

One minute guide

Child Sexual Abuse Disclosures

June 2020

What is a disclosure?

A disclosure is broadly defined as 'one person conveying their experience to another person'.

Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is best understood as a process that is influenced by the features and qualities of relationships in children's lives and may develop over an extended period of time.

In September 2019 some research was conducted by the Child Sexual Abuse Centre, Bedfordshire University and the NSPCC. This research contains important messages for professionals regarding CSA. Please read the key messages below and keep them in mind during your professional practice.

Key messages

Children's disclosures of sexual abuse vary in the mode of communication, intent, spontaneity and amount of detail that is included. Disclosure is best understood as a process which is influenced by relationships and interactions with others and may extend over a considerable period of time.

Rates of verbal disclosure are low at the time that abuse occurs in childhood. However, children say that they are trying to disclose their abuse when they show signs or act in ways that they hope adults will notice and react to. This is particularly important for disabled children.

Professionals need to keep in mind that any child could be attempting to disclose, but certain children may face additional barriers to disclosure because of their disability, gender, ethnicity and/or sexual orientation.

A range of complex and interacting individual, relational and social barriers may prevent children disclosing abuse, to professionals or anyone else.

The act of disclosing sexual abuse can heighten shame and guilt. Others' negative reactions to disclosures may compound these impacts. This should not stop professionals from providing opportunities for children to disclose, but it is essential that children and their families receive appropriate support following disclosure.

Teachers are the professionals to whom children will most commonly disclose, but the disclosure process can be helped or hindered by the way in which any professional engages with a child about whom concerns exist.

Children want to be noticed by friendly, approachable and caring professionals, with whom they have built a trusted relationship. They want to be asked how they are doing and what is going on, so they have an opportunity to have an open dialogue.

Confidentiality is important to children but can be difficult to balance with professionals safeguarding responsibilities. Professionals may experience a tension around this in their relationship with the child. If maintaining confidentiality after a disclosure may not be possible, it is important to be open, honest and transparent with the child.

Note – the term 'children' refers generally to individuals under 18 years of age