



# Resources for Professionals

## Handling Disclosures of Abuse

### What would you do if a child discloses abuse?

1. The best way to respond to a child you suspect may have been abused is **to listen carefully and be attentive to the child's behavior**. Children are often cautious when disclosing abuse. They may speak using childish language or use terms that are unfamiliar to you. Some children may not say anything about the abuse but may assume that the abuse has marked them in some way that should be obvious to adults. It is for this reason that you should be aware of the physical and behavioral indicators of child abuse.
2. If a child discloses to you it is important not to carry out an investigation yourself as this may jeopardize the case in a court of law.

### What should you do?

#### 1. Believe the child

- Accept what the child tells you despite how difficult it may be to accept the identity of the abuser or that the abuse occurred.
- Victims often believe they are responsible for the abuse they receive and may be hesitant to discuss the abuse.
- This is especially true of sexual abuse where a child feels he/she is breaking a "trust", "telling a secret" or has been threatened.
- Understand that disclosing the abuse can be difficult for a child, and that your relationship has allowed the child to open up to you.

#### 2. Listen open and calmly

- It is important to put your own feelings of anger, frustration or pain aside.
- Give the child your full attention and nod understandingly as the story pours out.
- If possible, take the child aside to a quiet place.
- Allow the child to tell what happened in his/her words.
- Do not press for details and do not "interview" or "question" the child in any way.

#### 3. Reassure the child

- Discussing abuse can be very difficult for a child.
- Be supportive of the child; let him/her know you will do something to help.
- Let the child know that what has happened is not his/her fault and the child is doing the correct thing by telling you.
- Do not promise that the abuser will go to jail or the child will have a new home. You may not be able to keep these promises.
- You can tell the child you will do your best to help him/her.

*"Listen Carefully"*

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Believe the child.

**4. Write down the facts**

- Record as soon as possible (same day) what the child has told you.
- Attempt to use the child's own words and avoid interpreting what the child has said.
- Write down everything about the disclosure, no matter how insignificant it may seem at the time.
- Correctly recording the information is an important step in the investigation process.

**5. Report the disclosure**

All individuals have a responsibility to report child abuse. Report information directly to Child Protective Services and/or the police.

**Listening to Children (Disclosure of Sexual Abuse)** If a child trusts you enough to tell you about an incident of sexual abuse, you are in an important position to help that child recover. The following suggestions can help you provide positive support.

**Do:**

- Keep calm. It is important to remember that you are not angry with the child, but at what happened. Children can mistakenly interpret anger or disgust as directed towards them.
- Believe the child. In most circumstances children do not lie about sexual abuse. Give positive messages such as "I know you couldn't help it," or "I'm proud of you for telling".
- Explain to the child that he or she is not to blame for what happened. Listen to and answer the child's questions honestly.
- Respect the child's privacy. Be careful not to discuss the abuse in front of people who do not need to know what happened.
- Be responsible. Report the incident immediately to Child Protective Services.

**Don't:**

- Panic or overreact when the child talks about the experience. Children need help and support to make it through this difficult time.
- Pressure the child to talk or avoid talking about the abuse. Allow the child to talk at his or her own pace. Forcing information can be harmful. Silencing the child will not help him or her to forget.
- Confront the offender in the child's presence. The stress may be harmful. This is a job for the authorities.
- Blame the child. **Sexual abuse is never the child's fault!**