

# COLLABORATIVE RESPONSE TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN ANY COMMUNITY

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## *Framework For A Collaborative Response To Child Sexual Abuse For Communities Around The Globe*

**INTRODUCTION:** Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a worldwide threat to children's health. Without support, children who experience sexual abuse can have physical, mental, and behavioral problems. All children have the right to life without sexual abuse. When children have experienced sexual abuse, however, they have the right to get the best possible support. The community's response to a CSA case is complex because many trained people (professionals) from different fields are needed to properly support the child. This means that multi-disciplinary support teams must be set up to make sure that trained people in the community can respond to the children's needs. These support teams can then work together to maximize resources, reduce burnout, and better support the victims.

### **Collaborative responses:**

- Provide complete care to fulfil the child and family's needs.
- Help support teams to share information with each other, which can help the investigation, and help them to choose the best way to meet the needs of the child and their family.
- Help members of support teams to each have clear, specific roles and jobs so that they can offer help to victims and their families quickly.
- Help to keep the child and family from experiencing more trauma.
- Support non-offending caregivers who play a significant role in the child's recovery.
- Raise public awareness and understanding of child sexual abuse.
- Help to prevent child sexual abuse.
- Help to deal with harmful taboos and stigmatizing beliefs.
- Inform policies and laws to improve systems of care.
- Involve communities to take part in the mission of keeping all children safe.
- Lessen stress and frustration among professionals and support teams.

### **A child-centred response is in the best interest of the child because it:**

- Keeps the feelings and needs of the child as the focus of support.
- Lowers the possibility of further trauma after the abuse has been reported.
- Helps prevent the child from becoming a child who has experienced sexual violence again in the future.
- Empowers the child to have some control of their recovery.
- Builds trust and helps the child to share their worries and experiences.
- Respects interactions between family, and how culture influences these interactions.

- Helps the child to begin healing.

It is important to stress that a combined response in your community is not one-size-fits-all. Combined responses are unique to each community because it depends on local resources, existing laws, support from professionals and government leaders, and the support from the ordinary people of the community. Although it may take time and patience, any community can begin the process wherever they are by focusing on their specific strengths and resources.

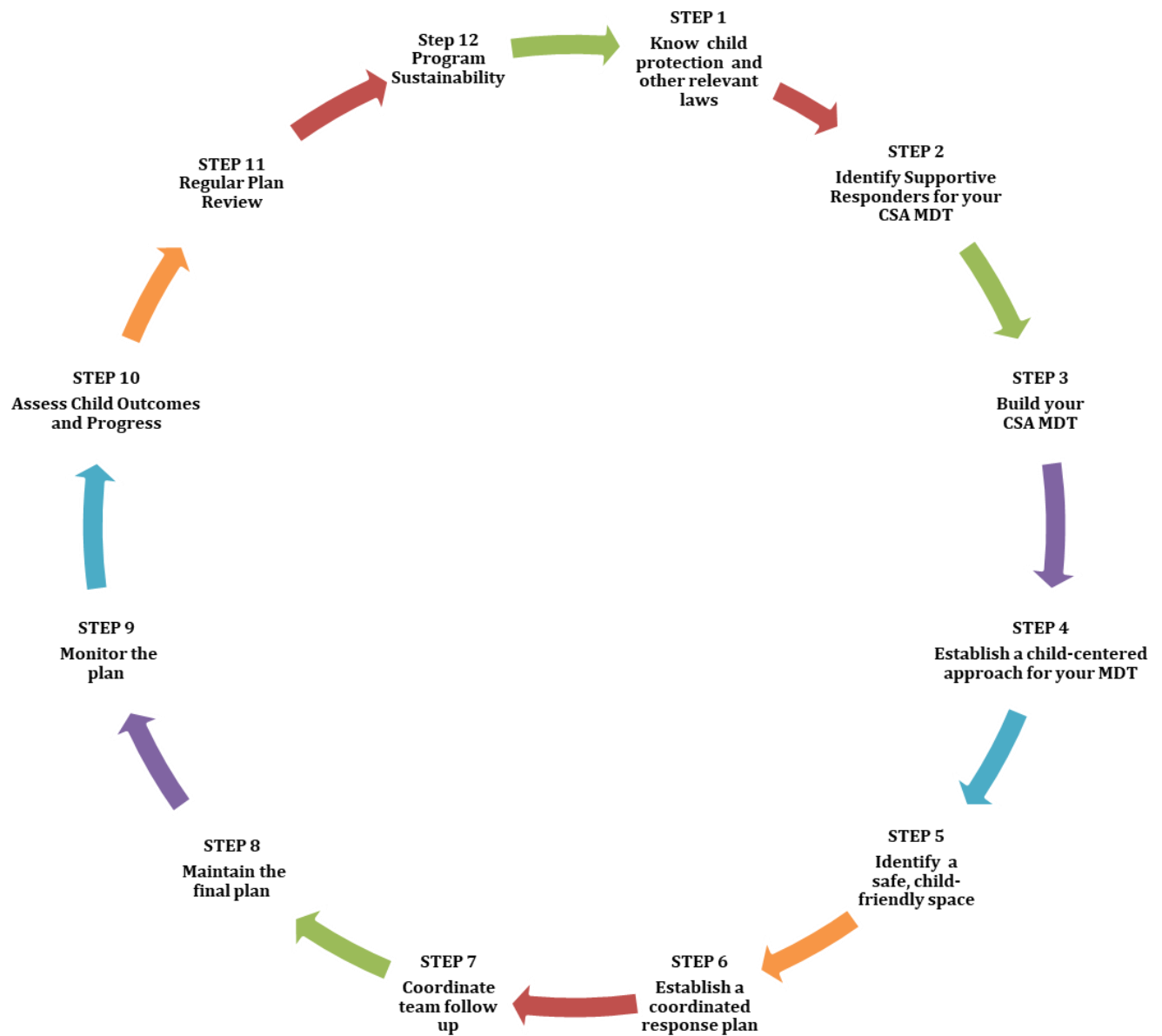
### **HOW TO BEGIN?**

1. Partnership-building can start with two individuals or more.
2. Each community is different, and this framework is designed to make the most of the existing resources. While extra resources are always helpful, they are not needed to create a plan.
3. The framework is organized into twelve steps, to help professionals to develop community responses in a logical way. However, given the unique circumstances and resources of each community these steps do not have to be carried out in order.
4. This framework cannot address all situations and circumstances, it should be used as a guide, with partners, adding or changing it to fit your community's culture and circumstances.
5. There are links to resources at the end of this guide to help as needed. The idea is that you create a living document that you can use to solve problems together with partners and members of the support team.
6. A fillable form is attached to help you build a custom plan that will become the response plan for you and your local team.
7. Creating a collaborative community response to child sexual abuse is not easy and will take time and dedication, but it can be achieved one step at a time.

## Twelve-step framework for building an action plan for your community

This framework is intended to help support teams and caregivers, regardless of their circumstances or training, to begin forming their own plan of action. Everyone can build on the resources that they already have in their community to help children who have experienced sexual abuse.

Links to resources in the Appendix are included and can be used to create a response plan that supports the strengths of any community and help them to give children who have experienced sexual abuse the best support. Every step may not apply but think about them and decide what to build into your community's plan.



## STEP 1: Know the existing child protection and other relevant laws

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The laws can help identify potential resources and funding opportunities, as well as clarify who is mandated to act. Knowing this basic information at a high level is important even if the appropriate action is not currently happening well. It will be important to leverage this when the time is right to make sustainable change.

Know the laws in your country and how you can still protect the child even if the criminal case doesn't go forward. The success of one may not depend on the success of the other.

## STEP 2: Identify supportive responders for your multi-disciplinary team

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Who are the people in your community to whom a child, caregiver, or mandated reporter can speak to about child sexual abuse?

### *Potential members of a multi-disciplinary support team:*

- Social workers
- Child welfare agency workers
- Healthcare professionals (doctor, nurse, emergency medical staff)
- Mental health providers (counsellors, psychologists, therapists)
- Educators and school administrators
- Staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supporting children, women and/or families
- Religious or spiritual leaders
- Police or law enforcement staff
- Ombudsman for children
- Government officials (ministry official, public health officials)
- Lawyers.
- Judges from child court or family court
- Staff of shelters/homes for abused children
- Child helpline representatives
- Other individuals or community leaders

## STEP 3: Build your local support team

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- Reach out to those you identified in Step 2 to discuss the benefits of collaboration.
- Obtain a commitment from each person to participate on the CSA team.

- Organize a meeting with team members to confirm that all agree to work as a collaborative team to maximize efficiency and resources, improve responses, and optimally care for sexually abused children and non-offending family members.
- Ask team members if there are others who should be invited to join the team. Who are the people to also consider?
- ONCE PEOPLE COMMIT TO BEING PART OF THE CORE TEAM, list each person's resources and strengths and define the roles and responsibilities of each team member.
- Based on the information above, decide together which team member will be best suited and responsible for coordinating the collaborative response.
- Build consensus as to how each responder/sector will best support the collaborative response to allow flexibility while avoiding duplication of effort.
- Agree that each team member's role will be given equal weight and respect by all. Commit to prioritize the best interest of the abused child.
- Identify any on-going training needs. Re-visit training priorities at the start of each year. Identify team members responsible for facilitating crucial trainings – and how to secure funding for attendance.
- Develop clear goals and objectives of the team.
- Develop strategies for safe ways to store and share information among members of the support team on a 'need-to-know' basis. Make sure these strategies help to keep child-and-family case information private, especially when working with non-team members of the community, as expected from related policies and laws.

#### STEP 4: Set up a child-centred approach among all members of the team

- The child's best interest must always be the focus of support.
- Make sure that all written and verbal communication with the child and caregiver is in their preferred language, using age-appropriate language that they can understand. Use professional interpreters when needed, avoiding use of family members/companions as interpreters whenever possible.
- Use child-centered strategies for building trust and communicating with children on their level of development.
- Let the child know that you believe them – this can change everything!
- Explain why relevant assessment/interviews/examinations must be done and ask the child for permission. If a child does not give permission, unless it is an emergency, DO NOT force examinations, treatments, interviews, etc., even if a parent has given their permission.
- Work with the child, listen to their concerns, and consider options that serve the child yet satisfy investigation needs (e.g., delay physical exam or interview until the child is rested, as long as the evidence will still be available).
- Support the child throughout the process: this can include calling the child by their own name, thanking them for working with you (and others), and acknowledging their efforts and difficulties.

- Minimize the number of times a child must share their experiences during the initial questioning and investigation.
- Avoid leading or suggestive questions when speaking with the child and non-offending caregiver. Open-ended, non-leading questions are crucial to obtaining accurate information.
- Ensure maximum confidentiality and inform child/non-offending caregiver of any limits of confidentiality. This includes protecting data and passwords so nothing is accessible to anyone outside of the team.
- Be aware of and responsive to the cultural beliefs, practices, and norms of the child and family. These may impact a child's disclosure, a caregiver's response, and local community reactions to the CSA.

## STEP 5: Identify safe, child-friendly spaces

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Identify child-friendly places where children and/or their non-offending caregivers can feel comfortable to report CSA and/or seek help after abuse has been reported. 1. The location should maintain the child and caregiver's privacy and confidentiality. 2. It is important to choose a space that is shame free. 3. Make sure that a representative from that space is a member of your multidisciplinary support team. 4. The space should have child-friendly furniture, toys, etc.

### **Some possible locations:**

- Hospitals or health clinics
- Schools
- Community centers
- Children's centers (if one exists in the community)
- Help line/welfare or other organizations
- Places of worship
- Other places specifically developed or identified by your team to be a safe space to respond to abused children
- Law enforcement agency or police department (with child-friendly rooms)
- Court rooms (specifically made to be child-friendly)

*\*Determine if it is safe to create child-friendly signs at the specific location to make CSA victims comfortable and let the community know this is a safe place to report or go to for help.*

## STEP 6: Establish a coordinated response plan

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Bring the support team members together to create a written response plan for child sexual abuse in your community. (See sample of a fillable template in the appendix). Get creative in thinking of ways to use the combined resources in your community to best support children who have been sexually abused.

### **Consider including the following points in your plan based on your team's expertise:**

- a) REPORTING CSA IN YOUR COMMUNITY:

- Identify how and to whom the abuse must be reported. Is there a specific reporting hotline that should be called?
- How should the investigation be carried out?
- If there is not mandatory reporting in your area, consider if reporting will cause negative consequences or other problems. If so, form a response plan on how to best respond to these potential negative results or problems.
- Once reported, who needs to be alerted right away, which team member will contact them, and how will each team member respond to the family? How should team members work together to respond to the report and caregivers?
- Identify a few people within the team who are trained, or who are willing to be trained, to speak to and/or interview the child.
- Document everything carefully whenever possible.
- Comply with local legal requirements for reporting, information sharing, etc.
- Is it safe for the child to stay in the home? If not, where should the child go? Should the child be placed with other family members, out of home care, etc.? If so, how will the child get there?
- Who checks on the child's well-being after they are moved and for what reasons?

b) LOCAL TEAM COMMUNICATION:

- How and when should other members of your team be notified of the abuse?
- What should happen when each member has been notified?
- Find safe and secure ways of communicating when sharing sensitive information to protect the child's identity and identify ways of communicating that should be followed due to safety risks to the child who has experienced abuse and caregivers.

c) LAW ENFORCEMENT/ LEGAL RESPONSE:

- Define what 'justice' would look like in the best interest of the child, the caregiver, and your community.
- If not yet involved, should law enforcement be contacted? Under what circumstances?
- Are there legal resources available for the child and/or family?

d) MEDICAL RESPONSE:

- Are there medical doctors, nurses, clinics, and hospitals in your local community that can respond to the child who has been abused? If not, where is the closest hospital or clinic?
- Under what circumstances should a child be referred for medical care? If possible, think of a medical care plan for a child, built on the help available in your community. Create plans and processes that should be followed when a child who has been sexually abused must be sent to different places for testing and care. Remember some treatments and tests are time-sensitive – this means they must be carried out before a certain amount of

time has passed. These include treatments for STDs and HIV, which may need to be done before anything else in the response plan.

e) MENTAL HEALTH RESPONSE (See APENDIX for best practice & resources):

- Are there psychologists, social workers, or counsellors in your community who can meet with the child and family at a cost they can afford, or is outside funding needed? If so, how, and when will the child and family be able to see the mental health worker?

f) CHILD WELFARE RESPONSE -- IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO BUILD RESILIENCE:

- Can the child still stay in school? Are there ways to encourage this?
- Are there other outlets in the community to support the child's resilience and help them to recover quicker, like sports, arts/crafts, sewing, cooking, etc.?
- What does the non-offending caregiver believe will help the child to recover? How can these things be added to the child's recovery plan?
- Identify people in the child's life who have given the child love and strength and make them part of the "care plan." If possible, invite the child and caregiver to help identify these people.
- Are there internet resources, like articles or books, that can help the child, family, or team?
- Are there other community resources that can be used to help the child, and how do they fit into the recovery process? Add this to the child's plan.
- Is there a possibility that the offender can reach other children in the home or the community? If so, draw up safety plans for those children to prevent more children becoming victims.
- Keep in contact with the child and/or their family to offer ongoing support and check in on their wellbeing.

## STEP 7: Coordinated team follow-up

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- Hold regular meetings to talk about the condition of the child and family, and how other team members may be able to further help in the child's recovery and attempts to seek justice. All meetings must respect the investigation processes and court procedures.
- Regularly check the changing needs of the child and family; keep track of and fine-tune responses as needed for the current and long-term support plan.
- Bring in more support partners, or make referrals as needed in each specific case.

## STEP 8: Maintain the final agreed upon CSA response plan in a written or electronic format that can be easily accessed by everyone

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*The plan can include:*



- A list of contact persons from the local support team – updated yearly.
- A list of helpful community resources.
- A flowchart to show each step of the response and case management process, as well as names of people who will be responsible for each step.
- The process for organizing ongoing training sessions for the team.
- Print and hand out the final plan to all team members.

## STEP 9: Monitor how the plan is working

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- Create chances for team members to examine the details and processes of successful and difficult cases. Encourage team members to speak out if they need help in particular cases or with carrying out specific parts of the process.
- Document case outcomes if possible to routinely assess progress and identify strengths and areas needing improvement.
- Monitor and evaluate use of, and commitment to, the CSA Response Plan.

## STEP 10: Assess case results and progress

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- Keep track of the child's medical health and mental health appointments and follow up on the child's progress to see if the child needs extra help.
- Check on the safety and well-being of the child and family regularly.
- Teach the family how best to support the child and help the child to recover and support resiliency.
- Help the family and child to understand myths about victim-blaming, or taboos about speaking out against CSA.
- Teach the child and the family how to cope with the stress and trauma in a way that will aid the child's recovery, healing, and resiliency.

## STEP 11: Review the plan on a regular basis

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- Have regular team meetings to hear from everyone what is working, and what should be changed or updated.
- Revise and date the updated plan to make sure that the revisions will be applied in the future. Add any new people or organizations to the plan as new members join the support team.
- Update contact information for any new team members.
- Gain the support of more participants as needed to strengthen your team's combined response.
- Once you have a plan that is running well, can you collect data without any personal details to help educate the community or children? Is there data from

- the CSA cases that you can use – without making any personal information or sensitive details known – to help educate the community and their children?
- Are there new ideas the team has for preventing CSA in the community?
  - Can you work with schools or the government to improve policies or laws that can help protect children?

## STEP 12: Ensure program sustainability

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- Define what success means to you and your team – celebrate your successes!
- Offer initial and ongoing training opportunities for both trained workers and other supportive responders in your community.
- Identify or create new training opportunities based on recognized needs or knowledge gaps.
- Offer training and resources to help members of the support team take care of themselves, process any secondary trauma, or stress, and reach out to other team members for help.
- Hold debriefing sessions with some or all team members when a specific case has been very stressful.
- Encourage the support team to explore and share new resources.
- Create regular team meetings in which you can learn something relevant or new or in your respective fields together – these joint meetings are important to strengthen trust and your ability to work together.
- Consider if changes to policy or laws would help your group be more successful, and if so, how those changes might be achieved.

**CONCLUSION:** Building a multi-layered response to child sexual abuse in any community can be done with the resources that currently exist within that community. Having a plan of action can enable a support team to work together to help children in the best ways possible. This twelve-step plan can be fitted to your community by choosing the elements that work for your situation. Work with what you have, and you can help children, no matter the cultural or legal challenges.

Choose the parts that work for you and leave out the parts that are not possible. Identify important partners, bring them together to build the plan, and start small. Create a team that is moving together with one goal in mind – that being to help CSA victims and protect the children of your community. Once you have a solid base, you may want to build on it to include other areas of child abuse such as child trafficking and other forms of physical abuse. Data has proven that bringing together people from different fields of expertise does work and most importantly, can help a child heal from the devastating effects of sexual abuse.