

Module D Exercise 2 – 9 Principles for Communicating with Children¹

Some communication techniques need to be adapted to individual children. The following **communication principles** should guide **all** communication with **children**.

1. Be Nurturing, Comforting and Supportive

Children who are at risk/have experienced abuse **rarely seek help independently**, especially younger children, and will usually be identified by someone else. Children **may not understand** what is happening to them or may experience fear, embarrassment or shame about the abuse. This can **affect their willingness and ability to talk** to you or other service providers.

Your initial reaction will impact their sense of safety, willingness to talk, and psychological well-being. A positive, supportive response will help abused children feel better, A negative response (such as not believing the child or getting angry) could cause further harm.

2. Reassure the Child

Children need to be reassured that **they are not at fault** for what has happened to them and that they are **believed**. Children **rarely lie** about being sexually abused. Caseworkers should **encourage** children to share their experiences.

Healing statements are essential to communicate at the outset of disclosure and throughout case management. Find opportunities to tell children that they are brave for talking about the abuse and that they are not to blame for what they have experienced. Tell children that they are not responsible for the abuse and emphasize that you are there to help them begin a process of change.

- *“I believe you”* which builds trust
- *“I am glad that you told me”*, which builds a relationship with the child
- *“I am sorry this happened to you”*, which expresses empathy
- *“This is not your fault”*, which is non-blaming
- *“You are very brave to talk with me and we will try to help you”*, reassuring and not making promises

Say that you accept that their feelings (anger, fear, anxiety...) are natural in the situation.²

- *“These are difficult things you are telling me”, or*
- *“Many children feel upset after a thing like that happens”*

¹ Source: *Caring for Child Survivors (2012), International Rescue Committee and UNICEF.*

² Source: *Communicating with Children: Helping Children in Distress (2000) Save the Children*

3. Do NO Harm: Be Careful Not to Distress the Child Further

Try to limit any interactions that might distress the child. Do not:

- Become angry with a child
- Force a child to answer a question that he or she is not ready to answer
- Force a child to speak about the situation before he/she is ready
- Have the child repeat the story of abuse multiple times to different people (follow-up conversations with children who become distressed are not considered “multiple interviews”)

4. Speak So Children Understand

Information must be presented to children in ways and language that they understand, based on their age and developmental stage.

5. Help Children Feel Safe

During Registration and/or Assessment, children often like to have trusted adult present, especially young children and those who are scared. **Always offer** children the choice to have a trusted adult present, or not. **Do not force** a child to speak to/in front of someone they appear not to trust. **Do not include** the person suspected of the abuse in the interview.

There may be times when it is appropriate to talk to children and parents separately (e.g. for unaccompanied children identified as living with unrelated caregivers) as children may hesitate to speak in front of caregivers. Tell the **truth** —even when it is difficult. If you don’t know the answer, tell the child, “I don’t know.” **Honesty and openness** develop trust and help children feel safe.

6. Tell Children Why You Are Talking with Them: Every time you communicate with a child take the time to **explain** to the child **the purpose** of the meeting. It is important to explain **why** you want to speak with them, and **what they will be asked** and what will be asked to his/her caregiver. At every step of the process, **explain** to children **what is happening**.

7. Use Appropriate People: In principle, only female service providers and interpreters should speak with girls about sexual abuse. Boys should be offered the choice. If this is not possible use a more open space or have someone the child chooses to be present. The best practice is to ask the child if he or she would prefer.

8. Pay Attention to Non-Verbal Communication: It is important to pay attention to both the child’s and your own **non-verbal communication** during any interaction.

9. Respect Children’s Opinions, Beliefs and Thoughts – Right to Participate

Children have a right to express their opinions, beliefs and thoughts about what has happened to them as well as any decisions made on their behalf. Service providers are responsible for communicating to children that they have the right to share (or not to share) their thoughts and opinions. The child should be free to answer “I don’t know” or to stop speaking with a service provider if he/she is in distress. The child’s right to participation includes the right to choose not to participate.