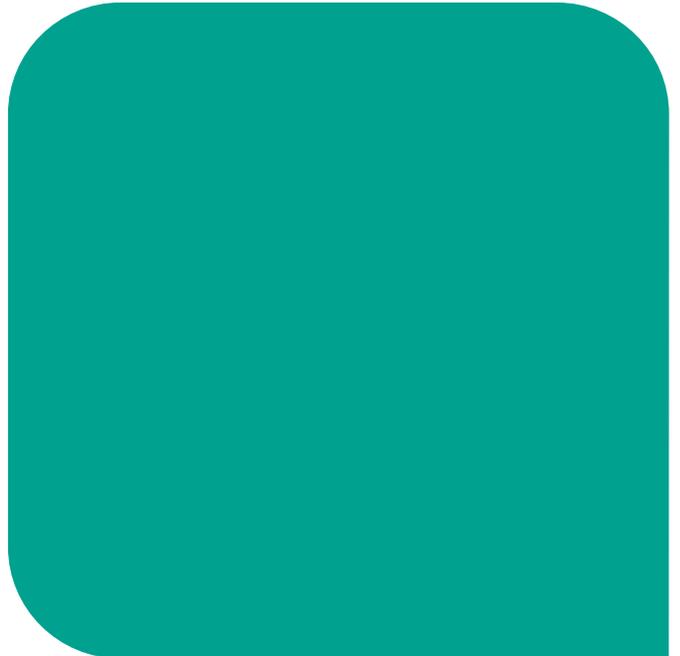




social care
institute for excellence

Protecting adults at risk: Good practice guide



Seeing and speaking to the adult at risk

It is often very difficult for someone to talk about experiences of abuse, mistreatment or neglect they have had or may be having. The person may feel that they will not be believed, they may fear reprisals, they may feel they are in some way responsible for what is happening to them, and they may feel ashamed. It could well have taken some time for them to find the courage to talk to anyone, so it is important that they know they are supported in giving their account and that they are confident they are being heard and not judged.

When taking a disclosure the aim is to enable the person to give an accurate account of what has happened or is happening to them, and what impact the experience is having on them. The person should receive reassurance that action will be taken to reduce the risk and make them safe.

The person's account of what has happened will provide important evidence if the abuse is a crime and there is a criminal prosecution, so it is important to use the person's own language and record them accurately wherever possible. Guidance for formal interviews is contained in *Achieving best evidence in criminal proceedings (16)*. This document states that any initial questioning should only be to elicit a brief account of what is alleged to have taken place. The purpose is to obtain information that will assist the early investigation, establish whether a crime has been committed, assess the risk and enable appropriate initial action to be taken.

Any views expressed by the person on what they wish to happen, in terms of future investigations, should be noted, even if the person may lack full capacity to make decisions relating to their own safety.

When listening and responding to a disclosure, remember some important communication points:

- to stay calm and not express dismay or shock
- to allow the person to express their feelings, including their fears
- to try to discover what the person is afraid of and when they feel most at risk
- to listen carefully to what the person is saying
- to assure the person that they are being taken seriously
- to demonstrate regret that abuse has taken place and the impact that it must have had on the person physically and emotionally
- to reassure them that there is help available
- to summarise their account and check that you have it right
- to explain the safeguarding adults process in a way that is meaningful to the person, and provide them with information such as leaflets and contact details for the local authority safeguarding adults service.

Disclosures from certain people will require specific communication considerations.

Using the person's name at times at the start of a question or comment, so they are clear they are being addressed, may assist adults with learning disabilities who may have difficulty in understanding pronouns such as 'he', 'she', or 'they'.

Using open questions, i.e. questions that require more than a simple 'yes' or 'no' response, is often the right approach. However, some adults with learning disabilities or autism may find open questions difficult to understand. Adults with autism often have a literal (inflexible) understanding of language and therefore open questions such as 'Do you know why I'm here?' and 'Can you tell me what happened?' can be a problem for this reason. In such cases, try to keep your questions simple, with no more than one or two key concepts, use concrete rather than abstract language, and avoid the use of jargon, abbreviations and metaphors. More detailed advice on communicating with people with autism can be found on the National Autistic Society's [website](#).

If there is any doubt whether a person understands a question, try asking them to repeat it in their own words. Simply asking, 'Do you understand?' may result in an automatic positive response. Try to avoid the possibility of witnesses trying to answer a question by guessing what was meant.

An interpreter or appropriate communication aids must be made available if required for clear two-way communication.

Whoever you are speaking and listening to, however, certain things are vital:

Do not promise complete confidentiality. The adult at risk should understand that the information about the abuse will need to be shared, but that it will only be shared with other people who need to know, such as a line manager and other appropriate professionals.

If the risk is high and/or other people are at risk, the person must be advised that the information may have to be shared to protect them and others.

Obtain the person's written permission, if possible, to share the information with other organisations in order for the adult safeguarding work to be facilitated.

Ensure that the person is able to speak with you privately.

Clarify the basic facts about what has happened to the person or to other people who may be at risk, but do not ask detailed or probing questions. Such questions are for the investigation.

Cover the following key points: the current location of the adult; whether there is a need for medical assistance; the nature of the incident; the identity of the person alleged to be causing/have caused harm (if known); whether anyone else was present; and where the incident happened. Consider whether or not it may be a domestic violence situation as this may affect the response and the level of risk.

When the person is explaining what has happened, keep interruptions to a minimum.

Take accurate contact details for the person making the disclosure, including how they can be contacted without putting them at further risk.

Agree with the person what will make them safe while further action is taken.

Protecting adults at risk: Good practice resource

Tell them what will happen next, and when and how they will be informed about what actions will be taken.

Give them your name and details of how to contact you.

Tell your line manager or other available manager immediately, or within four hours of receiving the disclosure.

Make an accurate factual record of exactly what the person said as soon as you can after receiving the disclosure, giving times, dates and when the disclosure was made. Make this as comprehensive and verbatim a record of what is said as possible.

Sign and date the report using a blue or black pen as it may need to be copied.

Make a record of the person's decision about sharing information with other organisations.