

Managing a disclosure

Children experiencing distress or abuse may seek to ‘tell’ in school, often because this is the place where they feel most safe, secure and listened to. It is not unusual for them to choose members of staff seen to be on the periphery of the staff team such as midday supervisors, caretakers or classroom support staff because they may be perceived as having less authority, more time and be less intimidating.

It is important to note that children may not find it easy to tell staff about their abuse verbally. Children can show signs or act in ways that they hope adults will notice and react to. In some cases, the victim may not make a direct report. For example, a friend may make a report or a member of staff may overhear a conversation that suggests a child has been harmed, or a child’s own behaviour might indicate that something is wrong.

It is important to make sure therefore that ALL staff know how to respond to a disclosure from a child. If a child discloses harm to any staff member it must be remembered that the school role is to recognise and refer abuse, not to investigate. This is to avoid contamination of evidence gained in any subsequent investigation undertaken by Police and/or Social Services and to ensure that the child is not placed in the stressful position of having to repeat their story over and over again.

‘Not investigating’ does not mean that the staff member receiving the concern cannot ask any questions. **Keeping Children Safe in Education 2021 stresses that if staff have any concerns about a child’s welfare, they should act on them immediately.** However, careful thought needs to be given to how and what questions are asked, avoiding anything that can be interpreted as ‘leading’ the child. The basic rule of thumb is that staff should ONLY ask enough questions of the child to clarify whether there is a child protection concern. Once the child has clarified that they are being harmed or are at risk (or the staff member is reassured that the child is safe), no further questions are required.

If a child presents with an injury accompanied by a clear disclosure that they have been harmed, or makes a clear sexual disclosure it should not be necessary to question the child other than perhaps to clarify who was involved and when an incident took place.

The child should be listened to actively and their story carefully recorded. In this situation the staff member should ensure immediate information sharing with the Designated Safeguarding Lead. It is likely that such a scenario will require immediate consultation about action to be taken and an urgent referral to Specialist Children’s Services may be necessary.

In other situations where the child appears to be making a possible disclosure or has a suspicious injury, it is reasonable to ask open, non-leading questions in order to establish the child’s story. Examples of questions are:

“That’s a nasty bruise, how did it happen?;

“Tell me about what happened?”;

“You seem a bit upset and I’m worried about you, is anything troubling you?”;

“Can you tell me more about that?”

You may wish to use the acronym ‘TED’ as a reminder that the child can be encouraged to ‘Tell’, ‘Explain’ and ‘Describe’ the concern. If it is necessary to seek further clarification, staff should keep to open questions such as What? When? Who? How? Where?

It is important to remember that questions should only be asked to help clarify whether the child is at risk of harm. Once clarification is achieved, no further questions should be asked. Sometimes children choose to disclose concerns through a third party such as a friend ‘telling’ on their behalf, or indirectly e.g. sounding out information and reaction by asking ‘what if my friend.....?’ If such concerns arise they should be taken equally seriously and be followed up with the DSL in the same manner as a direct disclosure.

Children may also seek to disclose and share their experiences through drawings, writing and play. If concerns arise, it is appropriate to talk further with the child to allow wider discussion and clarification. This might involve inviting the child to “tell me more about what is happening in your picture/ story / game”.

So, what do I do as a member of staff if a child asks to talk to me about a problem?

- Do not promise them confidentiality
- Reassure them that they are being taken seriously and that they will be supported and kept safe
- Listen to the pupil
- Write down the initial details of the disclosure on the Concern Form in the words used by the pupil
- Do not say words for them, however embarrassed they are to say them
- Do not get them to give too much detail but sufficient to make you concerned about the nature for their disclosure.
- Immediately after the conversation, give the Concern Form to
- Never leave any situation for a few days to allow you or the child to ‘think about it’ – the child could be at risk. Act immediately.

How do I prepare for the meeting?

Collect a disclosure/concern form from

Where do we hold the meeting?

If a child asks to talk to you about something personal, make sure of the following:

- Go somewhere quiet but make sure there are people near to the room you are in. Ideally, two members of staff should attend the meeting, but this may not be possible.
- Do not shut the door – make sure it stays open.

How do I conduct the meeting?

- Listen to the child - let them do the talking and try not to say things for them.
- DO NOT PROMISE that you will not tell anyone else – even if it means the child may stop talking to you. Explain that it is very likely that it will be in their best interests to seek advice and guidance for others in order to support them.
- After the child has told you the problem, try to record the exact words used by the pupil when disclosing to you and complete the Concern Form.

How much detail do they need to give me?

- Just enough to support your concerns that they have a serious issue/are at risk.
- The notes should not reflect the personal opinion of the note taker. Schools and colleges should be aware that notes of such reports could become part of a statutory assessment by children’s social care and/or part of a criminal investigation.

- Save any drawings and artwork. This information may need to be shared with Children’s Social Services and the police.
- Just make sure you have the basic facts that caused your concern in the first place to complete the Concern Form.

Writing the report

Effective safeguarding practice includes considering the best way to make a record of the report. Best practice is to wait until the end of the report and immediately write up a thorough summary. This allows the staff member to devote their full attention to the child and to listen to what they are saying. It may be appropriate to make notes, especially if a second member of staff is present. However, if making notes, staff should be conscious of the need to remain engaged with the child and not appear distracted by the note taking. Either way, it is essential a written record is made.

Record keeping

All concerns, discussions and decisions made, and the reasons for those decisions, should be recorded in writing. Information should be kept confidential and stored securely. It is good practice to keep concerns and referrals in a separate child protection file for each child.

Records should include:

- a clear and comprehensive summary of the concern;
- details of how the concern was followed up and resolved;
- a note of any action taken, decisions reached and the outcome.

If in doubt about recording requirements, staff should discuss with the designated safeguarding lead (or deputy).

Responding to a report of sexual violence or sexual harassment

The 2021 version of the DfE document, Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment between children in schools and colleges, gives useful guidance on responding to this type of disclosure including managing the initial response, considering confidentiality and anonymity, risk assessment and follow up action (pages 25 – 30). Addressing inappropriate behaviour (even if it appears to be relatively innocuous) can be an important intervention that helps prevent problematic, abusive and/or violent behaviour in the future. A victim should never be given the impression that they are creating a problem by reporting sexual violence or sexual harassment. Nor should a victim ever be made to feel ashamed for making a report.

The school or college’s initial response to a report from a child is incredibly important. How the school or college respond to a report can encourage or undermine the confidence of future victims of sexual violence and sexual harassment to report or come forward.

Abuse that occurs online or outside of the school or college should not be downplayed and should be treated equally seriously. The starting point regarding any report should always be that there is a zero-tolerance approach to sexual violence and sexual harassment and it is never acceptable and it will not be tolerated.

NOTE: Disclosures relating to allegations against colleagues and members of staff should be treated in the same way. This information must be passed immediately to the Headteacher who will ensure the appropriate procedures are followed.

Allowing Children to Talk

Helpful ideas

- Take what you are being told seriously
- Listen carefully – do not interrupt
- Acknowledge what you have been told
- Always accept what the child says, no matter how fanciful it may appear to you — let them know you believe them
- Remain calm
- Listen attentively and only ask open-ended questions. Avoid using leading questions, and remember: you are not investigating the allegation.
- Do not pressure the child/young person into telling you more than they want to.
- Encourage the child/young person to talk about their concerns, as this can be helpful in dealing with difficult experiences.
- Allow the child/young person to talk at their own pace, and use their own language
- Reassure – tell them they have done the right thing to report their concerns and that they will be taken seriously and kept safe
- Tell them you will have to pass the information on and who you will be telling and why
- You may wish to stop the interview if you think it is better handled by another person or staff member, or if it is too stressful for the child/young person
- Pass to the Designated Safeguarding Lead on the referral form

What to avoid

- Do not investigate
- Do not look shocked or distasteful
- Do not probe
- Do not speculate
- Do not pass an opinion about the alleged perpetrator
- Do not make comments
- Do not promise to keep a secret
- Do not display disbelief
- Never delay getting help

I Think I Should Act Now

What will stop me?

- What if I'm wrong?
- I'm not very confident
- I don't know the child very well
- I've reported before and had a bad experience
- I don't know who to talk to
- It's not my job
- Someone else will pass it on
- I will do it tomorrow
- I haven't got the time
- It doesn't happen to families here

Why I will pass it on?

- At this school we take safeguarding seriously
- I know our school procedure
- I know who to pass it to
- I know what is expected of me
- It is my responsibility
- This is serious and important
- Children spend more time in school than any other place
- After parents, school staff are often the next adults a child will respond to
- The indicators of abuse are present
- Abuse investigations often highlight a failure to act

It can be very stressful for staff involved in a disclosure with a child/young person. Staff do not have to cope on their own, and it is important that they know that that support from the school leadership team is available.

Additional guidance and further reading

- **Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools and colleges** (September 2021)
- **Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment between children in schools and colleges** (September 2021)
- **What to Do If You’re Worried a Child Is Being Abused** (2015)
- **Working Together to Safeguard Children** (July 2018)
- **Effective Support for Children and Families in Essex** – guidance for all practitioners in working together with children and families to provide early help and targeted and specialist support (July 2017)
- **National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children**
www.nspcc.org.uk
- The **NSPCC Helpline** is a service for anyone concerned about the safety or welfare of a child. You can contact the helpline 24 hours a day, seven days a week by phone, email or online. 0808 800 5000
- **Childline**
<https://www.childline.org.uk/> 0800 1111
- **No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse (NSPCC)**
- **How safe are our children?** NSPCC report
<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/pre-2013/child-abuse-and-neglect-in-the-uk-today/>