

## 2.9 Dealing With Disclosures From Children

It is important that all members of school personnel are aware and prepared for responding to a child who may disclose abuse.

### Dealing With Disclosures From Children

- > A child or young person may disclose to a member of school personnel that they have been or are being harmed or abused.
- > Children will often have different ways of communicating that they are being abused. If a child hints at or tells a member of school personnel that they are being harmed by someone it should be treated in a sensitive way.
- > An abused child is likely to be under severe emotional stress and a member of school personnel may be the only adult who the child is prepared to trust. Great care must be taken not to damage that trust.
- > Information may be offered in confidence and the member of school personnel will need tact and sensitivity in responding to the disclosure.
- > The member of school personnel will need to reassure the child, and endeavour to retain their trust, while explaining the need for action which will necessarily involve other adults being informed.
- > It is important to tell the child that everything possible will be done to protect and support them, but not to make promises that cannot be kept, for example promising not to tell anyone else.

The following approach is suggested as best practice for dealing with these disclosures:

- > Be as calm and natural as possible.
- > Listen carefully and attentively. Give the child the time and opportunity to tell as much as they are able and wish to.
- > Take the child seriously.
- > Be aware that disclosures can be very difficult for the child.
- > Reassure the child that they have taken the right action in talking to you.
- > Do not pressurise the child. Allow them to disclose at their own pace and in their own language.
- > Do not promise to keep anything secret.
- > Remember that the child may initially be testing your reactions and may only fully open up over a period of time.
- > Do not express any opinions about the alleged abuser.
- > It is important to differentiate between the person who carried out the abuse and the act of abuse itself. The child/young person 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 of, or anger towards the alleged perpetrator while talking with the child/young person.
- > It may be necessary to reassure the child/young person that your feelings towards him or her have not been affected in a negative way as a result of what they have disclosed.



- > Questions should be supportive and for the purpose of clarification only (for example, ask “Am I correct in saying that...?”).
- > Do not ask leading questions. Leading questions are questions that are asked in a way that is intended to produce a desired answer.
- > Check back with the child that what you have heard is correct and understood.
- > Ensure that the child understands the procedures that will follow.
- > Treat the information confidentially, subject to the requirements of the *Children First National Guidance 2017* and relevant legislation.

At the earliest possible opportunity:

- > Make a written record of the conversation as soon as possible, in as much detail as possible, preferably quoting words actually used. It is important to note that there is no need to anonymise this record at this point.
- > Signs of physical injury should be described in detail and, if appropriate, sketched.
- > While a child should be allowed to make a written statement if they wish to do so, **it is important to note that the child should not be asked to write the account of their disclosure for the record.**
- > Fact-check the written record with the child, where possible.

Where necessary, immediate action should be taken to ensure the child’s safety.

The reporting requirements outlined in chapter 5 of these procedures must be followed at the earliest possible opportunity.

## Ongoing Support

Disclosure is a huge step for a child. Following a disclosure by a child, it is important that the member of school personnel continues in a supportive relationship with the child. It is important to ensure that the child feels safe, and that any actions necessary for that safety are taken.

School personnel should also continue to offer support, particularly by:

- > Maintaining a positive relationship with the child.
- > Keeping lines of communication open by listening carefully to the child; Any further disclosure should be treated as a first disclosure and responded to as indicated above.

**Any further disclosure should be treated as a first disclosure and responded to as indicated above. It must always be remembered that school personnel have a supportive, not an investigative role.**

It is important to deal with any allegation of abuse or neglect in a sensitive manner through listening to and facilitating the child to tell about the problem, **rather than interviewing the child about details of what happened.**

Tusla has also published a “Child Safeguarding: A guide for Policy, Procedure and Practice” document which includes further guidance in relation to responding to a child who discloses abuse and it is available on Tusla’s website.