

# Talking to children about sexual abuse: When you have concerns

## Planning

### **Ask yourself:**

What might the experience of this child be?

Might these experiences create barriers for the child in talking to us?

How might you be able to help the child overcome these barriers?

Does the child have the language to talk about what is happening for them?

Does the child need any additional support to communicate with you?

How might this child be being groomed?

From what we know of the person who may be harming the child, how might they be behaving towards this child?

From what we know about the child's non-abusing parent/carer, what might the threats 'not to tell' involve, i.e. what might their fears be if they were to tell? E.g. parent will be ill/die/overdose.

### **Preparing yourself**

Take a deep breath...

Ask yourself 3 questions:

1. **How do I feel?** Scared, awkward, embarrassed, fearful, uncomfortable?
2. **What does the child need or want?** To be heard, reassured, to be safe, to have information and to understand, to be listened to, protected, to be praised for being brave.
3. **How can I best respond?** If you don't know what to say, tell them that you need to think it through and that you don't have the answer now, but you will get it for them.

It is really important to use your **authentic self** when discussing sexual abuse.

### Points to consider

- *Be attuned to the needs of the child*  
Using phrases such as “I am here for you”, are effective ways to show you are attuned to the needs of the child.
- *Open a door*  
Using phrases such as “If you want to talk to me I am here” are a great way to communicate an invitation to the child and allow them to come to you another time if they wish. Following this up at a later time also helps the young person to see you have kept them in mind and allows them to communicate more with you.
- *Be aware of your body language*  
So much of what you communicate is through your body language, so it is important that you try and ensure your body is communicating the same messages as your spoken word.
- *Give the child time*  
Children may need a few seconds, or even minutes, to process questions, particularly young children, those with learning difficulties or children whose first language is not the language you are speaking. Interrupting the child or asking another question before they have had time to answer your original question can make children feel they are not being listened to.
- *Does the child have the language to communicate their experiences to you?*  
When children experience sexual abuse before they are able to speak, they may have difficulty attributing words to their experiences. In these situations, it may be easier for children to communicate with you in other ways, such as through play or drawing.

### **How could we ask?**

*I've noticed you're not your usual self – I am here if you would like to talk to me?*

*'You don't seem okay, can you tell me more about that??'*

*'What is it that is upsetting you at the moment?'*

*'Is there something I can do to help you tell me what is going on?'*

*'Is there something going on that feels too hard to talk about?'*

*'Is there someone who you do feel able to tell?'*

Sometimes children go through difficult things but adults don't always ask them about it

Sometimes when children have difficulty sleeping at night it's because something is bothering them. I am wondering whether something was bothering you?"

*'Sometimes we worry about what may happen if we tell someone what is going on (e.g. that we'll get into trouble/that we've been told to keep it a secret/that we'll upset people) – what is it that you are worried may happen if you tell someone what is going on?'*

*'I'm going to show you an online resource so that if there is something that is worrying you, you can work out how to get some help'.*

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/getting-help/asking-adult-help/#Writesomeonealetter>

*I'm going to come and see you again next week and we can talk a bit more about this if you would like to.*

Or, give a third person example and talk about that person. E.g. *If you had a friend had something going on that they were worried about, what do you think would stop them telling? Help them tell?*

The PANTS rule - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-IL07JOGU5o>

*Is there anything that you feel worried about at the moment?"*

*If you were worried about something, who would you tell?*

[https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/contacting-childline/contacting-childline-in-welsh/getting-help-keep-safe/?in\\_type=under12service#what-will-happen](https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/contacting-childline/contacting-childline-in-welsh/getting-help-keep-safe/?in_type=under12service#what-will-happen)

<https://www.childline.org.uk/globalassets/get-support/childline-in-welsh/getting-help-to-keep-safe/you-have-the-right-to-be-safe---english---o12.pdf>

## Reflection

Think about whether you have given the child enough opportunities to communicate with you.

Remember, it is not the child's responsibility to talk to us, it is our responsibility to provide the child with opportunities for them to feel safe enough to communicate with us, either verbally or through their behaviours.

## DfE Guidance on Managing Disclosures

- To ensure the safe handling of a disclosure from a child, there are a number of basic rules that should be followed:
- Don't panic – remain **calm** and **reassuring** in your manner.
- Give the child your full attention to demonstrate you are **listening carefully** and taking the information **seriously**.
- Let the child take their time, go at their **own pace** and use their **own words**.
- **Reassure** them that they did the right thing by telling someone, and that they have been **brave** in doing so.
- Assure them that it is **not their fault** and you will do your best to help.
- Let them know that to, ensure they will be safe, you will need to **tell someone** else.
- Let them know **what you are going to do next** and that you will let them know what happens.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.

## A note on language

This resource is intended to support you in communicating with children about child sexual abuse. For the sake of simplicity we will generally refer to anyone under the age of 18 as 'child' and it is important to remember that child sexual abuse affects children and young people right up to the age of 18. We have also chosen, where possible, to avoid some terms that are sometimes understood differently or that feel uncomfortable for some:

- Instead of "perpetrator" or "abuser", we talk about "the person who has been reported to have sexually abused the child" or similar.
- Instead of "disclosure", we have said "when a child tells us" or similar.