

Dealing with disclosure about sexual abuse

All teachers are aware of the possibility that they may be the trusted adult to whom a young person may disclose abuse, including sexual abuse. In light of this, all teachers should be familiar with the school's Safeguarding Statement in line with the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post Primary Schools, 2017*, and know their responsibilities within the necessary reporting and safeguarding processes.

That said, there may be the additional possibility that learning about some areas of SPHE/RSE might trigger student disclosures of personal difficulties, abuse or unwanted sexual experiences. Rather than see such a disclosure as a problem, it is important to consider the appropriate support and referral that you can provide as a caring professional, as a vital service to that young person.

Containment of disclosures in the classroom

The appropriate containment of any disclosures can be addressed at the start. Firstly, it's important to let students know that if they or anyone brings up something in class that sparks your concern about their wellbeing or safety (or that of another young or vulnerable person) that you will then need to tell someone about this. In addition, it's helpful to gently mention that people may be affected by some of the themes within SPHE/RSE and in such an event they can come to you for support after class. Students should be reassured that they will never be pressured or expected to talk about anything they are not comfortable with. There may be times when the teacher may need to gently steer a student away from sharing personal

experiences in class in order to respect their own and others privacy. If a student tries to make a disclosure within the class, safe interrupting can be used to hold the disclosure until after the class where you can follow up with the student.

When a victim of sexual violence discloses any part of their experience, they may be very fearful of your reaction, that they will be blamed, rejected or not believed, and of the consequences of telling. Your initial reaction is very important. Think about the qualities they would look for in the person they would approach and try to present with those qualities. Be aware of the role in which you are relating to the person, and of the limits and boundaries to the support you can offer. Always act in accordance with your school's **Child Protection guidelines in line with Children First guidance**.

Information about your safeguarding responsibilities can be found here:

[Training and Resources](#)

[Key questions and answers in relation to Child Protection](#)

Other relevant topics

Dealing with challenging conversations
What makes a safe SPHE classroom?

Dealing with disclosure about sexual abuse

How to respond to and support a student

- In the event of needing to follow up with a student, or a student approaching you to seek your support, look for an appropriate, comfortable place to talk with no disturbance.
- Don't promise to keep it secret. Explain to the young person, that where you have any concerns about their wellbeing or safety (or that of another young or vulnerable person) you have a responsibility to pass the information on. Assure the student that you will uphold confidentiality (within the bounds mentioned above). This means that only those who really need to be told will know.
- Let the young person know that you believe them. This can be conveyed as much by the caring and respectful attention you show to them as by actually saying you believe them. Remember, false disclosures are very rare.
- Sometimes a person may test the waters by talking about 'a friend'. If you respond well to this, they may then feel able to acknowledge that it is they themselves who has the problem.
- Listen to what they are telling you, rather than immediately talking/asking questions. Show you are listening by being attentive, by nodding, maintaining eye contact, reflecting back what they are telling you.
- Avoid asking a lot of questions and keep those you do ask to open questions. Avoid asking leading or probing questions, allow them to tell at their own pace, without pressure.
- A sense of calm is reassuring. Remember you have been approached because you are trusted and appear to be someone who will listen, care and respond appropriately. Awareness of the limits of your role and trusting to your skills and ability within those limits will help you to remain calm.

- Be aware of how difficult telling is. They may feel ashamed, guilty and dirty. Let them know you appreciate the difficulty of telling, and the courage needed. If the young person expresses guilt for the abuse, reassure them that it is not their fault.
- Affirm the student, showing that your feelings towards them haven't been negatively affected and reassure them that they have done the right thing in telling.
- Be careful that you do not, in your desire to help, make commitments you cannot keep. This will be seen as a breach of trust. Think before you promise anything.
- Do not express judgements about the perpetrator, only about the abusive behaviour. The victim often has mixed feelings towards the abuser.
- When ending the conversation: Reassure them again, tell them what the next steps will be and give them information on resources and supports available to them.
- If appropriate, arrange to check in with them in the near future.
- Consider any immediate steps which might help protect the person. If there is an immediate threat to them, the Gardaí may need to be notified.

Afterwards: Record and date the encounter in writing. Keep the account factual. Report the disclosure without delay to your DLP. Follow your schools Child Protection procedures with the support of your School DLP. Be aware of the impact on you of hearing such a disclosure. It's important for your own self-care that you deal with how you feel having heard the disclosure. Use the supports available to you within the school or externally, to support your own wellbeing.