



Unit 6

Responding to Abuse

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ All actions taken to respond to abuse should be consistent with the principle of the child's best interests.
- ✓ Whatever actions are taken, it is essential to remember that an insensitive or inappropriate
- ✓ intervention can serve to further victimise and unnecessarily harm the child
- ✓ Teachers and students in schools should be aware of who they can turn to in case they come across abuse and need to report it.

Unit 6

Responding to Abuse

Responding to situations of child abuse means prioritizing two things:

1. Ensuring that the immediate needs of the child are being met and that they are safe from further harm in an appropriate environment
2. Ensuring that the issue is not pushed to one side but reported in the appropriate manner in the best interest of the child.

The immediate physical and emotional consequences of abuse demand a quick and appropriate response. Every incident of abuse must be examined and analysed so that the necessary medical and psychosocial support can be provided. The survivor's immediate or long-term vulnerability must be taken into account, and the survivor's own decisions must be respected during the whole process. A response that does not respect confidentiality and lacks sensitivity and understanding can make the problem even worse than it already is.

When children have been sexually abused, it may be necessary for counselling to be undertaken with the family in order to ensure that the child is believed, supported and provided with everything they need to move on from the incident. Family members may also need help, such as when parents feel guilty that they have failed to protect their child.

With the agreement of the survivor, governmental agencies such as the police, judiciary and welfare services will need to be involved. All activities need to take account of criminal and child protection legislation within the respective jurisdiction, and be dealt with in conjunction with national and local authorities. It is essential that in this process the survivor's confidentiality be respected, including the right to decide whether to seek legal redress.

All actions taken should be consistent with the principle of the **child's best interests**, and in order to ensure this is the case, the child's own expressions of his/her wishes and feelings will be vital. Failure to do take this into account constitutes an act of negligence.

It is the duty of everyone, including community members, to be involved in ensuring that they;

- Take seriously any concerns raised
- Take positive steps to ensure the protection of children who are the subject of any Concerns
- Support children, staff or other adults who raise concerns or who are the subject of concerns
- Act appropriately and effectively in instigating or co-operating with any subsequent process of investigation
- Be guided through the child protection process by the principle of 'best interests of the child'

- Listen to and take seriously the views and wishes of children
- Work in partnership with parents/carers and/or other professionals to ensure the protection of children.

Challenges to Reporting

It is often difficult for an abused child (or someone who witnesses child abuse) to report that something is taking place, especially to someone in authority. It is especially difficult if the report could result in the removal of the child or abuser from the home, or the expulsion of the child from school. Reporting may also result in anger and blame toward the child in the family and the community. In many cases a child will say nothing, as disclosure may be perceived as having even worse consequences.

Likewise, children may worry that nothing will happen if they contact the social and legal system. It is not uncommon that the survivors of sexual abuse are themselves treated as the criminals.

How to Raise Concerns: A Framework for Actions

Detailed below are three different scenarios you may encounter as a teacher at a school or even as a community member or a carer.

What would you do in these Cases?

1. You see or suspect a case of abuse / exploitation / neglect

2. An allegation of abuse/ exploitation is made or situation of neglect brought to your notice by the

3. A child discloses abuse/ exploitation/neglect by relating the incidence to you or to someone you know

Where Serious Concerns Exist and the Safety of the Child is at Risk, Act Immediately

1. If you are a teacher or a carer, the first step is to make sure that the child is safe from harm and is provided with protection. If a child discloses to you that s/he has been abused, it is essential to respond in a calm, caring and supportive manner. The child is never to blame in where abuse occurs and should be reassured they have done nothing wrong, either in relation to the abuse itself or in reporting it.
2. The child needs to know that you are listening and taking their account of what happened seriously, and that you will respond positively to ensure their protection. Listen carefully and let the child tell you the information in their own way. It is important to record what is said - at the time if appropriate, or as soon as possible following the disclosure. And the incident should be immediately reported to the police.

How to Talk to a Child Who May Have Been Abused

Where any child brings up the subject of abuse for any reason, it is essential to:

- Stay calm and reassure them
- Find a quiet and private place to talk
- Believe what they tell you
- Listen, but do not press the child for information
- Say that you are glad that the child told you
- Say that you will do your best to protect and support the child
- If necessary, seek medical help and contact the authorities as soon as possible
- Talk to any other adults the child has already spoken to
- Determine if this incident may affect how the child reacts at school. It may be advisable to liaise with the child's teacher or head teacher depending on the issue
- Stress that the abuse was not the child's fault
- Acknowledge that you will probably need help dealing with your own feelings

Do	Don't
Believe the child.	Do not ask accusing questions.
Create a rapport with the child.	Do not be overly formal.
Show a measure of trust.	Do not be judgmental.
Show a measure of accessibility and reliability.	Do not miss appointments keep promises? Do not read, talk on the phone etc. when the child is talking to you.
Assure the child of confidentiality which is reasonable.	Do not give information about the child unless professionally required.
Be realistic and explain circumstances as they	Do not assure the child about matters you have no control over.
Ensure privacy is obtained to enable the child to talk in confidence.	Do not interview in open space where there is likely to be interruptions and eavesdroppers.
Be patient: let the child go on at her/his own pace. Changing behaviour is difficult and calls for a lot of patience. You should listen care- fully, patiently and with understanding.	Do not pressure the child to speak. Do not rush the client.
Accept the child the way she is.	Do not be judgmental.
Relaxed atmosphere: The room should also be comfortable where possible and the atmosphere relaxing.	Do not go to a place where the child feels the need to leave as soon as possible.
Commitment: You must show a high degree of commitment.	When you agree to offers to assist, you have to be committed. If you are not able to be committed then it is not useful for you to offer any assistance.

Further Reading:

- ✓ Odhiambo, M. and Maganya, J. (2004), *Making Schools a Safe Horizon for Girls*.
- ✓ Institute for International Research (1997), *Improving Educational Quality Projects: Tips on How to manage a large class*.
- ✓ GoSS, MoEST (2007), *Training Guide for PTAs and School Management Committees*