

Responding to a Child's Disclosure

Children don't always speak out!

A report by the Children's Commissioner for England, captures a number of reasons as to why children choose not to speak out about something that is abusive or neglectful and has either happened, or is happening to them. "Are they shouting because of me?" Voices of children living in households with domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and mental illness (2018), captures some of the reasons why children choose not to speak to another person about adverse experiences. Some children in the report stated that they were told to keep abuse 'a secret' and made great efforts to hide what had happened to them. One child explained that they were told, "Don't be telling anyone... whatever happens in the house stays in the house". Some children spoke about being 'reluctant to talk about problems at home because they were afraid of getting someone in their family into trouble' or they were afraid of being taken away from their family if someone else found out what was happening to them. There are lots of reasons why children don't speak out about abuse however, some do and it is important to know how we should respond if a child does disclose that abuse and neglect has either happened to them in the past or is happening to them now.

What do we mean by a disclosure?

It is important that practitioners or adults working with children are trained to identify signs of possible abuse and neglect and to respond both appropriately and in a timely manner. One of these signs may become evident as a result of 'children's comments which give cause for concern'. Early Years Foundation Stage – Statutory Framework (2017). If a child speaks out about abuse, discloses something to an adult or makes an allegation of harm against someone, it is vital that we always respond from a child centred perspective and ensure that actions during and following a disclosure always focus on the needs and well-being of the child.

Things to Consider about a child's disclosure

Children may choose to disclose to someone who they trust. It may be a person who has shown a child an act of kindness or someone who has developed a meaningful relationship with them overtime. Sometimes children will tell someone to test a reaction from an adult. This is often when they are wanting to disclose information and want to start a difficult conversation so that someone might do something to help them. It is important to understand that disclosure can be very difficult for children and they need our support and help to ensure the best outcomes for them both immediately and going forward.

Some important things to think about if a child discloses

- ***Listen carefully*** It might be difficult given where or when a child decides to disclose. It is always important to listen and take time to hear what the child is saying or communicating with you. Try not to react in shock or give the impression that what is being said is unthinkable or unbelievable. Always give a child time and attention.
- ***Let the child give a spontaneous account*** Make sure that you don't jump in too quickly by trying to make sense of what is happening or trying to clarify what the child is saying to you too soon. If a child uses language and words that are unfamiliar to you or describes something to you, make sure that you recollect and record exactly what is said by the child in their own words without adding opinion or your own interpretation.
- ***Don't offer false confidentiality*** Never agree to keep secrets or say that you won't tell anyone else if a child asks you to do so when disclosing. Always explain that you will have to tell someone else in order that something can be done to help them or keep them safe.
- ***Reassure them*** Children may need us to tell them that they have done the right thing by telling an adult about their experiences. Children need to know that we are taking them seriously should they disclose. They need to know that we care about them and want to help them. They need to know that abuse is not their fault.
- ***Don't speak to the alleged abuser*** It is the role of others to investigate an allegation of abuse against a child. If others begin to ask questions that may place the child and other children in harmful situations.
- ***Always record and report allegations of abuse*** Recording accurately and following effective safeguarding procedures for sharing information from disclosure is vital. Always pass concerns and information to the designated safeguarding lead in your setting or directly to statutory services where appropriate.

Interpersonal skills and responding to a child's disclosure

A useful resource from the NSPCC – *Let children know you're listening: 'The importance of an adult's interpersonal skills in helping to improve children's experience of disclosure'*, is available from their website www.nspcc.org.uk This resource is particularly helpful for those working with school aged children and young people.