



# Foundational theories and knowledge Responding to disclosures of harm Practice Paper

## 1. Introduction

This practice paper aims to support practitioners to develop an understanding of how children and young people make disclosures of harm and provide advice on how to respond appropriately. It is important that DCP practitioners develop positive relationships with children and young people and facilitate environments that support them to feel comfortable to disclose experiences of harm.<sup>1</sup> Supporting children and young people to feel comfortable to express their experiences is crucial in enabling DCP to ensure the safety of children and young people. Whilst some of the examples in this paper may refer to disclosures of sexual harm, the approaches for responding to disclosures outlined herein are applicable to all forms of harm.

Please note that in this document, the term Aboriginal refers to all people who identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This term is used as the First Nations Peoples of South Australia are predominantly Aboriginal peoples and it is their preferred term. We acknowledge and respect that it is preferable to identify Aboriginal peoples, where possible, by their specific Language group or Nation.

## 2. Factors that impact disclosure of harm by children and young people

Disclosure (for the purposes of this practice paper) refers to the process where a child or young person conveys or attempts to convey that they have been or are currently being harmed. It is important for practitioners to understand that it can be extremely difficult for children and young people to disclose past or current harm and many children and young people will not disclose during childhood. The grooming process is designed to silence the victim, to ensure the abuse can continue and to protect the perpetrator from being held accountable. Given this, practitioners must pay close attention to the behaviour of children and young people and be alert to potential signs they are being harmed (for further information refer to the [Safeguarding Practice Paper](#)).

Children and young people may be afraid to talk about the harm they have experienced or are experiencing for a range of reasons including:

- feeling frightened about how others will react
- thinking they will not be believed
- feeling guilty, ashamed or embarrassed and fearing the social stigma of sexual abuse
- blaming themselves for what has happened
- feeling love or a sense loyalty to the person who has harmed them



- having concerns about privacy
- fearing the possible consequences of their disclosure
- not believing that disclosing will help to keep them safe
- not trusting the adults around them or the systems in place to protect them
- fearing for their safety or that of another person (perpetrators often make threats to prevent disclosure)
- feeling concerned about the consequences for the perpetrator
- feeling highly distressed by the idea of talking about the abuse
- being unable to recognise or identify the behaviour as harmful due to young age, disability, lack of education, previous experiences or the perpetrator has presented the abuse to them as a normal way to show love or affection or as a game
- being young or having a disability that impacts their language skills or cognitive capacity to describe their experiences
- not remembering, not understanding or not being able to describe what has occurred.

## 2.1 The impact of culture on disclosure for Aboriginal children and young people

The Stolen Generations, colonisation, disconnection from Country, racism and institutionalisation continue to have a significant impact on Aboriginal peoples and communities and result in intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma makes it extremely difficult for Aboriginal children and young people, families and communities to trust both government and non-government services.

Aboriginal children and young people face additional, unique barriers to disclosure including:

- racism and discrimination including past and current experiences leading to distrust of police, government authorities and people in positions of authority
- fear of being judged and of being removed and separated from family, community and Country
- shame and concerns about bringing shame on family and community
- lack of cultural safety
- lack of access to culturally safe and responsive Aboriginal led services
- language barriers.<sup>ii</sup>

## 2.2 The impact of culture on disclosure for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds

For children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, there may be cultural barriers to disclosure including:

- strong views on respect for adults
- feelings of shame
- concerns about bringing shame to the community and the family name<sup>iii</sup>
- fear of reprisal within the community.



### 3. Creating environments that support children and young people to disclose

It is essential for practitioners to create the most optimal environment for children and young people to share their experiences.

Key elements that support children and young people to feel comfortable to make disclosures:

- **Ensuring safe adults are available and accessible:** Social support is critical to a child or young person's decision to disclose.<sup>iv</sup> Research has demonstrated that children and young people considered trusted adults to be those who:
  - are available
  - listen
  - are able to talk about sensitive issues
  - prioritise children's needs and concerns
  - do what they say they will do.<sup>v</sup>
- **Creating opportunities to raise concerns:** It is important to regularly ask children and young people about their safety and wellbeing, rather than waiting for significant behavioural concerns to arise.
- **Ensuring children and young people are educated on their rights, sex, sexual abuse and boundaries.**<sup>vi</sup>
- **Attempting to establish cultural safety<sup>1</sup> by:**
  - taking the time to deeply listen to and hear the voices and stories of Aboriginal children and young people's stories about what connects them to their families and culture
  - building cultural connections and relationships through yarning and storytelling with the child and young person, and their family
  - encouraging the child or young person's expression of culture, values and beliefs
  - supporting the child or young person to understand their family's culture and history
  - working in ways that value the child and young person's lived experiences and story.<sup>vii</sup>

### 4. Understanding how children and young people disclose

Disclosures by children and young people often emerge over time, which can include disclosure to peers prior to disclosure to caregivers and trusted adults.<sup>viii</sup>

#### 4.1 Accidental or unintentional disclosures

Accidental disclosures occur when the child or young person unintentionally mentions a concern about being harmed without understanding what they are saying constitutes as abuse. This is more common in younger children or children and young people with a developmental delay or disability.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that cultural safety is different for each person and is determined by them.



The following are some examples of how children and young people may make indirect or partial disclosures:

Possible indicator of an accidental disclosure:	Examples
<p><b>Making a comment about a person, place or activity that gives cause for concern</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “When Steve came into my room last night when everyone was in bed, he said...”.</li> <li>• “Why don’t I have hair on my private parts? David does. He showed me”.</li> <li>• “Jane always checks us all over for bruises when we have our shower after cricket practice”.</li> <li>• “Brad said to keep it the secret. I will never tell because secrets are important”.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Making a comment that gives cause for concern and then quickly recanting or correcting</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Steve came into my room once but it was just a dream.”</li> <li>• “Jane checks some kids’ bodies but not mine.”</li> </ul>

## 4.2 Indirect or partial disclosures

Children and young people may feel conflicted about whether or not to disclose harm they have experienced or are experiencing and they may:

- decide that they want to tell someone but are unable to find the right moment or person to listen
- fear the repercussions so they 'test the water' before disclosing
- feel too ashamed, embarrassed or frightened to speak directly about the abuse, and may try to communicate about it indirectly in the hope that someone will recognise what they are trying to say
- say things to determine the reaction of the person they want to tell by hinting about or alluding to the harm instead of openly saying that they have been harmed.

Practitioners must be aware that children and young people will often make indirect or partial disclosures first. It is important to be alert to this to ensure an opportunity to support a child or young person to talk about their experiences is not missed. If a child or young person makes an indirect disclosure, it is important to ask them to tell you more about the situation. If on reflection it appears that a child or young person was attempting to disclose and this was not noticed at the time, it is helpful to inform them that you are there to listen to anything they have to say.



The following describes the manner in which children and young people may make indirect or partial disclosures:

Possible indirect disclosure by a child or young person	Example
<b>Through art or play (for example, drawing a picture, writing in a journal, playing out a scene with toys) the child or young person alludes to, depicts or describes the harm</b>	Isla (6 years) has been asked to draw a picture for homework. She shows her worker Tammy a picture she has drawn about an outing to the beach for family contact. Tammy notices that Isla has drawn herself looking sad and a man with a large penis.*
<b>Making statements about a person, place or activity that cause concern, or indicate unusual levels of anxiety</b>	Michael (12 years old) says to his carer, “I don’t want Jane [his mentor] to drive me to cricket practice anymore”. The carer is surprised because she had always thought Michael and Jane had a good relationship and she asks him “Why?”. Michael replies: “I dunno. She always makes me get an ice-cream with her afterwards and makes me hold her hand while we eat it. And I don’t like ice-cream. It makes me feel sick”. Michael ordinarily loves ice-cream.
<b>Playing in a manner that alludes to sexual harm or depicts what has happened to them</b>	A residential care worker notices Isla (6 years old) playing with two dolls. One doll is telling the other to take her clothes off and touching her between the legs.
<b>Making statements in general about harm or asking hypothetical questions about it</b>	Michael (12 years old) and his DCP case worker are in the car when they hear a story on the radio about a sexual abuse. Michael suddenly says, “What would you do if you knew someone that had happened to?”
<b>Disclosing about another person being harmed, but speaking as if it happened to somebody else.</b>	Elise (15 years old) says to her carer, “I have a secret. I know someone who got raped”.
<b>Using social media</b>	Elise (15 years old) posts a link to an article about the sexual assault of a teenage girl without explanation, even when asked.

\*Whilst it is important to be alert to warning signs in relation to drawings, children and young people can unintentionally produce drawings that may appear to have sexual content. For example, young children find it hard to draw people lying down side by side and the figures they draw may look like one person is on top of another person, which could give the impression of two people engaging in sexual activity, when this is not what was intended. With all warning signs, it is important to consider the whole context for the child or young person and any other signs that are cause for concern. Although current literature does not suggest a strong reliance can be placed on drawings, certain drawings which contain figures with enlarged or exaggerated genitals, an erect penis, ejaculation and drawings depicting sexual acts should raise concern about possible sexual harm. The child should be asked to describe what is happening in the picture and who the figures represent and the drawing photographed and/or retained.



If there are concerns that the child or young person has been harmed, the concerns must be reported consistent with requirements detailed at 6.1 of this paper.

## 5. Responding to indirect or partial disclosures

It is important to note that children and young people do not ordinarily make clear and detailed disclosures of their experiences of harm.<sup>ix</sup> Instead, they may leave clues or drop hints in an effort to invite conversation. The process of indirect disclosure may take days or weeks. It is critical that their signals are identified and responded to appropriately. Practitioners need to also ensure that they are supporting children and young people to feel safe and comfortable to disclose their experiences of harm.

What you can do to respond to indirect or partial disclosures	
<b>Find the right person</b>	<p>If it appears that the child or young person has something they want to say, ask them if there's someone else they would prefer to talk to.</p> <p>You could say, "I feel like there's something important you want to say. I'm happy to talk to you about it, but I understand that you might not want to tell me. It is no problem if you think you might like to talk to someone else?"</p> <p>Ensure that the person is available to listen in an environment that is comfortable and free from distractions. Consult with relevant experts and the child or young person's care team if required.</p>
<b>Find the right place</b>	<p>If the child or young person seems uncomfortable disclosing in the current environment, suggest somewhere else. Ask where they might feel comfortable and/or suggest a drive or a walk.</p> <p>You could say, "This morning you said there was something you wanted to tell me but it is a bit busy here. I feel like it was really important. We could go for a drive to chat if you like?"</p>
<b>Find the right time</b>	<p>It is important that the child or young person discloses at a time when they feel ready and comfortable but also that the person they are telling has the time and space to listen.</p> <p>Choose a time to talk when there are few distractions and minimal risk of interruption.</p> <p>If it is not possible to talk with the child or young person straight away, communicate that what they have said sounds important and the space will be made to hear them as soon as possible.</p> <p>You could say, "I felt like you wanted to tell me something important earlier, can we have a chat after dinner when things are a bit calmer?"</p>
<b>Use their own words</b>	<p>If there has been a partial disclosure or a 'hint', use this information (even if limited) to start a conversation.</p>



	You could say, “I noticed this picture that you drew yesterday and left outside your room. Can you tell me about it?” or “I heard you call yourself dirty and disgusting earlier. I was wondering if you could tell me why you think that about yourself?”
<b>Ask them what they need to feel more comfortable</b>	<p>If the child or young person seems to find it difficult to talk about what happened, acknowledge this and ask what might help them.</p> <p>You could say, “I can see this is really hard to talk about. You’re really brave and you’ve done the right thing. Is there someone or something else that might help you to feel more comfortable or [for older children] would you prefer to write it down?”</p>

## 6. Responding to disclosures

### 6.1 Reporting concerns

The safety of children and young people is always the paramount consideration. Where there are any concerns that the child or young person has been harmed, practitioners must report the concerns, consistent with the requirements of the [Reporting a suspicion a child or young person is at risk procedure](#) and sections 64A and 65 of the *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935*. Refer to the [Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935 flow chart](#) for further information.

### 6.2 Supporting children and young people during and after disclosure

The response adults give to a child or young person who discloses sexual harm (directly or otherwise) can have a profound impact on their long-term emotional wellbeing, healing from harm and their future willingness to disclose, provide further information and generally trust adults. The child or young person may have been considering for some time about whether or not to tell anyone, and if they have chosen a particular person as their confidant, that person’s reaction is critical. Personal emotions must be put aside and the needs of the child or young person made a priority, with all efforts focused on ensuring they feel as emotionally, culturally and physically safe as possible.

Key messages that must be communicated when a child or young person discloses, they have or are being harmed include:

- “You have done the right thing to tell”
- “This isn’t your fault”
- “I believe you”
- “You are brave”
- “I can’t keep this a secret but I will help and support you and work to make sure you are safe”.

Useful ways to respond to indications or disclosures of harm include:	
<b>Remaining as calm and supportive as possible</b>	Show the child or young person that there is plenty of time for them to talk and that they will be listened to. It is important to put aside negative personal feelings about the disclosure (such as, shock, anger, disgust) and convey support, patience, kindness and acceptance through words and body language.



<b>Accepting the information as true</b>	Disclosures of sexual harm are rarely false. Fear of not being believed is a primary barrier to disclosing. Practitioners must listen to the disclosure and assure the child or young person that they are believed and will receive help.
<b>Giving your full attention</b>	A child or young person might not always begin talking about what happened to them in a place or at a time where you can both focus. If you are in a busy and/or in a noisy place, ask the child or young person if you can move to a place where you can hear them properly. If that cannot occur immediately, let them know you have heard them and you will arrange a quiet space for further discussion.
<b>Letting the child or young person take their time</b>	Disclosing is difficult for children and young people and they may only be able to say a little at a time. Allow them time to speak. It is important they do not feel rushed or panicked. During this time gently and occasionally let the child or young person know that you will listen to anything they have to say when they are ready. Whilst it is important the child or young person has control over the process, this must also be balanced with the need to gather information to ensure their safety and the safety of other children or young people.
<b>Assuring the child or young person they have done the right thing</b>	Practitioners must reassure the child or young person that they have done the right thing and they will be supported.
<b>Not promising secrecy or make promises that cannot be kept</b>	As a mandated notifier, it is a legal obligation to report harm and risk of harm. Practitioners cannot promise to keep a disclosure a secret. Inform the child or young person that only professional people whose job it is to assist will be informed. If you are unsure what will happen next, let them know you are not sure but will inform them as soon as you know.
<b>Allowing the child or young person to speak in their own words</b>	Using their own words is important for the child or young person to feel heard and supported and to prevent any contamination of evidence if a formal investigation is required.
<b>Showing you understand and reflect back</b>	Make it clear you are interested in what they are telling you. Reflect back what they have said to check your understanding using their language/terminology.
<b>Not pressuring the child or young person to say more than they are comfortable with</b>	It can be difficult and traumatic for children and young people to describe harm they have experienced. Even if you feel critical information is missing, it is important not to make the child or young person feel stressed and uncomfortable by asking for more information if they are not ready to provide it.
<b>Telling the child or young person what will happen next and how they will be supported</b>	It is important to let the child or young person know that the information they have provided will be acted on to ensure that they are safe and receive support. Ask them how they are feeling and ask what they might need to feel safe.



### 6.3 Gathering additional information

In some circumstances, it may not be the role of a practitioner to investigate allegations (for example, residential care workers), but in situations where the child or young person has made a partial disclosure, it may be necessary to ask some considered questions to gather enough information to make a notification and ensure safety. These questions must be asked with respect and sensitivity and with the purpose of determining what has occurred, who is involved and whether any person is in immediate danger. Accurate reporting is crucial. Notes should either be taken during the discussion with the child or young person or immediately afterwards. If you are able to take notes, inform the child or young person, “While we’re talking, I might have to write a few things down because it helps me remember what you’ve said because it is important I get it right”.

Appropriate approaches when gathering further information after a disclosure	Example
<p><b>Use open questions and statements as much as possible and avoid closed questions</b></p> <p>Open questions encourage the child or young person to provide accurate information and speak in their own words. (Closed questions require yes/no answers or limit detail.)</p>	<p>“Tell me about...”</p> <p>“You said that XXXX happened. Tell me more about that...”</p>
<p><b>Allow the child or young person to do most of the talking</b></p> <p>Show understanding, acceptance and non-judgement through body language. Often nothing needs to be said for a child or young person to keep talking. If reflecting what has been said, use the child or young person’s own words (including their own terms for body parts). Do not interrupt or break their train of thought or recollection. It is important that they know that the listener is interested and supportive, which can be conveyed through body language and facial expression.</p>	<p>Head nodding and saying ‘uh huh’.</p> <p>“You said that you were touched on your ‘bot bot’. Tell me more about what happened.”</p> <p>If the child or young person has come to a point where they have stopped speaking, patient silence may help them to elaborate or keep talking.</p>
<p><b>Avoid any questions that could be considered ‘leading’</b></p> <p>A leading question is one that leads a child or young person toward a certain response, introduces information the child or young person has not yet provided or suggests a particular response is expected from them.</p> <p>Leading questions are inappropriate because they can make the child or young person feel pressured to answer in a certain way and can lead to false information being provided and impact future investigations.</p>	<p>Avoid: “John has been touching you, hasn’t he?” or where the bathroom has not been mentioned, “You were in the bathroom when John came in weren’t you?”</p>
<p><b>Examples of appropriate questioning techniques</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “What do you want to talk to me about today?” “Or “I heard that...”</li> <li>• “Tell me what happened when.....Start from the beginning”</li> <li>• “What happened then? What else happened?”</li> </ul>	



- “Tell me all the things you can remember because I was not there”
- “Tell me more about the part where....”
- “What happened when.....”
- “You said that Jane hurt you. Tell me about that”
- “Tell me what you remember about that day”
- “You said you got into a car. Tell me more about the part when you got into the car”

#### **Examples of inappropriate questioning techniques**

- “Something bad happened to you when you went out the other day, didn’t it?”
- “Did John hurt you?”
- “He touched your private parts, didn’t he?”
- “Was it John that touched you there?”
- “Was it a red car that you got into?”
- “Can’t you remember anything else? I need more information to help you”.

## **7. Reflective questions**

DCP practitioners are better able to develop skills when they engage in reflective practice as an individual as well as with their leaders and team. All DCP practitioners are encouraged to seek feedback in relation to responding to disclosures of harm by children and young people and to reflect on and discuss their practice in supervision.

In supervision or a team meeting:

- discuss how to best respond to disclosures from children and young people
- think about a time that you have been present when a child or young person has disclosed experiencing harm. What else could have been done to support the child or young person?
- consider a past situation where a child or young person has made an indirect or partial disclosure. Are there additional actions that could have been undertaken to support the child or young person to talk about their experiences? Is there anything else that needs to be done to make their environment conducive to supporting them to discuss their experiences?



## Document control

<b>Reference No./ File No.</b>			
<b>Document Owner</b>		<b>Lead Writer (position)</b>	
Directorate/Unit: Quality and Practice		Principal Policy and Project Officer, Quality and Practice	
Accountable Director: Director, Quality and Practice			
<b>Commencement date</b>	18 October 2023	<b>Review date</b>	18 October 2026
<b>Risk rating</b> <a href="#">Risk Assessment Matrix</a>	<b>Consequence Rating</b>	<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>Risk Rating</b>
	Minor	Rare	Low

REVISION RECORD		
Approval Date	Version	Revision description
13 October 2023	1.0	Final

<sup>i</sup> Final report - Identifying and disclosing sexual abuse. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Sexual Abuse Volume 4 2017 [Final Report - Volume 4, Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse \(childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au\)](#) p.154

<sup>ii</sup> A brief guide to the Final Report: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

<sup>iii</sup> Sawrikar, P. and Katz, Ilan (2017) Barriers to disclosing child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities: A review of the literature and implications for practice in Australia. Child and Youth Services Review, 83, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d3926cb32ea470001417416/t/5dd475cd0553ae467b79f09e/1574204884381/Literature+review+CALD+barriers+to+disclosure+of+CSA.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Royal Commission Final Report p.158

<sup>v</sup> Royal Commission Final Report p.158

<sup>vi</sup> Royal Commission Final Report p. 162

<sup>vii</sup> Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care: What is cultural Safety? <https://www.cetc.org.au/what-is-cultural-safety/>

<sup>viii</sup> Department of Health: Child Safety and Wellbeing – Disclosures of Harm by children and Young People Practice Guidance, Tasmanian Government p.9

<sup>ix</sup> Royal commission Final Report p.156