

If a Child Discloses Sexual Abuse

As a parent, your reactions to abuse may make the strongest contribution to the child's capacity to resolve the abuse. An understanding, supportive parent goes a long way toward helping the child cope with the trauma of sexual abuse. Although child sexual abuse is very serious and may have long-term as well as short-term consequences, children can and do adjust and recover.

You will no doubt be upset following a disclosure of abuse, and may need to make a concentrated effort to be helpful to the child. Please understand that you cannot change what happened. There are no magic wands. Ten recommendations on how you can help your child follow:

1. *Believe the child.*

The person that abused your child may be the last person you would suspect. Facts show that children that are sexually abused rarely lie about it.

2. *Stay calm.*

If you show that you are very upset, your child will also be upset, as well as feeling worse for hurting you.

3. *Don't blame the child.*

The abuse is never the child's fault, regardless of any mistakes that the child may have made. Children need to be told, "It wasn't your fault."

4. *Don't question your child extensively.*

It will not help your child for you to ask for all the details or to ask questions repeatedly. The authorities will need to be involved and will take an official statement from the child.

5. *Allow your child to talk.*

If the child wants to talk, focus on feelings, not on the factual details. Sometimes you may need to set limits on whom they can talk with about the abuse. It is also important to honestly answer the child's questions and if you cannot answer something, find someone who can.

6. *Keep routines normal.*

Children may view any extra restrictions as punishment. They will feel reassured by life going on in a normal way as much as possible after the disclosure.

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7. Talk with siblings.

Discuss with other children in the family that their sibling has been touched inappropriately and by whom. Help them understand that it was not the child's fault. You may also want to take this opportunity to talk with all your children about what is and what is not appropriate.

8. Take care of yourself.

Carefully choose someone in whom you can confide and share how you are feeling. This should be someone who can readily support you in this time of crisis. This is especially important if you are one of the many adults in our society who have histories of sexual abuse as a child.

9. Do not confront the offender.

This should be handled by trained authorities. A confrontation by parents may give the offender time to destroy evidence or prepare a response for authorities.

10. Respect your child's confidentiality.

Be selective about the persons with whom you discuss the abuse, and be sure not to casually comment about it in front of the child. If you are being pressured to discuss it with someone that you don't feel comfortable with, simply state that you have been instructed that the case is under investigation and you may not discuss it.