

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

How to help a child or young person who has been sexually abused

As children and adolescents grow they're still learning how the world works. Sexual abuse erodes their ability to trust people around them and affects their perception of what normal, healthy relationships are. With care and support children and young people do heal from trauma.

Let the child know that you believe them.

It's vitally important they feel there's an adult in their lives they can trust. Let them know they're now safe, and that you will protect them. Some children may still feel loyal to their abuser. This can happen when the abuse has been long-term and the abuser has been a trusted friend or family member.

Talking

Children often don't tell about sexual abuse straight away. Sometimes it can take months or years. The abuser may have made threats about the consequences of telling. The child may find it difficult to talk to you about what's happened. Don't force them to talk. Let them know you're available whenever they're ready and that they have control over when they want to talk, who they talk to, and what they talk about.

Common behaviours in children and young people after sexual abuse

The after effects of sexual abuse are varied, and every child or adolescent will behave differently. Even the most resilient child or adolescent can be overwhelmed from the cumulative effects of sexual abuse.

Common responses

- Anger towards the abuser.
- Anxiety around people who are physically or culturally similar to their abuser.
- Feeling of being betrayed by all adults — because the adults failed to stop it.
- Angry at themselves for not stopping the abuse.
- A sense of shame — the abuser may have made them believe it was their fault.
- Feeling stigmatised.
- Withdrawing and not engaging with school or social activities.

Helping the child or young person to keep healthy and well

It's essential that both these age groups maintain solid sleep patterns along with a healthy diet. Rest and good nutrition make the body strong and provide a solid platform for them to work through the recovery process.

Memories and flashbacks

Children — Children are particularly vulnerable to flashbacks at quiet times, particularly bedtime. They try to avoid these situations by acting out at school (during quiet time) and at bedtime. Children also experience disrupted sleep from nightmares which then affect their performance and behaviour at school the next day.

Adolescents — Adolescents will often stay up all night to avoid nightmares, preferring to sleep in the safety of the daylight. To avoid distressing and intrusive memories and flashbacks they can also turn to alcohol and drug abuse.

When to seek help from a counsellor

A counsellor can help you and the child talk about the abuse. They can guide a discussion that can reveal how the abuser manipulated the situation and made sure that the abuse was kept secret. This helps both you and the child understand that the abuse is completely the fault of the abuser.

If the child is having trouble sleeping or their behaviour is worrying, again a counsellor will be able to work with you, the child and family to help them recover.

Your reactions

Many children worry that talking about what's happened will upset others they care about. If they can see that you're not overwhelmed, then they'll be more willing to talk. Never give the impression that you might be blaming them. Don't ask questions that could imply you think they could have stopped the assault. For example, don't ask *'Why didn't you say or do something?'*

You may be worried about letting the child out of your sight, but the child's usual activities should be continued as much as possible. The familiar routines of school, hobbies and sports will help reassure your child that life will not fall apart because they told about the abuse.

Some people worry about hugging the child or showing affection. Some children may feel uncomfortable about physical affection as it may bring back memories of the assault. Give the child control. Ask questions like, *'Would you like a hug?'* This lets them know that you care and value closeness. It's also an important way of giving the child the message that they have the right to control who touches them and how.

Don't ask too many questions

You'll probably have lots of questions, but it's best not to ask too many. Leave this to the Police as they're trained to interview children with empathy and care. There's also an important legal reason why you shouldn't ask too many questions. If charges are laid, and the case goes to court, then there's a concern that the child's recollection could have been influenced by your discussions. Ask the child how they're feeling and coping — just don't ask specific questions about the abuse. If you are the parent, guardian of the child you may be entitled to read or view the child's statement.