

FACT SHEET — *This fact sheet is for parents, carers, educators and community members.*

If you think a child is being sexually abused

Statistics tell us that in 85% of child sexual abuse cases, the child knows their abuser and that assault takes place in the child's home. ¹

Some professionals have a legal obligation to report suspected abuse to authorities, but all adults have a moral obligation to ensure that children are not in danger. Children who have been abused may say something to a family member or a friend, before they tell their parents. One of the reasons for this is because the child does not want to upset those closest to them.

Changes you may see in a child's behaviour

Children who have been sexually abused may feel confused and distressed, and may:

- Have physical symptoms such as headaches, tummy pain, problems sleeping, bed wetting and nightmares;
- Touch themselves sexually in front of other people, or try to touch other people in a sexual way;
- Try harder at school as a way of blocking out what has happened;
- They may have difficulty at school because they're unable to concentrate because of the abuse;
- Isolate themselves and stop playing with their friends;
- Behave in ways that can harm themselves or other people.

Children who have been sexually abused may feel:

- Scared about getting their abuser into trouble;
- Worried that they're to blame;
- Ashamed that they have been abused;
- Angry that they have been abused;
- Feel let down that the adults around them did not protect them;
- Powerless to change their situation;
- Confused about what might happen if they tell.

What you can do to find out more information from a child

A child may say something to you, or you may notice a change in their behaviour. They may say things like:

- “Something happened to me.”
- “I don’t like going to (place) anymore.”
- “Sometimes my step-dad keeps me up at night.”

An effective, but simple question you can ask is “Can you tell me a bit more about that?”

Show your care and concern.

Ask them, “Are you OK?” Talk to them about ‘body signals’ that are warning signs of not feeling safe: tummy butterflies, jelly legs, sweaty palms, goose bumps, o-oh thoughts and wanting to go to the toilet.

Children disclose what’s happened to them over time.

Your role to listen and support them. Allow time for them trust that you will listen to them and help them. Take time to soothe and reassure them and let them say what’s happened in their own way, in their own words. Do not quiz them for details or ask them to repeat the story several times.

You need to give the child your full attention and provide a safe place to talk.

Children do not think about the best time or place to talk. If it’s noisy, ask if you can go somewhere else, where you can hear properly, though respect their wishes about the best place to talk. Some certain places may trigger memories or reminders of abuse. For example: being alone with an adult in a quiet, isolated place may make them feel anxious. And if you’re busy with something when they begin to talk, stop what you’re doing and make yourself available to listen.

Stay calm

You may have strong feelings when you hear about child sexual abuse. It will help if you can be patient and calm, even though this may feel difficult. If the abuse happened in the past, the child has already survived it. The only thing that has changed is that you know about it now. If the child sees you’re upset, you can say that you feel sad because they have been hurt, but you are very glad they were able to tell you. Even if you have many questions about what has happened, do not ask. It is not your role to investigate.

Don’t worry about knowing the right thing to say. Just listen and be supportive. Say things like:

“You have been very brave and strong to talk about this.”

“What happened is not your fault. You have done nothing wrong.”

Tell them what will happen next

Do not promise that you won't tell anyone about what has happened. Explain that for them to be safe, and to get the right sort of help, you will need to talk to a professional who deals with these issues and they will help decide what to do next. Explain to the child that they may need to talk to this other person, and that you will help and support them through that process. Tell them that they can ask questions as often as they need to.

Seek professional advice.

Do not confront the perpetrator or discuss with them what the child has said. Talk to a professional straight away — you do not need to have the full story to discuss your concerns with them.

The following organizations will help you keep the child safe. You may be asked for information such as your contact details and how the child talked with you.

Child Protection Crisis Line

13 12 78 24 hours

7 days a week Toll free within Victoria

Centre Against Sexual Assault Central Victoria (CASACV)

03 5441 0430 (BH)

1800 806 292 (AF)

National Child Abuse Prevention Helpline

1800 99 10 99

childwise.net

Kids Help Line

1800 551 800

kidshelp.com.au