

### Providing support and care after sexual abuse

A child or adolescent who has experienced child sexual abuse needs the following:

- To be believed and supported
- To know they are not responsible for the abuse
- Acknowledgement they've made the right decision to tell
- Safety and protection from further abuse and harassment
- To know what happened to them is serious and will not be ignored
- Acknowledgement of their feelings (whatever they may be).
- To understand they may have both positive and negative feelings about the person who abused them
- To know they are not responsible for deciding what happens to the person who abused them after the child or adolescent has told someone and
- To be able to receive support and counselling from a sexual assault counsellor if they believe this would help.

Parents or carers often express their understandable worry when they hear their child may be on a wait list for counselling for several weeks before commencing counselling. It can be helpful to hear that in fact at the time immediately after disclosure (telling their safe adult what has happened) most children and young people tell us it is the reactions of the safe adults in their lives that mean the most to them.

While your child or adolescent is waiting to be allocated to a therapist or counsellor, please know these 6 support strategies can make a difference.

#### 1. Listen

Your child or adolescent may want to talk about their feelings, the abuse that occurred or the effects of the abuse they are experiencing (like nightmares, trouble concentrating, feeling unable to be around crowds of people).

Sometimes we don't have to use a lot of words to comfort someone. Simply listening without offering a judgement (such as... *you should* or *you should not feel that way*) or a solution (*have you tried...*) can lessen feelings of isolation and self-blame.

Remember, if the CPIU (Queensland Police) are undertaking an investigation **it is very important you do not discuss details of what occurred** during the abuse (as difficult as this may be). A nurturing alternative may be to gently steer the conversation with your child/ adolescent to their feelings or emotions. For example, you may want to say *'How are you feeling as you remember the day? I wonder if there is something I can do to help that feeling? I am so sorry you had that experience – this was never your fault.'*

## Fact Sheet

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### 2. Validate

If you can, try to find the words that remind the child or adolescent that you believe them, you are on their side and that you will support them no matter what. Some helpful phrases might be:

*I believe you*

*I'm so sorry this happened to you.*

*No-one ever has the right to hurt you.*

*This is not your fault.*

*You are not alone. I'm here for you and I'm glad you told me.*

### 3. Keep an open heart

See if you can build in extra time just to be available to your child or adolescent. Healing from sexual abuse may take quite a while but it can also offer some opportunities for bringing safe people closer, for meaningful discussion and moments of real connection. These times of connection are particularly crucial in challenging the tactics of secrecy and separation that are often encouraged in grooming processes. When things are difficult (perhaps the child or adolescent is angry, distressed or withdrawn) remember that this will pass.

### 4. Keep yourself strong

Caring for, and loving dearly, a child or young person who has experienced sexual abuse can bring a particular level of grief and distress to the safe adults. It can be extremely hard to manage the feelings of grief, anger and (misplaced) guilt that can arise as a result of knowing the child you love has been hurt. One important thing to remember is to find ways you can possibly take care of yourself in order to remain strong for your child. There is a limit to what we are able to hear and process. You cannot be your best self if you find yourself too tired to listen with care and compassion. You are always welcome to contact True and request a Priority Appointment with the Senior Practitioner if the feelings are becoming too difficult to manage.

### 5. Ask if there is something in particular your child needs or wants from you

It can be difficult for humans of any age to be able to articulate exactly what they are feeling, what they need and why. This is particularly the case if someone is living with the effects of trauma and finding themselves in the survival part of the brain. One way of supporting a child or adolescent is to ask simple questions, with yes or no answers, about what would be best at that particular time. Would they like to be alone? Would they like you to be around them? Would they like you to distract them? Would they like you simply to be quiet but nearby? Allowing the child or young person to feel as if they have moments of control in their life helps with a sense of regaining personal power.

### 6. Keep the contact details for supports in a handy place while you wait for a place to become available

Parents and carers are encouraged to ring True Child and Family Service if circumstances deteriorate while a child is on the wait list for counselling.

Other supports that can be valuable to access include:

- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800
- Parent line 1300 30 1300
- 1800 Respect 1800 737 732
- State-wide Sexual Assault Helpline 1800 010 120