

Handling a Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse

When a child discloses child sexual abuse, it is important that the report be taken seriously. Your response can contribute to a child's recovery if you communicate belief and reassure the child that the abuse is not their fault.

General Guidelines

1. Any child can be a survivor of sexual abuse/exploitation.
2. Any child can be a survivor of intrafamilial and/or extra familial sexual abuse.
3. A child of any age and sex can be a survivor.
4. Children rarely lie about sexual abuse.
5. Often, abuse of a child will not stop without intervention.
6. Children will often try to alert significant others of their abuse in unusual ways, including veiled and ambiguous remarks or questions.
7. Child survivors of sexual abuse are often initially ambivalent and confused with respect to who is at fault, what should happen, etc. Therefore, the care and support of adults can be extremely helpful during this time.
8. The language of child sexual abuse can be shocking and ugly. Be prepared.

Disclosure

1. Respond to survivors in an understanding, non-judgmental, encouraging manner. Do not express shock, disgust, anger, etc.
2. Be reassuring of the survivor. Convey to them that they have done nothing wrong and that making the disclosure was the right thing to do

3. Reassure the survivor that there are other people who can protect and assist them. Tell them that they are not alone. However, do not make promises about the outcome.
4. Convey your belief in what the survivor is saying. Even if you are doubtful at first, you can honestly say that you do believe that a problem exists and that it should be explored.
5. Avoid making promises to the survivor. If a question or concern arises, tell the survivor that you will try to find the answer, pass the concern on to the authorities, etc.
6. Protect the survivor's right to confidentiality to the extent possible.
7. Analyze the situation and consider the possible consequences of every step you might take.
8. Do not investigate.
9. Develop a plan for reporting.
10. Always keep the safety of the survivors as your paramount concern.

Reporting

1. Report in a timely manner, having all your information readily available.
2. Although anonymous reports are accepted, you are encouraged to identify yourself so that you can be contacted, if necessary, for clarification or further information.
3. Report accurately and concisely. Do not exaggerate or embellish your report
4. Use professional judgment in determining whether to discuss the report with the parent(s).

5. When the authorities contact you, you are required to provide the necessary information to further their current investigation. Historical information is usually not necessary to investigate current events.

Special Considerations

1. If the child gives you any physical evidence (letters, photos, diaries, etc.), secure the evidence and turn it over to DCFS or the police. Be sure to tell the child of your intention to do so.
2. If a perpetrator of sexual abuse makes an admission to you, it should be reported in the same way that it would be if a survivor made the disclosure.
3. If you are aware of the possibility of violence in a situation, make DCFS and the police aware of your concern.
4. When you make a report, you are not responsible for the outcome. Even in unfounded cases, a report is made in good faith. When abuse is confirmed pursuant to your report, the perpetrator bears full responsibility, not the person who made the report.
5. If in doubt in a situation, do not be afraid to call for information or consultation.

(Adapted and used with permission from the Volunteer Training Manual at Sexual Assault Counseling and Information Service (SACIS) in Charleston, Illinois.)