



Mandatory reporting information sheet 5: responding to disclosures

What is protective interrupting and how do I protectively interrupt?

If a child is disclosing sexual abuse, it is important to make sure that their visual and auditory privacy is being upheld. For example, if a child indicates a possible disclosure in a public setting or in front of peers by saying something like, 'can I tell you a secret?' or 'I need to tell you something', you may need to interrupt them to protect their privacy.

To do this you can use the protective interrupting or 'parking' strategy, which is when you interrupt them and say something like, 'it sounds like you want to tell me something; I am very interested in what you want to say but can we talk about this in about 10 minutes?', in which you can organise to take the child to an area where the conversation will not be overheard. By doing this you have 'protectively interrupted' and 'parked' the conversation with the goal to continue the conversation privately.

Protective interrupting is a strategy to prevent a child disclosing in front of other children or people who should not be privy to their information. If a child starts to disclose about sexual abuse publicly, they should be stopped immediately and an arrangement should be made to continue the discussion in a private setting where both visual and auditory privacy can be upheld. If there is no one else around, and there is no need to park the conversation, do not interrupt a child's disclosure and follow this guide on how to respond to disclosures.

If you had to protectively interrupt a disclosure, it is essential that the child is given an immediate opportunity to continue to disclose in a safe environment, away from other children/people.

Steps for receiving a disclosure

- Tell the child that what they've said is really important and that you want to talk to them where no one else can hear.
- Guide the child into a place where they feel safe and other children/people are not around.
- Be supportive and gently indicate that the child is safe to talk.
- Following the disclosure, make arrangements to have the child looked after in a supportive and confidential way. For example, in the care of a nurse, counsellor or trusted staff member.

How to respond to disclosures

If a child is disclosing sexual abuse, it is important to make sure that their visual and auditory privacy is being upheld. Please refer to the section above about protective interrupting for more information.

The reaction of the person to whom a disclosure is made may affect whether the victim makes further disclosures in the future and may also affect the severity of psychological symptoms experienced by the victim. A negative response to disclosure can affect a victim's willingness to disclose again, exacerbate the impacts of the abuse, and allow it to continue.

According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2015) and Briggs (2012), the following is important when a child is disclosing:

- **Give the child your full attention:** allow time for the child to trust that they will be listened to and supported.
- **Maintain a calm appearance:** a disclosure of child maltreatment can evoke strong feelings. For some, the disclosure may be overwhelming or provoke feelings of anger or rage. As a professional, you must conceal your feelings and remain calm. This does not mean that you cannot validate the child's feelings or feel empathy for the child, but you need to do so professionally.
- **Believe the child:** it is important that you take the child's disclosure seriously and they feel supported. Some children delay disclosing because they fear that they will not be believed.
- **Don't be afraid of saying the 'wrong' thing:** if a child has disclosed to you, it is a sign that they trust you and think that speaking to you will be helpful. Try not to be distracted by needing to know exactly the 'right' thing to say.
- **Reassure the child that they have done the right thing in telling you:** let the child know that you are glad they told you and that their situation is not their fault. Affirm that it is never okay for a child to be hurt or harmed in this way. Address any concerns about the child's safety, particularly if they have fears about potential consequences.
- **Accept the child will disclose only what they are comfortable with and acknowledge their bravery/strength in doing so:** it is important that children disclosing child abuse feel in control of the situation. Acknowledge the child's bravery and strength in talking about something that is so difficult.
- **Let the child take their time:** disclosing is difficult for children and something they may only be able to do a little at a time. It is important that the child does not feel rushed or pressured and that you allow them to take their time. For children who disclose indirectly, be mindful that this process may take several days or weeks. During this time, let the child know that you will listen when they are ready. Please balance this with safety considerations.
- **Let the child use his or her own words:** letting the child use their own words is important in reducing their discomfort and in case there is a subsequent court case. It

is also important not to ask leading questions or questions that suggest the 'right' words.

- **Don't make promises you can't keep:** child sexual abuse relies on secrecy and perpetrator/s often go to great lengths to conceal child maltreatment. Children learn to hide what is happening to them. Sometimes they fear repercussions for themselves or family members. In other instances, they may fear the consequences for parents whom they love despite the abuse. Because of this, a child might ask an adult to promise secrecy before disclosing. Such a promise should not be made. It is important to tell the child that you will need to tell someone whose job involves helping kids to stay safe. You can never promise that reporting will stop the abuse and you can't promise to keep it a secret. Such well-intended commitments completely diminish children's trust when they realise that the statements were not possible to uphold and therefore untrue.
- **Tell the child what you plan to do next:** tell the child in language they understand what will happen next. Explain who the child may need to speak to (someone from the Department of Communities and/or the Western Australia (WA) Police Force), what the purpose is and what they will do. Explain that for them to be safe they will need to talk to another person about their experience and that you will support them through that. Let the child know that it is okay for them to ask questions.
- **Never criticise the offending parent/s:** children often have very confused feelings about their parents or carers. They hate the abuse but enjoy other aspects of the relationship. They are angry with them and intensely loyal at the same time. If you criticise offending parents, the feeling of loyalty may rise to the forefront and lead them to protect the abusers. Some children may fear violent repercussions for exposing the problems.
- **Check the child's emotional state and immediate safety:** it is best to check in with the child to see how they are feeling and what they might need to help them through this process.
- **Do not confront the alleged perpetrator:** it is imperative that you do not confront the child's alleged perpetrator or discuss the disclosure with them. This could create a potential risk for the child's safety. Also, perpetrators of child abuse can work hard to shift responsibility from themselves to others. Sexual abusers are often charming and persuasive and are able to fabricate seemingly plausible excuses for their behaviour. Confronting an alleged perpetrator of sexual or other types of abuse should only be done by the WA Police Force and/or the child protection workers who have been specifically allocated the investigation.
- **Document the disclosure verbatim:** please refer to the section in the Mandatory Reporting Guide about what you need to document.

What not to do when a child is disclosing:

- Don't stop the child from talking (unless you are protecting their privacy).
- Don't doubt the child or question the validity of their account.

- Don't dismiss or minimise what the child is telling you.
- Don't ask a child why they have not shared information sooner.
- Don't make assumptions about how the child is feeling.
- Don't promise that everything will be fine or that the child will be safe or happy.
- Don't ask leading questions or interview others (your role is not to investigate; this is the role of the Department of Communities and/or WA Police Force).
- Don't try to deal with the situation completely on your own.
- Don't make assumptions about how a child is feeling.

It is important to remember that unless you are a police officer or a child protection worker who has been specifically allocated the investigation, your job as a mandatory reporter is not to investigate disclosures of child abuse. You do not need to prove the sexual abuse has occurred; however, you must make the notification as soon as is reasonably practicable after forming a belief the child has been sexually abused. Your role is to listen, acknowledge the child's feelings and experiences, and provide emotional support while they are disclosing.

As outlined above, when a child or young person is disclosing, if the person to whom they are disclosing helps the child feel comfortable, provides the right environment for the disclosure, and listens attentively, the child is more likely to talk. It is important to understand that this conversation is generally not a to-and-fro conversation, but rather a conversation where the adult largely listens. There are times when it is appropriate to ask questions, but these questions must be carefully constructed to ensure they are not leading or investigative questions.

It is okay to repeat back what the child has said to clarify your understanding and encourage them to elaborate on it if the information is too vague for you to form belief on reasonable grounds. For example, 'I just want to check my understanding, you have said that daddy touches you; could you tell me a little bit more about that please?' is a suitable question. It is important that the adult does not ask questions that may make the child feel uncomfortable or pressured, e.g. 'You need to tell me more about that please'.

If a child indicates that they have been abused, you may decide you need further information before forming a belief that a report must be made to the Mandatory Reporting Service. Please remember that you do not ask questions in the presence of other children and/or potential witnesses. It is important to let the child talk at the pace they wish and collect information by asking open questions rather than leading questions. Open questions are broad and can be answered in detail, rather than by a simple yes or no response. The previous example ('I just want to check my understanding; you have said that daddy touches you. Tell me more about that please.') is an open question.

The child has revealed that daddy touches her. Without seeking clarification, we might assume that this child is being abused. If the child was then asked, 'does he do that often?' we are likely to get a yes or no response. A direct question does not allow for context; therefore, there is still not enough context around this statement to draw any

reasonable belief. By asking an open question such as, 'could you tell me a little bit more about that please?', it opens up the question to gather further information that is more likely to provide enough detail to make a decision.

For example, the child might say, 'he touches me on my back and rubs my back when I'm sad; it's not often that daddy touches me there, just when I'm really sad. And then he gives me a hug'. This context has provided enough information to determine that this is not concerning. Conversely, she might say, 'he rubs the inside of my leg up to my vagina every time he comes into my room at night'. This provides enough context to suggest that this is a concern. Open ended questions invite information and allow a child to say only what they wish to say.

Leading questions or loaded questions can be suggestive, particularly for younger children. A leading question is a type of question that prompts a respondent towards providing an already determined answer. If we use the 'daddy touches me' statement as an example, and we ask, 'does he do that at night-time?', this question is leading. It has suggested that the father touches the child at night-time. It is also a closed question that is likely to yield a yes or no response. Some children might say yes because they are being asked a direct question and want to appease the adult by saying what they think the adult wants to hear. Others might say yes because she was upset at night-time when her father came and rubbed her back to comfort her. Asking leading questions of the child may prejudice subsequent investigations.

It is sometimes appropriate to ask direct questions to a child if you have concerns about their safety and wellbeing, such as in instances where you think they are at risk of self-injurious behaviour or physical violence, or if you suspect they may be at risk of immediate harm if you do not gather this information quickly. For example, you believe that they may be about to enter an environment where they will come into contact with the perpetrator as they have indicated that their uncle is sexually abusing them and he is staying at their house.

Asking children direct questions about their safety is important in such instances. This is distinct from asking 'leading' questions in an investigative style (which should not occur). Decisions made about asking questions should depend on the nature of concerns and the context.

Table 1: Examples of leading and open questions for a range of situations

| Examples of a child or young person's statement | Examples of leading questions/making assumptions | Examples of open-ended questions |
|---|--|---|
| I don't like my babysitter, she's weird. | What is your babysitter doing to you? | Why do you feel that way? Tell me what you mean by she is 'weird'. |

| Examples of a child or young person's statement | Examples of leading questions/making assumptions | Examples of open-ended questions |
|---|---|---|
| | | Explain to me what you mean by she is 'weird'. |
| A boy from school keeps texting me. | Is he sexting you? | Tell me more about that. Or describe to me what you mean by that. Or explain to me what he is texting you. |
| Uncle Sam is always looking down my tops. The other day he 'accidentally' touched my boob. He's such a perve. I hate him. | Is uncle Sam being sexual towards you? | Tell me more about this. Describe to me what you mean he 'accidentally' touched your boobs? Describe to me what being such a 'perve' means. How old is your uncle? Have you told anyone else about what has happened? |
| My friend's mum is so nice to me, she buys me gifts all the time and invites me over to spend time with her. | Is she trying to groom you? What is she trying to get you to do? | Tell me more about that. |
| I was touched inappropriately. | Were you touched on your penis? | Explain to me what you mean by 'inappropriately'? |
| I was sexually abused when I was 10. | Who raped you? | Tell me what you mean by sexually abused. |
| I was touched. | Did someone touch you on your vagina? | Tell me more about that. Or where were you touched? Or describe to me what happened. When did this happen? |

References

- Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2015). *Responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse*. <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/responding-children-and-young-peoples-disclosures-abuse>.
- Briggs, F. (2012). *Child protection: The essential guide for teachers and other professionals whose work involves children*, Jo-Jo Publishing, Melbourne.