



Australian Government
Australian Institute of
Family Studies



Responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse

Mandy Truong

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Practice guide | February 2025





The Australian Institute of Family Studies acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands and waters. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.

© Commonwealth of Australia 2025

With the exception of AIFS branding, the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, content provided by third parties, and any material protected by a trademark, all textual material presented in this publication is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence (CC BY 4.0). You may copy, distribute and build upon this work for commercial and non-commercial purposes; however, you must attribute the Commonwealth of Australia as the copyright holder of the work. Content that is copyrighted by a third party is subject to the licensing arrangements of the original owner.



The Australian Institute of Family Studies is committed to the creation and dissemination of research-based information on family functioning and wellbeing. Views expressed in its publications are those of individual authors and may not reflect those of the Australian Institute of Family Studies or the Australian Government.

Australian Institute of Family Studies
Level 4, 40 City Road, Southbank VIC 3006 Australia
Ph: (03) 9214 7888 Web: aifs.gov.au

Cover image: © gettyimages/Shapecharge

ISBN (online): 978-1-76016-377-8
ISBN (PDF): 978-1-76016-378-5

Suggested citation: Truong, M. (2025). *Responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse* (Practice guide). Child Family Community Australia, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Edited by Katharine Day
Typeset by Rachel Evans

2501_responding to children and YP

Contents

Overview	2
Who is this guide for?	2
Introduction	3
If you are a parent, family member, other adult or friend	3
If you work for an organisation that works with or for children and young people	3
What do we know about disclosures of abuse?	5
What is a disclosure of abuse?	5
When might a child or young person disclose?	5
Barriers to disclosure	5
Enablers to disclosure	6
How might a child or young person disclose?	6
Secondary or second-hand disclosures of abuse	7
When the person causing harm is a child or young person	7
What to do when a child or young person discloses abuse	7
Give the child or young person your full attention	8
Maintain a calm appearance	8
Reassure the child or young person that it is right to tell	8
Recognise the bravery and strength of the child for talking about something that is difficult	9
Let the child or young person take their time	9
Understand and accept the child or young person will disclose only what is comfortable	9
Let the child or young person use their own words	9
Do not make promises you cannot keep	9
Let the child or young person know what you will do next	10
Do not confront the person causing harm	10
Self-care and support for individuals responding to disclosures	10
Further reading and related resources	11
Related AIFS resources	11
Other guides for responding to disclosures of child abuse and maltreatment	11
Other websites	11
Information on Child Safe Organisations	12
Acknowledgements	12
References	13

Overview

This is a guide to responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse and maltreatment. It also outlines what we know about how, why and when children and young people are likely to disclose abuse and provides information to help individuals respond to these disclosures.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for family members, friends, other adults and professionals working with children and young people. The way that individuals respond to disclosures of abuse may differ according to their role in the child's life. Child protection workers and professionals working in specialist services (e.g. sexual abuse/assault services) should consider this information in conjunction with their organisation's protocols and the relevant state/territory child protection legislation.

Introduction

Child abuse or maltreatment refers to any behaviour or treatment by parents, caregivers, other adults or older adolescents that results in the likelihood of and/or actual physical or emotional harm to a child or young person (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS], 2018; AIFS, 2023). Child abuse can include physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and exposure to domestic violence (Haslam et al., 2023).

In Australia, child abuse and maltreatment are widespread and are associated with severe mental health problems and behavioural harms, both in childhood and adulthood (Haslam et al., 2023). According to the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), 62.2% of the population have experienced at least one type of child maltreatment (Haslam et al., 2023). Experiences of child abuse are rarely isolated events nor limited to a single type (Haslam et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2017). The ACMS also found that girls are significantly more likely than boys to experience sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and multiple types of maltreatment. In the vast majority of incidents, child sexual abuse is inflicted by males (Haslam et al., 2023; Mathews et al., 2024).

Despite how common experiences of child abuse are, many victim-survivors of child abuse do not disclose until many years after the abuse and some never disclose at all (Royal Commission on Child Sexual Abuse [Royal Commission], 2017a; McQuire & London, 2020; Meinck et al., 2017). The Royal Commission on Child Sexual Abuse (2017a) found that whether, when, how and to whom a victim-survivor discloses is influenced by various factors, including age, developmental stage, disability status, gender and cultural or linguistic background.

Research suggests that an individual who experiences abuse will commonly think through their personal situation and weigh up the anticipated risks or benefits when deciding whether to disclose (Brennan & McElvaney, 2020; Morrison et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to be aware of the factors that may influence a disclosure so a supportive environment can be provided to help a person through their disclosure experience.

Most research into children and young people's disclosures has focused on disclosures of child sexual abuse – however, the issues discussed in this guide are likely to be relevant to disclosures of other types of abuse (e.g. physical, psychological and emotional abuse).

This guide aims to help individuals respond to children and young people's disclosures of abuse and maltreatment. It also outlines what we know about how, why and when children and young people are likely to disclose abuse. The information in this resource is drawn from research and practice.

If you are a parent, family member, other adult or friend

Children and young people are most likely to initially disclose abuse to a trusted adult (e.g. parent, family member, teacher, coach) or peer (i.e. same- or similar-aged friend) (Brennan & McElvaney, 2020; Winters et al., 2020). Hearing that a child or young person has been abused is distressing, and this may feel more intense if you are their friend or relative. It is possible that the person causing harm is known to you and may even be a family member.

If a child discloses abuse:

- It is important to remember that while it is your role to be a supportive listener, it is not your role to counsel the child or investigate their claim(s). Child protection workers or police will undertake investigations and professional counsellors are available to provide counselling.
- Remember to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the child or young person while ensuring the necessary people are informed of the disclosure. Take into account who the child or young person wants informed.
- Disclosures of abuse should be reported to the reporting authority in your state or territory.

If you work for an organisation that works with or for children and young people

Organisations that have contact with children and young people should have a set of protocols to respond quickly and effectively to any concerns, disclosures, allegations or suspicions of abuse and harm. In 2019, the Australian Human Rights Commission released the [National Principles for Child Safe Organisations](#) in response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission (2017). It provides a national approach, which has informed each state or territory's approach, to embedding a child safe culture across all sectors, including recommendations on how to respond to concerns, suspicions and disclosures of abuse.

If a child or young person in the care of an organisation you work for discloses abuse:

- It is essential to follow the organisation's protocols as well as make a report to the police or statutory child protection authority in your state/territory. If there are no protocols in place, you or your management should contact the police or relevant child protection department in your state/territory and follow mandatory reporting legislation in your state/territory. Further information is available in [Further reading and related resources](#).
- Most importantly, the needs and welfare of the child or young person must take priority over any perceived threat to the reputation of the organisation or associated individuals (Irenyi et al., 2006).
- Unless you are working in an official capacity as a child protection worker or counsellor, it is important to remember that while it is your role to be a supportive listener, it is not your role to counsel the child or investigate their claims. Child protection workers or police will undertake investigations and professional counsellors are available to provide counselling.
- Remember to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the child or young person while ensuring the necessary people are informed of the disclosure.

Promoting a culture of child safety and wellbeing within organisations is critical to ensuring children and young people are safe. For information on creating a child safe organisation and environment, refer to [Further reading and related resources](#) at the end of this guide.

Reporting disclosures of abuse

Anyone who suspects, on reasonable grounds, that a child is at risk of being abused and/or neglected should report it to the reporting authority in their state or territory. See [Reporting child abuse and neglect](#).

Additionally, each state and territory has its own mandatory reporting law that specifies who is required to report known or suspected cases of child abuse and neglect to government authorities. In the Northern Territory, it is mandatory for any person to report any suspicion of abuse or neglect of a child to government authorities. In Queensland, all adults must report child sexual abuse by an adult. In all other states and territories, certain groups of people (e.g. teachers, doctors, nurses, police and early childhood educators) are required by law to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect.

Further information and guidelines regarding mandatory reporting can be found in this resource: [Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect](#).

Locating the appropriate authority in your state or territory

Contact details for the statutory child protection authority with responsibility for receiving and responding to reports of child abuse can be found in the [Reporting Abuse and Neglect](#) resource. In most cases it is possible to make anonymous reports, although it must be remembered that if an anonymous report is made, authorities cannot subsequently contact the person making the report if clarification or further information is required.

The next sections outline what we know about how, why and when children and young people are likely to disclose abuse. It also provides information to help individuals respond to disclosures of abuse.

What do we know about disclosures of abuse?

What is a disclosure of abuse?

Disclosure is the process by which children and young people share their experiences of abuse or maltreatment with others (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], 2023). It is rarely a one-off event and can take place over a long period of time (Reitsema & Grietens, 2016; Thulin et al., 2020). Disclosure may be purposeful or accidental.

At the time of disclosure:

- Disclosure is about seeking support and your response can have a big impact on the child or young person's ability to seek further help and recover from the trauma.
- When there is a suspicion of abuse or a child discloses that they have been abused, it is important to offer immediate support and comfort to the child, as well as to help protect them from further abuse. It is also a chance to help the child connect to professional services that can keep them safe, provide support and facilitate their recovery from trauma.

When might a child or young person disclose?

- The child or young person's type of disclosure may be influenced by their developmental features, such as their age when the abuse began and/or their age at the time of disclosure.

Children and young people can disclose abuse at any time. If the abuse is ongoing over a period of weeks, months or years, they may disclose while the abuse is happening. Others might disclose either immediately after the abuse has ended or years later. Many children do not disclose abuse at all during childhood (Alaggia et al., 2019; Royal Commission, 2017a).

Research suggests that younger children (12 years and under) are more likely to disclose experiences of abuse to their mother whereas older children (over 12 years old) are more likely to disclose to a peer (McElvaney et al., 2020). Further, research suggests that accidental and eyewitness detection may be more likely with younger children (Alaggia et al., 2019).

Barriers to disclosure

Delays in disclosure may be linked to a range of factors including concerns about what may happen after their disclosure. The stress of disclosing and receiving potentially negative responses from adults may lead some children to recant in an attempt to ease the stress (National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, 2024). Children and young people often experience barriers to disclosure, including:

- fear of not being believed (Collin-Vézina et al., 2015; McElvaney et al., 2020)
- pressure or threats from the person causing harm (e.g. threats of harm to the child/person, their family members or friends) (Royal Commission, 2017a)
- feelings of shame, self-blame, guilt and embarrassment (Royal Commission, 2017a).
- fears about the negative outcomes of disclosure – to themselves, their family and/or the person causing harm (e.g. physical injury/death, emotional distress, family separation, housing instability, financial issues) (Collin-Vézina et al., 2015; Morrison et al., 2018; Winters et al., 2020)
- perceived and actual lack of support from others (Latiff et al., 2024; McPherson et al., 2024).
- being worried that formal reporting processes will cause them distress (Winters et al., 2020)
- reasons or factors related to culture, identity, gender, sexuality and disability (e.g. taboos about sex and sexuality, patriarchal attitudes, social/religious/cultural norms, fear of reprisal and non-support, lower social status of children) (Fontes & Plummer, 2020; McPherson et al., 2024; Sawriker & Katz, 2017).

Further, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people can face additional barriers, including (Funston, 2013; McPherson et al., 2024; Royal Commission, 2017b):

- racism and discrimination contributing to mistrust of authorities such as police and child protection services
- fear related to being re-traumatised by non-Indigenous workers who have limited understanding of the impacts of history and fears of being removed from their family
- shame related to cultural abuse and a sense of bringing shame to their broader community
- lack of cultural safety
- language barriers, where cultural or language interpreters are unavailable.

(See [Further reading and related resources](#) below for resources on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.)

There may be additional and emerging barriers related to online and technology-facilitated abuse, which are beyond the scope of this resource to explore in detail. For example, children or young people may feel shame and self-blame in situations where harmful images or photos are being shared online by others in an attempt to gain money or other favours (Finkelhor et al., 2023). Children or young people may be reluctant to disclose experiences of online abuse if they have been online without the knowledge of their parent/carer.

Enablers to disclosure

Research has identified some factors that make it more likely a child or young person will disclose abuse. These include:

- children and young people being asked and being given the opportunity to tell (Alaggia et al., 2019)
- having a safe, private place and being with someone the child or young person trusts (Gagnier & Collin-Vezina cited in Alaggia et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2018)
- having social supports such as a friend, teacher or parent that they can confide in (McPherson et al., 2024; Winters et al., 2020)
- being provided with information and education on topics such as child safety, sex, abuse and consent (Alaggia et al., 2019; Lemaigre et al., 2017).

How might a child or young person disclose?

A child or young person's disclosure is rarely straightforward, and they can disclose abuse in several ways. Children may disclose indirectly or directly and in different ways to different people; disclosure may be verbal or non-verbal, accidental or intentional, partial or complete (Royal Commission, 2017a).

- Some children may drop hints and little signs to begin with or change their behaviour. This can be a way to test the responses of the person they are disclosing to or may be because they do not know how to fully articulate what is happening or has happened (Reitema & Grietens, 2016). For example, a child or young person might suddenly refuse to attend the house of a previously loved relative.
- Some children may talk about a situation making them feel concerned, uncomfortable or unsafe without recognising or articulating it as abuse (Cossar et al., 2019).
- Sometimes children and young people only give some details about what they've experienced (i.e. partial disclosure).
- Children and young people who experience abuse may display a range of physical behaviours and emotional signs that could be indicators of distress, trauma and abuse (Cossar et al., 2019). For example, they may begin saying and doing sexual things that are inappropriate for their age.

Although changes in a child or young person may not always be a sign of abuse, individuals can be equipped to identify signs of possible abuse and to receive disclosures of possible child abuse in a supportive manner (Reitema & Grietens, 2016; Royal Commission, 2017a).

Secondary or second-hand disclosures of abuse

Given children and young people, especially those over 12 years old, commonly disclose to a peer or friend (McElvaney et al., 2020), it is not unusual for trusted adults to receive a secondary or second-hand disclosure of abuse from the friend, sibling or peer of a child who is experiencing abuse. The child or young person that shares this information may not understand what they have heard. They may be seeking clarification about the disclosure, or they may be troubled, upset or worried about what they have heard or seen. They may be concerned that they are 'dobbing' or breaching the trust of their peer.

While it is not the role of the individual who hears a secondary disclosure to investigate, gently gathering information from the child can be useful to aid a follow-up. This may include the name of who they are speaking about, or other identifying information about them, such as where they know them from and when they were told about it.

If the child or young person doesn't know or doesn't want to share the details, it can be useful to provide them with some tips about how they can encourage their peer to seek the help of an adult. This can include explaining some of the tips included in this resource in a way that is age appropriate, in addition to providing whatever information has been provided to the relevant authorities.

It is important for adults to listen carefully to the secondary or second-hand disclosure and to reassure the child or young person that they did the right thing by telling an adult. It is an opportunity to provide immediate support and comfort to the child or young person and to talk about next steps that can be taken together to protect their peer from further abuse.

In some cases, a secondary or second-hand disclosure may be the first step to a further disclosure about their own experience of abuse. Therefore, it is important that the child or young person sees they are believed and that action will be taken to protect the safety of all children.

When the person causing harm is a child or young person

Children and young people may also disclose harm caused by another child or young person. This form of abuse or maltreatment can be as serious as that perpetrated by an adult.

The context and reasons for why a child or young person is causing harm to others are often complex and are usually considered as a different phenomenon to adult-perpetrated abuse and maltreatment (Campbell et al., 2023). Young people who cause harm often need support themselves. It is advised that a child or young person causing harm should not be described as an 'offender' or 'perpetrator' because it places them in the same category as adult offenders. This can reduce their chances of receiving appropriate support to reduce the likelihood of them causing further harm (National Office for Child Safety, 2024).

However, the information about disclosure – and taking disclosure seriously – that we provide in this resource still applies in situations where the person causing harm is a child or young person.

What to do when a child or young person discloses abuse

In this section we discuss in more detail the things that you can do to be supportive while a child or young person is disclosing. It is important to remember, however, that if a child or young person has decided to speak to you about their experiences of abuse, then there is a good chance they trust you. Simply by calmly and empathically listening and offering support, you are helping the child or young person.

The timing of the child or young person's disclosure will influence their immediate needs and this, in turn, will determine the most appropriate response. For a child or young person who discloses that they are currently being abused, the immediate priority is safety and protection from further abuse. Anyone who suspects, on reasonable grounds, that a child is at risk of being abused and/or neglected should report it to the reporting authority in their state or territory as soon as possible.

See [Further reading and related resources](#) for further information on reporting child abuse and neglect.

Some general tips for responding to disclosure (Bravehearts, 2018; Emerging Minds, n.d.; Kids Helpline, 2025; National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, n.d.):

- Give the child or young person your full attention.
- Maintain a calm appearance.
- Reassure the child or young person it is right to tell. Tell the child or young person that you believe them and that the abuse or maltreatment is not their fault.
- Recognise the bravery and strength of the child for talking about something that is difficult.
- Let the child or young person take their time.
- Understand and accept the child or young person will disclose only what is comfortable.
- Let the child or young person use their own words.
- Do not make promises you cannot keep.
- Tell the child or young person what you plan to do next. Ask the child or young person what they need or hope to happen after they told you.
- Do not confront the person causing harm (i.e. the perpetrator).

These points are discussed in more detail below.

Give the child or young person your full attention

A child or young person might not always choose the best location to begin talking about what happened to them. If you are in a busy and/or noisy place, ask the child or young person if you can move to a place where you can hear them properly. While remaining sensitive to the child or young person's needs, let them know that you want to be able to give them your full attention. Respect their wishes about where the best place is. Some locations or situations may trigger memories or be reminders of abuse (e.g. being alone in a quiet, isolated place with an adult).

Maintain a calm appearance

Inevitably, a disclosure of child abuse will evoke strong feelings for the person hearing it. For some, the news may be overwhelming. Although potentially difficult, it is helpful if you can be calm and patient. Allow time for the child or young person to trust that they will be listened to and helped. It can be useful to remember, particularly when the disclosure is of past abuse, that the child or young person has already survived the abuse. The only thing that has changed is your awareness of it.

Be mindful of your facial expressions, body language and tone of voice – try to manage your reaction and focus on listening to the child or young person. If the child or young person becomes aware that you are distressed, reassure the child that they are not the cause of the distress. You can explain that you are upset because adults are meant to care for children and you are sad because some adults hurt children.

Reassure the child or young person that it is right to tell

Address any concerns about the child or young person's safety, particularly if they fear the potential consequences of disclosing. The child or young person may need to be reassured repeatedly over an extended period of time, especially if legal proceedings follow the disclosure. It is vital that the child or young person knows that the abuse, and anything that happens afterwards, are the responsibility of the person causing harm and not the responsibility of the child or young person. For example, if parents separate after a disclosure of child abuse, the child or young person needs frequent reassurance it was not their fault.

Recognise the bravery and strength of the child for talking about something that is difficult

It is important to acknowledge the child's bravery and strength in talking about something that is difficult. This is to counter the experience of violation and loss of control caused by the abuse. It is important that children and young people disclosing abuse feel in control of their situation as much as possible.

Let the child or young person take their time

It is important that the child or young person does not feel rushed or panicked and that you have plenty of time to soothe and reassure them. Allow the child or young person to take their time to speak. Disclosing is difficult for children and young people and something they may only be able to do a little at a time.

Understand and accept the child or young person will disclose only what is comfortable

For children who disclose indirectly, be mindful that this process may take several days or weeks. During this time, it is possible to gently and occasionally let the child or young person know that you will listen to anything they have to say when they are ready.

Some children may not wish to talk much about the abuse and might want to resume some regular activity soon after disclosing. Others, however, may need to talk for longer about different aspects of their experience.

While it is important that the child or young person has control over the process, this must also be balanced with their safety, and the safety of other children or young people. If the child or young person has not disclosed but you have reasonable grounds to suspect abuse, you may need to go to the police or child protection authorities in your state/territory. You do not necessarily have to have a full disclosure to go to the authorities. You can discuss concerns without making a formal report.

Let the child or young person use their own words

It is important that the child or young person uses their own words. Allowing the child or young person to use their own words is important in minimising their discomfort. Let the child or young person know it is okay to use any words they want to or to say whatever they need to.

Children and young people have their own way of describing their experiences. It can be useful to clarify what they mean by asking: 'Are you saying ... ?' It is important not to assume you and the child or young person mean exactly the same thing. It is also important not to ask questions that suggest the 'right' words to a child or young person, or in a way that can be seen as putting words in the child's mouth.

Quizzing the child or young person for details or asking them to repeat their story a number of times can create the impression you doubt what the child or young person has said. This type of quizzing might also be interpreted as 'leading' the child and might have unintended consequences if any legal action is taken. You may wish to write down some notes about what they have told you.

If your conversation with the child or young person is later used during legal proceedings, it is important that the child or young person's account is not seen as having been distorted by your questioning (Powell & Snow, 2007). Any questions asked should be relatively general and aimed at eliciting just enough information in order to work out what action is required and which authority should be contacted.

Do not make promises you cannot keep

Child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, relies on secrecy. Other forms of abuse are also usually hidden. Children may fear repercussions for themselves or other family members. In other instances, they may fear the consequences for parents whom they love despite the abuse. Because of this, a child or young person might ask a person to promise secrecy before disclosing. Such a promise should not be made. By telling the child: 'I can't make that promise but I can tell you I will do my best to keep you safe', you can reassure the child, manage expectations and encourage them to speak out about abuse.

Let the child or young person know what you will do next

When explaining to a child or young person what you will do next, it is important to ensure they understand. Child abuse often leaves children feeling disempowered and lacking control in their own life. Making sure the child or young person is fully aware of each step can make the process less intimidating and can help return a sense of power and control. Key things to remember:

- Advise the child or young person that for them to be safe they will need to talk to another person (police or child protection) about their experience and that you will support them through that experience.
- Try to avoid speaking about organisations and authorities that the child or young person may not be familiar with, without explaining the organisation's name, its purpose and what its staff will do.
- Only reveal the disclosure to others where it is absolutely necessary. If you believe that you need to discuss the disclosure with others in addition to the police or child protection authority (e.g. a school counsellor, the school principal) let the child or young person know.
- In an overwhelming situation, information can be hard for children to retain and they may need reminding. Let the child or young person know they can ask about what will happen next as often as they need to.

Do not confront the person causing harm

Remember, it is the role of the appropriate authorities to investigate the disclosure or allegation. Your role is to support the child or young person. It is essential that you do not confront the person causing harm of any type of abuse or discuss the child or young person's disclosure with them. This could create a potential risk for the child or young person's safety.

People who perpetrate child abuse can work hard to shift responsibility from themselves to others. Some child abusers use manipulation tactics (Royal Commission, 2017a) that enable them to build emotional rapport with the people they are harming, including manipulation of their families (Katz & Barnett, 2016). Confronting an alleged perpetrator of sexual or other types of abuse should only be done by professional child protection workers or the police.

Self-care and support for individuals responding to disclosures

When a child or young person has disclosed to you that they have experienced abuse or maltreatment, it is understandable and normal that you may be upset and distressed. You may feel many different emotions, such as shock, anger, sadness or confusion and feelings of being overwhelmed. You may also experience symptoms such as headaches, tiredness, difficulty sleeping and the inability to focus (Breckenridge et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important that you know how to access support to manage your own health and wellbeing and practice self-care.

This CFCA resource sheet provides a list of [Helplines, telephone and online counselling services for children, young people and adults](#).

This guide from the National Office of Child Safety has a section on workers' wellbeing: [Engaging with victims and survivors of child sexual abuse: A practice guide for workers and organisations](#)

Further reading and related resources

Related AIFS resources

Publications

- [Australian child protection legislation](#)
- [Reporting child abuse and neglect](#)
- [Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect](#)
- [Australian child protection legislation](#)
- [Child safe organisations: Information for organisations on how to keep children safe](#)

Webinars

- [Supporting children who have disclosed trauma](#)
- [Preventing emotional abuse of children: The role of parenting support](#)

Other guides for responding to disclosures of child abuse and maltreatment

[Believe Inquire Respond to Disclosures \(BIRD Report\)](#) and [practice framework](#) (published by SNAICC – National Voice for our Children) is a culturally safe model for responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

[Engaging with victims and survivors of child sexual abuse: A practice guide for workers and organisations](#) (published by the National Office of Child Safety)

[I'm a parent, carer or community member – Tell someone](#) (published by the Tasmanian Government)

[Recognising disclosures and responding to children](#) (from the Queensland Government's Child Safety Practice Manual)

[Preventing self-blame after disclosures of child sexual abuse](#) (published by Emerging Minds)

[National strategy to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse: a guide for children and young people](#) (published by the National Office of Child Safety). This guide is for children and young people and includes how and where to get help.

Other websites

The Australian [National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse](#) has a variety of resources that help individuals, workers and organisations respond to and support victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.

The Australian [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse](#) report has several volumes, including Volume 4, Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse. This volume contains information including identifying child sexual abuse, barriers to disclosure and improving identification of abuse, and supporting disclosures. The Royal Commission website also has brief guides to the Final Report summarising key information for different audiences. For example, [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities](#) and [people with disability](#).

The UK-based [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children](#) has information, training and resources on how individuals and organisations can protect children from harm.

The Australian eSafety Commissioner has [resources](#) related to preventing and dealing with online harm or abuse.

The [Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation](#) has information related to preventing online child sexual exploitation.

The [Queensland Sexual Assault Network](#) has resources for different groups including children and young people, parents and people with disabilities to help individuals, workers and organisations respond to and support victims and survivors of sexual abuse.

The [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Principle](#) has been adopted by all Australian states and territories. The principles in this framework are designed to keep First Nations children connected to their families, communities, cultures and country and to reduce the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system.

Information on Child Safe Organisations

[National Principles for Child Safe Organisations](#) The National Principles for Child Safe Organisations set out a nationally consistent approach to promoting a culture of child safety and wellbeing within organisations. The principles give effect to the child safe standards that were recommended by the Royal Commission and bring attention to general child safety and wellbeing issues. Translated materials in different language are also available.

[Keeping Our Kids Safe: Cultural Safety and the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations \(Guide\)](#) This resource supports organisations engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

[Child Safe Organisations](#) This website by the Australian Human Rights Commission provides resources to help organisations become child safe.

Acknowledgements

This paper was updated by Dr Mandy Truong, Research Fellow with the Child Family Community Australia information exchange at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Dr Kristel Alla (AIFS) and Dr Stewart Muir (AIFS) reviewed drafts of this resource.

We wish to acknowledge and thank the AIFS Critical Friends Network members who provided valuable advice and feedback on this resource: Kathryn Fordyce (Laurel House) and Robyn Evans (Centre Against Domestic Abuse).

References

- Alaggia, R., Collin-Vézina, D., & Lateef, R. (2019). Facilitators and barriers to child sexual abuse (CSA) disclosures: A research update (2000–2016). *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 20*(2), 260–283.
- Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). (2015). *Responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse*. Melbourne, Vic: AIFS.
- Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). (2018). *What is child abuse and neglect?* Melbourne, Vic: AIFS. aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/what-child-abuse-and-neglect
- Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2023). *Reporting child abuse and neglect*. Melbourne, Vic: AIFS. aifs.gov.au/resources/resource-sheets/reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect
- Bravehearts. (2018). *Tip sheet: Responding to disclosures*. bravehearts.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/BraveheartsInfoSheet_Responding-to-a-Disclosure.pdf
- Breckenridge, J., Suchting, M., HannaOsborne, S., & Porteous, J. (2024). *Engaging with victims and survivors of child sexual abuse: A practice guide for workers and organisations*. Prepared by the Gendered Violence Research Network and the National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence for the National Office for Child Safety, Canberra. www.childsafety.gov.au/system/files/2024-06/child-sexual-abuse-practice-guide.PDF
- Brennan, E., & McElvaney, R. (2020). What helps children tell? A qualitative meta-analysis of child sexual abuse disclosure. *Child Abuse Review, 29*(2), 97–113.
- Campbell, E., Ellard, R., Hew, E., Simpson, M., McCann, B., & Meyer, S. (2023). *WRAP around families experiencing AVITH: Towards a collaborative service response*. Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.
- Collin-Vézina, D., De La Sablonnière-Griffin, M., Palmer, A. M., & Milne, L. (2015). A preliminary mapping of individual, relational, and social factors that impede disclosure of childhood sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 43*, 123–134.
- Cossar, J., Belderson, P., & Brandon, M. (2019). Recognition, telling and getting help with abuse and neglect: Young people's perspectives. *Children and Youth Services Review, 106*, 104469.
- Emerging Minds. (n.d.) *Responding to a disclosure of child sexual abuse*. National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health. emergingminds.com.au/resources/responding-to-a-disclosure-of-child-sexual-abuse/
- Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Colburn, D., Mitchell, K., & Mathews, B. (2023). Child sexual abuse images and youth produced images: The varieties of image-based sexual exploitation and abuse of children. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 143*, 106269.
- Fontes, L. A., & Plummer, C. (2010). Cultural issues in disclosures of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 19*(5), 491–518.
- Funston, L. (2013). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews and cultural safety transforming sexual assault service provision for children and young people. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 10*(9), 3818–3833.
- Haslam, D., Mathews, B., Pacella, R., Scott, J. G., Finkelhor, D., Higgins, D. J. et al. (2023). *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report*. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology.
- Irenyi, M., Bromfield, L., Beyer, L., & Higgins, D. (2006). *Child maltreatment in organisations: Risk factors and strategies for prevention* (NCPC Issues No. 25). Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse.
- Katz, C., & Barnett, Z. (2016). Children's narratives of alleged child sexual abuse offender behaviors and the manipulation process. *Psychology of Violence, 6*(2), 223.
- Kids Helpline. (2025). *Responding to disclosures of child abuse*. kidshelpline.com.au/parents/issues/responding-disclosures-child-abuse#:~:text=Respond%20empathically%2C%20objectively%20and%20use%20supportive%20language%20Be,their%20words%20what%20happened%20and%20how%20they%20felt
- Kim, K., Mennen, F. E., & Trickett, P. K. (2017). Patterns and correlates of co-occurrence among multiple types of child maltreatment. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*(1), 492–502.
- Latiff, M. A., Fang, L., Goh, D. A., & Tan, L. J. (2024). A systematic review of factors associated with disclosure of child sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 147*, 106564.

- Lemaigre, C., Taylor, E., & Gittoes, C. (2017). Barriers and facilitators to disclosing sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence: A systematic review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *70*, 39–52.
- Mathews, B., Finkelhor, D., Pacella, R., Scott, J. G., Higgins, D. J., Meinck, F. et al. (2024). Child sexual abuse by different classes and types of perpetrator: Prevalence and trends from an Australian national survey. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *147*, 106562.
- McElvaney, R., Moore, K., O'Reilly, K., Turner, R., Walsh, B., & Guerin, S. (2020). Child sexual abuse disclosures: Does age make a difference? *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *99*, 104121.
- McGuire, K., & London, K. (2020). A retrospective approach to examining child abuse disclosure. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *99*, 104263.
- McPherson, L., Gatwiri, K., Graham, A., Rotumah, D., Hand, K., Modderman, C. et al. (2024) What helps children and young people to disclose their experience of sexual abuse and what gets in the way? A systematic scoping review. *Child Youth Care Forum*. doi.org/10.1007/s10566-024-09825-5
- Meinck, F., Cluver, L., Loening-Voysey, H., Bray, R., Doubt, J., Casale, M. et al. (2017). Disclosure of physical, emotional and sexual child abuse, help-seeking and access to abuse response services in two South African Provinces. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, *22*(suppl), 94–106.
- Morrison, S. E., Bruce, C., & Wilson, S. (2018) Children's disclosure of sexual abuse: A systematic review of qualitative research exploring barriers and facilitators. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, *27*(2), 176–194.
- National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse. (2024). *In conversation: Courage and responding to disclosures of sexual abuse from children and young people. Webinar snapshot*. Melbourne: National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse. nationalcentre.org.au/resource/in-conversation-courage-and-responding-to-disclosures-of-sexual-abuse-from-children-and-young-people/
- National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse. (n.d.). *Responding to children's disclosure of sexual abuse*. nationalcentre.org.au/resource/responding-to-childrens-disclosure-of-sexual-abuse/
- National Office for Child Safety. (2024). *Who perpetrates child sexual abuse?* Canberra: National Office for Child Safety. www.childsafety.gov.au/about-child-sexual-abuse/who-perpetrates-child-sexual-abuse#types-of-perpetrators
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). (2023). *Recognising and responding to abuse*. London: NSPCC. learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/recognising-and-responding-to-abuse
- Powell, M., & Snow, P. (2007). Guide to questioning children during the free-narrative phase of an investigative interview. *Australian Psychologist*, *42*(1), 57–65.
- Reitsema, A. M., & Grietens, H. (2016). Is anybody listening? The literature on the dialogical process of child sexual abuse disclosure reviewed. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, *17*(3), 330–340.
- Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. (2017a). *Final report: Volume 4, Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse*. Barton, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. (2017b). *A brief guide to the Final Report: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*. Barton, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Sawrikar, P., & Katz, I. (2017). Barriers to disclosing child sexual abuse (CSA) in ethnic minority communities: A review of the literature and implications for practice in Australia. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *83*, 302–315.
- Thulin, J., Kjellgren, C., & Nilsson, D. (2020). Children's disclosure of physical abuse-the process of disclosing and the responses from social welfare workers. *Child Care in Practice*, *26*(3), 285–299.
- Winters, G. M., Colombino, N., Schaaf, S., Laake, A. L., Jeglic, E. L., & Calkins, C. (2020). Why do child sexual abuse victims not tell anyone about their abuse? An exploration of factors that prevent and promote disclosure. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, *38*(6), 586–611.