



KEEPING KIDS SAFE

WHEN A CHILD DISCLOSES ABUSE Tips for Handling Disclosures of Abuse

One of the most challenging moments for a parent may be knowing what to say or do when a child discloses to you that they have been sexually abused. Parents should be familiar with these general guidelines on how to handle a disclosure so that they can react appropriately. In addition, these guidelines are applicable if a friend of your child discloses abuse.

- **Remain calm**, this child is looking to you for support, and will be disturbed if you get excited or emotional. Remaining calm will allow the child to feel comfortable disclosing what has happened. Anger, excitement or excessive emotion may send the message that you don't want to hear what happened, or that the child is frightening you or causing problems by telling. Make sure the child knows that it is okay to tell about these things. "You did the right thing by telling me" is a good thing to say. The more you can show sympathy, understanding, and security the more likely the child will continue to confide in you.
- **Allow the child to tell the story** without asking numerous questions. "Can you tell me what happened?" "What happened after you went into his house?" or similar questions that ask the child to give a narrative response are good lead ins to prompt the child to tell the story. "Where did s/he touch you that made you uncomfortable?" is a question that can be used to clarify the behavior.
- **Believe the child.** Do not use words that discount or discredit the child's statements. Don't say things like: "But he is a very nice man" "Are you sure you didn't misinterpret what was said or done?" "Oh, I am sure it must have been an accident." Those statements send a message that you do not believe the child, or worse, that you will defend the alleged abuser. Even if you have reservations, do not disclose them to the child. Report the allegations and let the experts decide if the child is truthful.
- **If the child uses any words that imply that the child is blaming themselves** (it's my fault, I went there) or believes he or she is in trouble, reassure the child. The message you send is that if inappropriate behavior occurred, it is never the child's fault. You can do this without expressing an opinion, by saying: "You know, when things like this happen to kids, it is never the kid's fault."
- **Express appreciation** for the courage that it takes for a child to tell someone about abuse. "I know this was hard for you to tell about this, and I am proud of your courage in telling." "Thank you so much for telling me, I am glad you trusted me and were brave enough to tell me." Support the child and the decision to tell. Make it clear that telling was the right thing to do.
- **Reassure the child** that you will do everything you can to help protect them from further abuse.
- **Show love and confidence** with your words and your gestures.

- **Talk in terms of making the child safe.** Make sure the child understands that your primary interest is in making sure that they are safe from harm.
- **Do not criticize the alleged abuser.** Especially if the alleged abuser is someone the child knows and loves, the child will already feel guilty about getting them in trouble. If your words reinforce the idea that the person will be punished, this could have the potential of causing the child to retract the statement, out of fear about what will happen to the alleged abuser. Instead, express concern about “getting help” for the alleged abuser if the child questions you about what will happen to them.
- **Report the abuse** to Health and Welfare Child Protective Services, or tell your pastor, principal, or supervisor, and make sure they report it. You can also call the Assistance Coordinator at the Diocesan Pastoral Center, (509) 353-0442 to ask questions or enlist help in reporting. Washington law **REQUIRES** everyone to report abuse if they have reason to believe that it may be occurring. You can report by calling Child Protective Services at (509) 363-3333, as described in the Safe Net for Children & Youth brochure. You must call within 24 hours after learning of the potential abuse.
- **DO NOT try to investigate** the allegation yourself, talk to the alleged abuser, or involve yourself in trying to gather information to assess the allegations. Leave this task to those who are experienced in such investigations. Questioning of a child about the details of sexual abuse must be done very carefully, to avoid any implication that the questions have suggested the answer to a vulnerable and compliant child. Overquestioning your child may compromise any potential criminal investigation of a perpetrator. Use your energies to offer emotional support to the victim where appropriate. Remember, you do not have to decide whether the allegations are true or not true. Professionals will undertake that task. Your only role is to support the child who has trusted you with this information.