



Guidelines for Social Case Workers for handling Disclosures of Sexual Violence

Social Case Workers could be the first point of contact for children and sometimes, for their families to make **disclosures about sexual violence**. Considering the sensitivity of the matter, we have put together a set of guidelines that can help support the social case workers in **responding empathetically** to the children and their families. These guidelines have been evolved from Prerana's experience of handling such disclosures.

Please note: This is an indicative list and is not documented to be followed in a particular sequence. Social case workers are advised to modify and use this list as per the context and situation they are in.

-
- When the child approaches you to speak to you try to find a **neutral setting** where you can have a quiet conversation with limited interruptions. Reconfirm with the child if they are **comfortable**. In case of any constraints in choosing a location, please inform the child about the same.
 - The child might approach you independently without an adult with them. Ask the child if they would like to talk to you in the presence of the parent or an adult the child trusts. If the child says they would like to speak with you **individually/ independently**, do not keep insisting on the presence of another adult individual.
 - Do not let the child **"swear you to secrecy"**. Before they make the disclosure, it is crucial that you inform the child, that under Section 19 of POCSO Act 2012, you are **mandated to report** cases of sexual violence against children to the local police. During this time, you may also discuss the child's **entitlements** as a victim of violence and the **support** they can expect from the child protection system. Once this discussion is done, assess the child's comfort in sharing the information with you and proceed forward accordingly
 - **Listen to** and support the child while they are making an effort to disclose the incident/ incidences of sexual violence. Engage with the child in an age and maturity appropriate manner. Share with them a few tools to interact (for example a picture of a human body can help the child explain the incident of sexual assault better), and let them explain what happened in their own words. Do not pressure them for a great amount of detail. Do not interrupt the child with your questions while the child is sharing. You may want to park your questions for the latter of the discussion/ conversation.
 - Avoid being **judgmental** or jumping to conclusions. Assess the situation without assumptions. Avoid 'Why' questions that may pressurize the child to share an explanation for their behavior or action.
 - Focus on the **facts** of the incident and clarify the same with the child, if needed.
 - **Reassure the child** that they did nothing wrong and also that they did the right thing by sharing this with the social case worker and that will make all efforts to support the child.
 - **Respond calmly** and matter-of-factly. Even if the child's sharing is difficult to hear, it is important not to showcase disgust or alarm through verbal and non-verbal communication before the child.
 - **Provide reassurance** to the child that they and a trusted adult (family/ guardian) will be involved in any decision-making processes concerning them in the future.

- Once the child has made the disclosure, explain to them the next steps:
 1. Informing the **child protection** and law enforcement
 2. **Arrest** of the accused & statement recording of the victim
 3. Referral to the child protection system along with the possibility of appointment of a **social worker** to support the child
 4. **Victim compensation** (including Manodhairya for victims in Maharashtra) and process for the same
 5. Orientation to the **Legal process** through legal aid or the Special Public Prosecutor.

- After the disclosure, assess if the child is **feeling safe** to return home. If they do not, or if you believe that it isn't safe for the child to return home, this should be considered an emergency and handled immediately by contacting the local Child Welfare Committee and/or the local police. You can take further steps in consultation and as per the recommendation of the CWC.
- As a social case worker, you need to discuss the facts of the case with your supervisor and inform the family or the adult the child trusts about the same. If the child expresses that they don't want their parents or family to know about the incident, ask the child if they can suggest a **trusted adult** whom you or they can inform.
- Refer the child to the **counsellor** after discussing the same with the child and their trusted adult.
- Remember that children who disclose about sexual assault are often **frightened** and **anxious** and may need reassurance, encouragement, and support in the weeks following disclosure. Assure the child that you or another staff member will be available for support whenever possible. Explain how they can reach you or the other support staff.
- Do not make **promises** to the child that you cannot keep.
- Do not **confront** the abuser or anyone connected to the abuser, and don't make judgmental comments about the abuser. Let the law enforcement deal with the situation as per the law of the land.

Note: *While the child is making a disclosure, you may choose to record (make a note of) certain details. Use your discretion as a social worker to decide if you should do this either before the child or later. However, in either of the cases, **inform the child** that you would be making a few notes and the purpose of the same. Ensure that these remain limited to the purpose of social case work. In no situation, should the social case worker **audio or video** record the discussion.*

Social Case Worker's Role in Engaging with Parents/ Guardians/ Trusted Adults:

Many parents and other family members in this situation experience trauma, guilt, anxiety, depression, isolation, exhaustion, and feeling judged and blamed. They need **guidance** in supporting their child and also to address their feelings and emotions. The social case worker can help the **parent/caregiver** by understanding the concept of creating a safe environment for their child. Support the parent in creating such a space for their child free from harm, judgement & blame, where the child can share their concerns and their emotions.

The social case workers can help the parent understand that they may need to constantly reinforce the child with positive words and actions. Following are a few helpful tips:

- **Reassure the child** that you are glad they disclosed about this incident.
- Don't try to find faults in the child. Understand that this was **not the child's fault** and help the child realise the same.
- Avoid being **judgmental** or jumping to conclusions by asking too many questions.
- Express **love** and **care** towards the child.
- **Communicate** to the child that their relationship will not change due to this disclosure.
- **Respond** to the child and **don't react**. In case the child asks a question that you have no response to, assure them that you will look for the right responses and get back to them.
- Do not **confront** the abuser. This may be tricky, especially in cases where the abuser is a known person.
- Don't **remind** the child of the incident. Any information about the incident should not be used to discipline the child.
- Don't be **overprotective**, don't put restrictions justifying it as protecting the child.
- Support the child through **counselling**.
- Involve the child in all the **decisions** concerning changes to the child's life to ensure safety. Discuss with the child the pros and cons of these decisions in an age-appropriate manner.
- Work on a **safety plan** for your child with their participation. This plan has to be assessed and reviewed periodically with the child.
- Discuss the **incidence** only if the child wants to talk about it again.
- **Listen** to the child when they want to talk about the incident again in the future. If the child discloses additional information about the incident at a later stage, don't ask them to stop, don't doubt them by saying things like "Are you sure?", "Are you making up things?", "Make up your mind once and for all" "If you keeping share more details people will think you are a liar", "You are making your case weak", etc.
- Respect the child's **right to confidentiality**.
- Don't **compare** your child with another child you know who has experienced sexual violence.
- Be **firm** with your child not harsh.
- Try to bring **normalcy/routine** back to the child's life at the earliest.

The Social case worker also needs to support the parent(s) in their reaction to the situation. The social worker may also have to work with the others in the family and help them to show empathy and compassion and be mindful of what they say and do.

Some common reactions from parent(s) include:

01

Anger

They feel angry at the abuser for hurting their child or even frustrated with their child for not telling them. The social worker should help the parent understand that they might feel angry at their child for disclosing the abuse. It's not easy news to hear, but it's important to remember it is **not their child's fault**. The social case workers can reinforce by sharing that they should **not blame themselves** either for what has happened. They should not feel guilty and let anyone make them feel guilty for what has happened.

03

Anxiety

The parent might be anxious about responding in the **"right" way** to their child or navigating the other relationships in their life, especially if they have a relationship with the abuser. The social case workers can explain to them that such feelings are normal, and they too can seek external help to address these emotions.

02

Fear

Depending on the family circumstances, the parent may be afraid that the abuser or those related to him/her will find a way to **harm the child**. If the abuser was the sole earning member the parent might experience fear of how to support the family with the abuser being incarcerated. The social worker can support the family in mapping their **support systems** to address these issues. Over time the social case worker can also help the parent/ guardian to look for relevant job opportunities.

04

Sadness

Parent(s) may feel **sad** for their child, their family, or themselves when a child discloses sexual assault. They may feel sad because of the changes in their lives due to the incident and the subsequent disclosure. The social case workers can reassure the parents that it's ok to be upset over the changes that may result from this disclosure.

05

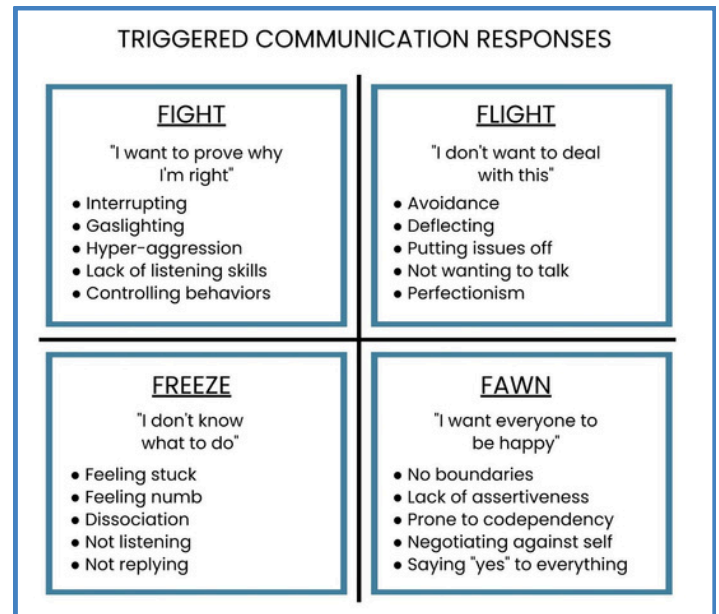
Shock

If the parent had no idea that the harm was occurring, they may be very **surprised** to hear what has happened. The social case workers can explain to them that this reaction is normal, and they may want to consider seeking help to address this feeling. Showing **disgust** or **alarm** will not help the child recover and heal.

Social workers/case workers have to be informed about Trauma responses:

When a child entrusts the social worker with a disclosure of sexual abuse, exploitation, and assault, it is critical and paramount for the professional to recognize and understand the various **trauma responses** the child might exhibit. Awareness and being mindful are key in ensuring that the social worker avoids labeling, making assumptions, being judgemental, reacting hastily, or jumping to conclusions. Instead, a nuanced understanding of trauma responses enables the social worker to approach the situation with empathy, sensitivity, and a commitment to providing the support and care that the child urgently needs. It also helps the social worker to explain and help other stakeholders the child will meet to understand the children's responses.

The mental health community broadly recognizes four types of trauma responses which can manifest in different ways for different children.



01

Fight

The fight response is **self-preservation** and for children using it, it doesn't matter who they hurt in the process.

03

Freeze

Though not as common as fight and flight, the freeze response is one with which many aren't familiar. The child will **pause** instead of trying to fight the danger or run away. Freeze response can be seen when children **"zone out"**, "show laziness", want to isolate themselves, and disassociate.

02

Flight

When the threat seems impossible to defeat in a fight, a child may **leave, run away** from the situation entirely. That is the flight trauma response

04

Fawn

Fawning is the least known trauma response, and it is primarily related to **people pleasing**. Children sometimes go above and beyond to make the abuser happy, thus neutralizing the threat.

The Social Worker has to create and promote an environment conducive to healing and recovery. Every action must be aimed at safeguarding the child from further trauma. It is imperative to have a thorough understanding of both the immediate and long-term impacts of childhood sexual trauma and prioritize the child's physical, psychological and emotional safety. Every significant adult in the child's life should recognise the profound impact disclosure can have on the recovery and healing of the child.

Therefore, communication must convey support, assuring them that they are not at fault. It may also help the child if you communicate that this happens to other children and that they are not alone.

First Draft - December 2020

Revised in April 2024.

