



2.1C GUIDANCE ON RESPONDING TO A COMPLAINANT WHO DISCLOSES ABUSE

A complainant may disclose to a member of church personnel that they have been or are being harmed or abused or are at risk of harm and abuse. Some complainants including children may have different ways of communicating that they are being abused. If a complainant hints at or tells a member of church personnel that he or she is being harmed by someone, any disclosure should be treated and responded to in a sensitive way. Remember, a complainant may disclose abuse to a member of church personnel as a trusted adult at any time during their work with them. It is important that church personnel are aware of and prepared for this.

When dealing with a disclosure:

- Be as calm and natural as possible.
- You have been approached, because you are trusted.
- Do not panic.
- Do not promise to keep secrets or make any assurances in relation to anonymity.
- Be aware that disclosures can be very difficult for the complainant.
- The complainant may initially be testing your reactions and may only fully open up over a period of time.
- Listen to what the complainant has to say. Give them time and opportunity to tell as much as they are able and wish to.
- Do not pressurise the complainant. Allow him or her to disclose at their own pace and in their own language.
- Questions should be supportive and for the purpose of clarification only.
- Avoid leading questions, such as asking whether a specific person carried out the abuse.
- Conceal any signs of disgust, anger or disbelief.
- Do not make the complainant repeat the story unnecessarily.
- Accept what the complainant has to say – false disclosures are very rare.
- It is important to differentiate between the person who carried out the abuse and the act of abuse itself. The complainant quite possibly may have an attachment to the alleged abuser whilst also disliking what was done to them. It is important therefore to avoid expressing any judgement on, or anger towards, the alleged perpetrator while talking to the complainant.
- Reassure the complainant that they have taken the right action in talking to you.
- Explain to the complainant that this information will only be shared with people who can help.
- It may be necessary to reassure the complainant that your feelings towards him or her have not been affected in a negative way because of what they have disclosed.



- Do not communicate with the respondent.
- Do not attempt to deal with this on your own – follow the reporting procedures (**Guidance 2.1A**).
- Do not conduct any further investigation.
- If you consider the complainant to be in immediate danger, contact the PSNI/An Garda Síochána without delay. This should be followed by a report to the RCB Safeguarding Casework Team (**Guidance 2.1A**).

CONFIDENTIALITY

At the earliest opportunity, tell the complainant that:

- You acknowledge the courage that they have shown in making the disclosure.
- Your priority is their safety and well-being and if the complainant is not safe, you cannot keep that information to yourself.
- You will be sharing this information only with people who can help.

Secrets hide things that need to be known if people are to be helped and protected from further ongoing harm. By refusing to make a commitment to secrecy to the complainant, you run the risk that the complainant may not make a disclosure. However, it is better to do this than to make a commitment that you cannot keep and risk ruining the complainant's confidence in you or another adult. By being clear about the boundaries in this, it is more likely that the complainant will return at another time and make/continue a disclosure.

ONGOING SUPPORT

Following a disclosure by a complainant, it is important that the person who receives the disclosure makes every effort to continue in a supportive relationship with the complainant if appropriate. Appropriate support will be offered as outlined in **Guidance 2.2A**.