



# Adopting a child-centred response to all concerns

## Why is this important?

Research shows that children who have been sexually abused often internalise blame for the abuse. This self-blame can be reinforced, unintentionally, by the language that professionals use. When we focus on a child's behaviour rather than the actions of the person who harmed them, we risk deepening shame and making it harder for the child to recover.

## 1. What responses can leave children feeling blamed?

### **Language and responses to avoid when a child tells you about sexual abuse:**

- **Don't** ask why they didn't tell someone sooner.
- **Don't** offer an alternative explanation for what happened.
- **Don't use** language that could be interpreted as suggesting the child may be exaggerating or lying.
- **Don't** say things like "That explains a lot," or suggest that the abuse accounts for their behaviour.
- **Don't** react in a way that implies you expected a particular answer, or that what they've said is "right" or "wrong".
- **Don't** show any sign of shock or panic, even if you feel uncomfortable and unsure what to do – the child will pick up on this.

**Avoid framing the conversation around the child's actions**, as these place responsibility on the child and not the person who has caused harm. **Don't** say:

- "You were putting yourself at risk."
- "Don't make the same mistakes again."
- "You need to learn to keep yourself safe."
- "You had a lot of problems on social media."

### **If the harm happened online:**

- **Don't** imply the child was unwise to share images or go online.
- **Don't** suggest they have broken the law.
- **Don't** remind them about education they have previously received about staying safe online.
- **Don't** use phrases like "the real world" versus "the online world"; children rarely see these separately.
- **Don't** suggest removing, or threaten to remove, devices as a protective response; this can feel like punishment, and may isolate the child further and stop them telling you more

## 2. What to do instead

- Accept what the child tells you. Stay calm. An overly emotional reaction may make them reluctant to continue.
- Be clear that what happened is not OK and should not have happened to them.
- If you say, “It’s not your fault,” be prepared to explain why. Some children have been told repeatedly by the person harming them that they are to blame. Simply saying “It’s not your fault” may make them feel you don’t understand, so be ready to talk it through.
- Focus on the behaviour of the person who harmed them, not on what the child did or didn’t do.
- If you decide to do some work around protective behaviours, make sure that this is part of a wider package of support and is delivered sensitively.
- Make clear to the child that you are there to support them, and that as part of this there are some safeguarding actions that you will need to take. Tell them that you want their input as much as possible; if you need to share what they’ve told you in order to ensure their or other children’s safety, explain to them who those people are but be clear that it will otherwise remain confidential.

### **Use open, non-leading language:**

- “I’m here to listen to you.”
- “Help me understand more about that.”
- “Can you tell me what happened?”
- “If I get something wrong, you tell me.”

**Record what the child says in their own words** – do not interpret or paraphrase.