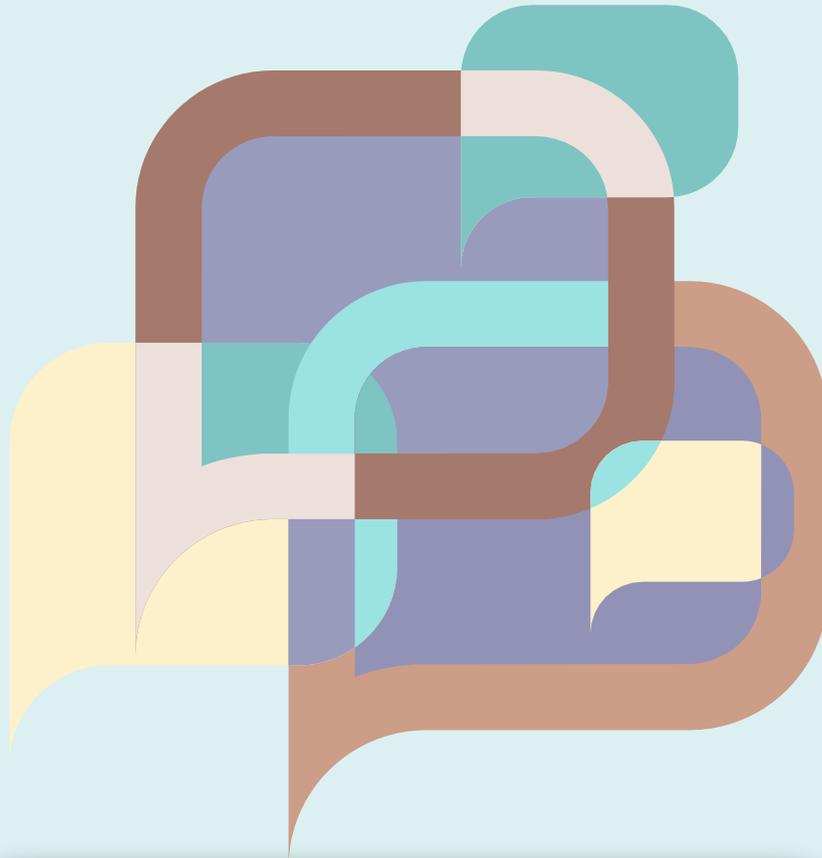


WHAT ABOUT YOU?

DO YOU KNOW **HOW TO** ASK ME?



**INTERVENTION IN CHILDHOOD
AND ADOLESCENCE AGAINST
SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
PROFESSIONALS**



Generalitat de Catalunya
Departament de Justícia



Use

This guide arises from the practical evidence that we know about how visits and interviews by different professionals affect children and adolescents (CAs) from the moment they reveal the sexual violence they have suffered. Thus, it aims to serve as support material to provide a practical guide that highlights the action guidelines that professional teams must know in order to reduce secondary victimisation.

Remember that each child and adolescent (CA) has their particular needs, personality and circumstances, in addition to their own experience of sexual violence. Don't convey your personal interpretations to the CAs or their families.

Dissemination

The dissemination of any copy by any means, in the medium in which it is presented, is permitted.

We thank you for disseminating this material, through which you contribute to giving better support to children and adolescents who suffer sexual violence and who have had the courage and the opportunity to talk about it.

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introductory questions

Can any professional¹ who cares for children and adolescents ask and examine a child or adolescent (CA) who is suspected of having suffered or has revealed that they have suffered sexual violence?

1.1



NO In order to ask and examine, highly specialised and continuous training is required, with extensive knowledge on the subject, so that productive interviews can be carried out with CAs who are victims of sexual violence.

For this reason, as a professional who works in the care of children and adolescents, we ask that, in the event of a suspicion or revelation, you exercise caution and refer the case to specialised professional teams. In this way you will contribute to not interfering with or harming the CA's memory, thus avoiding re-victimisation and reducing the adverse consequences to their mental health derived from an incorrect intervention.

¹ Professionals in psychology, social education, social work, pedagogy, speech therapy, education, security forces, health personnel, non-formal education, etc.





1.2

So, can't we contribute anything?

Yes, a great deal, because this social reality is an issue that must be addressed from the family, the school, the healthcare sector, the police, and throughout society as a whole. Listening carefully and having a helpful attitude contributes to the CA having greater security and feeling more protected and important. To do this, you do not need to investigate the details of the sexual violence experienced, simply listen and offer support. Then, decide what you should do with that information and whether you should approach professionals in this field, applying the protocols established in your own field, if any.

Each CA who has had no information or specialised advice is a more accessible victim for the attackers. One of the most valuable messages you can give to a CA is that secrets can always be told and that they have to feel free to say what they want: no one can ask them not to talk about a situation.





Why is it so important that we know how to help CAs?

1.3



Because the first disclosure of sexual violence is always the most important. Normally the CA will reveal it to their closest and most trusted social circle and, until they can explain it to specialised personnel, they will have been exposed to too many questions and interrogations that will have a negative impact.

We must ensure that our attitude towards a disclosure of this type does not cause a negative effect on the CA, so that they retract their accusation, as they do not wish to explain it again and/or they feel guilty. Without realising it, the way in which we seek to obtain information about what has happened to them can condition children and adolescents in the future and, above all, can harm them.





Intervention during the disclosure

What can immediately appear in a CA who has just revealed sexual violence?

2.1



You should know that in most of the first disclosures, CAs provide much less information than what they have actually experienced. Let us review their expected reactions, which should not make you doubt the allegations you hear.

Expected reactions in a CA

- When the attacker is a relative or a trusted person, it may take months or years for the disclosure to be made.
- They fear and worry that the disclosure will affect their family, in particular if the attacker is a family member or friend.
- They can show empathy for the attacker, feel concern and display protective attitudes towards him/her.





Expected reactions in a CA

- They may show concern that the attacker may go to prison if they reveal what has happened to them.

- Retraction is usual and expected, in the form of denying it or saying that they have invented it.

- They fear that the attacker will harm them, their families, or people important to them.

- They are afraid of not being believed, being blamed or getting into trouble.

- They fear that if they talk about it, they may be abandoned or separated from their family.





Expected reactions in a CA

• They worry that their family members will get angry or hold them accountable.

• In adolescence, they have been able to disclose it to their friends beforehand, or to their own family, or before asking for help.

• In adolescence, shame and guilt appear more conspicuously, because they now have more sexual education and know the social norms.





2.2

What should I avoid doing during the CA's disclosure?

We are different professionals intervening during the course of a disclosure by a CA of sexual violence and, without doubt, we have the best intentions when we attend to them and try to help them. However, ignorance can lead us to fall into errors of practice that can be to their detriment.

An important element to keep in mind is that memory does not work like a recorded tape that is always intact and available to provide all the information. Not all victims of sexual violence are affected to the same degree, which in turn affects the access to and recovery of recollections stored in the memory.

A re-questioned memory favours secondary victimisation. That is, exposure to a great many interviews and interrogations can affect both psychological recovery and the precision and accuracy of their recollections.





Below, we indicate some of the aspects most frequently observed when caring for a CA, which should be avoided



Asking them why they behaved in a certain way.

In sexual violence with deception, most CAs become aware of the situation when the attacker already has too much power over them. Remember that, in addition, if they have no knowledge of sexual education, they cannot understand the interaction that is being imposed on them. Therefore, it is not appropriate to ask them to react immediately or ask for help.

In sexual violence with the use of force, let us remember that sexual offences directly attack the feeling of freedom and control of the situation itself, and they are considered as an act in which they may feel that their very life is at risk. Thus, they are experiences where the brain is not in a position to act as would be expected. Hence, it is normal for *contradictory behaviours* to develop during the assault, with the sole purpose of surviving the attack.





Ask why he/she has waited for explain it.

The processes of acceptance of and recovery from sexual violence experiences are unique to each CA. Most victims do not reveal them when they want to, but when they can. On the other hand, all the family, social, cultural and/or personal variables and pressures that prevent them from asking for help at the time of the events cannot be disregarded.



Asking why they behaved in a certain way and questioning their actions.

Avoid phrases like: *“Why didn't you tell your mother? Why didn't you scream and ask for help? Why did you go with him if you didn't want to?”*



Asking them why they did not take precautions or were not wary.

Avoid phrases like: *“Why did you go back to that place with him? Didn't you have your mobile phone?”*





Ask why he/she has waited for explain it.

Avoid phrases like: *“How can this have been going on for so long? Have you been doing this for years without saying anything? You should have mentioned it immediately. In ten years, haven't you told anyone?”*



Expressing doubts about the attacker's intentions.

CAs do not have to tell you what the attacker's intentions might have been. The disclosure process is internal and enables the victims to verbalise their psychological state, not to produce statements regarding the cognitions of the person who attacked them.

Avoid phrases like: *“Perhaps you've misunderstood. Maybe he didn't mean to do that. But you liked him and you knew what you were going to do at his house, right?”*



Warn them that they must not tell lies or

With this warning you are predisposing the CA to feel that you do not find their message credible. Remember that telling lies is something that, above all, children associate with misbehaviour.





You should not describe the consequences for the attacker.

You do not know the final consequences of the disclosure for the attacker, so you do not have to explain what you imagine could happen, because if so, you are predetermining and limiting the CA's freedom to express him/herself.

Avoid phrases like: *"He/she could go to jail. What you are saying about ... is very serious"*.



Do not convey negative thoughts about the attacker.

You do not know what type of relationship the CA has established with the attacker; therefore, do not convey negative thoughts to them which could influence or predetermine their story. Your feelings towards the attacker are legitimate, but your rejection can provoke protective attitudes towards him in the CA.

Avoid phrases like: *"What you have done is a serious offence. Your brother is a criminal and he should pay for it"*.





Don't make promises that you don't know you can keep.

You may create expectations in the CA that subsequently make them feel failure or disappointment.

Avoid phrases like: *"They're going to put him in jail. You won't have to see him anymore. You won't have to talk about it anymore"*.



Do not assume you know how they feel, or encourage certain emotions.

CAs can express themselves with patience and when they need to. Sometimes, the moment of disclosure is not the ideal time to identify emotions.

Avoid phrases like: *"You must be very sad. I understand how you feel. I know it's been very hard for you"*.



Don't demand that they be careful about their emotional reaction.

The disclosure process is often a brave effort and CAs should not be concerned about how their status affects you, but about their ability to say what they need to.

Avoid phrases like: *"Don't start crying now. Don't be nervous. It hasn't been so bad"*.





Don't deny or question whether it could have been sexual violence.

For a CA to arrive at disclosure is a difficult process in most cases, so generating doubts at that time can cause feelings of guilt, shame and an attitude of retraction.



Don't hold them responsible for the situation.

Remember that the process of deception and dealing with the situation has been too complex. While they explain their situation to you, you cannot ask for explanations of their behaviour.

Avoid phrases like: *"Why didn't you stay with your friend? How did you not realise what was going to happen? Why didn't you run away? Had you drunk too much?"*



Don't belittle their suffering.

Each CA experiences sexual violence in a different way. Sometimes, the cases that seem more serious to us are emotionally managed more efficiently than the less serious ones. However, you must remember that the level of psychological damage depends on a great many personal and contextual variables that constrain inter-subject variability.





2.2.1.

SYNTHESIS: What is it very important NOT to do?

Do not ask why they are talking about it now rather than before.

Don't ask questions, because by not knowing how to ask, you could introduce untrue aspects into their memory.

Don't force CAs to express their emotions at that moment; respect their current state of mind.

Don't make derogatory comments about the attacker, because you do not know the type of bond they have been able to create and you could create a stronger feeling of guilt.





Given that anxiety, curiosity or the desire to help can lead us to make serious mistakes when listening and talking to CAs, we suggest that you take into account the following guidelines.

How should I act?

2.3



- Stay calm and in control of your emotions. Breathe, relax your body and focus on staying in control.

- Avoid impulsive gestures or expressions, because the CA notices our state, and it will affect what they have to tell you.

- Initially believe the testimony, since it is not up to you to make any judgement as to whether what they are telling you has happened or not.





- Thank them for their trust and for telling you about it, and recognise their courage, since communicating such a complex situation may have required a great effort on their part.

Try saying phrases like: *“Thank you for telling me about it, you've been very brave. Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me about it. You're a very brave boy”.*

- Answer their questions, if any, simply and briefly. Don't give them too much information at once if they do not ask for it. If you can answer something because you do know it, tell them normally and let them know that you will look for the answer.

Try saying phrases like: *“I don't know what you're asking me now, but I'll try to find the answer and I'll let you know”.*

- Record the disclosure as literally as you can. You can help yourself by writing down what they tell you on a piece of paper and telling them that you are writing it down so that you can remember what they are saying correctly.





• Respect personal privacy and ask them if they want a hug or prefer to have some space. Sometimes, when aspects related to sexual violence are being explained, people need a distance that allows them to feel more comfortable and less physically overwhelmed.



• Try to understand any discomfort and suffering they may have. Professional mental health teams will take charge of helping the CAs to manage their psychological state.

• Confirm the emotional state that they are expressing now, without putting it into words, but letting them know that it is their right to feel however they need to.

Try saying phrases like: *"It's normal for you to feel this way. It doesn't matter if you cry"*.

• Be aware of your limitations before making a commitment.





SYNTHESIS: What needs to be done as a priority?

2.3.1



Listen to them without completing their sentences or filling in their silences. Don't finish the CA's sentences or give them suggestions, because that is not helpful to them.

Name the assault and the parts of the body using the CA's own words, without correcting or changing them. Repeat the same words, do not soften or aggravate them.





2.4

So, is what I do NOT ask them as important?

Yes, it is very important that you do not ask them about the specific details of what happened to them. The way we are asked questions can alter the recollections that we have stored in our memory.

Your need to find out what has happened is understandable, but you must think that, above all, you are ensuring the best possible recovery for the CA.

What you can do is be with them in their process and show your attention to what they need to tell you. We recommend that you do not ask questions; instead, we advise you to always be available in case they want to tell you things spontaneously (*active listening*). You can also remind them that if they need to express themselves more on the subject, they can count on you.





What is recommended in the disclosure?

2.5



The age of the CA is key when taking their disclosure. Depending on their stage of development, their capacity for expression, memory and strength regarding suggestion is different.

Suggestion is a characteristic that people have of giving in to external pressures that, intentionally or otherwise, can modify our memories, thoughts, or what we want to say.





2.6

Do I have to report it?

As you know, sexual contacts and interactions between a person of legal age and a child or adolescent are an offence and, if you suspect or know of a possible situation, you are obliged to report it.

You can report it to the public prosecutor's office, the security forces, the corresponding duty court, or a health centre. You can also address yourself to the victim care services closest to your community or to childhood protection services. These professionals should advise you on what to do or take note about the victim's information and start an investigation process.

You may also have become aware of a situation of sexual violence between minors, and you must also report this through the childhood protection services.





Mental health professionals

But is the CA's testimony the most important thing?

3.1



The most important aspect is, without doubt, the CA's mental health. However, as you know, most sexual offences against CAs occur in the privacy of the family and are committed by people they trust. To a lesser extent, in a less intimate but well-known context (school, extracurricular activities, neighbourhood, friends, religious centre, leisure, etc.). This secrecy associated with sexual offences implies that, on many occasions, the only evidence is the testimony of the CA him/herself.

We know that the judicial system can be slow, victimising, and not always adapted to the needs of CAs. However, it is the means whereby their statement is taken. Therefore, we ask that, as far as you can, you try to ensure the least possible *contamination* of their memory.





3.2

So does that mean that we cannot act on the clinical level until their statements have been taken?

Since we are aware of how slow a judicial procedure is, we cannot ask that CAs receive no mental health care in the meantime. But always keep in mind that an aspect necessary for a correct statement is that they have not previously received any *suggestive* therapeutic intervention. It would also be necessary to avoid a large number of preliminary interrogations.

However, mental health should not be inhibited in light of the judicial system. We would however ask you to apply non-suggestive therapies and methods based on scientific evidence.

If you are not a specialist in the subject, we consider that the most responsible thing to do is to refer the case to resources, services or entities that have expert personnel.

In almost all cities, there are teams of expert professionals who know how to ask to the children and adolescents about what had happened. This means that, through an interview, and using specialised techniques, CAs will be able to talk about everything they want and need.





The expert professionals charged with their attention and support while they testify work to enable them to do so in the best possible conditions, and with all the guarantees established by law. However, we need the collaboration of the families and professionals who act beforehand so that, on the day when the statement is taken, the CA can give it with as little contamination of the story as possible. Remember that we are in a judicial environment and that, when trying to help, we may be hindering their statement.





What are we asking you to remember?

3.3



Follow the indications of the established protocols, stay calm, neither exaggerate nor belittle the situation. If you see that the situation is beyond you, talk to your immediate superior.

Our questions and assumptions distort the CA's memory

Don't change the words used by the CA

You should never introduce information that has not been previously given by the CA

Don't suggest or indicate the answer





Secondary victimisation or *re-victimisation* is the harm caused to the victims after the disclosure, as a consequence of the incorrect actions of the various professionals who attend them. In some cases, exposure to continued *re-victimisation* may be more detrimental to recovery than the suffering caused by the offence itself.

The most effective way to combat *re-victimisation* is specialised training in caring for victims of violent offences.





The theoretical foundations of this publication are based on the national and international body of doctrine recognised and validated by the scientific community and other experts in the field.

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