

Understanding and responding to adults' disclosure of child sexual abuse

*Content warning:
This material contains
information that may be
distressing for readers.*

More than one-quarter of Australians (28.5%) have experienced child sexual abuse¹ but generally it is not until adulthood that victims and survivors disclose being sexually abused as a child.^{2,3,4}

Existing information about disclosure often focuses on children in an effort to intervene, promote child safety and prevent further harm to a child.

However, we know that people are more likely to receive a disclosure of child sexual abuse from an adult than a child, and they may not know how to respond.

When we refer to an *adult*, we mean a person aged **over 18 years**.



What does 'disclosure' mean?

When an adult 'discloses' child sexual abuse, it means sharing their experience of abuse or talking about what happened during their childhood. An adult might talk about their abuse to different people at multiple times throughout their life or only tell one person. Some people never talk about being sexually abused.

How do adults disclose?

Adult victims and survivors of child sexual abuse often feel shame and embarrassment, worry about not being believed, and have concerns about the impact their disclosure will have on others.⁵

These are only some of the reasons why it can take decades for some people to disclose,^{6,7,8,9} especially males. People from First Nations or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and those from LGBTQIA+ and some religious communities, can experience additional barriers that may delay disclosure.^{10,11,12,13}

Disclosure is rarely a one-off event and is typically a complex and lifelong process.^{14,15}

Adults often disclose gradually, revealing more information over time if the response received is supportive.¹⁶ How victims and survivors make sense of their experiences, and its impacts, unfolds over time, well into adulthood. People tell their story in ways that have personal meaning.



Disclosure in adulthood involves constantly 'weighing up' who to tell, when, and why.^{17,18} Common motivations and circumstances that can prompt disclosure in adulthood include:^{19,20}

- Wanting to protect others
- Unplanned contact with the perpetrator
- Media coverage and hearing others speak about abuse
- Realising that what occurred was abusive
- Victims' child/ren reaching a similar age to when their abuse occurred
- Death of a parent who the victim had been protecting by not disclosing
- Significant life events like becoming a parent, relationship breakdown, death of a loved one, or significant health and wellbeing issues.

The types of people adults often disclose to include friends, partners, family and helping and healthcare professionals (eg. counsellor, doctors).^{21,22,23,24}



Responding to disclosures

Many people don't feel confident in talking with a victim or survivor about their experience of child sexual abuse or in responding to disclosures. They may feel shock, surprise, anger, disbelief or doubt. They may be fearful of doing or saying the wrong thing or responding in a way that might not be helpful or supportive to the person.

A victim or survivor's experience of disclosure can be healing depending on the reaction and response received.²⁵ Whether you are a friend, parent, partner, other family member or colleague providing an emotionally supportive response can have a significant and positive impact on the person.

Here are some ways to provide a [compassionate](#) response if an adult discloses their experience of child sexual abuse to you:

- try to manage your reaction, stay calm and focus on listening
- try to be patient, it may take some time for the victim or survivor to tell their story
- be aware of your facial expressions and body language
- reassure the adult that:
 1. you believe what the person said, and
 2. the victim or survivor is never to blame for what happened
- ask what the person needs from you and what support you can provide
- help the adult understand that you are trustworthy and can talk to you again.

It is very important that people are believed when disclosing, even if there are significant delays between the abuse and disclosure.



Providing support

Child sexual abuse can affect many areas of people's lives and cause a wide range of lifelong, significant and interconnected harms and impacts to a person's mental, social and physical health. Understanding this, can help you to respond compassionately and appropriately to victims and survivors throughout their lives.

If the victim and survivor is open to accessing professional support, you can help connect the person to support services which can help recovery and manage the traumatic impacts of child sexual abuse over their life.

Supporting someone who has been sexually abused can bring up different emotions for you. We recommend seeking professional support for yourself if you feel it is needed.

Find out more

The National Centre has a range of resources designed to support you to understand and respond to child sexual abuse. You can access these at: [Resources - The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse](#).

If you need support, please contact:

Lifeline - 13 11 14

13YARN - 13 92 76

1800RESPECT
1800 737 732

Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service
1300 657 380

Kids Helpline
1800 55 1800

- ¹ [Prevalence of child sexual abuse across all Australians - The Australian Child Maltreatment Study \(ACMS\)](#)
- ² [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ³ [A preliminary mapping of individual, relational, and social factors that impede disclosure of childhood sexual abuse \(sciencedirectassets.com\)](#)
- ⁴ [Disclosure, reactions, and social support: findings from a sample of adult victims of child sexual abuse - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)
- ⁵ [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ⁶ [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ⁷ [Adult Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: A Literature Review - Dafna Tener, Sharon B. Murphy, 2015 \(sagepub.com\)](#)
- ⁸ [Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) Disclosures: A Research Update \(2000–2016\) \(sagepub.com\)](#)
- ⁹ [Disclosure, reactions, and social support: findings from a sample of adult victims of child sexual abuse - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)
- ¹⁰ [Barriers to disclosing child sexual abuse \(CSA\) in ethnic minority communities: A review of the literature and implications for practice in Australia - ScienceDirect](#)
- ¹¹ [Religion in child sexual abuse forensic interviews - ScienceDirect](#)
- ¹² [‘They Wouldn’t Believe Me’: Giving a Voice to British South Asian Male Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse | The British Journal of Criminology | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#)
- ¹³ [Engagement with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/ questioning + victims and survivors | IICSA Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ¹⁴ [Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse \(CSA\) Disclosures: A Research Update \(2000–2016\) \(sagepub.com\)](#)
- ¹⁵ [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ¹⁶ [Adult Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: A Literature Review - Dafna Tener, Sharon B. Murphy, 2015 \(sagepub.com\)](#)
- ¹⁷ [Adult Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: A Literature Review - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)
- ¹⁸ [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ¹⁹ [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ²⁰ [Adult Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: A Literature Review - Dafna Tener, Sharon B. Murphy, 2015 \(sagepub.com\)](#)
- ²¹ [Is Anybody Listening? The Literature on the Dialogical Process of Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure Reviewed - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)
- ²² [Frontiers | Disclosing Child Sexual Abuse to a Health Professional: A Metasynthesis \(frontiersin.org\)](#)
- ²³ [Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- ²⁴ [Adult Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: A Literature Review - Dafna Tener, Sharon B. Murphy, 2015 \(sagepub.com\)](#)
- ²⁵ [Adult Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: A Literature Review - Dafna Tener, Sharon B. Murphy, 2015 \(sagepub.com\)](#)