

# DISCLOSURE OF ABUSE

## 1. Types of Disclosure

### 1.1. Accidental

- Somebody walks in on the abuse.
- Caught in the act of sexual play.
- Someone overhears the child talking of abuse.
- Inappropriate sexual activity.

In the above examples the child is often not ready to talk about the abuse in these cases, and sometimes inappropriate sexual activity may be due to reasons other than abuse.

### 1.2. Purposeful

- The victim wants the abuse to stop and/or is ready to take control in order to change his/her circumstances.

*Note:*

- Disclosure is a process and it will take time. It is not a single/isolated event.

*Remember:*

- The role of the educator and/or parent is one of reporting the abuse, supporting the child and not the case. For example, it is not the educator's role or responsibility to insist on seeing physical evidence of abuse, or to question the child about the abuse.

**Under no circumstances should an educator take it upon him/herself to examine the child for signs of sexual abuse, e.g. removing underwear and touching or examining the child's private parts or to cross examine the child on the details of the child's disclosure.**

*If the child wants to show his/her injuries say: "I do believe that this has happened to you. It is a nurse or doctor's job to make a report on the physical signs of what happened to you. Will you allow me to talk to the school sister/nurse. I am not qualified to write a report on your injuries."*

*Remember:*

- Do not condemn the offender whom the child may love. The victim wants the abuser to stop and not necessarily to have the perpetrator punished.

## 2. Outline for Dealing with Disclosure

At the time of disclosure, whether it is accidental or purposeful by the child, it is normal for one to feel anger or fear and to want to quickly remedy the situation. Despite what you might be feeling, remember that you have to act in the best interests of the child so *react cautiously and if one is uncertain, confer with a the support team in your school or with an organization such as Childline.*

Below is an outline of how to deal with a child who is disclosing:

- Acknowledge the child's statement.
- If possible, try to remain calm and not show any shock.
- Reassure the child and refrain from any judgments.
- Ensure that you are discussing the issue privately.
- Always show the child that you believe what they are telling you.
- Try to avoid questions that involve "why" as they sound as if you're placing blame.
- Always reaffirm the child that they are not to blame for what has happened and that they did nothing to encourage it.
- Empathise with the child by showing them that you know how difficult it is for them to discuss something like this.
- Reassure the child that you will be getting some help but avoid false reassurances such as everything will be all right now that you have told.
- Make a note of everything the child tells you.
- Lastly, reinforce the child for having told you, e.g. *"I'm glad you told me."*

### **3. After Disclosure**

After a child has disclosed to you, keep the following in mind:

- Explain to the child that you need to involve other adults to help.
- Inform the headmaster (he should, in consultation with the educator and an experienced Social Worker, decide at which stage and by whom the parent should be contacted).
- Follow school policy on child abuse.
- Contact the parent.
- Report/lay a 'Suspicion Charge' at a welfare organization and/or CPU.
- Contact a social worker.
- Contact other resources if necessary.
- Treat the child's disclosure as confidential within the confines of who needs to be told in order for the child's well-being and safety to be secured.
- After the child has disclosed make written notes on the content of what the child has said and the demeanor of the child and keep these notes in a safe place. If you are the first person to whom the child had disclosed abuse you may be subpoenaed to court as a "first report witness" in order to testify to the content and context of the child's disclosure. You will not be an expert witness. Sometimes this happens a long time – even years – after the child has disclosed to you.

NOTE! If the educator is the alleged perpetrator, inform the headmaster and/or the abuse committee (he in turn must inform the District Office).
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## 4. Reasons for Disclosure

### 4.1. Reasons for Non-disclosure

When caught up in sexual abuse, a child develops an adjustment pattern to the abuse. Here are some reasons for not disclosing:

- **Lack of awareness of the wrongfulness of the abuse:** Younger children especially may not be aware that gentle sexual acts between children and older persons are wrong and abusive.
- **Secrecy:** Victims of child abuse are often threatened with physical violence and/or withdrawal of love and affection so they rather keep the abuse secret.
- **Afraid of disapproval or punishment:** Although they are desperately unhappy because of the abuse, they also want approval and do not want the abuse to escalate. They therefore do not want to 'rock the boat'.
- **Helplessness:** Children are unable to stop the abuse and although they may resist initially, they later abandon active resistance in an effort to protect themselves.
- **Entrapment:** An abused child may feel entrapped by feelings of helplessness and secrecy leading to feelings of self-blame and guilt. In addition, the child faces other pressure, e.g. he/she has the power to "destroy" the family, but the responsibility to keep it together (taking on a pseudo-adult role).

With the stress, a child may develop different personalities to cope with complex feelings. This in turn leads to psychological maladjustment and even multiple personalities in some survivors. Their mental state becomes such that they become confused and therefore do not disclose.

### 4.2. Reasons for Disclosure

Some victims decide to disclose their abuse as a result of:

- **Impossible home situation:** The situation at home may be so bad that the child cannot imagine anything worse. They would rather report the abuse and live with those consequences than stay and continue to be abused.
- **Presence of a sensitive friend or helper, e.g. teacher:** Having someone trustworthy as a friend makes the disclosure easier for the victim as they know that when they have disclosed, they will receive emotional support.
- **Perpetrator no longer in contact (divorce):** For obvious reasons, the presence of the perpetrator is a major threat to the abused child. As a result, the child gains the courage to disclose the abuse.
- **Education strategies e.g. Childline:** Whilst we all inherently know that abuse is wrong, a child who feels completely alone, does not know they can report their abuse. Education strategies by organizations such as Childline, reinforces to a child the fact that the abuse is wrong and that they are not alone. Receiving information about *where* to report the abuse is also vital.
- **Fear of consequences:** Sometimes when girls begin to develop physically and receive education on the results of sexual intercourse, they may be anxious about pregnancy.

## 5. The Healing Process

A child who has been sexually abused may need professional therapy. You can help by being aware of the kind of things they need to work on and the goals of treatment.

### 5.1. General Treatment Goals

- Form a positive self image.
- Establish appropriate trust in other people.
- Acknowledge emotions.
- Vent aggression; receive support in dealing with their anger.
- Experience positive adult and peer interaction.
- Learn how to communicate needs and feelings verbally.
- Develop alternate and more acceptable means of coping behaviour.

### 5.2. Therapists Help Children to Cope and Heal

It is important that children who have been abused receive assistance from appropriate care givers and therapists. Children who do not receive assistance, may find it very hard to cope with the trauma of the abuse. The psychological effects of child abuse can also lead to social and emotional problems in adulthood.

The following are some of the problems children need help with in order to cope and heal:

- **Damaged-goods syndrome:** A feeling that they have been permanently dirtied; in the case of sexual abuse, a sense that sex is the only value they have to other people. In addition, sometimes children have been treated like damaged-goods by other adults after the abuse have been made known.
- **Guilt:** A belief that they are to blame for the abuse and for the family disruptions and changes.
- **Fear:** There is a fear of events they cannot predict.
- **Depression:** The child needs help with feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and suicidal tendencies.
- **Low self-esteem:** The child feels 'small', helpless and worthless.
- **Repressed anger:** The child feels very hurt and wants to lash out; further anger because the hurt has not been given expression.
- **Poor social skills:** The child feels inadequate when dealing with their own peers; a belief that they don't have importance to other people.
- **Impaired ability to trust:** Since an important bond has been violated, children may respond by trusting no-one or by inappropriately trusting people who may hurt them further.
- **Blurred role boundaries:** Children have often assumed roles they are not developmentally ready for such as acting as emotional partner, mother, or even mistress.