



## Responding to Adult Disclosures of Childhood Sexual Abuse

### Introduction

This briefing paper has been developed by Safeguarding in Sport in partnership with Open Secret, an abuse and trauma service working with adult survivors of childhood abuse. We are aware that considering recent media attention many adults have found the courage to open-up about abuse they have experienced as children which may have happened within sport or within other areas of their lives. Each survivor is first and foremost an individual and each will disclose in their own way however we know that if you take on the role of club or governing body child protection officer, you may be the person an individual feels most comfortable to discuss this matter with.

Through Safeguarding in Sport we provide regular training, updates and guidance on how to respond to concerns about or a disclosure in relation to children, however we are aware that though the key principles may be similar there are some added complexities when an adult chooses to disclose to you. This paper is therefore designed to give you an overview of how you can best support an adult disclosing, the slight differences in reporting (or choosing not to report) and what ongoing support is available nationally for adult survivors of abuse. The guidance in this paper relates only to adults over the age of 18 disclosing historical abuse and we would remind you that any concerns about the wellbeing of a child under the age of 18 should be dealt with using your current child protection policies and procedures.

### Who are Safeguarding in Sport?

Safeguarding in Sport is a partnership between Children 1st and **sportscotland** the national agency for sport. We work with governing bodies of sport, local authority sports/leisure departments, leisure trusts and sports clubs.

The aim of Safeguarding in Sport is to help ensure children stay safe and have fun while taking part in sport. We provide advice, consultancy, resources and training for any sports organisation working with children.

### Who is Open Secret?

Open Secret are a specialist abuse/trauma service which operates as part of Wellbeing Scotland. Open Secret have been supporting survivors of childhood abuse, with a specialism in working with issues of childhood sexual abuse for many years and offer holistic, trauma based confidential support and counselling, group work, EMDR/EFT, befriending and advocacy support.

## What should you know about disclosures from adults?

If you receive a disclosure about abuse from an adult, in most cases the abuse will be historical and will in many cases have been kept secret for many years. In some instances, you may be the first person they have told about the abuse.

Many people are anxious about dealing with disclosures of abuse, especially from adults, and hold fears and anxieties around how they will react to the person making the disclosure. In particular they may have concerns about their ability to control their own reactions to the content they might hear. In most cases, particularly at an initial disclosure, adult survivors are unlikely to go into any depth of detail about the abuse itself. Everyone is an individual and discloses in a different way so there is always the possibility that someone may go into detail, however this is not common during initial disclosure and during ongoing processes.

It is also important to remember that not every single survivor will be suffering from trauma – many survivors do find ways to turn their experiences into personal strengths and have moved on with successful lives and relationships.

## What can you do if you receive a disclosure from an adult?

When hearing a disclosure from someone the following are really important factors:

- *Validation and Acceptance*

At the point of disclosure, for many survivors their lives will be in crisis and they feel like they are not coping with what happened. Take time to recognise the tremendous strength and courage it took them firstly to survive those childhood experiences and secondly to come forward to tell their story as an adult.

It is extremely important that you accept what the survivor is telling you – the fear of being judged or not being believed is one of the biggest barriers to survivors speaking out. Remember you are not there to question any of the content nor investigate allegations being made, you are there to listen.

- *Believe in yourself*

If someone has chosen to disclose their abuse to you, they have chosen to share this information with you for a reason – usually because they have a sense they can trust you, or feel safe to disclose to you and you have given them a sense of your warmth and empathy which is more important at this point to someone, than how qualified you are.

- *Be Respectful/Non-Judgemental*

Many adult survivors have developed various coping strategies throughout their lives from childhood to adulthood to find a way of living with the pain of their experiences and have a real fear of being judged for their lifestyle choices and behaviours. Survivors of abuse have any sense of power or control over their lives and personal boundaries taken away from them from a very young age and having their coping strategies and other feelings and behaviours validated as a choice made to help them survive in a terrifying world can be the first step towards them feeling valued and respected as individuals.

- *Go at Their Pace*

Make sure there is an appropriate space to hear the disclosure to ensure safety and confidentiality for the survivor. If the disclosure is made at a time or place that you cannot provide enough time or a confidential space to support the individual, stress how important it is to give the matter time and make an arrangement to set aside time to give the matter the space and time it requires.

- *Confidentiality*

A disclosure should always be treated with the utmost of confidentiality. Always remember that a survivor may have chosen to not tell their family about their experiences. This should be considered when making any agreements for further contact between yourself and the survivor or any signposting actions – for example is it ok to leave a voice mail/send a text/send anything to their postal address.

### **What should I say if someone discloses to me?**

Sometimes it can be hard to find the initial words to respond when someone shares something difficult or unexpected with us and disclosures of abuse are no different. Unfortunately, there are no 'right words' but encouraging words or phrases can avoid judgement and show support for the individual. Some key phrases you may wish to consider are:

- *'I'm sorry this happened to you'* – Acknowledge that the experience has affected them. Phrases like 'I am so glad you have felt able to talk to me about this' or 'I imagine this must be really tough to talk about' can help to communicate empathy.
- *'Is there anything you need to hear from me right now?'* – One of the first things taken away from a person when they are abused is a sense of control, so it is important that this is not replicated during a disclosure. Ask the individual what they need from you right now using phrases like 'What can I do to support you right now?' or 'Is there anything you would like me to do to help you with this just now?'
- *'It's not your fault'* – Many survivors of abuse blame themselves for what happened, especially if they know the perpetrator personally so it can be helpful to remind them that they were a child and the responsibility for abuse always lies with the adult.
- *'This doesn't change how I think of you'* – Some survivors are concerned that sharing what happened will change how others perceive them so it can be helpful to reassure the survivor that surviving abuse does not change how you think or feel about them. Phrases such as 'Now that you have told me about this, what are you thinking that I may think?' can also help open a dialogue and avoid the survivor feeling that you judge them differently.

### **Do I need to report disclosures of historical abuse?**

The short answer is not necessarily, you only need to report a disclosure from an adult if they give you information which leads you to believe that a child may be at risk now.

If the person making the disclosure is an adult (over 18) they are entirely in control of whether they report their own experiences to the Police, however you should always make the individual aware that if their disclosure provides information which makes you believe a child is currently at risk that you have a duty of care to pass this information on to comply with child protection legislation. If this

is the case you can reassure the individual that you would be passing on the information in order to keep current children safe and there would be no pressure on them to make a statement about their own experience unless they felt they wished to do so.

If someone did express a wish to report their abuse to the police this would be handled by the local Public Protection Unit within Police Scotland. You can explain to individuals that these officers have had special training in handling disclosures of abuse and have sensitivity around the subject. The PPU officers should gather the information in a very survivor focussed way. These officers recognise that the statement taking process may take a long time, over several meetings as they know it is crucial to go at the pace of the survivor. Appointments can also be made to take a statement at a local police station, in your own home or at another location that is comfortable and respects the privacy of the survivor.

Though it may not always be what an individual wants to hear, it can also be helpful to explain to survivors who may wish to report their abuse, that although all allegations of abuse are taken seriously and fully investigated by Police Scotland, there is a low rate of successful prosecutions, particularly with historical abuse cases. This is often due to lack of evidence and this is a factor they may wish to consider in relation to the stress and trauma associated with giving detailed statements about the incidences of abuse. This is not to dissuade anyone from reporting but rather to give them the information necessary to make the decision that are in their best interests at this moment in time.

### **Who should survivors contact if they do want to make a police report?**

Adult survivors can contact Police Scotland on the general 101 number or by visiting their local police station and requesting to speak with a member of their local PPU team. Clubs or SGBs can support individuals in setting up an initial meeting with police which can negate the need for the individual to make the difficult phone call themselves.

### **What if a survivor does not want to report to police but they believe their abuser may still be involved in sport?**

Survivors can share information with the sports SGB who can cross check coaching and volunteer databases to establish current involvement within the sport. This can be done anonymously if a survivor does not wish to self-identify. Based on this information SGBs can then implement their own processes around internal investigations and take appropriate action based on the outcome of this. This internal process can take place to establish and minimise current risk regardless of police involvement or any civil case occurring.

### **What ongoing support is available for adult survivors?**

Many adult survivors will make a disclosure at a time in their lives where they feel in crisis, or no longer able to cope with the legacy of the abuse so it is crucial that they are able to access ongoing support to cope with the very distressing thoughts, feelings and memories that have been triggered. Make sure you are aware of the services available in their area and any helplines that may be helpful to them also in times of crisis. \*Survivors should also be made aware that these services are available to anyone, regardless of whether they have chosen to report to police at this time or not.

There are several agencies throughout Scotland offering specialist support to survivors of abuse whom you can signpost survivors to for ongoing support. Some of these services are listed below:

## **OPEN SECRET (A SERVICE OF WELLBEING SCOTLAND)**

Services Available in most areas of Scotland.

SGB Lead Child Wellbeing & Protection Officers can refer individuals for support through Wellbeing Scotland by contacting 01324 630100. Lead CWPOs can offer to refer for support but referrals must be made with consent of the individual requiring support and cannot be made as part of standard procedure for all survivors. At the point of referral, the Lead CWPO will be asked to share geographical location and contact information for the individual in order to set up support meetings. It is therefore vital that the referring SGB have this information to hand and have clear instructions from the individual regarding how they wish to be contacted:

- Would they prefer mobile, landline or email contact?
- Are they happy for a voicemail to be left?
- Have they considered possibility of a family member or friend accidentally picking up a voicemail if it is a shared number?

Following a referral being received the individual will be contacted directly by Wellbeing Scotland as per the contact preferences expressed. After referral is made the SGB will be entitled to no follow up information, including whether the individual attended for the support offered.

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## **RAPE AND ABUSE SUPPORT**

Aberdeen

Telephone: 01224 59032 Helpline: 01224 591342

Email: [info@rasane.org.uk](mailto:info@rasane.org.uk)

Website: <http://www.rasane.org.uk/>

## **HEAR ME**

Forfar

Telephone: 0130 785 0741 Helpline: 0130 785 0741

Email: [hear-me@btconnect.com](mailto:hear-me@btconnect.com)

Website: [www.hearmecounselling.com](http://www.hearmecounselling.com)

## **BREAK THE SILENCE**

East Ayrshire

Telephone: 01563 559558

Email: [info@breakthesilence.org.uk](mailto:info@breakthesilence.org.uk)

Website: <http://www.breakthesilence.org.uk/>

## **CHILDREN 1ST**

Selkirk

Telephone: 01750 22892

Email: [ettrick@children1st.org.uk](mailto:ettrick@children1st.org.uk)

Website: <https://www.children1st.org.uk/>

## **SURVIVORS UNITE**

Selkirk

Telephone: 07921 058675 or 07590 350857

Email: [ettrick@children1st.org.uk](mailto:ettrick@children1st.org.uk)

## **EIGHTEEN AND UNDER**

Dundee

Telephone: 01382 206222

Helpline: 0800 731 4080

Email: [lormac1053@aol.com](mailto:lormac1053@aol.com)

Website: <http://www.18u.bothybiz.com>

## **EAST LoTHIAN SEXUAL ABUSE SERVICE (ELSAS)**

Telephone: 0131 557 6737

Helpline: 0131 556 9437

Email: [elsas@ewrasac.org.uk](mailto:elsas@ewrasac.org.uk)

Website: <http://www.ewrasac.org.uk/East-Lothian-Sexual-Abuse-Service/>

## **HEALTH IN MIND**

Edinburgh

Telephone: 0131 225 8508

Email: [contactus@health-in-mind.org.uk](mailto:contactus@health-in-mind.org.uk)

Website: <http://www.health-in-mind.co.uk/>

**SAHELIYA (BME SUPPORT)**

Edinburgh

Telephone: 0131 556 9302

Email: [saheliya@connectfree.co.uk](mailto:saheliya@connectfree.co.uk)

Website: <http://www.saheliya.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/>

Counselling and support for Black and Minority Ethnic Communities

**KINGDOM ABUSE SURVIVORS PROJECT (KASP)**

Kirkcaldy

Telephone: 01592 644217

Email: [info@kasp.org.uk](mailto:info@kasp.org.uk)

Website: <http://www.kasp.org.uk/>

**SAFE SPACE**

Dunfermline

Telephone: 01383 739084

Email: [contact@safe-space.co.uk](mailto:contact@safe-space.co.uk)

Website: <http://www.safe-space.co.uk/>

**S.A.Y. WOMEN**

Glasgow

Telephone: 0141 552 5803

Email: [enquiries@say-women.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@say-women.co.uk)

Website: <http://www.say-women.co.uk/>

**SPEAK OUT SCOTLAND**

Glasgow

Telephone: 0300 400 3202 (Please leave message on answer machine.)

Email: [info@speakoutscotland.org](mailto:info@speakoutscotland.org)

Website: <http://www.speakoutscotland.org/>

## **THE MOIRA ANDERSON FOUNDATION**

Airdrie

Telephone: 01236 602 890

Email: [info@moiraanderson.com](mailto:info@moiraanderson.com)

Website: <https://moiraanderson.org/>

There are also several emergency helplines which individuals can contact for support if they feel they are in crisis. These lines are not abuse specific but call handlers are able to provide general emotional support over the phone or in some cases by email or instant messaging.

## **BREATHING SPACE**

Telephone: 0800 83 85 87

Website: [www.breathingspace.scot](http://www.breathingspace.scot)

## **SAMARITANS**

Telephone: 116 123

Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

## **The National Child Abuse Inquiry**

It is also worth noting that if someone's experiences of abuse happened whilst they were within a care setting, there is an ongoing child abuse inquiry through which individuals can be supported to give their testimony towards.

Telephone: 0800 0929 300

Email: [information@childabuseinquiry.scot](mailto:information@childabuseinquiry.scot)

<https://www.childabuseinquiry.scot/>

## **Further Case Specific Advice**

If you still require further case specific advice you can, as always, contact the Safeguarding in Sport team on 0141 419 1156 or by email at [safeguardingsport@children1st.org.uk](mailto:safeguardingsport@children1st.org.uk)

Children 1st Parentline also offers support to every family in Scotland, over the phone and online. Call free on 08000 28 22 33, email [parentlinescotland@children1st.org.uk](mailto:parentlinescotland@children1st.org.uk) or start a webchat at <https://www.children1st.org.uk/parentline>