



Responding to Disclosures of Child Sexual Assault

It is hard for anyone to disclose about a sexual assault. For children who have limited language and understanding of what they are disclosing, it can be even more difficult. Offenders usually put a great deal of effort into ensuring the child remains silent. Some of the reasons children don't disclose may be:

- They feel responsible for the sexual assault in some way
- They feel guilty about their body's natural response (even though it is beyond their control)
- They feel that no one will believe them
- They may have been told by the offender that their disclosure will cause problems such as family breakdowns or the offender going to gaol
- The offender may be someone they heavily relied on or made them feel 'special'
- They don't want anyone to be angry or upset with them or the offender

Your response to any disclosure of an assault can be the first important step in stopping the assault and protecting the child from further harm. This initial response can vary depending on circumstances and needs. Responses may consist of implementing protective strategies, engaging appropriate support services or making reports to relevant authorities.

If a child discloses, try to keep in mind the following steps:

- **LISTEN:** Listen carefully to all that they say. Have eye contact at the child's level, check that you have understood, put your adult thoughts aside and be respectful of the child's perspective.
- **AFFIRM:** Tell the child that you believe them.

- **DON'T BLAME:** Let the child know that what has happened is not their fault.
- **SUPPORT:** Tell the child that they are not responsible for the assault and acknowledge that it must have been difficult for them to tell you.
- **SAFETY:** Let the child know that you will do everything in your power to help them.
- **DOCUMENT:** Write everything down, using the child's own words as best you can. Include behaviours and any thing they have said previously that may have hinted at the assault.
- **CHECK:** Check your organisation's policy on reporting disclosures.
- **ACT:** In the best interests of the child, report the disclosure to your State's statutory child protection authority or the Police.

Try not to...

- Make promises you cannot keep such as promising them they won't see the alleged offender again.
- Interrogate the child and push for details. This includes avoiding leading questions such as "who did that?" or "did ____ do that?".
- Discuss the disclosure with others not directly involved in keeping the child safe

Tips:

- Use general language such as "could you tell me more about that?" if you would like further details.
- Let the child know that you will need to tell someone to help keep them safe. This may upset the child but it is very important that you act protectively for the child.



Be aware of the emotional distress that a child may be experiencing, and always approach the child in a *caring* and *sensitive* manner by assuring them that you are there to listen, and that you will do everything you can to help keep them safe.