

2.5 Responding to a child who discloses abuse – suggested guidelines

Remember, a child may disclose abuse to you as a trusted adult at any time during your work with them. It is important that you are aware and prepared for this.

- Be as calm and natural as possible.
- Remember that you have been approached because you are trusted and possibly liked. Do not panic.
- Be aware that disclosures can be very difficult for the child.
- Remember, the child may initially be testing your reactions and may only fully open up over a period of time.
- Listen to what the child has to say. Give them the time and opportunity to tell as much as they are able and wish to.
- Do not pressurise the child. Allow him or her to disclose at their own pace and in their own language.
- Conceal any signs of disgust, anger or disbelief.
- Accept what the child has to say – false disclosures are very rare.
- It is important to differentiate between the person who carried out the abuse and the act of abuse itself. The child quite possibly may love or strongly like the alleged abuser while also disliking what was done to them. It is important therefore to avoid expressing any judgement on, or anger towards, the alleged perpetrator while talking with the child.
- It may be necessary to reassure the child that your feelings towards him or her have not been affected in a negative way as a result of what they have disclosed.

When asking questions

- Questions should be supportive and for the purpose of clarification only.
- Avoid leading questions, such as asking whether a specific person carried out the abuse. Also, avoid asking about intimate details or suggesting that something else may have happened other than what you have been told. Such questions and suggestions could complicate the official investigation.

Confidentiality – Do not promise to keep secrets

At the earliest opportunity, tell the child that:

- You acknowledge that they have come to you because they trust you.
- You will be sharing this information only with people who understand this area and who can help. There are secrets, which are not helpful and should not be kept because they make matters worse. Such secrets hide things that need to be known if people are to be helped and protected from further ongoing hurt. By refusing to make a commitment to secrecy to the child, you do run the risk that they may not tell you everything (or, indeed, anything) there and then. However, it is better to do this than to tell a lie and ruin the child's confidence in yet another adult. By being honest, it is more likely that the child will return to you at another time.

Think before you promise anything – Do not make promises you cannot keep

At the earliest possible opportunity:

- Record in writing, in factual manner, what the child has said, including, as far as possible, the exact words used by the child.
- Inform your supervisor/manager immediately and agree measures to protect the child, i.e. report the matter directly to the HSE.
- Maintain appropriate confidentiality.

Follow your organisation's procedures for child protection issues. Further support regarding concerns is available from the HSE.

Ongoing support

Following a disclosure by a child, it is important that the staff member continues in a supportive relationship with the child. Disclosure is a huge step for a child. Staff should continue to offer support, particularly through:

- maintaining a positive relationship with the child;
- keeping lines of communication open by listening carefully to the child;
- continuing to include the child in the usual activities.

Any further disclosure should be treated as a first disclosure and responded to as indicated above. Where necessary, immediate action should be taken to ensure the child's safety.

2.6 What to do if you are concerned about a child's safety and/or welfare

Protecting children should not be seen as a separate response from promoting their welfare. Those with protection concerns must be mindful of the welfare and needs of a child in the same way that those with child welfare concerns must be alert to potential abuse and neglect.

2.7 Informal consultation

If any person has misgivings about the safety or welfare of a child, they may consult the HSE Children and Family Services' Duty Social Worker to seek advice through initiating an informal consultation. This could be just a telephone call and provides an opportunity to discuss the query in general and to decide whether a formal referral is warranted.

The consulting party needs to state explicitly that they are not making a report – that they are giving details of a concern, but no identifying information in relation to a child or family.

Remember – if in doubt, check it out. If you are concerned about the safety of a child and are unsure what to do, talk to your line manager or a HSE social worker.

2.8 Out-of-hours services/In case of an emergency

Ensure that you are aware of your local area Emergency Services arrangements since different arrangements are in place across HSE health areas.

In the event of an emergency where you think a child is in immediate danger and you cannot get in contact with the HSE Children and Family Services' Duty Social Worker, you should contact the Gardaí.

Under no circumstances should a child be left in a situation that exposes him or her to harm.