



Discovery vs Disclosure

Research shows that there are a number of reasons why children do not tell when they have been sexually abused. This difficulty in telling reflects the trauma caused by the abuse, the offender's level of control and coercion over the child, and the child's fear of how we will respond. Therefore, how we find out about the sexual abuse of a child should be factored into the professional response.

When abuse has been recorded, there are additional impacts to consider. The existence of images of the abuse may reinforce the child's reluctance to tell for fear of others (including professionals) seeing them. Understanding the difference when abuse has been discovered rather than disclosed will help to maximise the possibility of the child and family working with you and minimise the likelihood of further harm as a result of any subsequent investigation or intervention.



Discovery

By discovery, we mean the finding of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) before the child has told anyone. The child may be aware of the recordings but is not able or ready to tell; they may be aware of the abuse but not that it was recorded or the images shared; or they may be completely unaware of the abuse and the recordings.

CSAM can be discovered in many different ways. It may be found on someone's device, as a result of being uploaded to a website or shared directly. A parent or carer may see an image or conversation on the child's device or another child may come forward. In some cases the authorities are alerted by an anonymous call.

If we consider a disclosure as a process, then discovered abuse will deny the child from choosing a time or person(s) they may want to talk to. The child will not have had a chance to prepare themselves to discuss issues that they may find embarrassing and personal. They may not even know the words to use to describe the abuse and will not have had time to find and understand these words. These feelings, combined with the possible fear of the offender or the reactions of others, will increase the likelihood that the child will not want to talk about the abuse and may be more inclined to deny, say that it was consensual, or refuse to engage.

In some cases, the child may have been coerced, through persuasion or intimidation, into believing they had a choice, and therefore do not see themselves as having been sexually abused.

Disclosure

This is where the child has told or indicated to a person what has happened to them, sometimes in full, but often only part of the picture.

Disclosure should be seen as a process rather than a one-off event, with the child working out what has happened, how to tell and whom they can trust. Disclosure may not be deliberate, and abuse may be identified through conversations with the child.

Initially, disclosures are often limited as the child is testing out our response. They may hold information back as a way of reducing any feelings of blame, guilt or shame they may have. The impact of trauma can make a child struggle to recall events sequentially and professionals need to adapt any questioning to reflect this.

Children rarely make false allegations. It is common for children to retract their disclosure because they are overwhelmed by the response. If this happens, it is important to remember that the offender will have used many tactics to prevent a child telling, saying they will be blamed, not believed or even taken from their family. Something has led the child to talk despite the offenders controlling tactics.

All disclosures and concerns must be reported to the relevant safeguarding lead in your organisation and a record of what the child said or did should be made immediately, dated, and signed by you. Children should not be told to write down an account of their abuse, unless that is the only way they can communicate.

Do

- Be clear on your reason for telling the child and their family about any discovered content or images, and ensure you explain your reason to them.
- Be mindful that the child has now lost control of the information. This, combined with the power the perpetrator and other agencies have, can leave the child feeling very disempowered. Where possible, include the child in decision making and explain why certain actions are happening.
- Talk to the child in a location where they say they feel comfortable and secure, but not their bedroom. This is so that memories from the abuse aren't linked to this room.
- Reassure the child if you have not seen the images of their abuse. The child may be embarrassed that professionals they are talking to will have seen them.
- Remember that the child and parents may not know the content of the images. Explain, in an age appropriate and sensitive way what they contain. Before sharing with the parents, consider if the information will put the child at additional risk.
- Consider any siblings of the child. They may also have been subject to technology-assisted child sexual abuse or may be confused about what is happening.
- Challenge any terminology used by professionals that is victim blaming.
- Explore what support you can give to the parents. Are there any resources, local or national, that could further help the family?
- Remember if the child has already identified a trusted adult to disclose to, they may be able to offer further support to the child.
- Consider any factors that led the child to disclose. It may be that additional threats, or an increased fear had been used, which the child will need reassuring about. This will need to be factored into any risk assessment.

Do not

- Under any circumstances, show the images to the child or parents or ask the parent/carers to look through any of the children's devices for further CSAM.
- Pressurise the child to give a statement using phrases such as: "By coming forward you will help it stop happening to others."
- Tell a child that "The image is online now, there's no way to control who sees it, and we can't get it back". This can often make the child feel helpless as there is no end to their abuse being viewed by others. This may not always be the case. There are measures that can be taken, but they are not an absolute solution either. Professionals must be clear with the child and their family about what can and cannot be done in relation to images, but this should be done in a sensitive way.

Considerations

- If the images were obtained by another child, has the risk assessment considered the areas in which the children may meet? For example, school, youth/sports clubs.
- The child will probably view the removal of their devices as a punishment. Consider what you can do to mitigate the child feeling this.
- If information has come from another source, such as the child's friend, will the child feel betrayed?
- Has there been enough emphasis on the alleged offender(s)? What is being done to identify them? If restrictions are in place, are they effective enough to reduce the risk to the child?
- The child may have disclosed the abuse but they may be unaware that the abuse has been recorded.
- Are there any additional actions that could reduce their anxiety? For example, seek to remove images via Report Remove.(UK only)
- Is the family being updated regularly, even if nothing is happening? MCF Website parents' section has resources they may find helpful.



For more information visit
mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk

or contact us **01765 688827**
help@mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk

Follow us for our latest news   