



Training Matters

Guidance On Handling Disclosure Of Possible Abuse From A Child



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What should you do if a child comes to you and tells you that they are being abused?

It's normal to feel shocked in this situation. Child abuse is a difficult subject that can be hard to accept and even harder to talk about. Children who are abused are often threatened by the offender to keep the abuse a secret. Thus, telling an adult takes a great amount of courage. Children have to deal with a lot of issues, including the fear that no one will believe them. So, care must be taken to remain calm, not panic and to show support to the child.

It is not unusual for children to choose adults on the periphery of the staff team such as dinner staff, caretakers or class-room support staff because they may be perceived as less intimidating. It is important to make sure therefore that **ALL STAFF** know how to respond to a disclosure from a child. It follows that every organisation should have a safeguarding policy and designated safeguarding lead.

If a child discloses harm it must be remembered that your role is to recognise possible abuse and refer it, **NOT TO INVESTIGATE**. This is to avoid interfering with any evidence which may be needed by Police or Social Services in any subsequent investigation.

If a child presents with an injury accompanied by a clear disclosure that they have been harmed, or makes a clear sexual disclosure it should not be necessary to question the child other than perhaps to clarify who was involved and when an incident took place. This could be important information to establish in order that police can safeguard the child or any other vulnerable person and to secure

potential evidence. **ONLY** non-leading questions however, such as “tell me who did this” or “where were you when it happened?”

The child should be **listened** to actively and their account carefully written down as soon as practicable afterwards. Avoid discussing the matter with anyone else until you have done this so your memory is fresh. In this situation, you should ensure immediate information sharing with the Designated Safeguarding Lead and urgent referral to Specialist Children’s Services. You do not need parental consent to listen to a child if they start to disclose to you.

In other situations, where the child appears to be making a possible disclosure or has a suspicious injury, or you are concerned about their demeanour or behaviour, it is reasonable to ask open, non-leading questions in order to establish what has happened.

The basic rule of thumb is to **ONLY** ask enough questions of the child to clarify whether there is a child protection concern. Once the child has clarified that they are being harmed or are at risk (or the staff member is reassured that the child is safe), no further questions are required.

SOMETIMES THE FIRST TIME A CHILD DISCLOSES IS THE ONLY TIME THEY DISCLOSE, hence the importance of taking notes, asking non-leading questions, and recording what questions you ask.

So **‘NOT INVESTIGATING’** does not mean that you cannot ask any questions. You just have to ensure you do not **‘LEAD’** the child.

Examples of suitable questions are.

“That’s a nasty bruise, how did it happen?”

“You seem a bit upset and I’m worried about you, can you tell me what’s wrong?”

If it is necessary to seek further clarification, you should keep to specific closed questions starting with ‘What?’ ‘When?’ ‘Who?’ ‘How?’ and ‘Where?’

Another useful type of question can be *“tell me more about what happened”*

LEADING questions are those in which you suggest the answer and must be avoided.

For example, *“Who gave you that bruise, was it your dad?”*

It is ok to repeat back to the child what they have told you and prompt for more information, such as

“You’ve told me your Mum hurt you? How did she do that?”

But you must not LEAD the child by saying

“You’ve told me your Mum hurt you? Did she hit you?”

Or

“You say that Daddy touched you and you didn’t like it. Did Daddy touch your private parts?”

It is important to remember that questions should only be asked to help clarify whether the child is at risk of harm. Once clarification is achieved, no further questions should be asked. **THIS MUST NOT BE AN INTERVIEW.** The child should not be placed in the stressful position of having to repeat their story over and over again.

Children may also seek to disclose through **drawings, writing or play**. If concerns arise, it is appropriate to talk further with the child to allow wider discussion and clarification. This might involve inviting the child to “tell me more about what is happening in your picture”.

Sometimes children choose to disclose concerns through a third party such as a friend ‘telling’ on their behalf, or indirectly e.g. sounding out information and reaction by asking ‘what if my friend.....?’ If such concerns arise they should be taken equally seriously and be followed up with the Designated Safeguarding Lead in the same manner as a direct disclosure.

If a child does tell you that they have been abused it does not mean that your relationship cannot continue with them. They have trusted you enough to tell you so will probably still want your support and re-assurance. They may tell you more about what has happened over time so it is important that you manage that in exactly the same way as the initial disclosure.

It is vitally important that you record anything relevant that the child tells you and any observation you make about the child pertinent to the disclosure. Any records may be requested by the police or social care.

When a child discloses abuse it is not always apparent at the outset what will happen. Often, the matter will be investigated by social services on their own or sometimes jointly with police.

A police officer may ask to take a statement from you and to see records you have made about the child and the disclosure. This does not mean that there will always be a criminal prosecution as there are other options available to ensure children are safeguarded.

Remember The 3 R's

REASSURE:

Listen to what is being said without displaying shock or disbelief or the child may be afraid to continue talking and will shut down.

NEVER stop a child once they have started talking to you, even if you don't feel prepared. They may never start again.

Reassure the child, but only so far as is honest and reliable.

Don't make promises that you can't be sure to keep, e.g.

"everything will be all right now".

Reassure the child that they did nothing wrong and that you take what is said seriously.

Don't promise confidentiality – never agree to keep secrets.

You have a duty to report your concerns. Tell the child that you will need to tell some people, but only those whose job it is to protect children.

RESPOND:

Listen quietly, carefully and patiently. Do not assume anything – don't speculate or jump to conclusions. Accept what is being said without judgement.

Do NOT investigate, interrogate or decide if the child is telling the truth. Remember that an allegation of child abuse may lead to a criminal investigation, so don't do anything that may jeopardise a police investigation.

Do NOT ask the child to repeat what they have told you to another member of staff. Explain what you have to do next and whom you have to talk to.

Refer directly to the named child protection officer or designated person in your organisation. Do not discuss the case with anyone outside the child protection team.

RECORD:

Make some very brief notes at the time and write them up in detail as soon as possible. Keep all notes made in case they are required by police or social care.

Record the date, time, place, words used by the child and how the child appeared to you – be specific. Record the actual words used; including any swear words or slang.

It is important that you also record what questions you ask the child.

Record statements and observable things, not your interpretations or assumptions – keep it factual.

Reporting a Concern.

If the child lives in Dorset contact the Children's Advice and Duty Service (CHAD):

Professional's Telephone Number and On-Call Out of Hours Service 24/7: 01305 228558

Families and Members of the Public Number: 01305 228866

Emails: childrensadvicandduty@dorset.gov.uk

If the child lives in Bournemouth, Christchurch or Poole contact the BCP First Response Hub

Telephone: 01202 735046

Email: childrensfirstresponse@bcp.council.gov.uk

Out of Hours Teams on: 01202 738256

Police Non-Emergency: Call 101

Police Emergency: Call 999