

GUIDELINE FOR PEOPLE WHEN FIRST APPROACHED ABOUT AN INCIDENT OF SEXUAL ABUSE :

FOR STAFF OR OTHERS WHO MAY NOT HAVE EXPERIENCE

It is recognised that a student may reveal an incident of sexual abuse to another student or a staff member who has had little or no training or experience in handling such matters. The formal response and responsibility as set out in the main guideline statement may not be appropriate in such circumstances.

This brief guideline statement is to assist someone who is approached by a student to discuss a concern that turns out to be one of sexual abuse.

1. Be prepared to listen to the student, even if you feel uncomfortable in doing so. You may think it is not appropriate for you to hear what they are trying to tell you, but you will need to help the student talk to someone more appropriate.
2. Do not give an absolute undertaking not to tell anyone else about what the student tells you, even though they may implore you to tell no-one. As soon as it is clear that the student wants to tell you some very sensitive information and begs you to tell nobody, especially their parents, you will have to make your position clear so as not to break trust. You may say something along the lines of "I will respect your confidentiality, but I would have to tell someone if I think you or someone else could be at any risk. In that case I would let you know what I was going to say and whom I would tell, and it would then be in confidence with a senior member of the staff on how to help you."
3. When it is clear that the matter the student wants to reveal may be a question of sexual abuse, you should look for an opportunity to suggest that the matter is so important that you would like to involve another staff member to hear about it and help. Remember that sometimes a person may reveal something that is very worrying for them, or something for which they feel ashamed, but having told them, regrets it and is reluctant to go over it again with someone else. For this reason, it is usually wise to involve someone more senior or experienced early rather than late when the student comfortable to do so. It may be appropriate to discuss whether the student would prefer a male or female person to be involved. If medical examination is required, it is usual for the student to have the choice of doctor, unless it is out of normal hours and it is an emergency..
4. When a person reveals a very sensitive matter such as sexual abuse, even if the incident may seem relatively minor, they usually experience very strong emotions about it. This needs to be respected. Providing comfort and support is an important first response, and often the most important way to help the student. It is usually not helpful for the staff member to express their own feelings about what they are told.

5. Sometimes it may appear that the interaction between the student and the person whom they talked to is sufficient to help the student. It is not however appropriate for a staff member to conclude this without further discussion with an experienced senior member of staff. Even what seems to have been a relatively minor event may lead later to deeply felt emotions.
6. Make notes of the discussion as soon as possible afterwards. These should be included in the confidential student file. It may be important if later you are called to describe what took place if a parent or the student challenge the way the school handled the matter. It could be helpful also if an adult was involved in the sexual abuse and the matter goes to court.