

## Supporting your child after abuse



This tipsheet talks about some of the real challenges that parents, family members and carers face when they find out that their child has been abused. When a child discloses abuse often the adults around them will feel grief and anger, as well as many other overwhelming feelings. They can also feel helpless and unsure of how to best assist their child. This tipsheet aims to increase your understanding about how a disclosure of child abuse can impact on your family and what you can do to support yourself and your child.

It is difficult to get a consistent picture from research regarding the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in Australia. However, we can be certain that abuse and neglect unfortunately are not rare, and can be devastating for children and their families. Prevalence rates of abuse vary widely and range from 5% to 18% for physical abuse; 2-12% for neglect; 6-17% for emotional maltreatment, and 1-36% for sexual abuse (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2013).

For the purposes of this tipsheet when we talk about child abuse we are referring collectively to physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, exposure to violence and sexual abuse.

The impact of abuse and/or neglect is different for every child and is dependent on a range of factors including:

- » The nature of the abuse; e.g. emotional, physical, sexual
- » The timing of the abuse; the age of the child

when the abuse occurred and how long it lasted

- » The severity of the abuse
- » The reaction of family and loved ones to the disclosure/discovery of abuse
- » The resources available to support the child following the disclosure/discovery of abuse
- » The child's own internal resources and resilience

### Responding to a child when they tell you they have been abused

Finding out that your child has been abused may be one of the most stressful and emotional experiences that you have. Many parents are shocked, angry and upset. Many parents feel that they do not know what to say to their child. They want to help them to feel better but don't always feel confident that they know the best way to do this. Here are some helpful tips on ways to respond your child:

#### Believe

One the most helpful things you can do 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 someone, or that there will be dire consequences if they do tell.

#### Reassure

Reassure the child that they have done the right thing in telling someone about the abuse, and that they are not in trouble for doing so. Give them age appropriate information regarding what will happen

## Supporting your child after abuse

next, ensuring they are clear that the adults will take care of things. Be careful not to make promises you can't keep, such as not telling anyone else.

### 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.

### Seek support for yourself

Specialist services exist throughout Australia to provide support for children and their families who have experienced abuse or neglect. Free confidential advice is available over the phone and will help you in supporting your child through this time. It is most helpful for children if the adults in their lives remain calm and in control through this difficult period. Seeking support for your own distress will be helpful in being able to best support your child.

### Moving forward

Not all children who experience abuse will need professional support, however some may benefit by taking part in counselling or therapy by someone who is experienced in working with children who have been abused. There may be a number of common emotional and behavioural symptoms that children demonstrate following abuse. These often abate with time, but if they do not, or are particularly distressing, it may be helpful to consider seeking professional support for your child.

## The impact that abuse has on children

It is important to recognise that all children respond to abuse and other traumatic events differently. Many children, especially young children but also older children and adolescents, will show that the abuse has impacted on them through their

behaviour. Here we have included some of the ways that your child may behave after a disclosure of abuse.

### 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 incident of abuse.

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

- » A return to behaviours such as thumb-sucking
- » Speech difficulties such as stammering
- » Toileting issues such as bedwetting or daytime incontinence

### Increased emotional needs such as:

- » Increased clinginess to parents and caregivers
- » Increased separation anxiety
- » Increased fearfulness, including fear of the dark or being out of sight of their parents

### Increased emotional vulnerability:

- » Emotional outbursts may be more common including tearfulness and anger
- » Aggressive behaviour toward self or others
- » Reduced capacity to calm down or 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 friends
- » Nervousness around large groups
- » Fear of strangers

## Supporting your child after abuse

### Difficulties at school:

- » School avoidance
- » Reduced capacity for concentration
- » Loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities

### Physical complaints:

- » Headaches or stomach aches

### How to help

Following the disclosure or discovery of abuse children may experience a wide range of emotions that may include relief, fear, guilt, anger, sadness and worry. Children should be encouraged to express and explore these emotions in ways that are appropriate for their age. This may include play and drawing with younger children, or open discussion with older children.

Parents and carers can help children to manage their reactions by responding to children's emotions and behaviours with tolerance, patience and understanding.

Children should be given 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.

The routines and structure of family life 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 they can. 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.

### Where to go for help

- » The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) website has details of where you can go for support or help <http://www.napcan.org.au/urgent-help>
- » CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION SERVICE: National Telephone Support Line – 1800 688 009. Freecall from anywhere in Australia Telephone support workers offer information, referral and ongoing support to those affected by child abuse, concerned about the welfare of a child, or needing family or parenting support. The telephone service operates from 9am - 5pm Monday to Friday and is closed on public holidays.
- » Lifeline: 13 11 14
- » Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800

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