



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. Kind, 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.



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## 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)*

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## 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

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## 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

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## 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

## Show support

Your unconditional love and support during this difficult, distressing time will help your child heal and move forward. It is important to avoid using this time for judgment, lectures, anger, or catastrophizing the situation.

## Build a sense of safety

Reassure your child that they are safe and there is no problem or situation you cannot get through together. Reassure your child that they are not alone and you are there to help.

## Consult with professionals

This may be a stressful time for the entire family. It may be helpful to seek guidance, support, and assistance from a health care practitioner who has expertise in trauma and working with people who have been sexually victimized. They will know how to best support your child and the entire family during this difficult time. Seek out such professionals (e.g., psychologists, social workers, counsellors, psychiatrists) or speak with your family physician for a referral.

## Learn about the impacts of trauma

Seek out resources to help you learn about trauma and how to support your child through their healing.

## Give messaging of hope during the recovery process

Youth who have experienced trauma 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. Interestingly and importantly, hope is not just a feeling – the experience of hopefulness actually contributes to physiological chemical changes in the brain that calm fear and anger, and allow for increased 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 any next steps that include them and in decision making where appropriate.



## Be patient and tolerant of moody behaviour

Youth who have a trauma response can be flooded by emotions, making it difficult for them to regulate their mood. Set realistic expectations and be patient with changes in mood. Examples of moody behaviour may include agitation, anger, sadness, clinginess, and outbursts.

## Help manage overwhelming emotions

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 it will pass and it is just a feeling.

## Help manage their flooding thoughts

Help your child see the links between their thoughts and feelings. Help them understand how working on controlling their thinking can help control how they feel. Consider exploring new activities that will help manage their thinking and emotions, such as yoga, art, music, etc.

## Establish clear expectations

This should be done with flexibility and reduced consequences. When rules are broken, gently re-establish the boundaries.

## Help your child stay connected to what they enjoy

Encourage and support your child to stay connected to family, friends, and activities that they previously enjoyed.

## Help to process their experience

Help your child shape their experience to have more control over what comes next in their life. Be available to listen and to help shape your child's beliefs of their life to understand that a negative experience doesn't define who they are. Your child has control over writing their life story.

## Advocate for your child

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

## Take care of yourself

To be effective, you must take care of yourself. Taking care of a child who has experienced trauma is very difficult, and it impacts the entire family. Make sure to take time to access the supports necessary for the entire family.