

When a child discloses abuse ...

First Steps:

- **Find a private location** where the child can talk freely
- **Provide assurance** that the child is doing the right thing by talking to you
- **Get enough detail to make a report of child abuse; but do not “interrogate” the child.** Ask open ended questions like “What do you want me to know”, “Is there anything else you want to say?” Also respect when the child is done talking. Other professionals will engage the child to gather details, you’re role is simply to ensure the child’s immediate safety and listen to what the child wants to say.
- **Report the abuse** to the Child Abuse Hotline or by calling law enforcement. If you are in Indiana the child abuse hotline number is 1-800-800-5556. Most states have laws that require adults to report suspicion of child abuse. ***Do not promise a child that you will keep the abuse a secret – their safety and that of other children cannot be addressed unless the crime is reported.***

Information needed to report child abuse:

When someone first learns of a child being abused, our instinct is often to gather as much information as we can from the child. Unfortunately, this approach may actually be more traumatizing. Trying to get the following information is helpful before calling in a concern of child abuse. Do not ask, or expect, the child to share details about the abuse as it could negatively affect the future investigation of the incident. **If you do not have all of the following information, it is still very important to call the Child Abuse Hotline in your community and report what you do know.**

- ✓ **The Child’s Name**
- ✓ **Who the child says is hurting them?** Name of individual and/or how they know the child.
- ✓ **General description of the abuse.** “The child said ... they were kicked in the stomach, locked in the basement, told to take their clothes off, etc.” Use the same words the child used when telling you about the abuse.
- ✓ **Where the incident(s) occurred.** Remember that children may not know an address, using their words is sufficient for filing the report. For example “At Grandma’s house”, “At my neighbors”, or “When I went to ...”
- ✓ **When the incident(s) happened.** This is necessary to determine what may need to occur to ensure the child’s immediate safety. Abuse that occurred recently in a location that child goes to often requires a different response than when they report an incident that happened a long time ago or perhaps in a location that they no longer go to or go to very rarely.

General Guidelines for talking to children after abuse is identified.

There are many ways in which children respond to and process abuse. As a caring adult in a child's life it is important to honor the child's individual needs. Make sure that the child knows you are available and willing to listen when they want to talk. Also be accepting when they do not want to talk by not asking questions or inquiring about details they may not want to share.

- **If a child tells you about abuse, realize that this is a rare moment and that this child is among the courageous.** Most children don't tell, even when adults have educated them and reassured them that they can talk to their parents and other trusted adults about abuse. The child should be praised, loved and supported for the huge risk he/she has taken in telling.
- **Realize that you, as the important adult the child has chosen to tell, have an important role in assuring the child's safety.** If you are not sure how to respond talk to professionals who work with children to get guidance. **Your response is extremely important**, and you will likely need professional help in knowing how to support the child over time.
- **Remain calm and in control of your own emotions.** Do not show disbelief, shock, or anger. Don't place blame or pass judgment. Take a deep breath and take it slow. Your reaction will determine how much information the child is willing to share.
- **Use phrases that reassure the child such as: "I believe you" and "It's not your fault."** Praise the child for being brave enough to talk to you. Your role is not to investigate what the child is saying, your role is to provide emotional support and reassurance that the child has done the right thing by speaking up.
- **Listen closely but don't ask specific questions.** You do not need to have every detail to help the child. Respect that the child may not want to talk about the details.
- **It's helpful to ask the child "How do you feel?"** This conveys deep caring and also will help you to understand what impact the event has had on the child, so that you know how to reassure them. For example, if the child says "I feel really scared," you can reassure that you'll protect them. If the child says "I feel icky or guilty," you can let them know that it was not their fault. If the child says, "I feel really mad," you can reaffirm that they have a right to be mad and it shouldn't have happened. If the child can tell you how he or she feels, it will help you to know what to say next to affirm them and honor their courage.
- **Let the child know that you are sorry they had this experience.** Describe the experience using the same words the child uses. For example, if the child says "he made me take my pants off", say "I'm sorry he made you take your pants off." This lets the child know that you as an adult can really hear and handle what actually happened. Most of the damage of sexual abuse comes from the secret of it, and the impact of carrying the experience alone.
- **Realize that most children, who are abused, are abused by someone they love and trust.** This means that they frequently feel deeply betrayed and tricked. They also feel shame, like they might be to blame for what has happened. It is important to help the child understand that the offender was skillful, and exploited the child's innocence; not that the child was "to blame" or should feel "guilty".