Childhelp | **PREVENTION EDUCATION**

RESPONDING TO A DISCLOSURE OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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.

How disclosures may happen



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.
- Avoid expressing anger or making negative comments about the person the child identifies as it may be someone they care 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

- Report a disclosure or suspected abuse to your local child protection agency. This helps connect children with protection, support, and appropriate services. The reporting agency can determine what additional steps may be needed.
- Even if the person who allegedly caused the harm is someone you know or care about, your priority should always be to protect the child.

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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 a child shares a concern, listen without interrupting or asking for details. Ask only the limited questions needed to understand immediate safety concerns or make a report. If clarification is necessary, use open-ended prompts such as "Tell me more about that." Avoid leading questions or conducting your own investigation; allow trained professionals to gather additional information and determine next steps.

Helpful Phrases:

- "Thank you for telling me."
- "I believe you."
- "You don't have to figure this out on your own."
- "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 and Make a Report

- 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 caused harm or independently contact anyone whose involvement could compromise the child's safety or a potential investigation. Seek guidance from the reporting agency about safely involving caregivers.
- Seek support from the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline if needed.

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.
- Reporting requirements vary by state. Some states require certain professionals to report suspected child abuse, while others extend reporting obligations to all adults. Learn the requirements in your state, including how and when to make a report.
- Regardless of whether you are legally designated as a mandated reporter, suspected child sexual abuse should be reported promptly to the appropriate authorities so that children can receive protection and support.
- You do not need to investigate, establish proof, or have every detail before contacting the reporting agency, and children do not need to directly disclose abuse for adults to take concerns seriously or make a report. Share what you know and allow professionals to follow up.
- To find your local reporting agency information, visit www.childwelfare.gov/state-child-abuse-and-neglect-reporting-numbers. For help with reporting, contact the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline 24/7 by calling, texting, or chatting: 1-800-422-4453 or ChildhelpHotline.org. Note: The Hotline offers information and support but does not accept official child abuse reports.
- 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 provide reassurance without repeatedly questioning the child or asking them to recount what happened, and let them know they can come to you for support.

Children benefit from a safe and supportive adult who believes them, respects their needs, maintains a positive, healthy relationship, and helps them access appropriate services.



Need Help?
Visit childhelp.org/resource-library 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 visit ChildhelpHotline.org.