

# RESPONDING TO A SEXUAL ASSAULT DISCLOSURE

## PRACTICE TIPS FOR CHILD PROTECTION WORKERS

Sexual abuse is a deeply serious, traumatic, and humiliating experience, and telling someone about it is often terrifying. A child who is sexually abused may not have significant physical injuries, but the unseen psychological injuries may be severe. Sexual abuse can affect a child's long-term ability to feel safe in the world, trust themselves and the world around them, and develop healthy relationships. These impacts may not be obvious at the time of initial disclosure, nor ever be easy to prove. As a child protection worker, how you respond to a disclosure is critical to a child's well-being and long-term recovery. These Practice Tips aim to better equip you to respond to a child's sexual abuse disclosure using a trauma-informed approach and help connect with appropriate supports and resources.

### WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

**Sexual abuse** is when a child is used (or likely to be used) for the sexual gratification of another person. It can include various types of sexual contact and behavior (non-contact abuse), such as:

- Sexual touching (or an invitation to touch)
- Penetration (vaginal, oral, or anal)
- Requests that the child expose their body for sexual purposes
- Exposing genitals to a child
- Deliberately exposing the child to sexual activity or material
- Sexual references to the child's body or behaviour
- Menacing or threatening sexual acts, obscene gestures, obscene communications, or stalking
- Sexual aspects of organized or ritual abuse

There are several sexual offences outlined in the Criminal Code of Canada, some of which apply only (or primarily) to children under the age of 16. These include:

- Sexual interference (s.151)
- Invitation to sexual touching (s.152)
- Sexual exploitation (s.153)
- Incest (s.155)
- Sexual assault (s.271–273)

**Children under the age of 12 cannot legally consent to sexual activity.** Sexual contact without legal consent is a crime.

In Canada, the age of consent is 16 years old – this is the age at which a young person can legally consent to sexual contact.

- There are exceptions for young people who are close in age:
  - Young people who are 12 or 13 years old can consent to sexual activity with someone who is less than 2 years older than they are.
  - Young people who are 14 or 15 years old can consent to sexual activity with someone who is less than 5 years older than they are.
- These close-in-age exceptions for consent are not valid if there is a relationship of trust, authority, dependency, or other exploitation of the young person.
- The age of consent is raised to 18 years old for sexual activity that is exploitative (e.g., prostitution, pornography) or occurs in a relationship of authority, trust, or dependency (e.g., caregiver, teacher, coach).

### **SOME TRUTHS ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE**

- Many sexual offences involve children and youth. Of the sexual offences reported to Canadian police in 2012, over half (55%) of the victims were between the ages of 1 and 17.
- Recent statistics indicate that 81% of the victims of (reported) child/youth sexual abuse were female, while 19% were male.
- Approximately 50% of trans individuals experience sexual violence in their lifetime. Research suggests that transgender and gender non-conforming children may be especially vulnerable to sexual violence.
- The vast majority (90–97%) of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by men.
- Sexual abuse is usually committed by someone known to the child. In 2012, 88% of reported sexual offences against children were committed by a family member or someone else known to the child.
- Sexual violations against children are one of the few types of violent crime that has increased in the past few years.
- Disclosure of child sexual abuse is often delayed. Research suggests that only 1 out of 3 sexually abused children will disclose during childhood.
- False reports of child sexual abuse are extremely rare (only 1–4% of reported cases).
- The trauma of sexual abuse can result in lifelong impacts – physiological, psychological, emotional and/or spiritual.

## **WHY IT MAY BE DIFFICULT TO DISCLOSE**

It is not easy for a child to disclose that they have been sexually abused. A sexual offence can often include a profound humiliation and shame. Although sexual abuse is about exerting power and control, it involves sexual body parts that some children are taught to be embarrassed or feel ashamed about. While some children demonstrate a high degree of resiliency, the trauma and shame of sexual abuse may also be deep. Sexual abuse is intensely dehumanizing, and the child may feel like they lack control over their life.

While children vary in their experiences and emotional reactions, a child who was sexually abused might:

- Feel embarrassed, ashamed, or humiliated, especially if the assault was perpetrated by someone they trusted.
- Fear they will be judged, not be believed, or that nothing will change, especially if the child has disclosed in the past and this was their experience.
- Be confused about whether what happened was wrong, especially for younger children.
- Not have the knowledge or language to name their experience as sexual abuse.
- Feel like a participant in the abuse, if they have been manipulated and/or groomed by the perpetrator.
- Fear for their safety, or the safety of their friends and family, especially if threats were involved.
- Fear judgment or anger from others, including their family and/or the perpetrator.
- Feel conflicted about the perpetrator getting into trouble, especially if they were abused by someone they know (e.g., family member, family friend, teacher, coach).
- Be scared about what might happen if they disclose (e.g., breakup of family), or be afraid of upsetting their parents/caregivers.
- Try to avoid having contact with the perpetrator.

## **COMMON EXPERIENCES/RESPONSES OF VICTIMS**

All responses to sexual abuse are **adaptive** attempts to survive this traumatic experience, both physically and emotionally. You might hear a range of experiences and observe a range of emotional responses during a disclosure of child sexual abuse:

- The child may appear anywhere on a continuum from calm to very upset – **all emotional responses are ways of coping**. They may be anxious, confused, or appear numb. They may be disoriented and their articulation of what happened may not seem coherent.
- They may have a difficult time articulating what happened.



- Victims of child sexual abuse often have responses that can be described as “fight, flight, or freeze.” There is a growing understanding that many people freeze in traumatic situations, and find themselves immobile, unable to speak, or mentally removed from their bodies (a common traumatic response due to flooding of stress hormones, or dissociation, which is especially common in children).
- Thanks to developments in neuroscience, we now know that trauma impacts how the brain encodes memory. The child may have clear memories of the abuse, or may only remember bits and pieces and have trouble recounting events in chronological order. They may remember sensory details like sounds and smells, but may have no clear memory of the abuse.
- The child may experience anxiety, fear, nightmares and/or sleep disturbances, invasive memories, self-blame, difficulty trusting others, and changes in appetite and/or behaviour (e.g., withdrawal, acting out, demonstrating sexualized behaviours or a premature knowledge of sexual activity),

You can help the child to recognize that these reactions are normal responses to trauma, and their way of coping with what has happened to them.

## **WHEN YOU RECEIVE A DISCLOSURE**

You are a key person in the child’s experience. How you react to their disclosure can have a significant influence on how they make sense of what has happened to them and could affect their long-term recovery.

Some **common pitfalls** when receiving a disclosure of child sexual abuse:

- An over reactive initial response or focusing on your own emotional reaction.

If you do react emotionally, explain your emotional reaction (sadness, anger, shock, etc.) to the child. Reassure them that they are not in trouble, and that you are upset with the perpetrator, not them. (Be aware that, if the perpetrator is a family member or someone else close to the child, the child may feel defensive.)

- Judging the child, their feelings, or their behaviour.
- Disbelieving, minimizing, or questioning the “truth” of the child’s story or reactions.
- Correcting the language the child uses to explain what happened to them.
- Reframing what the child is saying, or making assumptions about what happened.
- Questioning the child prior to an interview plan being developed in collaboration with the police, with the police taking the lead in the investigation.
- Asking why they did not behave in a certain way (e.g., immediately report what happened, stop spending time with the person who abused them).
- Inadvertently coaching the child by asking leading questions.

## **AN EMPOWERING RESPONSE**

### **LISTEN**

- Tell the child you are glad they are telling you about what happened to them.
- Get down to the child's eye level (e.g., sit, kneel, crouch) when speaking with them.
- Show the child that you are actively listening, through your body language (e.g., nodding, facing in their direction) and verbal cues (e.g., "mm hmm," paraphrasing what they are telling you, mirroring the language they use).
- Be patient and let the child tell you what happened at their own pace, without interrupting.
- Avoid asking the child probing questions before a police interview. This ensures that the child will not have to explain what happened to them multiple times, and also avoids jeopardizing any criminal investigation.
- Be aware that some people who have experienced sexual abuse may find themselves flooded with emotions. If the child is getting increasingly upset while telling you about what happened, they may be reliving the experience. There are several ways you can help to ground the child if they are overwhelmed:
  - Encourage them to take slow deep breaths while gently planting their feet into the floor and holding on to their knees.
  - Ask them to keep their eyes open, even if just momentarily. This helps to bring them back to the present.
  - Ask them to look around the room and name some ordinary objects they see. Do this until they feel calmer.
- Respect the child's personal space, and do not touch them. Even if you think they want a comforting touch, resist your urge to do so. Always follow their lead. You can offer the child something to keep them warm, like a blanket or your jacket (shock can involve feeling cold, shivering and shaking).

### **BELIEVE**

- As a child begins disclosing, it is important that they feel safe and believed. Children will often minimize the abuse, hint at the abuse, or first disclose a smaller aspect of the abuse in order to gauge the reaction they get.
- Validate the child's feelings and assure them that these are normal reactions to a very traumatic event, and avoid promising them that everything will be okay.

- Assure the child that it was not their fault (many victims of sexual abuse struggle with blaming themselves) and that the responsibility for sexual abuse lies solely with the perpetrator. **It does not matter what the victim did or did not do before, during, or after the abuse – it is never their fault.**
- Reassure the child that you will do whatever you can to help them and keep them safe. Stay with them or find someone they trust who can be with them.

## **EMPOWER**

Sexual abuse can result in a profound sense of loss of power and control. There are some ways you can help a child feel more empowered after disclosing that they have been sexually abused.

- Allow the child to make choices for themselves, when possible and appropriate. For example, you can give them the choice of bringing a comfort item (e.g., stuffed animal, blanket) with them when speaking to police or accessing medical assistance.
- Talk to the child about the places that feel safe and the people they trust (e.g., family, friends, teachers).
- Ensure the child's routines remain undisturbed as much as possible.
- Provide information about appropriate local services (e.g., a community-based victim support worker, counselor, doctor) as soon as possible, and support the child and their parent/guardian in accessing these services.

Keep your initial information simple and straightforward, and reassure the child if they seem overwhelmed.

## **DISCLOSURE AND REPORTING OPTIONS**

There are several options available to victims of sexual abuse/assault. These include *disclosing* to someone to access emotional support and/or medical assistance, and *reporting* to police.

### **Report to Police**

When a report of child sexual abuse is made to police, do what you can to make the child as comfortable as possible (e.g., plainclothes police officer, soft interview room, comfort object) and consider additional support persons/advocates (e.g., parent, victim services, Child Advocacy Centre).

### **Medical Assistance**

Arrange for a medical examination, as required by the child's circumstances. Medical attention can address the possibility of physical injury, pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted infections. Accompany the child to the nearest hospital (a children's hospital, if possible), health centre, or nursing station.

### **Forensic Medical Exam**

Medical staff can conduct a forensic medical exam and collect forensic samples, ideally within 72 hours, but forensic samples can be collected up to 1 week after the assault. If the assault was recent, it is best to not shower, eat or drink, brush their teeth, change their clothing, etc., before the forensic exam, as that may destroy potential evidence. Reassure them that if they have done any of these things, forensic samples can still be taken.

### **Civil Claim**

The child's parent or guardian may wish to contact a civil lawyer to inquire about taking the perpetrator to court for damages suffered. This option may be pursued instead of, or in addition to, police recommending criminal charges.

## **EMPOWERING VICTIMS THROUGH RESOURCES**

Help the child's parent or guardian find the best possible resource(s) for their emotional and practical support. Refer them to local and accessible support services, such as a community-based victim assistance program.

VictimLink BC is a toll-free, 24/7, confidential, multilingual (110 languages) telephone service. They provide information and referral services to all victims of crime and their families, as well as crisis support to victims of sexual and domestic violence.

### **VictimLink BC 1.800.563.0808**

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**TTY:** 604.875.0885

**Text:** 604.836.6381

**Email:** VictimLinkBC@bc211.ca

There are also youth-specific resources that children can access themselves. Both the Youth Against Violence Line and Kids Help Phone (for ages 20 and under) have toll-free telephone lines that are open 24/7.

### **Youth Against Violence Line 1.800.680.4264**

**TTY:** 604.875.0885

**Text:** 604.836.6381

[info@youthagainstviolenceline.com](mailto:info@youthagainstviolenceline.com)

### **Kids Help Phone 1.800.668.6868**

**Chat:** Wed–Sun, 3–11pm

[www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)

Receiving a child's disclosure of sexual abuse can be a difficult experience. It may be helpful to debrief or get support for yourself.

For other sector-specific sexual assault disclosure response practice tips and information about Third Party Reporting, **visit [www.endingviolence.org](http://www.endingviolence.org)**

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