FREE MATERIAL · FOR FAMILIES

When a child has been hurt

A guide for families of children who have experienced violence.

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Before anything else

If you are reading this, you have probably just found out something very hard.

The first thing that needs saying is this: **you do not need to be certain in order to ask for help.** It is not your job to investigate, gather proof or work out what happened. Your job is to protect and to seek support.

The second is that how the adults around a child respond in the first days carries enormous weight in what follows — for her protection and for her recovery. That is what this booklet is about.

What this booklet is and is not

It offers guidance on care and communication. It does not describe the laws or services of any particular country, and it is not legal advice. Use the **Local contacts** page to write down what exists where you are.

If she tells you something

What you do in the first minutes matters more than anything you will say later.

- ✓ **Listen to the end**, without interrupting and without finishing her sentences.
- ✓ **Tell her you believe her** and that she was right to speak.
- ✓ **Make clear it is not her fault.** Say it plainly, more than once.
- ✓ **Stay steady.** Feeling horror is natural; showing it tends to make a child go quiet in order to protect you.
- ✓ **Write it down afterwards, alone** — the date, the time, and the **exact words** she used. Her words, not your interpretation.
- ✓ **Seek help** from the services listed on your Local contacts page.

And what not to do

- ✗ **Do not question her.** Repeated, insistent or leading questions can alter a child's memory and damage the credibility of whatever she says later.
- ✗ **Do not ask her to repeat it** for relatives, neighbours or anyone else.

✗ **Do not record her** talking about what happened.

✗ **Do not confront the person suspected** or announce that you are seeking help. It can increase the danger to the child.

✗ **Do not discuss the case in front of her**, even when you think she is not listening.

✗ **Do not promise what does not depend on you.**

If the child does not speak

This is where children are most often left without protection.

A child who does not speak is frequently recorded as unable to give an account. That conclusion is almost always wrong. What is usually missing is not her capacity to communicate — it is a means through which she can do it.

What helps, long before it is needed

- A **functional communication system** — pictures, a board, signs, a device — that she already uses fluently. A system handed to her on the day is not access.
- Vocabulary that includes **body parts, pain, fear, "no", "stop", "I want to leave"**. Most systems are built around requesting preferred items, which leaves a child unable to report anything that matters here.
- **Independent access**: no physical support from another person, no hand being guided. Communication that depends on an adult's hand cannot be trusted as the child's own.
- An environment matched to her sensory profile, so that she can remain available.

> **If she already has a system**
>
> Bring it with you and explain to anyone who will speak with her how it works. A system she already commands is worth more than any resource improvised on the spot.

Humanised listening

A contribution from the Greenspan Floortime Approach® to hearing children.

Formal interviews with children follow their own protocols, and it is not the therapist's role to conduct them. But there is a question that is rarely asked before any of it begins, and it is precisely where developmental clinical work has something to offer: **can this child, right now, produce an account?**

Age is not the right measure

The Greenspan Floortime Approach® describes functional capacities that develop in sequence: regulation and interest in the world; engagement and relating; two-way intentional communication; shared problem-solving; the use of ideas and symbols; and finally the building of logical bridges between ideas.

Telling what happened — in order, with time and cause — requires the last two. A child who still communicates through intention, gesture and affect may have lived through everything and still be unable to organise it into a narrative. **That does not mean she has nothing to say. It means the question is being asked at a level she has not yet reached.**

Regulation and interest in the world — without this, no other capacity is available.

Engagement and relating — a child communicates from within a relationship.

Two-way communication — intention, gesture, gaze, refusal.

Shared problem-solving — longer sequences of exchange.

Ideas and symbols — naming what is not present.

Bridges between ideas — time, cause, sequence. Narrative becomes possible here.

What this changes in practice

- **Regulation comes before any question.** A child in a state of alarm cannot access higher capacities — the body shuts down whatever is not survival. Asking before regulating produces silence or random answers, and both harm the child.
- **Connection is not a five-minute formality.** The relationship is the channel through which communication happens, not a warm-up before the part that matters.
- **Individual differences define the room.** Light, sound, smell, texture, physical distance and pace are not comfort details: for many children they determine whether they can stay available at all.

- **Affect leads.** Before words, a child communicates intention. A professional who follows that channel perceives what a direct question never reaches.
- **The pace belongs to the child.** Following her initiative, rather than the order of a script, is what sustains communication.

What this is not

This is not an alternative interview protocol and does not replace the forensic protocols used by authorities. It is a contribution about **the conditions** under which listening happens, and about assessing what a particular child is able to communicate — so that the decision to hear her, and how to hear her, rests on how she functions rather than on the age written on a document.

Day-to-day care

Recovery does not happen in a meeting. It happens in ordinary days.

- **Predictable routine.** Same times, same places, same people. Predictability is the main antidote to the feeling that the world has become dangerous.
- **Give small choices back.** What to wear, what to eat, which game. A child who has been harmed lost control over her own body; regaining control in small things is therapeutic.
- **Honour "no" immediately.** No negotiating, no insisting — including for hugs, kisses and tickling. This is where she relearns that her body is hers.
- **Do not press her to talk about it.** She does not need to narrate what happened in order to get better. Leave the door open without pushing.
- **Expect regression.** Bedwetting, wanting to sleep close by, fears that had passed. This is expected and usually temporary.
- **Tell the school only what is necessary** to keep her safe.
- **Look for psychological support** from someone experienced in childhood trauma.

And you

Almost every caregiver in this situation carries guilt, anger and a sense of having failed.

It is worth saying plainly: people who harm children are usually skilled at not being noticed. Not having seen it earlier does not mean you were not paying attention. The guilt you feel is understandable, but it is not an accurate account of what happened.

You will need support too — emotional, practical and sometimes legal. This is not a luxury: a child's capacity to recover depends heavily on having an adult nearby who is reasonably whole.

This booklet offers guidance on care and communication. It is not legal advice and does not describe the laws or services of any particular country. Procedures for reporting and for hearing a child differ between countries — always check what applies where you are.

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Local contacts

Fill this page in with the services available where you are.

Every country organises child protection differently. Before you need them, find out which of these exist near you and write them down here.

Emergency number

Child protection authority

Police / specialised unit

Health service

Free legal assistance

School contact

Other notes