



Disclosures Part 2: Helping Children Overcome Barriers to Disclosures

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***Editor's Note:** This is part 2 of a 2-part series regarding child disclosures. Part 1 addressed why it is important to help children disclose, and this Part 2 will review how to help create environments where children feel comfortable disclosing abuse or other harm.*

Preview:

Lengthy delays in disclosure are common for child victims, and many suffer in silence even through adulthood. Conversely, children who self-disclose abuse have much more positive outcomes, giving safe adults opportunities to halt the abuse, and begin the healing process by providing avenues to address the immediate effects of abuse through medical and therapeutic interventions (which can then prevent future abuse).

Article:

Child disclosures are a critical element of learning about abuse that has occurred when physical or medical evidence can be lacking, or when children do not show behavioral indicators of abuse. Lengthy delays in disclosure are common for child victims, and many suffer in silence even through adulthood. Conversely, children who self-disclose abuse have much more positive outcomes, giving safe adults opportunities to halt the abuse, and begin the healing process by providing avenues to address the immediate effects of abuse through medical and therapeutic interventions (which can then prevent future abuse from happening to the person). Moreover, helping children to disclose abuse can be a critical component in their journey toward healing. This article identifies a few of the barriers children face to disclosing abuse, to equip caring and safe adults with additional information and tools needed to overcome these barriers to ultimately assist children with the healing journey.

For the context of this article, a "disclosure" refers to victim survivors communicating about the experience of sexual abuse, whether it's to a peer friend, to an adult (including family or to another safe adult) or to civil authorities.

Barriers

There are several barriers to a child's communication about child sexual abuse. Children can fear not being believed, or retaliation. They frequently experience feelings of shame and guilt, and increased confusion due to the manipulation and grooming of the abuser. They are often afraid of adult reactions, and of getting into trouble. Children may lack understanding about what is happening to them, have insufficient language to describe it, or can be isolated from supportive relationships. The abuser may be someone they know well, which can cause children to worry about disrupting family or social structures. They may even have been threatened to keep things a secret or may be unwilling to speak due to fears of social stigmatization.



Children also have barriers to communication based on the values of their culture, especially when the culture prioritizes the needs of a community or family above the needs and welfare of an individual child. A child's membership within a particular culture may increase their vulnerability to being victimized and can decrease their ability to speak up. That culture can also prevent the family or community from recognizing abuse, believing it, or taking action to stop the abuse.

Since sexual abuse may not always present clear physical or behavioral indicators, we cannot expect to be able to *observe* that children are being abused—and thus these disclosures become essential. However, since speaking about abuse is difficult for children on their own, we must take steps to create the opportunities for them to be able to disclose.

Helping children to disclose abuse can be a critical component in their journey toward healing—this is where safe adults like you come in! Children who *are able* to disclose, who have safe adults listen and believe them, have much more positive outcomes! This is because it gives safe adults opportunities to stop the abuse and to address the immediate effects of abuse—through professional and community support.

Since we can't rely solely on behavioral indicators of abuse to show us that abuse is occurring, disclosures become paramount. Even though disclosures are extremely difficult for children—there *are* actions we can take to make it more likely that children will communicate about abuse. This creates opportunities for children to disclose, while also making it easier for them to communicate about what is making them feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

To create opportunities for disclosures, talk to children in your care frequently about child protection matters, including:

- What appropriate physical touch behaviors are,
- What unsafe physical interactions are,
- Who in the child's surroundings may see or touch their private parts (these are typically the parents, a medical professional, or another designated safe adult *and only with a specific purpose* such as helping them to be clean or healthy), and
- Examples of safe adults with whom they can talk if they need to communicate any situations of inappropriate or unsafe behavior.

Let children know they can come to you, or another safe adult, if they are ever in a situation where they feel scared, uncomfortable, or unsafe. Tell them that if they ever need to share anything that is bothering them about their own situation or even that of a friend's, that you will believe them, and will do whatever you can to help keep them safe.

If a child or youth discloses abuse to you, you must communicate this to the appropriate civil authority. This will involve making a report to the child protective services agency in your state, or to local law enforcement. If the abuse involves an employee or volunteer of your organization, after making this report, also communicate to a representative in your organization, per your organization's policy.

Conclusion



Children need safe adults in their lives to help create havens where the one out of ten children who are survivors of child sexual abuse could disclose about what happened to them, or about what is making them feel uncomfortable, scared or unsafe. You can help be that safe adult for a child by teaching children about child protection matters, maintaining safe environments and only engaging in healthy and appropriate interactions with the children in your care. Thank you for all that you do as a safe adult to create opportunities for children to disclose, and get the help they need.