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## How to communicate with a child at risk?

*"There was one teacher who, even though she was strict, had my respect. She just had a natural authority. One time I put ink in her coffee, but I immediately went to tell her not to drink it. But I couldn't confide in her. There was no one at school I would have thought to talk to. Maybe there wasn't even enough education to make me think of talking about my situation at home. My first teacher was like my dad. When I told her I didn't understand something, she told me to just read it again." Stáña (33 years old)*

Teachers, social workers or anyone working with children, should be sensitive to the signs of child maltreatment and be able to talk sensitively to the child about their observations.

It is not the responsibility of teaching staff to assess the situation, determine a course of action or plan steps to address it, but to identify the child at risk and offer them or their family help through providing the contact to the school counsellor, an external counselling centre or social services.

### ? How can I determine if a child is at risk?

#### By observing the child's behaviour and general physical condition.

Injuries can be observed when assisting the child with changing clothes or personal hygiene, in physical education, on school trips etc. Signs in child's behavior can be observed during the lessons, breaks, trips etc. Signs of mistreatment in parents can be observed during dropping off/picking up the child or during the visit in the child's household.

#### By talking to the child or their classmates and friends.

**Variant A:** Child initiates the conversation.

**Variant B:** We need to initiate the conversation based on the signs of maltreatment. In either case, it is important to find safe space providing privacy and dedicate enough time for the conversation. In case of parental violence, invite for conversation parent-victim. Avoid confronting abusive parent.

#### Conversation key messages:

- It's good that the child wants to talk about the situation and has confided in someone.
- The child cannot stop the situation on their own, so it is important that they tell someone about it.
- Violence is the responsibility of the perpetrator; it is never the victim's fault.

#### Supporting phrases you can use:

- I'm glad you're talking about this.
- You're very brave to speak out about this.
- I'm sorry for what happened to you / what you experienced.
- It is normal to feel this way in this situation.
- It's not your fault.
- I'm here to support you.
- By talking about it, you can help your mum/dad/siblings too.
- You're not alone in this, these things have happened to other children too.

**If you feel the child is uncomfortable with the conversation, you can use other methods, such as offering them to try to express themselves in writing.** Again, support is important here and you can use supportive phrases as well.



## What to do

If the child wants to have conversation, allocate enough time and choose safe and quiet place where you can talk in privacy.

Listen and let the child explain what is happening or has happened in their own words.

Reassure the child that their emotions (or lack thereof) are normal in this situation.

Reassure the child that it's okay to want to talk to you, and generally reassure the child that no one should hurt anyone.

Respond calmly and factually. Even if the story the child is telling you is difficult, it is important to appear calm and supportive.

Respect the child's privacy, physical integrity and dignity.

Ask the child if they feel safe at home. If the answer is no, consider this an imminent threat to the child.

Limit the number of people you share information with – approach the child protection coordinator (if this position is established in the workplace). The main criterion for sharing information is the best interests of the child – i.e. information should be shared so that the child can be adequately supported, not because a member of staff needs to relieve their anxiety or insecurity.

Explain to the child that you need to pass on information about the situation to other professionals so that they can be helped.

Explain to the child what will happen next.

Truthfully answer all the questions the child asks you (if you know the answers).

**We can help keep safe children exposed to domestic violence by working with them to develop a safety plan.**



## What not to do

Don't promise your child confidentiality before they talk to you (you may have to report the information you find out further).

Do not push the child to share details and do not gather the evidence of maltreatment.

Do not criticise the parent/caregiver, even if the child's account suggests that his/her behaviour is reprehensible.

Do not promise the child that their situation will immediately improve. Subsequent steps can be stressful for the child.

Discourage the child from confronting the parent/caregiver about the maltreatment on their own.

Do not confront the parent/caregiver with the information you have gained, this may cause more harm to the child.

Don't make the child undress.