

# AND NOW, HOW CAN I HELP YOU?



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

WHEN THERE IS A  
DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN  
CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

## **Use**

These recommendations and guidelines arise from the knowledge that we have gathered from our experience on how the disclosure of sexual violence is experienced by relatives and people close to the environment of the child and adolescent (CA) who has suffered it. Therefore, they are intended to serve as an initial guide at the time of disclosure or discovery.

Each child and adolescent has their particular needs, personality and circumstances, in addition to their own way of experiencing sexual violence. Therefore, when in doubt, ask specialists who can help you with the most beneficial decision for each case.

## **Dissemination**

The dissemination of any copy, in the format that is presented, is permitted by any means.

We thank you for disseminating this material, with which you contribute to giving better support to CAs who suffer sexual violence and can talk about it.

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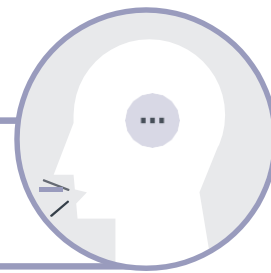
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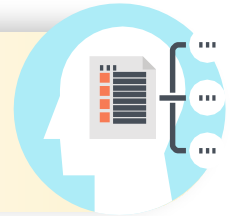




## Introductory questions

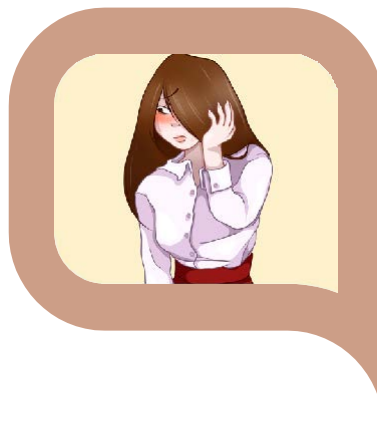
### Why do we make these recommendations?

1.1



Because there is no manual on how to be the best mother, the best father, the best brother or the best grandmother. In addition, there are situations like these, for which no one is prepared. Therefore, those of us who work with children and adolescents (CAs) who are victims of sexual violence want to convey some ideas to help you.

With these recommendations we are also helping CAs reduce their possible feelings of guilt and shame.





## 1.2

## Why has it happened?

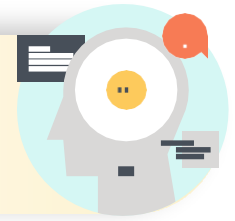
CAs are unaware that they may be victims of sexual violence, and most of them have never been given any sexual education, nor have they been taught how to act in these situations. Normally, we tell CAs that the dangers are outside the home and away from the family and trusted people. But sexual offences against children and adolescents occur precisely in these contexts in approximately 85% of cases. Therefore, the information they receive is contrary to the situation in which they live.





But, why didn't you tell me before?  
Perhaps I did something wrong, or  
was it my fault for not realising it?

1.3



The only responsible for sexual violence is the perpetrator. Sexual violence in childhood and adolescence is based on deceit, abuse and distortion of the CA's trust, and the strategies imposed by the attacker. Although it is true that there may be situations where force is used, they are by no means the most common, nor do they usually appear at the beginning.

The CA could not ask you for help before because, in the early stages, most are not aware that something bad is being done to them.

On the other hand, you have to understand that the manipulation and deception used by the attacker makes it very difficult for the CA to be able to identify the danger. By the time he/she does so, the attacker already has a lot of power and achieves silence, making it almost impossible for the CA to defend him/herself, let alone talk about it at that moment.





## 1.4

### Do I have to report it?

You should know that sexual contacts and interactions between a person of legal age and a CA are an offence, and that if you suspect or know of a possible situation, you should always report it.

You can go directly to the prosecutor's office, the police, the corresponding police 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.

In the event that the attacker is another CA, the childhood protection services should register the victim's and attacker's information and start an investigation process.

You will surely have doubts about how all this can affect the CA, but you should know that, in almost all cities, there are teams of expert professionals who will 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 to, in a safe and protective environment, and with the peace of mind of having the time they need.





As expert professionals in interviewing to the CAs victims of sexual violence, we work so that they can do so in the best possible conditions and with all the guarantees established by law. But we need the cooperation of relatives and companions so that on the day of taking a statement, the CA can do so with the least possible contamination; that is, letting him/her speak freely, in his/her own words and in his/her own way.

You should also know that, although the judicial system still needs a lot of improvement and judicial proceedings are hard and slow, you will always find professionals who will help both you and your CA.

Remember that, as stipulated by law, you have the right at all times to be informed on the entire judicial proceeding and to request clarification of all those questions that you need.







Why is it so important that we know how to respond when CAs explain the facts to us, whether it's the first time or other times?

1.5



Because the first time they explain it is very important for the future.

As is normal, that first time or those first times, the CA will tell those in their closest trusted social circle. And until he/she can explain it to the court staff, he/she may have been asked many times and, perhaps wrongly, because they did not know how to handle the matter.

We must ensure that our attitude and reaction to a disclosure of this type do not cause a negative effect on the CA, which makes them feel guilt, fear or doubt. It is about preventing them from going back on their disclosure, deciding not to describe it further, or even denying it in the future. Without realising it, the way in which we seek to obtain information about what has happened to them can affect and harm the CA in the future.





## Recommendations in light of the disclosure

Since we will be very eager to help him/her, but also very anxious and nervous, this can make us make serious mistakes when listening and talking to him/her. We suggest that you take into account the following guidelines.

### How should I act with the CA?

2.1



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

- Don't make impulsive gestures or facial expressions, because the CA may detect your state of mind, and this will affect what they want to tell

- Listen to them and remind them that they can count on you. This is not the time to think about whether you should believe him/her or not. Now the most important thing is that they feels that you are listening to them.





- Make them feel good about having talked about it. You can let them know that you are really pleased that they trusted you: *“Thank you for telling me about it, you've been very brave.”*

- If you see that they ask you a question, answer what you know, in an easy way for them to understand. And if you don't know the answer, say so, and let them know that you'll try to find the answer later: *“I don't know the answer to what you're asking me at the moment, but I'll try to find the answer and I'll let you know”.*

- Write down exactly what they told you, in the same words, without changing anything. It's best not to do this in their presence.





• React to the mood they are displaying with the same normality and ease. If they need a hug, give them one. If you think they only need only kind words, give them some.

• Try to understand their discomfort and suffering.

• Show understanding and support their emotional state, whatever it may be. Let them cry if they need to, and don't reject their feelings. Be with them: *"It's normal for you to feel this way; it doesn't matter if you cry."*





## 2.2

### What should you do as a priority?

**Listen to them without completing their sentences or filling in their silences. Don't finish their sentences, as you may distort their memory and that way you aren't helping them.**

**Name the attack and body parts in their own words, without correcting or changing them. Repeat the same words, don't soften or aggravate them.**





## 2.3

### What must I NOT do?



- Ask them why they behaved in a certain way, or ask these questions: *“Why didn’t you tell your teacher right away? Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t want to go with him anymore? Why didn’t you tell him no?”*.

- Ask them why they didn’t take precautions or weren’t being cautious: *“Why did you go back to that place with him? Why didn’t you stay close to your friends?”*

- Ask them why they have taken so long to talk about it: *“How can this have been going on for so long? Have you been doing this for years without mentioning it? You should have been telling me from the first time”*.





”

- You should never apologise or excuse the attacker (“*Perhaps you've misunderstood. Maybe he/she didn't mean to do that*”), nor anticipate the negative consequences that may occur (prison, police, etc.).

- Tell them they mustn't lie or exaggerate.

- Convey negative thoughts about the attacker: “*He's a bastard. What you've been doing is very wrong. Your father is bad and that shouldn't be done.*”

”





- Make promises that you don't know you can keep, or anticipate actions or procedures that aren't really under your control: *"They're going to lock him up, now all you have to do is go to the doctor and it will all be over. They're going to put him in jail. You won't have to see him any more. You won't have to talk about it any more."*

- Guess how they are feeling: *"You must be very sad. I understand how you feel. I know it's been very hard for you."*

- Deny or question whether it could have been sexual violence.

- Belittle their suffering.







## What is it very important NOT to do?

2.4



From our experience, the most serious mistake is to start asking them a lot of questions off the top of your head, and almost continuously. We insist:

**Don't ask them why they are talking about it now or why they haven't done so before, as it might make them feel bad.**

**Don't ask questions because, not knowing how to approach the subject, you could confuse them or add things that haven't happened to their memory.**





**Don't force them to express their emotions at that moment, heed their current mood.**

**Don't make derogatory remarks about the attacker because you don't know the type of bond they have been able to create and you could generate a stronger feeling of guilt.**

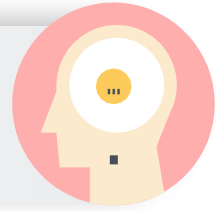
**Don't hold the CA responsible for the situation: *“Why did you go there with him? I told you something could happen to you. Why didn't you scream? Why didn't you tell me before?”***





## Why is it important NOT to ask them questions once they have disclosed sexual violence?

2.5



Because the way we ask can alter the recollections that we have stored in our memory. It's very important that you don't ask them about the specific details of what happened to them, just listen to them and be with them.

Your need to know what has happened is understandable, but you must remember that ensuring the best recovery for the CA outweighs your needs. Therefore, ask the specialists for what you need to know and let them do their job, so as to minimise the consequences.

Remember: our recommendation is that you don't ask, but that you are always available for whatever the CA wants to tell you spontaneously. You can also remind them that if they need to say more about the subject, they can count on you.





## First *guidelines* to follow for the CA's recovery

Following disclosure, the most important needs in the life of a CA are to maintain their routines and provide them with the greatest possible stability. Continuing with their guidelines and schedules will give them security, confidence and calmness.

- Organise their sleeping and eating schedules, and follow them.

- Think about what places they like, entertain them and give them peace of mind and try to organise an outing or a stay.

- Try to do some exercise and seek contact with nature.





- Avoid psychotropic drug that has not been prescribed by a child psychiatrist.

- Encourage them to go out, be with friends, and lift their spirits and laugh.

- Play upbeat music and make time for fun activities.

- Prevent them from watching series or films with violent content (on television, the internet, etc.), because they can trigger negative psychological mechanisms).

- Try to get them not to isolate themselves.

- Ask for help from specialists.





## Will they recover or will it affect them for life?

3.1



You should know that not all sexual violence is experienced in the same way, nor does it cause the same impact. In fact, the CA's age, the type of interaction with the attacker or the violence and deception used, as well as many other variables that we know about, affect their psychological state. Therefore, it is necessary that you consult specialists, who will guide you and schedule the next steps to take, assessing the need (or otherwise) for the CA to receive psychological support.

However, we can tell you that the support received and perceived by the CA constitutes one of the most important elements in their recovery. Most CAs are able to cope, and possess a strength of which we are often unaware.





## 3.2

### How can I help myself?

Your attitude, serenity and self-confidence are also a way of helping the CA. We know it's not easy to stay in control; therefore, here are some guidelines that improve feelings of guilt and can help reduce your anxiety:

I'll have to assume that they may not want to talk to me at the moment, or have therapy.

I won't inquire continuously. I'll be available for them to tell me what they want, when they want to, whenever they need me.

I won't blame myself and I'll understand that the attacker has breached my trust too.

I'll try to understand that my thoughts and interpretations regarding sexual violence are not those of the CA.





I'll deal with the subject patiently, without fretting over what they may tell me, so that the CA can remain calm.

I'll think that the life of the CA is much more than the sexual violence they have suffered.

I won't transmit fears to them, nor will I make them stay on constant alert from now on.

I'll prepare myself for the knowledge that the matter may perhaps resurface in adolescence, or other stages of life.

I'll respect the way they talk about the attacker.

I'll understand that their most obvious symptoms, if any, are part of a process.







If there is public masturbation behaviour or inappropriate sexual behaviour, won't make them feel bad, but I'll redirect their behaviour, and tell them that certain sexual actions must be carried out in private, and never forcing other children.

I'll repeat to them that I think they have shown a lot of strength and courage.

I'll seek help for myself if I need it, and I'll surround myself with supportive people.

I'll remind them of all the beautiful things in life and all the things they have yet to experience.





## Remember

**Don't use words that the CA has not used to express him/herself.**

**You shouldn't blame or question them, or doubt what they tell you.**

**Thank them for trusting in you to talk about it.**

**Ask for help from specialists in sexual violence.**

Every child or adolescent who lacks information is a more accessible victim for attackers. One of the most valuable messages you can give to a CA is that they should not have secrets, because things that happen to us, whether good or bad, can always be told: there are bad secrets and good secrets. Remind them that they should always feel free to talk about whatever they wish to, and that no one can ask them not to describe a situation, especially if it is making them feel bad or hurting them.





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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