

Child Sexual abuse

When Children Tell

This leaflet looks at the issues which arise when a child tells that they have been sexually abused. We make general suggestions on how such a situation could be handled but it is very important to stress that these are general guidelines, not fixed rules. Every child is different, every child who has been abused will need different support and reassurance.

This leaflet is not aimed at any particular group of people, we hope that it will be read by parents, teachers, social workers, nursery nurses, in fact anyone who has contact with children. We feel that if everyone who reads this leaflet were to discuss the issues raised with family, friends and colleagues then more people would be prepared and able to respond positively when a child tells of abuse. We should remember that child sexual abuse is very common and exists in many different forms. In all cases a sympathetic and supportive reaction helps to 'minimise' the bad effects.

How do children tell us?

Throughout this leaflet we talk of the child 'telling' about abuse. We should remember that children tell us about abuse in many different ways over and above talking. For example, through drawings, paintings, bad dreams, playacting, by the reactions and behaviour. How the child tells will depend on many things, including their age. It is important to interpret what the child is telling you, and to let them know you are concerned and will try to help.

Believing children

It may seem obvious to say that we should believe children but this should be clearly said *to the child* not just once but over and over again. Many children will have been told by their abusers that no-one will believe them so to be told immediately and repeatedly that you believe them will be very important.

It is extremely rare for children to make up false

stories of abuse. How would they know what to make up? It is also common for children to minimise what has happened, particularly when they first tell. On some occasions an abused child may deny that abuse has happened, for example because they are afraid or confused. Older children may "test" adult reactions, for example by telling a story about a "friend", or telling a small part of what they have experienced.

When we realise that a child has been sexually abused we may overwhelmingly wish that the abuse hadn't happened, that there is some other explanation. In fact the closer we are to the child the more strongly we may wish this.

This initial reaction of shock and disbelief is to be expected and is not the same as denial – but if we let the child see our reaction it will feel like denial to them. It is important to say, "I believe you, and you were right to tell me."

The child's feelings

Try to find out how the child feels – each child will have different fears and worries according to their age and situation. Try to find out what the child's fears are – remember abused children have been threatened in some way, either physically or emotionally. Let them know that you realise how frightening these threats must have been.

Whenever possible reassure them that the threats will not be carried out. For every child it is a good idea to acknowledge that it must have been very difficult for them to tell you, that they were brave to tell, and to emphasise again that you are glad they did so. Most children do not tell about abuse immediately so it is likely that the child has been worried about telling for some time.

The child may feel guilty – we do not prepare children for the possibility of sexual abuse so when it happens children often feel it is because they have done something wrong. Many children are told by their abusers that it was their own fault, or

that they won't be believed. We must remember to tell the child that the abuse was not their fault – that they were not responsible in any way. It is important to explain that abuse is never the child's fault, even if they have broken a 'rule', for example, if they were staying off school, or had gone into someone's house without their parents' permission. If the child has been tricked or 'bribed' e.g. with sweets or money, explain that the abuser was wrong not the child.

Children may feel ashamed and embarrassed – they might not be able to tell you everything that has happened at first. Perhaps they are testing your reactions to see if they can trust you. Be aware that the thing which is worrying the child may not come out until later. Try to think what is frightening for a child. Take everything they say seriously and try to make sure that they understand an explanation you give them.

One way to do this is to repeat back what the child has said, or to "summarise", for example "You were frightened when he shouted."

If the child has been abused by their father or someone else close to them they are likely to feel very confused. They may love their father but hate the abuse. They may feel responsible and feel that they should keep quiet to avoid their father getting into trouble, or upsetting the family. Children especially younger children, tend to see people as being either bad or good. It can be hard for them to understand that adults can be both. Tell the child that the abuser was *wrong*, rather than calling him bad.

The child may feel a 'freak' – that this has never happened to anyone else before. Explain that some adults have had similar experiences when they were children and that they found it difficult to tell as well.

Try to remember how helpless children are in an adult world. Let the child know that you will help in stopping the abuse. It is easy to forget that the child needs comfort. Tell her/him you will help, do what you can to comfort them and reassure them that they are important and wanted.

Trust

Child sexual abuse is about the abuse of trust between adults and children. It is vitally important

to be honest with a child who tells you about abuse. Reassure the child that you will help, but don't make promises you can't keep. Resolving a situation where abuse has been going on is rarely simple – it is better to tell the child what you can or can't do to help, than to promise things and then let them down, although, obviously, you have to give a response appropriate to the age of the child. Younger children cannot be expected to understand the implications of telling, and need an adult to act on their behalf; whereas it would usually be appropriate for older teenagers to be fully informed and consulted.

If you are not able to keep the child's information confidential, tell them who you will be telling and why you have to pass the information on. As far as possible go at the child's pace. If information is needed for police or medical investigations, make sure that the child knows what is going on. Make sure the child doesn't feel that they are being punished in any way. Try to give the child a say in everything that happens, even in very small ways – this will let them see that you are taking their feelings into account.

If you are not a central person in the child's life, encourage them to tell, for example, their mother and help them to find ways to do this.

One of the most helpful things for abused children is the belief and support of their mother and other close family members.

The way in which a woman finds out about the abuse of her child can greatly influence her ability to believe, and to support that child. She needs time and support to understand, particularly if told that the suspected abuser is her partner.

A natural first reaction may be disbelief "I can't believe it" "How can this be true". Remember that disbelief is not the same as denial. A woman might have exactly the same reaction to news that her child had been knocked down by a car or otherwise injured. If so, we would be unlikely to blame her, or immediately call her "uncaring". However this does happen all too often in cases of child sexual abuse. The myth of "colluding mothers" has influenced how women are treated during investigations.

Sometimes this implied, or even spoken, blame means that the woman is not given the time nor the opportunity to understand. Shocked. And denied support elsewhere, she may find that the only person she has to speak to is the alleged abuser. Studies have shown that where women are told, consulted, involved with their children, and given support for themselves, this is positive not only for the woman but for the child, who is more likely to be supported.

Your feelings

Your reaction to hearing about sexual abuse will obviously vary a lot depending on the situation. As we said earlier shock and disbelief is to be expected but it is important not to pass this on to the child. Stay calm and try not to overreact. Try not to say "are you sure?", "why didn't you tell me before?", "I can't believe it".

Questions or statements like this may not be meant to be hurtful but they will have the effect of increasing feelings of guilt or shame on the child's part.

If a child tells 'out of the blue', try not to panic. Don't rush immediately to tell someone else. The child has chosen to tell you so listen to them, find out what has happened as clearly as possible without pressing them.

Try not to confuse your own feelings or fears with the child's but remember that your own feelings are important as well. Child sexual abuse is not easy to deal with. It challenges all our personal beliefs and attitudes.

If it is your own child that has been abused then you may feel very guilty and feel that you should have been able to protect them. If the child has been abused some time ago, or over a period of time then you may feel as if you should have noticed before that something was wrong. If the abuser is someone you know and trusted then this is an additional shock. Try to remember that the abuse is not your fault – it is the responsibility of the abuser.

Make sure the child knows that, however shocked or upset you are, you are not angry at them but at the abuser. You may feel angry and frustrated, don't feel that you should be able to cope alone. The more support and information you have the better you will be able to help the child.

Retraction

As we have said, it is very hard for children to tell about abuse. Unfortunately, what happens after children tell is also very hard on them, particularly in cases where they have to go through interviews, medical examinations, and court appearances. In any case it is likely that the child and their family life will be upset and confused. Often it seems that no-one knows what to do. We may forget to keep reassuring the child, and often it must appear to them as if they are responsible for all this upheaval. There is therefore, great pressure on children to retract what they have said. This does not mean that what they said originally wasn't true – it simply means that we have not yet found ways of ensuring that all children get the help they need. This leads to a situation where it becomes less painful for the child to say, "it didn't happen", and to keep the reality to themselves.

This situation is difficult to handle. You may feel angry, made a fool of, or you may very likely feel relieved and reassure yourself that nothing did happen. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to be the case, but you cannot force children to talk. Tell the child that you know how difficult everything is, let them know they can come back to talk to you, tell them where else they can get help. Most importantly, let them know that children have the right to live without abuse.

There are books and other materials available to help you talk with children. For recommended materials look at the resources leaflets.

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