

Myself as an SPHE teacher

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.

In the context of SPHE there may be an additional possibility that learning about some topics might trigger student disclosures of personal difficulties, abuse or unwanted sexual experiences. Rather than seeing this 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 something in class sparks your concern about their wellbeing or safety (or that of another young or vulnerable person), you will need to tell someone about this. In addition, it's helpful to gently mention that people may be personally affected by some of the topics within SPHE and in such an event, they can come to you for support after class. Reassure students that they will never be pressured or expected to talk about anything that causes them to feel uncomfortable. There may be times when you 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 in 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 the consequences of telling and 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](#).

Other relevant guidance on this toolkit

Dealing with sensitive / challenging conversations

What makes a safe SPHE classroom?

[Barnardos 'Supporting children and young people living with domestic violence and abuse' \(9.06mins\) video](#)

Information about your safeguarding responsibilities

[Child Protection | PDST](#)

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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 where you won't be disturbed.
 - Don't promise to keep what you hear a 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 to the appropriate people. Assure the student that you will uphold confidentiality (within the bounds mentioned above). This means that only those who really need to know will be told
 - Let the young person know that you believe them. This can be conveyed as much by the caring and respectful attention you demonstrate 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 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 your skills and ability within those limits will help you to remain calm.
 - Be aware of how difficult telling is. The young person may feel ashamed, guilty and dirty. Let them know you appreciate the difficulty of telling, and the courage it requires. If the young person expresses guilt about 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 the young person 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 young person. If there is an immediate threat, 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 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.