Tip sheet 3:
Talking about abuse and neglect



3.1 Why this matters

- Naming abuse helps young people spot unsafe behaviour early.
- Knowing the signs can reduce confusion, shame and self-blame.
- Grooming and coercive control can happen online or in person. They are often slow and subtle.
- Young people may not realise something is wrong until they feel confused or pressured.
- Technology can be used to monitor, pressure or control young people.
- Young people are still learning how to talk about abuse. They may not have the words yet, and that's OK.
- Shared language (e.g. warning signs, boundaries, choice, control) helps young people talk about safety.
- Calm, supportive adult responses make it easier for young people to ask for help.

3.2 What you might notice

Signs that a young person may be facing grooming, abuse or neglect may include:

- secrecy about a specific relationship or a special friend
- receiving gifts, favours or extra attention
- feeling pressure to keep secrets
- changing routines (extra training or staying back late)
- testing boundaries (like sharing inappropriate jokes or adult information)
- being confused about what's normal in a relationship
- trying to protect the person causing harm
- unexplained injuries, frequent pain or discomfort
- struggle to name what feels wrong.

These signs show something may need attention. Every young person reacts to harm differently. While this list covers some signs of grooming and abuse, neglect often shows up as a pattern of unmet needs or a sudden change in behaviour.

3.3 What helps

Acknowledging their feelings	Let them know it makes sense to feel unsure or confused.
Keeping things calm and supportive	Your tone and pace help them feel safe.
Using simple language	You can say: *'Safe adults don't need secrets. You deserve to feel safe.'*
Asking gentle clarifying questions	Gentle questions can help you understand what they mean without pressure. You can say: • *'Tell me more about that.'* • *'What happened next?'* • *'How did that make you feel?'*
Asking just enough questions (the 'Goldilocks principle')	Ask enough to understand immediate safety, but not so many that they feel pressured or overwhelmed.
Giving the 'no trouble' message	Let them know they're not in trouble for speaking up.
Offering choice and control	Let them set the pace. Remind them they can pause the talk anytime.

For more information, see the **Starting a supportive conversation** and **What to do when a young person shares a concern** sections of the Trusted Adult Guide.

3.4 What to avoid

Speaking badly about the person	Focus on the behaviour, not the person. Criticising the person can make the young person shut down.
Taking over	Doing everything for them can make them feel they have no control.
Closed or shaming questions	Avoid questions like: • *'Why didn't you tell someone earlier?'* • *'Are you sure that's what happened?'*
Promising to keep secrets	If a young person is at risk, taking action is the best way to keep them safe. Be honest and clear. You can say: '*I need to make sure you're safe. I may need to tell another adult who can help us.*'
Assuming you have the whole story	Young people often share in small test pieces. Be patient
Downplaying what they share	Don't say things that make their feelings seem small. Acknowledge what they feel and listen.

3.5 Quick responses

These are suggestions. Use your own words and adapt them to suit you and the young person.

If the young person…	You can say or do…
Says something feels 'off'	*'That feeling matters. Let's look at it together.'*
Describes behaviour that sounds unsafe	*'Safe relationships don't use secrets or pressure.'*
Says an adult is pressuring them to keep a secret	'Safe adults don't need to keep secrets with young people. I'm glad you told me.'
Mentions someone is controlling them	*'You have a right to feel safe and respected. No one should pressure you to do something that feels wrong.'*
Blames themselves for what happened	*'You're not responsible for someone else's choices. This is not your fault.'*
Is worried about what happens next	*'I'll explain what happens next. We can go step by step.'*

If the young person shares something that feels unsafe, stay calm and follow the steps in **How to respond: The 6-step-framework**. If you're unsure what to do, check in with another trusted adult or a professional. You don't have to do this alone. Working together helps keep young people safe.

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