

Let children know you're listening

The importance of an adult's interpersonal skills
in helping to improve a child's
experience of disclosure

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Let children know you're listening

A **safeguarding resource** to help you show children and young people that, whatever they want to share, you're ready to listen.

There are three simple directions to remember...

➤ Show you care, help them **open up**

Give them your full attention and keep your body language open and encouraging. Be compassionate, be understanding and reassure them their feelings are important. Phrases like “you’ve shown such courage today” help.

➤ Take your time, **slow down**

Respect pauses and don’t interrupt them – let them go at their own pace. Recognise and respond to their body language. And remember that it may take several conversations for them to share what’s happened to them.

➤ Show you understand, **reflect back**

Make it clear you’re interested in what they’re telling you. Reflect back what they’ve said to check your understanding – and use their language to show it’s their experience.



+ Find out more

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nspcc.org.uk/listen

Introduction

Children^a disclose their experience of abuse and neglect in many different ways, which can be complicated, often fragmented and over a long period of time^{1,2}. Many children will delay telling someone^{3,4,5,6}, and when disclosures do occur they are not always direct or verbal^{7,8}. Research that has examined children's disclosure journeys has found that often attempts to disclose abuse and neglect go unrecognised, unheard or ignored⁹. With such complicated and sometimes subtle attempts to disclose, how can adults^b who work with children be sure they are hearing the child's disclosures of abuse?

To address this question, the NSPCC undertook a project to explore what adults who work with children felt they needed to better respond to disclosures. This exploration was informed by what children have said about their often negative

experiences of disclosing abuse and/or neglect¹⁰. A number of safeguarding resources already exist, including training and advice available from the NSPCC and the NSPCC helpline, but this project aimed to explore what additional resources could be useful. Based on the evidence gathered in this project, a number of resources are planned by the NSPCC. The first development from this project is a poster that is designed help adults who work with children to respond supportively in the moment a child chooses to disclose, and to interact and communicate in a way that helps children feel listened to. This paper provides a brief exploration of the evidence and insights gathered in this project, which were used to inform the development of content for a poster. The poster outlines the interpersonal skills^c that adults should use when a child discloses abuse and/or neglect.

We use the term disclosure in this report to refer to the process of a child starting to share their experiences with others. This process can start before the child is ready to put their thoughts and feelings in order. The process can be verbal and/or non verbal and can take place over a long period of time – it is a journey, not one act or action. This process may actually never lead to an 'allegation' of abuse.

Disclosure is a common term in the research literature that looks at how child abuse and neglect comes to the attention of someone (friends, parents, professionals, etc.). Disclosure is also often used in a multiagency context, allowing a common language across disciplines. We know that there are nuances and differences in how different individuals and professionals interpret the term disclosure. The use of the term disclosure in this report is used without intending implications as to the accuracy of the information a child is trying to convey. Other terms and phrases that have been suggested are 'allegation', 'what children tell us', 'what children do', or 'what children say', but we feel these are too limiting as they do not encompass the full extent of what we are trying to capture when using the term disclosure. Irrespective of the terminology that is used, the NSPCC believes that professionals should always take children seriously when they are trying to share and make sense of their experiences.

a Throughout this paper, the term children and child is used to refer to any child or young person under the age of 18.

b Throughout this paper, the term adult is used to refer to any adult who works with children, such as those who have a designated child protection role (like a head teacher) or those who come into contact with children through their job (like a nurse) or voluntary role (like a sports coach).

c Interpersonal skills are defined as the skills that help an individual to interact, communicate and build relationships with others. They include verbal and non verbal social, emotional, communication, and empathy skills.

Content development- In the moment of disclosure

The ambition of this project was to develop a practical resource to help adults 'in the moment' of a disclosure. 'In the moment' was defined as the situation where the child and the adult were in a conversation or interaction where a potential disclosure of abuse or neglect was occurring. The decision to focus on an 'in the moment' scenario of disclosure was driven by research that has examined children's experiences of disclosing abuse and/or neglect^{11,12}, which suggested that there are many behaviours and skills that adults could use during a conversation to make a child feel heard and improve their overall disclosure experience.

Several activities were undertaken to collect the evidence and insights needed to help shape the content for the resource. A brief review of evidence was also completed to ensure the content developed for the resource was informed by the latest research exploring young peoples' experience

of disclosing, adults' experiences of responding to disclosures, and the skills that are needed for good listening. Consultations were held with young people to explore their views on what makes good or poor listening skills, and how they would like adults to interact with them and respond to what they have to say. A UK-wide survey and a series of focus groups and interviews with adults who work with children were carried out to capture their experiences of responding to disclosures, what they identify as good practice in relation to listening to disclosures, and their views on resources that would help them deal with disclosures. The survey received 1510 responses, 75 adults participated in focus groups, 13 adults were interviewed, and 15 children were consulted. The rich and detailed insights gathered through these activities and the evidence review served as the foundation from which the content for the resource was developed, and led the decision to use a poster as the format for this resource.

Interpersonal skills: Key insights for people working with children

The key insight that emerged from this project was the importance of an adult who is responding to a disclosure implementing appropriate interpersonal skills to help a young person to feel heard. Although adults who work with children will have different reporting and recording requirements based on their role and organisation, many of the survey respondents and focus group participants recognised there are common principles in how they should interact with a child who is disclosing abuse and/or neglect. These principles can be fundamental in improving a child's overall disclosure experience. Although not exhaustive, three categories of interpersonal skills were reported as most important by adults who work with children

and skills that they would like more help with. Existing research evidence and children consulted for this project also viewed these skills as important in helping children to feel listened to and improve their experience of disclosure¹³. It was felt that it was crucial to concentrate on the interpersonal skills that both adults and children consistently recognise as important. These three groups of skills formed the foundation for content that was developed and presented on the poster.

1. How to demonstrate you are listening to a child who is disclosing
2. How to reassure a child and show empathy
3. How to put a child in charge of the conversation

1. How to demonstrate you are listening to a child who is disclosing

Children consulted spoke about how adults often do not display simple but highly important non-verbal messages to show they are listening to a child who is disclosing, which can leave them feeling unheard. Survey respondents and focus group participants also recognised the importance of demonstrating that they are listening to a child who is disclosing, and showing interest in what they have to say. Many adults stressed the need to be 'fully present' by listening attentively to the child. Children consulted, focus group participants and survey respondents suggested adults should avoid distractions, and refrain from looking at computers, watches or phones when hearing a child's account of disclosure. They also highlighted the importance of making appropriate eye contact, using open, warm and inviting body language, and being aware of tone of voice:

Body language. Eye contact, ONLY if they want it. Mirror their body language (Focus group participant)

Don't distract yourself (e.g. use your phone) (Child from consultation group)

Research in this area also emphasises the importance of these skills in demonstrating attention¹⁴, and helping encourage a child to tell their account¹⁵. In addition to being aware of an adults' own body language, research on good listening skills suggests that it is also important for an adult to have an awareness of the body language of the person who is telling them something¹⁶. Focus group participants reported this is important because paying attention to a child's body language while they are disclosing may provide valuable information on how the child is feeling, and whether they are finding it difficult to express what has happened or is happening to them.

Research that has examined what it means to be a 'good' listener advises against planning or rehearsing responses while listening, only listening for what is expected, or drawing conclusions before someone has finished speaking^{17,18,19}. Focus group participants suggested that while these responses may be natural problem-solving reactions to hearing difficult information, they may distract attention away from what the child is saying and could leave a child feeling unheard. Children consulted reported they can often sense when an adult shuts down and stops listening to them, which leaves them feeling that they have only passively been heard:

When an adult says they are listening, but they are just ignoring you (Child from consultation group)

Despite the consensus between children and adults who work with them about the importance of adults demonstrating they are listening and how this may help support a child to disclose, survey respondents indicated that they wanted more help with how to become a good listener when hearing disclosures:

(would like) to see good practice or not good practice when listening to children - this is the most sensitive and hardest part of the child protection journey. Our skills can either open up a child or close them down.....critical we do things right by them at their most vulnerable moment (Survey respondent from education sector)

2. How to reassure a child and show empathy

Many of the adults who contributed to this project spoke about the need to respond to children's disclosures with empathy and sincerity. They also highlighted the importance of accepting a child's account and feelings without judgment. These skills are crucial given that children in research and in the consultation sessions reported that fear of being judged is one of the barriers to disclosing abuse^{20,21}. Research with children has also shown that if an adult responds to a young person in a way that minimises their experience of abuse it may further exacerbate a young person's distress or trauma²². Focus group discussions and survey responses suggested many adults felt that 'checking-in' with a child during a disclosure (by asking whether they were okay) was helpful for the child, and showing compassion and care for the child was important in helping the child feel supported. These insights are in line with research in the area, which suggests empathetic listening relies on the listener seeking to understand the speaker's thoughts and feelings, and respecting them as valid²³. However, both focus group participants and survey respondents were concerned about the need to control their own emotional reactions, noting that they were worried about showing too much emotion, not enough emotion or inappropriate emotions:

Listening to any disclosure is somewhat traumatic and not showing this to the victim, whilst important, is not always easy (Survey respondent from education sector)

Many spoke about being aware of their own facial expression when listening to a child disclosing, to ensure they are demonstrating an appropriate level of emotion. Discussions in the focus groups suggested that adults should avoid appearing shocked and that looking overly concerned could be misinterpreted by a child as negativity

or disapproval and cause the child to shut down. Another skill commonly cited as good practice in the focus groups and survey was the need to reassure a child, but there was recognition that this can sometimes be difficult:

Regardless of the training that you receive, there is still an anxiety about handling the disclosure incorrectly due to the focus on potential need for good enough police evidence. This often means there is a barrier to responding to the child/young person in a way that reassures them and helps them feel listened to, heard and understood. (Survey respondent from social care sector)

In the focus groups, one technique considered as helpful in reassuring a child was to acknowledge that they may have difficulty in speaking about their experiences. Many participants cautioned against using language that might imply a child has done the 'right or wrong' thing by telling. Other, useful phrases that were volunteered by participants included:

I understand this might have been difficult for you (Survey respondent from social care sector)

You've shown such courage today (Focus group participant)

3. How to put young people in charge of the conversation

Adults who participated in this project also stressed the significance of putting the child in charge of the pace, flow and direction of the disclosure conversation. They explained this means allowing the child to communicate in their own time, without interruption. Being comfortable with silence was also cited as good practice, as was resisting the urge to fill gaps in conversations:

Provide a place of no pressure and sit with the silences for as long as the young person needs (Survey respondent from education sector)

Research also indicates that going at the child's pace²⁴, and avoiding quick responses to fill silences are all helpful listening skills²⁵. Some participants talked about the urgency they felt in getting the information from the young person as soon as possible for both safety and investigation purposes. This was despite their knowledge that giving a child time helps facilitate trust and encourages the child to disclose:

As an investigator of abuse we have very little opportunity to engage with the victim as time is of the essence in the first instance as our perspective is to investigate crime. It is essential that no tangible evidence is lost therefore the earlier a disclosure is made the better. This is often not conducive to building trust although certainly our best efforts are always made to let the child know we are there to achieve the very best for the child in question (Survey respondent from police sector)

Closely linked to time, existing research evidence from both children²⁶ and professionals²⁷ felt that having a safe and private space, even if it is creating the feeling of a safe space, to hear the disclosure was extremely important for both the adult and the child. Survey responses and focus group discussions highlighted that a safe space allows the adult and the child to focus on the disclosure, without a concern of who might overhear or interrupt.

Other distractions, particularly in a busy school. Phones ringing, pupils knocking on the door etc. Trying to note down the details and give the young person my full attention (Survey respondent from education sector)

Research has also helped to identify other strategies or interpersonal skills that are useful for demonstrating a listener's understanding of what has been said, including the use of paraphrasing and summarising^{28,29}. This was also echoed by those who attended the focus groups, who reported it can be helpful to reflect back what a child has said after they have disclosed. Participants reported it is important to remember to use the child's own language to help demonstrate the adult's own understanding of what happened and to ensure the child has been heard correctly. Research in this area, however, warns against providing feedback that simply repeats back a child's account word-for-word which could indicate that an adult hasn't properly engaged with or understood the message being communicated³⁰.

Let children know you're listening – poster development

The insights gathered in this project from children and adults who work with children highlighted three facets of verbal and non verbal interpersonal skills that are critical in helping children to feel heard when they disclose abuse and/or neglect. These skills are well known to people who work with children, but children tell us adults don't necessarily always do these things. Our ambition was to create something that would help keep these skills at the forefront of adults' minds.

Therefore, these skills formed the foundation from which the content for the poster was developed, which was considered the most useful format by participants. In addition, there were other requirements which were considered to ensure

that the poster would be useful. The messaging on the poster needed to be memorable, and easy to understand and implement. The poster also needed to be appropriate for children to see, given that this poster might be displayed in a number of places where children might see them such as classrooms, sports halls and staff rooms, therefore the language on the poster was also purposefully designed to be understood by young people too. In response to these considerations, three simple directions – opening up, slowing down and reflecting back – were formulated to remind adults of these effective interpersonal skills that can help improve children's experiences of disclosing.



Further insights gathered in this project

The development of the poster is the first step in helping to improve children's disclosure experiences, and helping adults who work with children to feel confident in how to respond and hear what children have to say.

From the insights gathered in the project, a number of additional training needs were identified by participants in this project. Many adults who work with children spoke about their uncertainty of how to explain confidentiality in a sensitive way to a child, and many wanted more resources to support them to do this effectively. They also spoke about their concern about how to handle other procedural aspects of disclosures, including how to open, continue, and close the conversation with a young person, and many adults were anxious about knowing the 'right' or 'wrong' thing to say to a child. Specifically, a number of adults were unsure about what questions they should ask, and indicated they wanted resources that would help them question young people in a supportive, but non-leading manner. Adults also expressed interest in training in how to spot the signs and symptoms of abuse.

Although many participants indicated they had accessed training in these areas, there was a clear call for additional training. The NSPCC aims to work to understand these training gaps further, and to make more resources available to adults to equip them with the necessary skills.

The NSPCC has a number of information, guidance and safeguarding resources that may be helpful for adults who work with children, including:

NSPCC helpline

The NSPCC helpline is a place adults can contact by phone or online to get advice or share their concerns about a child, anonymously if they wish.

help@nspcc.org.uk

0808 800 5000

NSPCC Learning

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Childline

If you work with children, you can also signpost them to Childline. Our Childline service is here for children, whatever their worry, whenever they need help. It's free, private and confidential, and can be accessed online, on the phone, anytime.

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Notes

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