**What to do if a child discloses to you**

When a child tells you they have been abused, the child may be feeling scared, guilty, ashamed, angry, and powerless. You, in turn, may feel a sense of outrage, disgust, sadness, anger and sometimes disbelief.

However, it is important for you to remain calm and in control of your feelings in order to reassure the child that something will be done to keep him or her safe. The child's feelings about themselves may be influenced by your initial reaction to the abuse.

You can show your care and concern for the child by:

* Listening to the child.
* Controlling expressions of panic and/or shock.
* Expressing your belief that the child is telling the truth.
* Using the child's language or vocabulary.
* Telling the child that this has happened to other children, and that they are not the only one.
* Reassuring the child that to disclose is the right thing to do.
* Emphasising that whatever happened was not the child's fault, and that the child is not bad.
* Telling the child that you know some adults do wrong things.
* Acknowledging that it is difficult to talk about such things.
* Letting the child know that you will make a report to the appropriate authorities so that they can help stop the abuse.
* Telling the child you are pleased they told you.
* Telling the child you will do your best to support and protect them.

If you suspect abuse, but the child has not told anyone, be aware of the emotional distress that the child may be experiencing.

Approach the child in a caring and sensitive manner and assure them that you are willing to listen and to help if there is a problem.

You will not be helping the child if you:

* Make promises you cannot keep, such as promising that you will not tell anyone.
* Push the child into giving details of the abuse. Your role is to listen to what the child wants to tell you and not to conduct an investigation (beware of asking any direct questions of the child as this may prejudice any subsequent investigation).
* Indiscriminately discuss the circumstances of the child with others not directly involved in helping the child.

The child may get angry and may displace his/her anger on you. Shouting/swearing at you, or attempting to strike you, don't take this personally, even if the attack seems very personal. The child needs someone to vent his/her anger on, and because you're there and you're safe, he/she will choose you. Try to overcome your desire to hit back and continue to treat the child with caring, understanding and kindness.

Don't berate the child for their situation and don't dwell on things that are beyond his/her control "you shouldn't have let them do it", "you should have told me (earlier)", "you shouldn't have been playing there anyway." Remember: (a) you make the child feel guilty and responsible for the assault; (b) children are often not powerful enough to prevent adults from abusing them. After all, kids are expected to do what adults tell them to do; (c) the child can't change what's already happened and maybe couldn't change the circumstances anyway.

Don't dwell on the sexual aspects of the assault.

Offer unconditional, non judgmental affection. Physical acceptance (eg. through gentle cuddles) will help the child overcome feelings of loneliness, of being "dirty" or of being "unworthy" of being cared for.

Let the child decide when or if they want to talks about their feelings about the assault. Reinforce his/her feelings, help them to know that it is okay to feel that way, and emphasize that he/she is in no way responsible for what happened. Mostly, just listen!

Remember, sexual assault involves a direct attack on a person's psychological boundary. While the child is learning to re-establish an appropriate boundary for him/her self, it is important that you, as the parent, continue to set appropriate limits for the child eg. continue to set appropriate rules for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, continue to set appropriate rules aimed at protecting the child.

Be consistent and dependable.

Make sure you give your kids a clear message that they don't need to protect you from their feelings - you will get your support from somewhere else.

# Important things to remember

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## Disclosures

If a child or adult discloses to you that s/he has been abused physically or sexually here are some suggestions to help you in supporting the person and helping her/him and yourself feel safe.

## Stay calm

Don't allow your own feelings of anger, outrage or disgust to intrude. The person who has disclosed may not be able to recognise that your anger etc. is directed towards the offender, and such a reaction may reinforce the idea that the abuse is a shameful/awful/disgusting topic which should not be discussed. If you are feeling overwhelmed with emotion, it may be necessary to explain your feelings to the person, making it clear that your reaction is directed towards the abuse, not towards him/her.

## Believe the person

Children rarely lie about abuse. Even in the unlikely event that the disclosure is untrue, there is still a problem which needs to be addressed. Regardless of whether the person disclosing is an adult or a child it is advisable to state very clearly that you believe her/him.

## Reassure

Tell the person that you are glad s/he has told you. Say very clearly that the abuse was not her/his fault no matter what the circumstances and you understand that while the disclosure is difficult you are pleased that s/he trusts you enough to talk about the abuse.

## Listen

Don't interrogate or ask questions beyond those necessary to find out whether s/he is safe from the abuse. Let the person speak at her/his pace, and reveal as much as s/he is comfortable in revealing. You do not need to know all the details, so don't ask for more than are volunteered. If the person is to be interviewed by police or protective services details will be taken then, so it is best to avoid more repetitions than necessary. Do not make promises that you cannot keep.

## Establish the persons safety

The main concern is whether the person is safe from further abuse. In the case of a child who discloses physical and/or sexual abuse, intervention is most probably necessary and the abuse should be reported immediately to the on call worker, who will notify Human Services. It is advisable to ask the child who else has been told of the abuse - it is possible that the child's protection is already being taken care of. If the person disclosing is an adult, there may still be protective issues which need to be addressed, in which case you may refer the adult to any one of a variety of family violence support agencies. Even if there are no immediate protective issues, the person may need counselling or professional support and it is important that s/he is given access to these.

## Confidentiality

It is important that information which is disclosed to you is treated with respect and in confidence. However, if a child or adolescent discloses to you that s/he is currently in an abusive situation, then concern for confidentiality must take second place to the young person's wellbeing. The disclosure is almost certainly a plea for help and intervention, even though the person may state the s/he does not want you to inform the authorities. This is often an attempt to avoid responsibility or blame for the following intervention. Adults have a responsibility to protect young people who are in situations where they cannot protect themselves.