

Scenarios

This resource is part of the [Sexual Abuse Prevention Program](#) educational requirement for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs).

The purpose of the scenarios in this resource is to help RECEs understand that:

- factors related to child sexual abuse are complex;
- educators' suspicions can be related to many things such as their relationship with the child and family, their knowledge about childhood sexuality development and education, and their own beliefs, biases, and experiences; and
- their duty is to contact a Children's Aid Society (CAS) if they suspect that a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm or injury.

Take the following steps for each scenario:

- Read the scenario.
- Read the reflection questions and ask yourself how you would handle the situation before reading the "Things to consider" section.
- Reflect on the complexities and the additional considerations for each scenario and how they may be appropriately handled by RECEs, including the duty to report.
- Consider facilitating a discussion with colleagues to share knowledge, experiences, and reflections.

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Scenarios

Scenario: Do you like secrets?

A 5-year-old child with autism starts using the word “secret” frequently and asking you, the educator who they are comfortable with, questions like “Are secrets good or bad?”, and “Do you like secrets?”. You’re curious where this is coming from as neither you or the other educators have previously noted this behaviour, nor heard the other children talking about secrets.

Scenario: My monkey hurts

A 3-year-old in your program is very attached to a monkey stuffed animal they brought from home. The child brings their monkey with them everywhere they go. Over the last couple of weeks this child has expressed to you that their monkey hurts, so you pretend to make their stuffed animal feel better and comforted. Despite all your efforts to help through actions with the stuffed animal, the child continues to tell you “My monkey hurts”.

Reflection questions

1. Identify and focus on the facts in the scenario.

- Is there a cause for concern? If yes, what is leading you to think there is?
- What information do you need before proceeding, if at all?
- Could there be other explanations for the changes in the child’s behaviour?

2. Examine your values, beliefs, perceptions, and biases as they relate to your professional responsibilities.

Identify your beliefs and perceptions around appropriate sexuality knowledge and behaviours for young children to determine what specifically concerns you in the scenario. For example, is there anything influencing you in speaking up about the child’s behaviour?

Critically reflect on your beliefs, biases, and knowledge around sexuality education for young children, which includes assessing what is appropriate knowledge and behaviour for young children (ages 0-6). Question what may hinder you in addressing this situation.

For more information on examining your beliefs and biases refer to the resource [Racism and Bias in Reporting to Child Welfare](#).

Please note that in this resource, sexuality knowledge / education refers to supporting children’s holistic development on topics such as consent, body safety, gender justice, gender identity, appreciation for their bodies, and healthy relationships. It could include discussions about friendships and how to say ‘no’ to unwanted touching, as well as answering children’s questions honestly and in developmentally appropriate ways. It means knowing our body parts and how to keep your body safe ([Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights, 2020](#)).

3. Consult the [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#), relevant legislation and your workplace policies to support your decision making.
- Review your ethical and professional standards and identify the standards that apply to the scenario and could guide your decision-making.
 - Are there legal obligations, such as the [duty to report](#), that provide direction on your course of action?
 - Are there relevant workplace policies that could support your decision-making? For example, does your workplace have a policy on duty to report, or sexuality education?

Under section 125 of the [Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017](#) (CYFSA), RECEs have a duty to contact CAS¹ if they **suspect** that a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm or injury. You do not need to be positive that a child is at risk, you must only have reasonable suspicion.

“It is not necessary for a person to be certain that a child is or may be in need of protection in order to make a report to a CAS. Reasonable grounds refers to the information that an average person, using normal and honest judgment, would need in order to decide to report” ([Professional Advisory: Duty to Report](#), 2019, pg.3).

Review your workplace policies related to the duty to report to help guide your decision-making process on reporting. Also, review your policy on sexuality education (if applicable) for guidance on what constitutes age-appropriate sexuality knowledge and behaviour.

Scenario: Do you like secrets?

Things to consider

Facts

The child with autism is frequently using the word “secret” and asking you questions related to secrets. You’ve asked your colleagues if they’ve been asked similar questions and they’ve said no.

Research tells us that children with disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual abuse. According to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, children with disabilities are sexually abused at a rate that is 2.2 times higher than that for children without disabilities ([Murphy and Elias](#), 2006).

¹ The name of a Children’s Aid Society or Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agency can vary in name and may include, Child and Family Services, Family Care, Family and Community Services, Family and Children’s Services, Catholic or Jewish Children’s Aid Society.

Ways to collect additional information

You may want to ask the child some prompting questions about their secret, for example “Tell me some secrets you like”, or “Tell me some secrets you don’t like”. The child might say “I can’t tell” or they may say nothing at all. You might also talk with the child about different types of secrets. Secrets that are hurtful or make them feel sad or scared should be shared with an adult they trust. Remember, it’s typical for a child not to give you more information and this is not a reason to abandon your concern.

For more information about safe versus unsafe secrets, please refer to “Teatree’s KEEP and SPEAK Secrets”. This resource is available to RECEs in lesson 4 of the Teatree Tells online module in the College’s Sexual Abuse Prevention Program.

If the child is willing to share their secret with you, there are a couple of key messages to remember to share with the child. “Children can be very confused about sexual abuse as they often know and trust the person who is doing it. They can have very mixed feelings because even though they may not like what the person is doing to them, they may care about the person or enjoy some aspects of their relationship” ([Canadian Centre for Child Protection](#), 2018). Remind the child that:

- It is never their fault. There may be immense guilt associated with sexual exploitation and abuse, and so children need to understand they are not responsible for the abuse.
- What is happening to them is not okay. They were right to share their secret with an adult they trust.
- A safe grown-up’s job is to take care of children and help keep them safe. All secrets can be told to safe adults.

For further guidance, refer to lessons 2 and 4 in the Teatree Tells online module.

Possible explanations

Children learn from information, exposure, or from experiencing something. In this scenario, exposure may stem from a TV show or video they watched or heard. Maybe a family member was talking about secrets, such as a sibling. When a child is sexually abused, it is common for the abuser to tell the child to keep it a secret, or to make it clear that it isn’t something they should tell anyone. Control tactics often used by abusers to silence young children can include:

- making the child feel complicit in what is happening
- telling the child that they will get into trouble if anyone finds out
- telling the child that no one will believe them
- using guilt that the child will get the abuser into trouble
- threatening the child or their animal with harm

Scenario: My monkey hurts

Things to consider

Facts

The child has a stuffed monkey that they bring with them every day to program, and it serves as a comfort object for them. The child has shared with you that their monkey hurts, so you do everything to help their monkey feel better over the next couple of weeks, but it doesn't seem to help because the child continues to express to you that their monkey hurts.

Ways to collect additional information

You can begin with open-ended prompts, such as:

- tell me about Monkey
- how do you know Monkey hurts?
- show me where Monkey hurts

When trying to get additional information to determine whether you have a reasonable suspicion there is a risk of harm, remember to:

- Avoid asking leading questions. Keep questions open-ended such as “tell me about how your monkey got hurt” as opposed to “did X hurt your monkey?”
- Listen carefully and clarify. This will show the child that you are listening carefully and that you are taking them seriously. Since the child in this specific scenario is 3 years old, repeat exactly what the child says – using their words only, such as “Monkey got hurt” or “Monkey hurts here...” and say the body part the child pointed to.
- Ensure the child leads the conversation by respecting when they are done talking or giving information.

For more information, refer to the “Educator Guide” in the Treetree Tells online module.

Remember, it's typical for a child not to give you more information and this is not a reason to abandon your concern.

Children disclose more often through behaviour than words. Observing the child's play and behaviour throughout the day is important to get more information. As you watch the child's interactions, ask yourself:

- Has the child demonstrated any changes in other areas of their play?
- Are there any changes in their interactions with the other children and staff, or their family?
- Are they demonstrating any changes in behaviour that are concerning?

Lastly, reflect on whether the family has shared anything with you recently that could be causing the change in behaviour. Take into consideration if the child has any medical issues (e.g., infection, allergy) or has experienced recent trauma (e.g., divorce, grief, sickness). As you gather more information the situation may or may not become clearer. It's important that you do not abandon your concerns even if the situation does not become clearer.

Possible explanations

There could be a harmless explanation as to why the child keeps expressing that their monkey is hurting. For example, the stuffed monkey could have a hole in it and the child is upset about the damage.

However, there could be a more serious explanation. The child could be disclosing abuse in a way that they can talk about it. Since it's occurring over a period of time it's possible that the child is trying to verbally disclose their abuse but doesn't have the knowledge of appropriate language to be able to name what is happening.

"Monkey", a word that the child is obviously familiar and comfortable with, could be what the child's family uses as a pseudonym for genitals (e.g., penis, vagina, vulva, breasts, anus). In a majority of child sexual abuse cases the offender is not a stranger ([Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017](#)), therefore the abuser could know the meaning of the word "monkey". By the child telling you that their "monkey hurts", they could be trying to tell you that a private area of their body (i.e., their genitals) is hurting but don't have the language to clearly communicate this information.

Research explains that offenders are less likely to target children who use the anatomical terminology for genitals, as they're more likely to be able to clearly communicate sexual abuse ([Kenny and Wurtele, 2013](#)). Important skills such as learning the anatomical terminology for genitals from a young age can provide children with ownership of their bodies and work to prevent sexual abuse ([Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017](#); [Kenny et al., 2015](#)).

Additional considerations for both scenarios

Identify options for steps to take and the potential consequences of each (i.e., risks, prioritize best interest of the child).

- Consult with a supervisor or employer if you require support with your concern.
- Consider whether or not asking the family about the changes in the child's behaviour might be appropriate. Remember, in the majority of child sexual abuse cases the offender is not a stranger ([Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017](#)).
- If you're unsure of how to proceed, contact CAS with questions to gain more information about the situation. Remember that CAS can be contacted to consult at any time, not only to report.

Seek guidance and additional information from your supervisor or employer, if appropriate. Remember to respect confidentiality.

If you suspect that a child needs protection, you're required to promptly report it to a CAS. Although you may choose to speak with your employer before contacting the CAS, you're not required to do so. If you do speak with your employer about the matter, this does not remove your responsibility to contact the CAS to make a report, nor should it delay your reporting.

If you are a supervisor or employer: RECEs employed as supervisors should not prevent or discourage staff members from contacting the CAS. As a supervisor, if an RECE comes to you with concerns of suspected child abuse, the RECE should be provided with support and encouragement in carrying out the duty to report.

Additional resources to further support your learning

- [Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights](#)
- [Understand Child Sexual Abuse Resources and Research](#), Canadian Centre for Child Protection
- [Protecting Children with Disabilities from Sexual Abuse](#), Defend Innocence
- [Trauma Matters: Trauma-Informed Practice Workbook](#), The Jean Tweed Centre for Women and their Families
- [Out and Proud: Affirmation Guidelines Practice Guidelines for Equity in Gender and Sexual Diversity](#), Children's Aid Society of Toronto
- [Teaching Sex-Ed: An Anti-Racist Sex-Ed](#), Saskatchewan Prevention Institute
- [Indigenous Perspectives - Sexual Health Education Resources](#), SIECCAN
- [Sex Information & Education Council of Canada](#), SIECCAN
- [Sexual Abuse of Children with Disabilities: A National Snapshot](#), Vera Institute on Justice

For opportunities to reflect on your practice and address the scenarios discussed in this resource, read the [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#) along with the following College resources:

- [Professional Advisory on Duty to Report](#) and [Reflection Guide on Duty to Report](#)
- [Practice Guideline on Professionalism](#)
- [Practice Note on Ethical Decision-Making](#)
- [Practice Note on Professional Judgment](#)



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