

### How does child sexual abuse affect children and young people?

Child sexual abuse is any sexual act or sexual threat imposed on a child or adolescent. Child sexual abuse is an abuse of power and the responsibility of the abuse will always be held by the person using the abuse. It is never the fault of the child. It is illegal in the State of Queensland and every state and territory across Australia.

Child sexual abuse can affect each child differently. For some, the effects are immediately noticeable, For others, it may take some years before their experience of abuse has an impact on their quality of life. This fact sheet describes the current understanding of how and why sexual abuse may impact children and young people in different ways.

### The experience for children and adolescents after telling a safe adult

#### A. The abuse does not, at this point, impact the child or adolescent in a significant way

For some children or young people, **the impact of the sexual abuse may not be felt immediately by the child.** They might simply feel relieved they have told the safe adults in their lives and the response has been supportive, nurturing and protective. Some of the children or adolescents who attend True for counselling are able to say that, for now, everything is OK. There are a couple of reasons that may contribute to this experience:

- The child is not yet cognitively or developmentally at a stage where they understand the sexually abusive behaviours as dangerous or abusive.
- The grooming process may have ensured the child or young person felt no pain and instead believed themselves to be agreeing to or wanting the behaviours to occur.
- The child may have an innate resilience and ability to process the abuse in a way that enables them to continue to feel safe and nurtured with the adults in their life.

In situations such as these, the True Therapist may offer the child or adolescent 4 -6 appointments and use this time to gently assess any unspoken fears or worries. The goal of counselling would be to affirm the child or adolescent's ability to tell a safe adult, reiterate that the abuse is never the fault of the child or adolescent and to provide reassurance that for many victims/ survivors of child sexual assault, there remain both positive and negative feelings about the person who hurt them.

### B. The abuse is experienced as a trauma – with possible PTSD

Some children or young people **experience the abuse as a crisis or trauma**. Trauma is the name given to a *life event that shakes the world view or innate belief of an individual*. For some who have not been exposed to previous traumas or adverse childhood experiences, the trauma may relate to the shock of finding that they too may be hurt or abused.

Some of the effects that may be noticed by safe adults or the child or adolescent include:

- Changes in eating or sleeping, in ways that have a negative impact on the quality of life.
- Unusual or new fears, such as a fear of being touched, being alone in a room or being without adults they know to be safe.
- Bedwetting or soiling after being toilet trained
- Nightmares, flashbacks (remembering the abuse – through any of the five senses) while awake, or appearing to dissociate (appear to be in a world of their own, unable to hear or focus on the present)
- Acting Out behaviours – aggression, breaking objects, running away from school or home, arguing with friends, family and teacher.
- Vague symptoms of illness such as tummy-aches or headaches

If a child or young person is assessed by a True therapist or counsellor to have feelings or behaviour that may be consistent with a trauma response then the therapist will prepare a Therapeutic Plan to discuss with the child/ adolescent, parents or carers. The therapist will discuss the individually tailored goals of the plan to ensure that all involved agree with the intention of the work with True. The therapist or counsellor will also describe how counselling sessions will be designed to achieve the proposed outcomes with the child or young person. This may include discussions about the type of counselling used, such as play or creative art therapies and the structure of appointments.

## C. The abuse is a culmination of many traumas with significant impact over time

Some of the children who attend True have experienced many challenging experiences over their lifetime. For some of these children, the sexual abuse is simply another difficult experience on top of other adverse childhood experiences. When children experience a series of traumas one after the other, they may develop what is referred to as **complex trauma**. If the traumas originated before the child was 2 years of age, the complex trauma is described as **developmental trauma**, in recognition of the impact of the trauma of the child's developmental milestones.

Research over the past two decades has confirmed that healing from 'complex trauma' takes time and requires the right intervention at the right time in the right order.

- If your therapist believes there may be indicators of 'complex trauma' (or developmental trauma) they will explain this to you in plain language, describing how and why this assessment has been made.
- The therapist will discuss the individually tailored goals of the plan to ensure that all involved agree with the intention of the work with True. The therapist or counsellor will also describe how counselling sessions will be designed to achieve the proposed outcomes with the child or young person. This may include discussions about the type of counselling used, such as play or creative art therapies and the structure of appointments.

The most important thing to know is that children are resilient and adaptable; neuroscience has demonstrated that the brain is flexible and open to being re-sculpted if given the opportunity.