

# What Helps Children Tell? Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure

**Background:** Reviews/studies have focussed on the barriers to disclosure more than the facilitators. A new analysis of 20 studies that help children disclose experiences of CSA has been completed. This meta-analysis forms the content of this briefing. Brennan B, McElvaney, R, 2020 *'What Helps Children Tell? A Qualitative Meta-Analysis of CSA Disclosure'*: Child Abuse Review Vol 29: 97-113 <https://doi/10.1002/car.2617>

**Why it Matters:** 'Non-disclosure and delayed disclosure continues to be prevalent among children and adolescents who experience abuse.' Many children who have been abused do not disclose until adulthood. Practitioners need to focus on what helps children tell rather than what hinders children telling. Adult studies continue to record significant numbers who never disclosed as children. Children need an environment in which to disclose.

## Question to ask

How do you recognise distress in a child?  
Are you professionally curious as to the cause?  
How do you initiate conversations about well-being?  
How do you ensure children know what abuse is and that it is not acceptable?  
How do you let children know they can talk to you and you can be trusted?  
Do you know what to do if a child discloses?



**Information.** Practitioners are well versed in the barriers to disclosure. Children feel responsible for the abuse, feel shame and stigma, fear not being believed, how they will be received, fear of family disruption and concern for the perpetrator, fear the threats by the perpetrator, lack of trust in other adults, lack of trust in services, lack of provision of services. However, they will tell if the child has concern for others or if they want the abuse to stop

## Key Practice messages

- 1) Need to focus on what helps children tell rather than what hinders children telling.
- 2) Children need those around them to notice when they need to talk about themselves and what is happening in their lives, when they are unable to cope with their distress, when they want something done about it.
- 3) Professionals and adults need to: ask children about their lives and wellbeing, help them access someone they can trust, let them know they will be taken seriously, help them understand that abuse is wrong.

## Factors that help disclosure

Two key dynamics help children tell: needing to tell (pressure cooker effect) and opportunity to tell. They will need: close relationship with a trusted adult, developmentally appropriate education, emotional support and understanding, feeling that they will be believed, adult initiating conversations about the child's wellbeing and life and asking the right questions

## Behavioural indicators

Children do not have to disclose verbally, their behaviour will indicate something is wrong. Research shows that children acknowledge the psychological distress associated with keeping the secret and when the distress becomes too much to cope with, they may become angry, sad, use physical violence, self-harm or any other behaviour that is out of the norm for that child. Quite often it is the behaviour that is concentrated on rather than the underlying cause.