DCJ's OSP Child Sexual Abuse Literature review](#) for more information about the heightened risk of sexual abuse for children with disability.

When you are talking to a child with intellectual disability about sexual abuse, remember every child and family is different and will need to be supported differently. Consult with

your colleagues in disability services to understand how to best to talk with the child you are working with.

Do:

- simplify your language
- use short simple sentences
- give one idea at a time
- give the child plenty of time to express themselves
- avoid using complex or abstract concepts (such as date or time)
- supplement your language with appropriate facial expressions and gestures
- check the child has understood by asking them to repeat what you have said in their own language
- rephrase information if the child does not understand.

For more information about children with disability and sexual abuse, see [Working with Children, See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse](#).

## How Else Can You Help a Child?

Work with trusted parents and carers

One of the most effective ways of helping a child who has been sexually abused is to help and support their non-offending parent or carer.

For the non-offending parent or carer, a report about the sexual abuse of their child is likely to affect their relationships with family, friends and other trusted adults. The offender may be continuing to groom them by:

- discrediting the child, parent or carer
- blaming the child, parent or carer
- fracturing the child's relationship with the parent or carer
- minimising their responsibility for abuse
- denying the abuse



- producing credible reasons why the allegations have been made
- threatening the parent, carer or child.

For children, one of the most important aspects to their recovery is their parent or carers believing them. For parents and carers, the process of taking a position of complete belief can be lengthy and complicated. Parents and carers rarely respond to allegations or disclosures of sexual abuse with complete belief or disbelief. Rather their responses could best be described as moving along a continuum of belief. Their position on this continuum changes and fluctuates from minute to minute, or week to week, depending on the information the parent or carer has at the time and the influence of others, including the offender.

A parent or carer who receives a supportive response from you is far more able to respond supportively to their child. The best way of understanding how a parent or carer is experiencing and responding to information is to notice their emotional responses and talk to them about it.

Other tips include:

- Use the child's words to help the parent or carer understand how they responded and resisted the abuse. This can be important for two reasons. Firstly, it helps the parent or carer to see how the offender abused the child very deliberately, in spite of the child's attempts to respond to or stop the abuse. Secondly, it helps the parent or carer to see their child's bravery and empathise with the child's experience.
- Share research with parents and carers. For example: 'we know that kids rarely lie about being sexually abused. It is actually more common for kids to deny that they have been abused or to say that it wasn't that bad.'
- Prepare the parent or carer for common behavioural responses in their child and the offender to help them manage these effectively. By providing the parent or carer with information about what to expect next, you are helping to manage their stress and anxiety and supporting them to support their child.
- Help the parent or carer answer these questions:
  - What can I say to my child?
  - How can I support my child?
  - What will I say to my family, friends, and other children?

- What will I say to the offender?
- What might the consequences be for the offender?

Tip: Be mindful of your biases and judgements. Know that parents and carers may feel blame for choosing the wrong partner or not noticing the abuse. It is important to build a relationship with a parent or carer to understand the history of a family and the role abuse has played.

For information about how to identify your bias, see [Reflective Practice](#) and [Reflective Practice – Practice Tips](#)

See [Working with Parents, See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse](#) for more information about how to work with a support a non-offending parent or carer.

#### Consult

If the child, parent and/or carer is Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, it's important to have regular culturally appropriate consultation with family, community partners, other organisations and consultants.

The consultations will help you understand and respond to cultural factors/influences and the way they can impact on child sexual abuse, disclosure and support. For example, in some cultures, men have authority over women. This may impact on a child's ability to disclose and the way in which a mother or female carer feels able to work with you. Another example is the child of a recently arrived migrant family who is unable to disclose because of their limited English language skills and social isolation.

Our Aboriginal Practitioners say... 'Shame is significant in Aboriginal communities. It can shut a child down. Understanding and exploring shame is important when you are talking to Aboriginal children and families. For example: 'Is this one of those questions that makes you feel shame?'

See [See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse](#) and [Working with Children](#)

For more information, see [Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse \(CALD\) Communities](#) (factsheet coming soon) and [Protocols for Working with Aboriginal People and Communities](#) (factsheet coming soon).

## Find therapeutic help

It's important that children who have experienced sexual abuse and/or their trusted parent/carer have access to therapeutic intervention that promotes trauma processing and healing. You can help find the right therapeutic intervention by:

- Considering options in consultation with the child and parent or carer
- Supporting the parent/carer to access services that best meets the needs of the child
- Identifying an appropriate service through [NSW Health](#)
- Identifying therapeutic specialists in your agency who can either provide therapy or refer to an appropriate external service
- Working closely with the DCJ Community Services Centre or Child and Family District Unit (CFDU) where the child lives, and Joint Child Protection Response Program, to identify an appropriate service

## Access Victims Support Scheme

A child who has been sexually abused may be eligible for counselling, financial support, information and referrals from the NSW government, as a victim of a violent crime.

Find out more by accessing [Victims Support Scheme](#) or calling (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm):

Victims Access Line 1800 633 063

Aboriginal Contact Line 1800 019 123

If the child is in out-of-home care, use the [form](#) available on the site to make an application to Victim's Services on the child's behalf. Talk to the child and their carer to help identify what support they need. Document this on the application form for Victims Services to consider.

If the child is not in the care of the Minister, you have an obligation to explain they may be entitled to victims support and refer them to the Victims Support Scheme.

## Work with offenders

Working with offenders is difficult for many practitioners. People who sexually abuse children are generally seen as the most undesirable and the least worthy of support or connection in our communities.

Practitioners commonly report feelings of disgust, mistrust and fear of the offender. While these feelings are common, they can be a stark contrast to the child and parent or carer's experience of the offender, which may be quite positive. It is important that you monitor your feelings towards the offender through self-reflection and supervision.

Your capacity to build a professional relationship with the offender is critical to helping you understand the:

- experience of having lived with the offender, for the child, parent or carer
- way the offender is representing themselves and the abuse to others
- requests by the child, or trusted parent/carer on behalf of the child, for family time with the offender

For information, tips and advice about working with an offender, go to [Working with the Suspected Offender](#), and [See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse](#).

## Mandatory Reporting

In NSW, child sexual abuse must be reported if you reasonably suspect that a child is at risk of significant harm. You must also report historical sexual assault (a report of past sexual assault of an adult, child or young person, even if it happened many years ago).

How to make a report of child sexual abuse?

 Complete the [Mandatory Reporting Guide \(MRG\)](#) tool.

 Call the Child Protection Helpline on 132 111.

When a report is made about suspected sexual abuse, it is DCJ's role to ensure the child's safety by:

- reviewing the reported information and determining the most appropriate next step, which could involve NSW Police and/or NSW Health, through the [Joint Child Protection Response Program](#)
- applying formal assessment tools to understand whether the child is at risk of significant risk of harm from sexual abuse
- developing safety plans for the child, in consultation with the child, trusted parent or carer and NGO practitioner
- leading Children's Court action and assisting with providing evidence for criminal convictions.

It is your role to:

- as soon as possible after hearing a disclosure, document the information you heard, as close as possible to the child's exact words, so you are able to provide that information to DCJ and/or the police as needed
- refrain from conducting a formal, investigative interview of the child or gathering evidence. This is the responsibility of DCJ practitioners and/or police officers
- respond appropriately when you reasonably suspect that a child has been or is being sexually abused. Responding appropriately means applying your agency's policies and procedures and the advice in this fact sheet
- report the suspected abuse by completing the Mandatory Reporting Guide and, when indicated, reporting to the Child Protection Helpline
- support DCJ's assessment, for example, by participating in a pre-assessment consultation (PAC) or supporting the interview process
- support the child, trusted parent or carer as they participate in the investigation and assessment process
- support the implementation of the child's safety or case plan
- provide casework that helps keep the child safe and to heal from the sexual abuse they have experienced. This may involve continuing to respond to disclosures from the child

- provide any relevant information to DCJ that will continue to keep the child safe
- undertake a reportable conduct investigation regarding the child's carer as needed, adhering to any advice from DCJ, especially the JCPPR.

Tip: Many child protection practitioners are afraid of contaminating evidence. These fears can come from a desire to make sure our questions do not hinder a criminal investigation or impact on the child's credibility during a criminal justice process. It is important to remember that not all disclosures will lead to prosecution and as practitioners, our primary role must always be to ensure children's safety. If we prioritise prosecution outcomes over safety, we inadvertently run the risk of not hearing children's worries and may lose opportunities to build a relationship with the child.

For more information: [Risk Assessment and Casework, See, understand & respond to child sexual abuse'](#) (2016), which is available on the DCJ website.

for more information about how risk of child sexual abuse is assessed, and good casework keeps children safe.

## References:

[DCJ's See, understand and respond to child sexual abuse resource kit](#), <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/providers/children-families/child-protection-services/resources>

[Australian Institute of Family Studies. \(2017\). Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect](#). Viewed 19 May 2020, < <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/mandatory-reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect> >.

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