

RESPONDING TO A DISCLOSURE

Many children delay telling about or reporting abuse, and many never disclose. However, sometimes a child will tell a safe adult, and when they do, the response matters. Disclosing abuse can be a scary and overwhelming experience for a child. A calm, supportive response can help them feel safe and begin the process of healing.



If a child discloses abuse, here are some general guidelines to help you respond:

LISTEN AND BELIEVE

- Give the child your full attention and let them share at their own pace and in their own words. Respond calmly and supportively without putting words in their mouth.
- Be mindful of your reaction. Avoid expressing shock, disbelief, or anger.
- Don't be judgmental about the perpetrator who may be someone the child cares about.

REASSURE AND SUPPORT

- Let the child know you believe them and thank them for telling you.
- Reassure them. Say, "This is not your fault," and "I am here to support you."
- Don't make assumptions or promises such as, "I'll make sure this never happens again."
- If the child is in immediate danger, call 911.

KNOW YOUR ROLE

- Understand you are there to support the child, not to investigate.
- Ask limited, open-ended questions only if needed to make a report ("Tell me more," or "What happened next?" etc.).
- When you are done talking, write down the child's exact words to help you make a report.

MAKE A REPORT

- Make a report to the local child protection agency and let them determine next steps.
- Even if the alleged perpetrator is someone you know or care about, your priority should always be to protect the child. Remember, reporting is the first step to getting help - for the child and the perpetrator.



Need Help?

Visit childhelp.org/resources for more information or to find your local reporting contact information. The Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline is available 24/7 to provide support and resources. Call, text, or chat: 1-800-422-4453 or ChildhelpHotline.org.



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In the Moment: Words Matter

Child welfare practices distinguish between an adult's initial conversation with a child and a forensic interview conducted by trained professionals. Limiting questions during an initial disclosure allows a proper forensic interview later and helps reduce the number of interviews a child may experience.

When talking with the child, use only the minimum questions needed to understand whether there is a safety concern or to make a report. Whenever possible, use open-ended questions such as, "Tell me more about that," or "What happened next?" Do not continue asking for details once you have enough information to make a report. Asking specific who, what, where questions are best left for trained forensic interviewers.

Helpful Phrases:

- "Thank you for telling me."
- "I believe you."
- "You did the right thing by telling."
- "This is not your fault."
- "You can tell me in your own words."
- "I can't promise to keep this a secret, but I can promise to only share with people who need to know to keep you safe."
- "I will tell you what I can about what happens next when I know more."
- "What would help you feel safe and supported right now?"

Avoid Saying:

- "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"
- "Why didn't you stop it?"
- "Are you sure?"
- "I can't believe they would do that."
- "I won't tell anyone."
- "Tell me every detail."

After the Conversation

Address Immediate Safety

- Determine whether the child is in immediate danger or needs urgent medical assistance and call 911 if needed.
- Do not confront the person alleged to have harmed the child or independently notify a caregiver. These actions may increase risk to the child or interfere with a potential investigation. Follow the direction of the reporting agency and any applicable organizational policies.

Document What Happened

- Record the date, time, and location of the conversation with the child, including anyone else present.
- Write down the child's words as accurately as possible, including any exact quotes you can recall.

Protect a Potential Investigation

- Do not ask the child to repeat the disclosure to others.
- Do not conduct your own investigation or collect additional information.
- Share information only with people who need it to protect the child.



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Making a Report

- Abuse reporting responsibilities and procedures are established by state law.
- In some states, professionals that work with children are mandatory reporters, meaning they must report any suspected abuse by law. In other states, all adults are mandatory reporters.
- Whether you are a mandatory reporter or not, if a child discloses abuse, you have a responsibility to make a report to help keep the child safe.
- You do not need to investigate, establish proof, or have every detail before contacting the reporting agency. Share what you know and allow the professionals to follow up.
- To find your local reporting agency information, visit www.childwelfare.gov/state-child-abuse-and-neglect-reporting-numbers.
- For help or support with reporting, contact the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline 24/7 by calling, texting, or chatting: 1-800-422-4453 or ChildhelpHotline.org. Note: This is not a reporting hotline.
- When you make a report you will be asked to share what you know. **Be prepared to share:**
 - The child's name, age and current location
 - What the child said or what caused concern
 - When and where the suspected harm occurred
 - The name and relationship to the child, if known, of the person who harmed the child
 - Any immediate danger, injuries, or medical needs
 - Whether other children may be at risk, if known
 - Your name and contact information (Note: Reporters' identities are generally protected, although confidentiality and disclosure rules vary by state.)

Supporting the Child

As a caring adult, your role does not end when the report is made. **Continue to support the child by:**

- treating the child with care and respect.
- maintaining ordinary routines as much as possible.
- not repeatedly asking about the disclosure or the abuse experienced.
- letting the child know they can come to you for support.

