

A PARENT'S GUIDE FOR RESPONDING TO A CHILD'S DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE UPON INITIAL DISCLOSURE

1. **Stay Calm.** Revealing abuse can produce anxiety for your child. Help ease the anxiety by responding in a calm and supportive manner. This may sound impossible, but do your best.

2. **Take the Allegation Seriously.** Affirm your child's feelings. The initial disclosure may sometimes sound unconvincing as it may be filled with hesitation, inconsistencies, and retractions. This does not necessarily mean your child is not telling the truth. Realize that to cope with the abuse, your child may have used defense mechanisms which can sometimes lead to blurry or fragmented memories with minimal details. As your child explains what happened, accept the allegation without challenge. Put aside your feelings about the accused.

3. **Listen to Your Child's Account of What Happened.** Encourage your child to tell you what happened and how he or she feels. Listen without interruption, blame, or judgment. You may ask questions in a supportive and open-ended way. For example, "Tell me more about what happened next?" "Were there any other times that this happened?"

4. **Reinforce Your Child for Revealing the Alleged Abuse.** "Some kids are afraid to tell for fear of being blamed or causing problems. I am so proud of you for telling me!" Your child may feel that he or she has done something wrong by telling you. Affirm your child for coming to you with such sensitive and important information.

5. **Take Your Child to be Examined by a Physician,** preferably one who is skilled in the medical examination of possible child sexual abuse. You may request a referral from your family physician, a children's hospital, or a hospital pediatric unit. Determining whether or not to visit a physician is a judgment call. If your child has described penetration of any kind, immediately seek a physician's examination. The reasons for a medical examination are twofold: (a) assessment of possible injury and/or disease, and (b) medical evidence for legal purposes if such action is taken.

6. **Take Immediate Action to Ensure Safety.** Keeping your child away from the accused may require that you remove your child from day care, avoid contact with a family member, find a new babysitter, and so on. If the accused is in your home, it may be necessary to request that he or she leave. Do not leave your child unsupervised. You do not have to cope with the situation alone. Outside services are available to help you, such as:

- The National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-4-A-CHILD). This hotline will refer you to support services in your area.
- Child Protective Services. (Different titles for Child Protective Services are used by different states. These titles are listed in the telephone book under governmental listings.) This agency will gather information and do an investigation. They can help determine if the police need to be involved.

- A mental health worker from the Child Protective Services agency, trained in the area of sexual abuse, will typically offer counseling and support for your child and others involved or may refer you to an appropriate mental health professional.
- A women's shelter maybe available to provide housing if you believe you and/or your child are not safe.

UPON DETERMINATION BY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES THAT ABUSE OCCURRED

7. Don't Blame Your Child. Clearly place responsibility on the perpetrator. Reinforce that your child did nothing to invite or deserve the abuse. "Whenever there is sexual contact between an adult and a child, the child is NEVER to blame - NO MATTER WHAT. You are not the only one that this has happened to, as many as 1 out of 4 girls and 1 out of 6 boys are sexually abused. We don't hear about it because people are afraid to talk about it."

8. Don't Force Your Child to Confront the Perpetrator. Confrontation could further traumatize your child and offers nothing positive to the situation. For some children confrontation may be beneficial at a later time with the help of a therapist.

9. Be Available for Your Child. Don't reject or withdraw from your child. Withdrawal sends the message that your child did something "bad" and does not deserve your love and attention or that you cannot cope with the situation and therefore cannot help your child.

10. Listen. Tell your child you are available to listen at any time and do it. Listen with empathy and without judgment. Accept your child's feelings without minimizing or negating them. Statements like "It wasn't that bad" or "You don't really feel like that" diminish your child's experience and makes your child again feel that somehow he or she is "bad" or "wrong."

11. Respect Your Child's Privacy. Don't pressure your child to keep repeating the story. Some children need to tell the story often and others don't. Being pressured to retell the story over and over may create more trauma for your child Your child needs to know that you are there to listen when he or she wants to talk about it.

12. Encourage Your Child to Express Feelings. Common feelings are anger, confusion, guilt, fear, betrayal (especially if the perpetrator is someone your child trusted), and feeling "dirty." Remember, feelings can be expressed not only through words but also through drawing, artwork, play, music, writing, dancing, hitting a ball, and so on.

13. Realize the Emotions Will be Stronger if the Perpetrator is a Family Member.. The feelings of anger, guilt, mistrust, and confusion will likely be intensified when the perpetrator is a family member. In addition, feelings of disbelief, betrayal, and sadness may emerge. You must still protect your child no matter how difficult it may be to confront the perpetrator. If the perpetrator must leave or be removed from the home to ensure your child's safety, you will need to be prepared for the reactions of others.

Some people will be understanding and supportive, and others won't understand. You or your child may be blamed for the situation. No matter what others say, remind yourself and your child that you both did the right thing in telling. You both did the responsible thing. The blame lies with the perpetrator.

14. Understand and Support Your Child. You may see age-regressive behaviors such as a return to bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, nightmares, fears of the dark, or fears of being alone. New behaviors may appear such as your child becoming frightened of others who are similar to the perpetrator (a man with a moustache or one who smokes cigars). These behaviors, including those listed in #12 above, are expressions of the trauma. Allow your child to express the trauma in a safe, supportive environment.

15. Help Your Child Not to Feel Damaged. Reinforce your child's innate goodness, worthiness, and beauty. At every opportunity emphasize the positive qualities of your child. You might even create opportunities to do this (e.g., look into a mirror with the child and say, "You know what I see when I look at you? I see a good and beautiful child, both inside and out").

16. Seek Help/Support for Yourself You may go through a grieving process for your child's loss of innocence and childhood. The situation may bring up issues of your own. You may feel distressed that you did not know that the abuse was occurring. You may simply want help with specific ways to facilitate the healing of your child, other family members, and yourself. Professional mental health providers can help and various books are available on the subject such as When Your Child Has Been Molested by Kathryn B. Hagans and Joyce Case; When the Bough Breaks by Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D. (both books are helpful guides for responding to and healing from the sexual abuse of your child); How Long Does It Hurt? by Cynthia L. Mather (this book is especially helpful for teenagers); and Mothers of Incest Survivors by Janis Tyler Johnson (this book details the experiences of mothers responding to the incest of their child).

Sexual abuse is a major life trauma. You are not the only one to whom this has happened. Don't hesitate to reach out!