

# ACORN EDUCATION AND CARE

## Managing Disclosures

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### What are disclosures?

The young people we live and learn with at Outcomes First Group may have suffered a high level of trauma in their early environments. This early trauma can be demonstrated indirectly, for example, through expressions of behaviour, emotional dysregulation and in damaged ways of relating to others (NICE, 2017, October 09). Young people may also find the words to express traumatic experiences more directly through a verbal disclosure. These disclosures can fall within the below categories of abuse (NCPCC, n.d.).

- **Physical Abuse** - causing intentional physical harm to a young person, such as hitting. Also includes causing them to be physically ill.
- **Sexual Abuse** - This includes both contact and non-contact sexual abuse. Contact abuse includes any physical sexual contact, making them touch someone else or forces them to underdress themselves. Non-contact sexual abuse can be both in person or online and includes abuse whereby the young person is abused without being touched, for example exposure to pornography.

- **Child Sexual Exploitation** - Is a type of sexual abuse whereby the young person is forced in to engaging in sexual activity in exchange for something such as money or affection.
- **Emotional or Psychological Harm** - this type of abuse is often an element of other types of abuse. It can involve ongoing emotional maltreatment of a young person, for example continuous criticising, frightening them and over-punishing them and not protecting them from emotional harm.
- **Neglect** - Continuous failure to meet the young person's fundamental needs, including physical, emotional, educational and medical.
- **Grooming** - This type of abuse involved the perpetrator building up trust and a relationship with the young person or significant people within their network, either in person or online, in order to manipulate or exploit the young person. Those whom are groomed can be abused, exploited or trafficked.
- **Female Genital Mutilation** - intentional removal or altering of a female's genitals.

• **Peer on Peer Abuse** – This type of abuse occurs between children and is harmful to both the perpetrator and the victim. It can include; but is not limited to, physical, sexual and teenage relationship abuse, sexual harassment and violence, emotional harm and on and offline bullying

## Why young people make disclosures?

(NICE, 2017, October 09; NSPCC, n.d.)

- The young person has started to realise that what happened was wrong
- The abuse has started again or is getting worse
- They have developed trusting relationships and feel safe enough to disclose
- They may be feeling shame or be confused about what happened
- They may not be able to manage on their own any longer
- They want to protect someone else
- Someone may have asked them about it
- Wanting the abuser to be punished

## How do young people disclose abuse?

Sometimes a young person may be on the verge of a disclosure and may demonstrate this through escalating emotional and behavioural needs. For example, refusing to return home, displaying sexually inappropriate behaviour and self-harm. Young people may make disclosures and then retract these due to feared consequences (Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007), such as fearing separation, not being believed or due to feelings of shame (NICE, 2017, October 09). Young people may also want to 'test the water' prior to making a disclosure to determine others' responses to them. Younger children are less likely to spontaneously disclose abuse directly, and may act it out through their play, e.g. re-enacting experiences through scenes with figures (Hunter, 2011).

## How can we best respond to disclosures?

How we respond to disclosures is really important. It can take traumatised children a long time to develop enough trust in their relationships to disclose abuse. They will be anxious about what might happen, that others may not believe them or that they may even be punished. They may also fear repercussions from their abuser.

The timing of the child or young person's disclosure will influence his or her immediate needs, and this, in turn, will determine your response. For a child or young person who discloses that he or she is currently being abused, the immediate priority is safety and protection from further abuse.

The below advice will help ensure your responses are therapeutic for the young person (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015, March; NICE, 2017, October 09, NSPCC, n.d, Sorensen & Snow, 1991).

### Hear it:

- Move to an appropriate environment – reduce distractions and consider who else may be able to hear
- Be patient – allow the young person to feel heard and to communicate their full disclosure
- Give the young person your full attention
- Remain calm – try not to appear shocked or panicked
- Don't ask leading questions – let them use their own language
- Don't ask lots of questions about the disclosure
- Accept that the young person may only disclose what they feel comfortable with

### Show Support:

- Reassure the young person that it is okay and important for them to have told you
- Reassure that it is not their fault
- Address any concerns about the young person's safety

### Show Respect:

- Respect that they may only reveal some information
- Affirm that they are brave
- Don't make promises that you can't keep e.g. by keeping it a secret
- Explain the next steps – that in order to keep them safe you will need to report it to someone else. Don't promise to keep secrets, the perpetrator of the abuse likely relied on this.
- Take notes of what the young person has told you as soon as you are able to and ensure these are stored confidentially

### Who should you inform?

We have a duty of care to protect young people from harm and reporting concerns or disclosures of abuse must be done in a timely manner. Staff should

put the needs of children first when determining what action to take (Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2018), following your service's safeguarding policy in conjunction with senior staff is key. For example, this will involve consulting with the Safeguarding Lead for your service and this will help determine next steps. Each home has a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), usually the Registered Manager. For education provisions, this would usually be the Head Teacher and/or Deputy Head. In their absence, the concerns must be escalated to a more Senior Manager, such as the Regional Manager or Director of Operations. For disclosures about historical abuse, if the young person has a social worker, they will need to be updated as soon as possible to ensure this information has been disclosed and therefore investigated before. Explain to the child or young person who you will need to tell, and discuss what will happen next and when. If you are unsure of this information, ensure you will keep them informed as soon as you are. If there is no social worker, a referral should be made to the local authority's social care.

For young people that may be at significant and current risk of abuse (e.g. being exposed to abuse, or the perpetrator now), a Designated Safeguarding Lead should be consulted. The Children Act 1989 introduced the notion of 'Significant Harm' as the threshold that justifies compulsory intervention in family life in the best interests of children. Under Section 47 of the Act, local authorities have a duty to make enquiries to decide whether they should take action to safeguard or promote the welfare of a child who is suffering, or is likely to suffer Significant Harm. A referral will be made to the local authority's social care and/or the police who will determine the next steps in ensuring the young person's safety. It is important that you do not confront the alleged perpetrator.

Following a disclosure, it is also important that you sensitively inform the integrated team that are supporting and working with the young person, for example school staff as well as the clinical team, in order to ensure they are best supported.

## Looking after yourself

Hearing about the abuse of a young person can be extremely distressing for the listener. It is important that you take time for yourself and seek further support when needed through:

- Employee Assistance Programme – provided by Bupa
- Supervision
- Reflective Practice

\*The information and guidance provided in this help sheet is to be read in conjunction with Outcomes First Group policies, statutory guidance and legislation including Keeping Children Safe in Education (2020) and Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018). KCSIE (2020) updated 2021.

## References:

Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2015, March). Responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse. <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/responding-children-and-young-people-s-disclosures-abu>

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