



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE
OF MELBOURNE

Responding to disclosures

THIS DOCUMENT RELATES TO THE FOLLOWING CAPABILITY AREA

4 Systems, policies and procedures



Disclosure

A disclosure is the process by which a child conveys or attempts to convey that they are being, or have been, abused. Disclosure can be verbal, non-verbal or indicated through behaviour. A disclosure may be accidental or intentional, partial or complete and victims may disclose in different ways to different people throughout their lives. Adults may also convey that they were abused as a child or that they may have perpetrated abuse.

Commission for Children and Young People (2022)

Children, young people and adults who experience abuse are significantly impacted by their experiences and are often reluctant to tell anyone about what has happened. Those who have experienced abuse may experience a range of emotions and symptoms that may impact their decision and/or ability to talk about their abuse. These may include the following as identified by Mudaly & Goddard (2006) and Moore (2017):

- fear e.g. of the perpetrator
- embarrassment and/or shame
- confusion
- guilt and/or self-blame
- powerlessness
- loss of confidence
- depression and/or anxiety (e.g. emotional numbness, nausea, difficulty breathing)
- anger
- denial, by trying to suppress what has happened in order to return to 'normal'
- flashbacks.

Concerns about “telling”

In addition to the emotional and physical impacts of abuse, those who have experienced abuse are often concerned about:

- who they can trust and talk to about their experience
- how to raise or talk about their experience of abuse
- not being believed
- previous negative experiences of not being listened to
- the reaction of others (e.g. being judged, blamed or held responsible for the abuse)
- the ability of others to help
- making things worse
- the consequences of coming forward for themselves, their families and even the alleged perpetrator (e.g. fear of retribution)
- legal consequences (e.g. involvement of Police, going to court) (Moore 2017).

The decision to disclose abuse is therefore significant and courageous. A child, young person or adult making a disclosure has often thought long and hard about disclosing their experience of abuse and has overcome significant emotional and/or physical barriers to share their experience. Either through your role, their association with the parish, agency or entity, or their connection with you, they have placed their trust in you.

The following guidelines may assist you in responding to a disclosure of abuse:

Provide a safe environment

It is preferable to direct the person making a disclosure to a quiet and comfortable setting that affords the person privacy, away from other persons who may overhear the conversation, possible interruptions and away from the alleged perpetrator (if they are present). For children and young people, you may wish to offer and ensure that a support adult is present or available, if they so choose.

Stay calm

Be calm and patient; strong reactions such as shock, disbelief, anger or crying can be distressing for the child, young person or adult.

Your ability to stay calm is reflected in your body language, so it is important to be mindful of your body positioning, posture and presence when receiving a disclosure.

Listen

As the decision to disclose is significant, it is important that we encourage the child, young person or adult to share their experience with few interruptions or questions.

Only ask questions that assist you to understand what has occurred:

- "I'm here to listen. Can you share with me what you wanted to talk about today?"
- "Would you feel comfortable telling me about what happened?"
- "Can you help me understand what happened after that?"

Remember that children and young people may find it more difficult to express themselves depending on their age, stage of development, language skills, abilities and level of confidence or the impact of their abuse and may require more time to talk about their experience.

When you do not feel able to help

There may be times when you do not feel able to listen and respond to a person's disclosure because of your own experiences of abuse, current issues in your life (e.g. bereavement, serious health issues) or because you feel compromised by your connection to the alleged perpetrator.

In these circumstances, it is important to acknowledge your limitations, engage in self-care, and sensitively support the person to connect with another key person within your parish, agency or entity who can assist them (e.g. parish priest, pastoral associate, members of the safeguarding committee, the Safeguarding Unit).

It is preferable for you to facilitate immediate contact and an introduction to the other key person, and to assure the person making the disclosure that you are confident in the other person's capacity to deal with the matter at hand.

You might say: 'What you have to say is really important. We will need to speak with..... as they are better able to assist you and support you in dealing with your concerns.'

Explain to children and young people making a report, the steps that will be undertaken in addressing a concern or complaint.

Responding to disclosures from children and young people with additional support needs

Disclosures from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and children and young people with a disability require a sensitive response that is considerate of the additional challenges that these groups may experience in making a report and/or participating in an investigation process.

Children and young people with a disability

A significant issue in relation to children and young people with a disability is the tendency for others to minimise or dismiss their concerns because they are not seen as credible witnesses.

Children and young people with a disability may experience significant barriers (e.g. hearing, communication difficulties, cognitive impairment) that may impact their ability to report a concern or participate in an investigation process. In equipping children and young people with a disability to speak up, every effort must be made to create and/or utilise accessible avenues to raise concerns, such as an Auslan interpreter, electronic communication technology or by providing additional support from parents, professionals e.g. case worker or a trusted support person. Where a child or young person is unable to communicate, where appropriate, parents/carers or a support person may be empowered to advocate on their behalf. Where possible, seek permission from the child or young person for the support person to advocate on their behalf, being mindful that parents/carers and support people may be associated with the disclosure.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

In some communities, the legacy of colonisation and racially discriminatory government legislation and policies (e.g. the Stolen Generations) and subsequent intergenerational trauma have resulted in significant mistrust of statutory authorities (e.g. Child Protection, Police). This mistrust may contribute to a reluctance to make a report and/or participate in the investigation process. It may be appropriate to recognise the extended family structure and connections within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to encourage the child, young person and their family to seek support and advice from a community elder(s) who can advocate on the family's behalf.

Children and young people from CALD backgrounds

Children, young people and families from CALD backgrounds may experience a number of challenges when making a disclosure and participating in an investigation process. In addition to possible language barriers, previous experiences in their country of origin, in refugee camps or in immigration detention may deter children, young people and their families from coming forward and reporting alleged abuse.

It is also important to acknowledge that CALD children, young people or their families may be concerned about possible negative consequences in relation to making a report and it may be important to allay fears in relation to confidentiality, privacy, residency in Australia, housing, employment, financial support, or child protection outcomes.

Communicating in English may be a significant barrier for some people who may require the assistance of an interpreter. It is not advisable to use other parish, agency or entity

participants, employees or volunteers to interpret unless they are credentialed interpreters, as there may be issues in relation to maintaining confidentiality, their level of expertise in providing accurate translation, existing relationships with the perpetrator within a close-knit community, or they may avoid discussing sensitive issues e.g. abuse occurring within a family, sexual abuse.

Translating and Interpreting Service

Immediate phone interpreting is available through the Translating and Interpreting Service (Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs):

- phone: 131 450
- website: www.tisnational.gov.au/Non-English-speakers/Help-using-TIS-National-services/Immediate-telephone-interpreting-for-non-English-speakers.aspx

Believe

Too often in the past, adults have been reluctant to believe those who have come forward to disclose their abuse. Our willingness to listen and support the person in a sensitive manner can make a significant difference to the person making the disclosure.

Offer reassurance

Respond with genuine concern when the child, young person or adult is speaking, through your body language and words, and demonstrate acceptance of what they are telling you. Responding in a compassionate manner communicates to the person that you understand and care about what they are telling you.

Useful body language:

- Nod your head to show that you are listening.
- Make eye contact in a comfortable and genuine manner to demonstrate your interest.
- Sit at a comfortable distance from the child, young person or adult (e.g. not too close or not too far away) to demonstrate that you are ready to listen.

Useful phrases:

- 'Thank you for being so brave and sharing your experience.'
- 'I can see this is very difficult for you to talk about.'
- 'Take your time, I'm here.'
- 'What you have told me so far is'
- 'I am sorry that you have experienced this.'
- 'Abuse is never your fault.'
- 'You are not to blame.'
- 'You have done the right thing in coming forward and telling someone.'
- 'I am glad you have told me.'
- 'I will do what I can to help you.'

DO NOT:

- conduct a formal interview – the Safeguarding Unit will gather information and direct the matter to statutory authorities as appropriate and/or an external investigation if required to gather evidence and ensure parties are provided with appropriate support
- do not promise to keep the disclosure a secret or agree not to tell people
- ask leading questions (e.g. 'Did Brenda hit you?')
- ask questions that imply the person is responsible for the abuse (e.g. 'Did you ask them to stop?', 'What were you wearing at the time?', 'Why didn't you stop it?')
- push for information (e.g. 'So where did he touch you?')
- offer alternative explanations (e.g. 'You know that Susan is a touchy-feely person.', 'It sounds like Henry was drunk and did not know what he was doing')
- diminish the seriousness or the impact of the alleged abuse (e.g. 'You'll get over it', 'It happened a long time ago, you should get on with your life')
- take any action that may undermine any future investigation e.g. discuss the matter with the alleged perpetrator or potential witnesses, gather evidence, destroy or delete records, gossip or make the disclosure 'public'
- do not promise any specific outcomes you cannot guarantee.

Provision of support

It is advisable to encourage the child, young person or adult making the disclosure to contact a support person who may provide support on an ongoing manner.

Ensure that support options are safe and appropriate, recognising that the family environment may not always be a safe source of support. Seek professional advice from authorities if required.

Remember that providing support does not rest with you as an individual but rather it is a parish, agency or entity responsibility. In speaking with your immediate supervisor, it is important to discuss how the person will be supported, going forward e.g. pastoral support, counselling.

The child, young person or adult should also be encouraged to seek further support from:

- their family and/or friends
- professionals in the community (e.g. general practitioner, psychologist)
- support agencies (e.g. sexual assault counselling service, family violence service).

Bravehearts	1800 272 831
Domestic Violence Resource Centre	8346 5200
Gatehouse Centre – specialist sexual assault service for children and their families	9345 6391 9345 5522 (After hours crisis care)
Kids Helpline	1800 55 1800
Lifeline	13 11 14
National Domestic Family and Sexual Violence counselling service.	1800RESPECT 1800 737 732
Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre	1800 015 188
Sexual Assault Crisis Line	1800 806 292
Victims of Crime Help Line	1800 819 817

Explain what happens next

Once you have ascertained that the child, young person or adult has experienced abuse, it is important to outline what you will need to do next and explain the reasons behind those obligations. Some sample wording is noted below.

‘Within the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, every person has a duty of care to respond and take action in relation to protecting children, young people and adults from abuse. I will need to tell my (supervisor) to make sure that we take action to keep you safe. We will make a report to the Safeguarding Unit and relevant authorities (Child Protection or Victoria Police) as required. It is important for you to know that you can ask any questions and you will be supported through this process.’

Ensure that the person(s) handling the report (e.g. investigator) has experience in working with children and young people, understands children’s ages and stages of development, and is able to communicate in a manner that is encouraging and supportive of the child or young person (e.g. allowing extra time, providing a comfortable environment).

Where appropriate, with parental or carer involvement, keep the child or young person informed about the progress of an investigation and its outcome.

Make a report

Follow the procedure set out in the [Safeguarding Children and Young People Reporting procedure](#).

If the child or young person is in imminent danger, contact Victoria Police 000.

For advice or support in making a report as per the Safeguarding Children and Young People Reporting procedure, contact the Safeguarding Unit (SU) on 9926 5630 (Monday to Friday, 9am–5pm) as soon as practicable.

Respect the confidentiality and privacy of all parties involved.

Self-care in relation to responding to a disclosure of abuse

When listening to a person's disclosure of abuse, you may experience a range of emotions, for example, you may feel:

- honoured that the person has chosen you to confide in
- sad or distressed that the person has experienced abuse
- uncomfortable or distressed by the person's emotional state
- fearful of what you are going to be told (e.g. the nature of the abuse, the involvement of a person you know in the abuse)
- uncertain about what to do next
- that you need to 'fix it'
- concerned about letting the person down
- fearful of the consequences of taking action to report the abuse e.g. losing your position
- responsible that the person experienced abuse while involved in your parish, agency or entity
- sad, disappointed or angry with the person who has allegedly perpetrated the abuse.

These are all normal emotions and part of an empathic response to the person who has experienced abuse.

You may also wish to contact the Employee Assistance Program – AccessEAP for confidential counselling and support and/or de-brief with your supervisor.

Access EAP - Employee Assistance Program for the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne

This is a voluntary, confidential and free counselling service available for clergy, employees, volunteers and their families of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne.

- phone: 1800 81 87 28
- email: info@accesseap.com.au
- website: www.accesseap.com.au

Useful resources

Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited (ACSL), (2024). *Disclosures and Responses – the basics*.

<https://www.acsltd.org.au/material/7-4-disclosures-and-responses/>

Australian Institute of Family Studies n.d., *Responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse*, infographic. Responding to children and young people's disclosures of abuse | Australian Institute of Family Studies (aifs.gov.au)

South Eastern CASA (Centre Against Sex Assault & Family Violence) n.d., *Feelings after sexual assault*, information sheet.

<https://www.secasa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/the-aftermath-of-sexual-assault-am-i-supposed-to-feel-this-way.pdf>

References

Moore, T (2017). *Protection through participation: Involving children in child-safe organisations*, CFCA Practice Paper, April, Australian Institute of Family Studies.
<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/protection-through-participation> (Accessed: 28 October, 2024)

Mudaly, N & Goddard, C (2006). *The truth is longer than a lie: children's experiences of abuse and professional interventions*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.