



# Disclosure of Child Maltreatment: Guidelines for School Staff



**UNICEF's analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic** identified many potential secondary impacts on children, including the increased risk of maltreatment and exposure to violence. Following the reopening of elementary schools, school staff may have to manage situations of abuse and neglect that are brought to their attention. The following guidelines aim to support school staff as they navigate these situations vulnerable children.

## SPEAKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR CONCERNS

- The school staff who speaks with the student must be someone they trust.
- The conversation should take place in private. However, the student should be made aware that, even though the conversation is private, other adults will have to be involved to ensure the child's safety if their parents are unable to properly care for them.
- It is crucial that the school staff not lead the student to believe that they will be able to keep all their secrets. This is done to prevent the student from feeling misled or betrayed.
- Leading questions and closed questions (i.e., "yes" or "no") should be avoided. For example, instead of asking: "Did someone at home hit you or touch you in a way that hurt?", a better approach would be: "Tell me about what happened at home."
- If a student asks about what will happen after the conversation, school staff should be as honest as possible in involving others, if necessary. It is important for school staff to avoid promising that "everything will be okay," as the outcome is unknown.

## RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES WITH EMPATHY AND WITHOUT JUDGMENT

- Disclosure is a difficult and delicate process; it should be handled with empathy and sensitivity given the emotional nature.
- School staff's reaction to the disclosure will significantly impact children's comfort and trust.
- If the student feels like the adult does not believe them or is not taking them seriously, or if they aren't informed of the steps that will be taken, the student may stop talking.

## LEARNING TO MANAGE EMOTIONS

- School staff may feel a range of emotion (i.e., anger, powerlessness, sadness) when a child discloses maltreatment.
- It is important to maintain a controlled, yet empathetic and compassionate emotional tone. Avoid shock or negative judgments. Specifically, take the time to pay attention to your psychological state, take advantage of opportunities to self-assess and seek out formal and informal support.