

perhaps led to the wrong person being blamed, but how can she resolve it now? Children and young people sometimes want to confide troubles within the peer group, with a confidence that adults will not just charge in and make matters worse. Older children and young teenagers listen to the news and are sometimes very anxious about national or world events. They want to express worries with an attentive adult who will not dismiss or try to avoid their questions.

ACTIVITY

You may find it useful to recall a time when you wanted to tell somebody about an experience of emotional importance to you. This memory need not necessarily be something from your childhood, but could be from your adult life.

- 1 How did the conversation go with the person in whom you confided? Did they listen to you? What made you feel that they were really listening?
- 2 What kind of comments did the other person make? What was helpful to you? What made you feel unsupported?
- 3 Did they ask you any questions? What kinds of questions were helpful and which were not?
- 4 Did they ask, what seemed to you, too many questions? How did you feel on the receiving end of lots of questions?
- 5 Looking back over the conversation that you experienced, what lessons have you learned that can be applied to delicate conversations with children?

If possible, share some of your general thoughts with colleagues or fellow-students. Be considerate of each other as you discuss these issues. If your colleagues are sharing a difficult experience with the group, they will not want to be criticised or cross-questioned now about their memories and feelings.

CONSULT AND MAKE NOTES

Children should not have to repeat a conversation to a whole series of adults in your setting after a first disclosure. When a child has confided in you, you need to consult a more senior practitioner or advisor who will help you to identify the best next step. As the person in whom the child confided,

you are responsible for making notes on the conversation as soon as possible, and certainly with no more delay than later in the same day. Your notes should include specific details of the conversation:

- ▶ When and where did the child talk with you? Were you alone with the child? Were any other staff or children within hearing? Did anyone else contribute to the conversation?
- ▶ What did the child say to you – as accurately as you can recall. Do not note down actual words in inverted commas (...) unless you are certain that those are definitely the child's own phrases.
- ▶ Your impressions and opinions can be valuable because you know this child. But support them with your reasons, for instance, 'I believe Sandy is very upset. When he said to me "My big cousin is nasty to me", Sandy was twisting his hair around one finger – the way he does when he is really distressed.'
- ▶ Do not add guesses or speculations to the written report – about the child's feelings, likely abusers or judgements about the possible truth of what the child has said. Keep your report factual and opinions supported with 'because ...'

Notes of this kind are following more general good practice in accurate written reports. An accurate and descriptive record will be just as important if the concern turns out to have an explanation that is not worrying. A careful approach, taking into account what you know and what you do not, can support you in a delicate conversation with a parent that perhaps starts with, 'I was worried/confused/taken aback by something that Tanya said to me today ...' If there becomes reason for serious concern and steps start to be taken in a child protection investigation by social workers, then a responsible and specific first record will be important for any future work.

But is it true?

One of the major steps forward for children in child protection has been that what children say is now given much more weight. The prevailing assumption of previous generations was that children were unreliable, especially if set against adult(s). Children, especially young children, were assumed to muddle fact and fantasy and be prone to lying. Unfortunately, some adults, even professionals, still persist in this belief.

In child protection there has been a significant shift to a working assumption that what a child says is true. However, there are several, subtle issues