



CANADIAN CENTRE *for* CHILD PROTECTION®
Helping families. Protecting children.

Supporting Youth Who Have Experienced Sexual Victimization

Supporting youth who have experienced sexual victimization requires a community-based response. Compassionate, caring and supportive responses by adults around the youth (e.g., parents, school staff, child welfare worker, law enforcement) play a key role towards the youth's recovery. Supportive relationships steeped in connection, availability, and patience help youth heal.

This resource raises considerations for teachers and other safe adults supporting youth who have been sexually victimized online, in person, or both. To help a youth feel supported and safe, it is important for adults to understand impacts of trauma and how to shape their responses toward the youth.



What can cause trauma to youth?

A youth may experience traumatic stress from an experience that:

- Was sudden or unexpected
- Was forceful or violent
- Is perceived by the youth as overwhelming or uncontrollable
- Left the youth feeling helpless, unsafe and/or having a lack of control

(adapted from D. Bowers, presentation at the Missing and Exploited Children Conference, Winnipeg, May 2011)

What do youth in crisis need from an adult who is first responding?

A youth needs:

- To feel safe and supported
- To not feel judged
- A caring reaction from the adult
- To know that they do not deserve what is happening to them
- A sense of control over how information about what happened to them will be shared
- A sense of hope (they will get through this)
- Concrete next steps for supporting them and attending to the sexual victimization

What are possible behaviours youth might demonstrate?

Individuals have unique reactions to trauma. The impact on an individual depends on a number of factors related to their personality, temperament, neurological make-up, past experiences, family dynamics, the type of support network they have, and specifics of the victimization they experienced. It is important not to assume that a youth is not distressed because they do not act the way an adult might believe someone in distress should behave. Sometimes the signs are obvious, and sometimes they're not.

Responses may (but do not always) include:

- Feeling jumpy, nervous, agitated, and easily startled
- Having images, sensations, or memories of the traumatic experience intruding into their thoughts
- Feeling numb, frozen, or shut down
- Pretending everything is okay
- Change in general behaviour — seeming "out of sorts"



- Difficulty regulating emotions — rapid, sometimes exaggerated, changes in mood where strong emotions or feelings occur (e.g., uncontrollable laughter or crying, heightened irritability, or temper cycle in a short period of time)
- Difficulty concentrating or learning new information
- Change in academic performance
- Resistance to going to school
- Trouble falling or staying asleep, nightmares
- Generalized fear and anxiety — a persistent feeling that they are not safe
- Difficulty trusting relationships
- Difficulty handling changes
- Substance misuse, cutting, or disordered eating
- Withdrawal/lack of interest in activities they typically enjoyed
- Isolating themselves from friends
- Sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and/or presenting a negative world view
- Extreme changes in the way they dress
- No observable behaviour changes
- Asserting that they are okay
- Acting as if nothing problematic has happened
- Stating they can deal with this on their own

How can an adult who is first responding intervene supportively?

- Put the youth at ease by letting them know you are here to help
- Keep the pace slow and calm
- Tell them their safety and wellness are your most important concerns
- Tell them you care about them
- Tell them you are sorry this has happened to them
- Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation
- Allow them to tell you what happened to them without interrupting or insisting on a chronological narrative; ask them to try to share with you as if they are watching a movie about it to help them avoid reliving the experience
- Avoid asking “why” questions; stick more to “tell me more about that” or “tell me how you responded to that” statements
- Listen without judgement or skepticism; provide them with positive feedback for sharing with you
- If their account sounds confusing, avoid pressing for clarity at this time
- Don’t make promises that may not be realistic
- Focus on problem solving and helping them understand that you are there to help sort this out, deal with how it is affecting them, and work towards bringing resolution to what has happened



Steps for Parents

Be supportive

Your unconditional love and support during this difficult, distressing time will help your child heal and move forward.

Build a sense of safety

Reassure your child that they are not alone and you will get through this tough time together. Carefully consider involving people in your child's life who can provide additional support, (e.g., family members, school personnel, friends). Children are more resilient in the face of stress when they are supported by caring adults and friends.

Consult with your health care provider(s)

They will be able to support you and your child, as well as provide referrals for services such as counselling, occupational therapy, art therapy, music therapy, dance therapy, etc. Earlier intervention promotes better resilience in the long run.

Learn about the impacts of trauma

Work with trauma-informed professionals to learn more about impacts of trauma and supporting your child through their healing.

Give messaging of hope

Youth who have experienced trauma can heal — they can regain trust, confidence, and hope. They have the ability to create a new “normal” and function within it. Help your child see the world as manageable, understandable, and meaningful. The stronger the belief that things will become and stay better, the more significant your child's recovery will be. Hope is not just a feeling — it is the foundation of a chemical reaction in the brain that calms fear and anger and increases resiliency and healing (D. Bowers, 2011).

Help rebuild a positive sense of self and sense of control over their environment

When youth are going through a situation like this, they may feel alone and powerless in their ability to control their own lives. In order to restore a sense of control, it is important to include your child in discussions about next steps and in decision making where appropriate.

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The information in this document is not intended as legal or professional advice. Readers should assess all information in light of their own circumstances and the age and maturity level of the child involved, and should consult with a qualified professional as needed.



Back to Basics:

Establish regular routine. Clear routines promote consistency, predictability, and reliability that can help your child regain a sense of security and control.

Provide balanced nutrition. Prepare balanced food options for your child that are low in refined sugar. Balanced nutrition is important for helping their body to regulate.

Provide time for physical activity. Engage your child in 30 minutes of daily physical activity for direct mental health benefits.

Help manage night sleeping. Nightmares and generalized fearfulness are common for youth who have experienced victimization. It can be helpful, for example, to leave lights on in their room or to sit with them until they fall asleep.

Ensure your child has time for fun. Make time for doing fun things that are structured and safe so they have a chance to be a tween/teen.

Help your child stay connected. Encourage them to stay connected to people who are supportive of them and to activities they enjoy or enjoyed in the past.

Be patient and tolerant of moody behaviour such as clinginess, pushing away, and outbursts

Youth who have a trauma response can be flooded by emotions, making it difficult for them to regulate their mood. Let your child know you can handle their big feelings and will stay by their side.

Help manage overwhelming emotions

The body is the best intervention tool. We have to settle the body before we can settle the brain. Youth engage when they feel safe and they use it to connect. Playing catch or board games, doing crafts, etc. while you talk can help them regulate and connect. Stay calm and keep the environment low key. Be consistent and help your child understand, express, and tolerate their strong emotions. They will get through it — reassure them that the feeling will pass, the way a storm passes.

Help manage flooding thoughts and feelings

Help your child see the link between their thoughts and feelings. Assist them in understanding how working on controlling their thinking can help control how they feel. Encourage them to take a break from upsetting thoughts by engaging in an activity they enjoy — perhaps colouring or art, listening to music, watching a show, or being physically active.



Be supportive as your child processes their abuse experience

You can take an active role in deciding what comes next in their life. Reinforce that this negative experience doesn't define who they are. Explain that healing is a process that takes time; they will have good days and bad days, and you are by their side to help every step of the way.

Advocate for your child

Be your child's champion and work with professionals to help them recover from trauma. Help others view your child through a trauma-healing lens so their expectations are realistic and their responses are supportive.

Take care of yourself

To effectively take care of your family, you must take care of yourself. Taking care of a child who has experienced trauma is hard work and it affects the entire family. Seek the supports necessary for the entire family. For example, you may wish to find a counsellor for each family member.