



Information sheet 15

Barriers to Children Disclosing Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is relatively common yet the disclosure of that abuse is the exception rather than the rule.

- A review of research conducted on child abuse between 2000 and June 2008, estimated that between 5 and 10% of girls and up to 5% of boys are exposed to penetrative sexual abuse, and up to three times this number are exposed to any type of sexual abuse ¹.
- Those who sexually abuse children almost never disclose that information voluntarily ².
- A 1997 survey of Australian women³ found that only 10 per cent of such experiences were ever reported to the police, a doctor or a helping agency and a 1994⁴ national survey of 2,852 self-selected adult survivors of child sexual abuse found that 52.6 per cent of male respondents, and 37 per cent of female respondents, had never disclosed their abuse to anyone at all prior to the survey.

Therefore the majority of child sexual abuse remains unnoticed and unknown to everyone but the abuser and their child victims.

Children have to overcome enormous barriers in order to be able to disclose sexual abuse in a way that will prompt appropriate action by an adult. Inappropriate or non-supportive responses to the disclosing child have the potential to leave them feeling discounted, disbelieved, blamed or stigmatised and thus less likely to attempt a further disclosure. The more knowledge that professionals have about the dynamics of child sexual abuse and the resulting difficulties for children in disclosing abuse, the more likely it is that they will be able to 'tune in' to tentative disclosures and respond in ways that can further support the child.

Barriers most commonly faced by children struggling to disclose sexual abuse:

1. The abuser is unlikely to be a stranger.

In 95% of cases, the abuser is known to the child as a relative, a family friend or another person with ongoing contact with the child. The child who is trapped into any sort of ongoing contact with the perpetrator is faced with far more barriers to disclosing than is the child exposed to the much rarer sexual abuse by a stranger. Evidence suggests that the closer the relationship between an abused child and a perpetrator, the less likely it is that the child will feel able to disclose.

2. The child is trapped into an ongoing abuse process.

The sexual abuse of a child usually involves an ongoing process directed by the perpetrator in order to gain and maintain ongoing access to a child's body for their own sexual purposes. This process commonly involves strategies to make the child feel responsible for the abuse and for keeping the abuse secret. This is a very powerful tool in ensuring the child's silence.

¹ Gilbert, Spatz-Widom, Browne, Fergusson, Webb & Janson (2009). Burden and consequences of child maltreatment in high-income countries. *Lancet* 373, pp 68-81

² Salter, A (1995). *Transforming Trauma: A guide to understanding and treating adult survivors of child sexual abuse*. Sage.

³ Fleming, JM (1997). Prevalence of childhood sexual abuse in a community sample of Australian women. In; *Medical Journal of Australia*. Vol 166, No 2 pp 65-68

⁴ Easteal, P (1994), *Voices of the survivors*. Spinifex Press, Melbourne.

3. The expectations of adults about disclosures.

- **The disclosure has to be verbal, and in a way understood by adults.**

Children can sometimes feel that they have told an adult about the abuse yet the adult may not have interpreted the conversation, the drawing, the playacting etc. in the way the child was hoping they would. The child who says, for instance, “I don’t want Uncle Alan to babysit, he’s always mean to me” or the younger child who says that his drawing is about the “mean fox who comes into my room at night and I hate it” could be a child’s first steps in an initial disclosure, yet the adult may understandably take such comments at face value and not enquire further. Younger children often lack the vocabulary to describe what has been done to them and older children who know the words are often fearful of getting into trouble for saying bad, dirty or swear words.

- **Police and/or formal child protection action requires particular disclosure of the event(s) to a particular person.**

For the child who does start a disclosure process, they will usually disclose in the first instance to a friend or trusted adult. However, system responses require the child to retell the details of the abuse to a stranger (a police officer and/or a CPFS worker) with sufficient accurate verifiable detail to; substantiate the abuse, to substantiate the identity of the person responsible and, if there is sufficient detail, to enable the police to lay specific criminal charge(s). Many sexually abused children find themselves unable to disclose to the interviewing authority in the manner required to initiate preventative action.

- **Child sexual abuse is a process, not an event.**

The disclosure of sexual abuse by a child is a process which can take months or years. The more a child feels supported and not blamed with their tentative first steps of disclosure the more they will be able to continue that process including more details of the sexual abuse.

4. The capacity of the perpetrator to prevent disclosures.

Perpetrators work hard to ensure that nothing will prevent their ongoing access to the child’s body.

- Threatening the child to ‘keep the secret’: “He told me that I would get sent to a home and that I’d never see him or mummy again if I told”
- Cutting the child off from anyone who they might confide in: “He banned all boys from visiting the laundry before 4pm.....and terminated her employment on the pretext that the laundry was being privatised ⁵ (a woman reflecting on the actions a hostel warden took to ensure his sexual abuse of young boys in the hostel was not disclosed)
- “Grooming” of others in ways that ensure any child’s disclosure will be treated with disbelief: “Child molesters groom the parents, school, church, clubs or any other organisations where children congregate into accepting them as upstanding in the community. These child molesters are known, loved, trusted or possibly feared, and their conduct is unfortunately assumed to be above reproach⁶.”

5. Fears and concerns for themselves, their family, the perpetrator.

Testimonies of adult victim/survivors as to why, as children, they felt unable to disclose ⁷ conclude that; fears for their own personal safety, of how they will be viewed by others, the pervasive fear that if they tell they will not be believed, fear of family breakdown and a sense of ongoing responsibility for the safety of other children, the abuser or family members all inhibit disclosures. Boys can be particularly reluctant to disclose their experiences ‘because of community assumptions that have often labeled them as future perpetrators; as homosexual; or, because they fear being treated as social outcasts, liars, or as emotionally weak’ ⁸.

There are a number of misconceptions concerning the disclosure of sexual abuse by children including⁹: children are easily manipulated into giving false reports; retraction and/or inconsistencies are evidence of lying; children cannot provide reliable accounts of sexual abuse; abuse claims often prove to be false; sexual abuse can be detected by medical examination. The more that is known and understood about the dynamics of child sexual abuse and the barriers for children in disclosing sexual abuse the more likely it is that the response to the child will lead to protection; and the less likely it will be that it will lead to secondary wounding.

Refer to *Guidelines for Protecting Children 2015* for further information and guidance.

⁵ Blaxwell, P (2014). St. Andrews Hostel Katanning: How the system and society failed our children. pg 69

⁶ Ibid. Pg 60

⁷ Neame A & Heenan M (2003), What lies behind the hidden figure of sexual assault? Issues of prevalence and disclosure, ACSSA Briefing Paper No. 1, Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, Australian Institute for Family Studies, Melbourne.

⁸ Ibid, pg 4

⁹ Miller, R (2012). Truth, testimony, relevance: Improving the quality of evidence in sexual offence cases.