

Principles for Working with Survivors

Principles for Working with GBV Survivors¹

All work with survivors of GBV is guided by a set of principles that apply to all interactions of helpers – no matter what their role is – when engaging with survivors. Survivor-centred principles are interrelated and mutually reinforcing; for example, confidentiality (principle 2) is essential to promote safety (principle 1) and dignity (principle 3).

Principle 1: Right to safety: Safety refers to both physical security as well as a sense of psychological and emotional safety. It is important to consider the safety and security needs of each survivor, their family members and those providing care and support. In the case of conflict-related and politically motivated sexual violence, the security risks may be even greater than usual. Every person has the right to be protected from further violence. In the case of girl or boy survivors, every girl and boy has the right to be protected from sexual and other violence; as adults, we all have responsibilities to uphold that right.

Principle 2: Right to confidentiality: Confidentiality promotes safety, trust and empowerment. It reflects the belief that people have the right to choose to whom they will, or will not, tell their story. Maintaining confidentiality means not disclosing any information at any time to any party without the informed consent of the person concerned. There are exceptions to confidentiality, and it is very important that staff are familiar with them.

Principle 3: Right to dignity and self-determination: GBV is an assault on the dignity and rights of a person, and all those who come into contact with a survivor have a role to play in supporting the person's dignity, self-determination and empowerment. Failing to respect the dignity, wishes and rights of survivors can increase their feelings of helplessness and shame, reduce the effectiveness of interventions, and cause re-victimization and further harm.

Principle 4: Non-discrimination: All people have the right to the best possible assistance without unfair discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, age, disability, race, colour, language, religious or political beliefs, sexual orientation, status or social class.

Best interests of the child principle: Every child is unique and will be affected differently by exposure to GBV. Decisions and actions affecting a child should reflect what is best for the safety, well-being and development of that particular child. Strategies for ensuring the best interests of the child include the following:

- Take an approach that considers the individual circumstances of each child, including their family situation and particular vulnerabilities and strengths, and prioritize their needs for safety, protection, and physical and mental health above other needs.
- Listen to the voice and perspective of the child and take wishes into consideration.
- Protect the child from further emotional, psychological and/or physical harm.
- Empower children and families.
- Examine and balance benefits and potentially harmful consequences of each decision or action affecting a child.
- Promote recovery and healing

¹ Adapted from UNICEF GBViE Programme Resource Pack, Kit 3 Responding to Survivors

Guiding principles for Working with Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse²

Service providers caring for child survivors should adhere to a common set of principles to guide decision-making and overall quality of care. Guiding principles set out the ethical responsibilities and behaviors of service providers delivering direct services to children and families seeking assistance. They assure service providers that actions taken on behalf of child clients are supported by standards of care that aim to benefit the health and well-being of the child client(s). Guiding principles ensure that all actors are accountable to minimum standards for behavior and action, and because of that, children and families receive the best care possible.

- 1. Promote the Child's Best Interest.** A child's best interest is central to good care. A primary best interest consideration for children is securing their physical and emotional safety—in other words, the child's wellbeing—throughout their care and treatment. Service providers must evaluate the positive and negative consequences of actions with participation from the child and his/her caregivers (as appropriate). The least harmful course of action is always preferred. All actions should ensure that the children's rights to safety and ongoing development are never compromised.
- 2. Ensure the Safety of the Child.** Ensuring the physical and emotional safety of children is critical during care and treatment. All case actions taken on behalf of a child must safeguard a child's physical and emotional well-being in the short and long terms.
- 3. Comfort the Child.** Children who disclose sexual abuse require comfort, encouragement and support from service providers. This means that service providers are trained in how to handle the disclosure of sexual abuse appropriately. Service providers should believe children who disclose sexual abuse and never blame them in any way for the sexual abuse they have experienced. A fundamental responsibility of service providers is to make children feel safe and cared for as they receive services.
- 4. Ensure Appropriate Confidentiality.** Information about a child's experience of abuse should be collected, used, shared and stored in a confidential manner. This means ensuring 1) the confidential collection of information during interviews; 2) that sharing information happens in line with local laws and policies and on a need-to-know basis, and only after obtaining permission from the child and/or caregiver; 3) and that case information is stored securely. In some places where service providers are required under local law to report child abuse to the local authorities, mandatory reporting procedures should be communicated to the children and their caregivers at the beginning of service delivery. In situations where a child's health or safety is at risk, limits to confidentiality exist in order to protect the child.
- 5. Involve the Child in Decision-Making.** Children have the right to participate in decisions that have implications in their lives. The level of a child's participation in decision-making should be appropriate to the child's level of maturity and age. Listening to children's ideas and

² International Rescue Committee and United Nations Children's Fund, *Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse: Guidelines for health and psychosocial service providers in humanitarian settings*, IRC, New York, pp. 88-90.

opinions should not interfere with caregivers' rights and responsibilities to express their views on matters affecting their children. While service providers may not always be able to follow the child's wishes (based on best interest considerations), they should always empower and support children and deal with them in a transparent manner with maximum respect. In cases where a child's wishes cannot be prioritized, the reasons should be explained to the child.

- 6. Treat Every Child Fairly and Equally (Principle of non-discrimination and inclusiveness).** All children should be offered the same high-quality care and treatment, regardless of their race, religion, gender, family situation or the status of their caregivers, cultural background, financial situation, or unique abilities or disabilities, thereby giving them opportunities to reach their maximum potential. No child should be treated unfairly for any reason.

- 7. Strengthen Children's Resiliencies.** Each child has unique capacities and strengths and possesses the capacity to heal. It is the responsibility of service providers to identify and build upon the child and family's natural strengths as part of the recovery and healing process. Factors which promote children's resilience should be identified and built upon during service provision. Children who have caring relationships and opportunities for meaningful participation in family and community life, and who see themselves as strong will be more likely to recover and heal from abuse.