



## Information for professionals on supporting children and families after a child has been abused.

Finding out that a child has been abused can be a stressful time for the professionals that are working with the child. This tipsheet has been developed as a guide to what some of the priorities are in responding to a child who has been abused, as well an information resource to help you assist families and children during this time.

In this tipsheet we use the term parents to refer to parents, carers or guardians of children.

### Your first priority is the safety of the child

Your first priority must be to work with the family to try and ensure the child is safe from future harm or abuse. This may involve the following:

- » Notification to the relevant child protection authorities and the Police if appropriate
- » If there has been recent physical or sexual abuse the appropriateness of a Forensic Medical Examination needs to be determined. This will be determined by the Child Protection Authorities in consultation with specialist Forensic Medical Practitioners and the Police. Forensic medical examinations will only occur if consent is given by parents or legal guardians of the child (if under 18 years).
- » Investigations into allegations of physical or sexual abuse of a child are usually conducted by specialised teams within the Police force; such as Sexual Abuse and Child Abuse Team (SACAT) in the ACT, or the Joint Investigation Response Team (JIRT) in NSW.

Once an incidence of child abuse is disclosed or discovered, the systemic responses are often swift and complicated. This can be confronting and overwhelming for families that are already extremely distressed. An important part of your role

as a professional is to assist families to navigate the system once abuse has occurred. This may include educating them regarding:

- » Child Protection Agencies' role and remit
- » Your role and responsibilities, particularly concerning Mandatory Reporting
- » The family's rights and options regarding notifications to Child Protective Services and reports to the Police
- » What is likely to happen to them and their child, for example, interviews with the authorities
- » Likely involvement of other services such as the Police
- » Supports that are available for themselves and their child

### What can you tell the family of the child?

This is a very vulnerable time for the parents, carers, other family members as well as the child. One of the most important ways that a carer can assist a child who has been abused is to be supportive and protective. Many parents are unsure of how they can respond to the child and may turn to you to ask for guidance on the appropriate ways to respond.

You can support parents and families by providing some basic information at this very difficult time. The following information on common issues regarding child abuse can be helpful to share.

Clinicians can share the information provided here directly with parents. It is ideal to talk through the detail of this information so issues can be discussed as they are raised and the family's distress managed and supported. Parents or family members may become concerned if they feel they have not responded in the 'right' way and be fearful of the consequences of this for the child.



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### Families responding to disclosures should:

**Believe the child:** One of the most beneficial ways an adult can respond following a disclosure of abuse is to believe the child. Many children who have been abused have been told that they will not be believed if they tell, or that there will be dire consequences if they do tell.

**Parents should reassure** the child that they have done the right thing in telling about the abuse, and that they are not in trouble for doing so. Give them age appropriate information regarding what will happen next, ensuring they are clear that the adults will take care of things. Adults need to be careful not to make promises that can't be kept, such as not telling anyone else.

**Parents should act protectively:** Take immediate steps to ensure the safety of the child, as well as the safety of other children who may be exposed to abuse. This may involve contacting Child Protection Agencies or the Police.

**Parents and other family members should seek support for themselves:** Children who have experienced abuse need the adults in their lives to remain calm and in control through this difficult period. Seeking support for their own distress will help parents in being able to best support the child.

### Give the family information about common behaviours and reactions

There are many reactions and behaviours that children may display following child abuse. It can be helpful to educate families regarding what types of behaviours they can expect to see, and how to respond to them.

These behaviours often abate with time, but if they do not, or are particularly distressing, families may want to consider seeking professional support for their child.

### Further disclosures:

- » once a child has made a disclosure regarding abuse, if the reaction was calm and the child was believed, often further disclosures follow. This may be further detail regarding one incident or details regarding other incidents of abuse.

### Regression of behaviours to previous developmental stages such as:

- » thumb-sucking, speech difficulties or toileting issues such as bedwetting or daytime incontinence

### Increased emotional needs such as:

- » increased clinginess, separation anxiety and fearfulness

### Increased emotional vulnerability:

- » increased emotional outbursts
- » aggressive behaviour toward self or others
- » reduced capacity to self soothe
- » depressed mood

### Difficulties with sleep:

- » difficulties getting to sleep
- » night terrors/nightmares
- » fear of sleeping on their own

### Difficulties with social situations:

- » withdrawal from others including family and peers
- » nervousness around large groups
- » fear of strangers

### Difficulties at school:

- » school avoidance
- » reduced capacity for concentration
- » loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities

### Physical complaints:

- » headaches or stomach aches
- » somatic complaints



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### Professionals can educate families dealing with a child who has been abused to:

- » Be aware of the wide range of emotions which children may be experiencing, such as; relief, fear, guilt, anger, sadness and worry.
- » Encourage children to express and explore these emotions through age appropriate means. This may include play and drawing with younger children, or open discussion with older children.
- » Respond to children's emotions and behaviours with tolerance, patience and understanding.
- » Give children clear guidelines about when, where and with whom they can speak about the abuse. Identifying safe adults at home, school and any other environments the children regularly visit that children can speak to and gain support if they need it can help reduce anxiety and increase children's sense of safety.
- » Routine and structure provide a sense of security and safety for children so as much as possible normal family rules and routines should be resumed as soon as possible. Concessions may be made such as extra attention at bedtime or reduced workloads at school initially, but overarching family values and expectations should be maintained.

### Offering hope

Sensitive, timely and attuned responses by families can significantly reduce the long term impact of abuse. Children are resilient and with adequate support many will be able to recover from abuse without significant long term consequences. Parents, carers, family members and children should all be helped to have hope that the future will be better for them.

### Be aware of your own reactions

Supporting families who are coping with the impact of child abuse is stressful and draining work. It can also trigger responses in professionals relating to their own experiences and history. It is important professionals seek their own support from peers or formal supervision sessions as well as engage in preferred forms of self care in order to help cope with the distressing nature of this work. If professionals find the work is too distressing it is important and appropriate to refer clients on others who specialise in this area.

Finally, remember as a professional you can play a significant role in providing support and stability for the family so they in turn can provide this to their child.

### Other resources:

Specialist support services for children and their families who have experienced abuse exist throughout Australia, your local Child Protection Agency will be able to provide details of appropriate services and support. Contact details for these agencies are detailed here  
<http://www.aihw.gov.au/child-protection/>

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) have produced a comprehensive practice brief on *Responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse* with clear advice for both professionals and family or friends.  
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/brief/pb2/pb2.pdf>

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