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What Should I Do After A Child Tells?

When a child discloses sexual abuse, here are some important things that the child will need you to do:

Stay steady

The child will look to you for cues that they will be okay. Unquestionably, sexual abuse can change a child's view of the world. Yet, regardless of how devastated you are, they need to believe that they will be alright, that they are not "damaged goods." As is true for other severe traumatic events, with protection, support, and specialized treatment, children can—and do—recover. Children can—and do—go on to live full, happy, productive lives. Lots of successful people, including many famous figures, are survivors of sexual abuse. Breaking the silence is the first step.

Believe what they say

Thank the child for telling you. Let them know you love them. If the disclosure is hard to believe, keep reminding yourself that false disclosures are rare. If you absolutely feel you need more information, think of the first step: stay calm. Ask clarifying questions in a matter-of-fact way. Be very, very careful to avoid questions that suggest you expect or want a specific answer (for example, stay away from leading questions such as "Did somebody touch you right here?").

Try not to show relief or disapproval to the answers your child gives. When children detect in others pain and upset resulting from their disclosure, they will sometimes try to take back or "recant" the disclosure. This is common and is not necessarily an indication that the abuse really didn't happen.

Re-establish safety

Restoring safety is crucial and should be considered a priority. Sexual abuse takes away a child's sense of control over their surroundings and can lessen the faith that adults will protect them. Immediately establish a plan with other adults so that unsupervised contact with the person who has abused is eliminated. Help the child understand that the person who abused them did something wrong, and that this person needs help to stop hurting others.

Pay close attention to the child's cues about what they may need to feel safe. What the child needs may be different from what you may expect. And what the child may say they want may not actually keep them safe, such as spending time alone with the person who abused them. That said, it's always best to take the extra step to give the child a greater sense of safety. Even if the requests the child makes seem irrational, ("I want to wear two pairs of pajamas tonight"), building up their sense of confidence and security is crucial.

You can also help the child feel safe by demonstrating your willingness to protect their privacy. The sexually abusive behavior may feel extremely personal to the child. Be careful not to talk about the abuse with anyone who does not need to know. Depending on the age of the child, overhearing others speaking about the abuse can cause embarrassment and an increased sense of feeling exposed.

Free them of self-blame

A child disclosing sexual abuse needs to be reassured that they are not to blame in any way. They are not to blame for causing it. They are not to blame for not stopping it. They are not to blame for not telling about it. Though it may seem unimaginable to the outsider, shame and self-blame are some of the most common responses to sexual abuse, and some of the most difficult to overcome. Some adults may find themselves privately blaming the child for not telling sooner.

Sometimes, as an adaptive measure, children take responsibility for the abuse rather than acknowledge how out of control they feel. It is natural for children to feel they are the cause of the behaviors and feelings of those around them.

Remember, even if a child gives permission or acts willingly, this never implies consent. A child's permission or even request to play a sexual touching game never excuses the adult (or teen) from taking full responsibility for the interaction. It is always the adult's responsibility to set the limit or say "no." The child is never accountable. Stressing to the child that the person who abused them did something wrong, and that this person needs help from other grownups to get better. This can help free the child from feelings of self-blame.

Express your rage to appropriate people

Anger or outrage is a normal and appropriate response when we are deceived or when someone violates our sense of safety, or when someone harms our own children. Be aware that a child may believe that they are the cause of the rage they see around them. Choose friends and professionals who can support you in expressing your reactions. Find someplace away from the child to express your anger and grief.

Some adults may mistakenly assume that a child will feel better if they hear that the person who abused them will be severely punished or harmed. Even if the child is also angry, threats of violence or punishment may frighten a child even more, especially if the child still has positive feelings toward the person who abused them.

Get help

Many people are tempted to handle a disclosure of sexual abuse on their own, especially when the abuse happens among family or friends. But that can be a mistake and can further isolate those who need support.

Recognize that all family members are affected when a child has been abused and each one may need special help. Typically, these kinds of family conflicts do not get better without help from an outside specialist who can assist in the healing process.

It is in the whole family's best interest for an adult within that family to be the one to reach out for help first. Waiting for a community member to recognize the problem from the outside, and then file reports on suspicions of abuse, can result in more damage to the family. Sexual abuse of children is against the law in all 50 states. By taking action, you may reduce the risk of others in your family or community from being sexually abused.

Many people who sexually abuse children are relieved to be stopped and are good candidates for specialized treatment to help manage abusive impulses. Secrets support everybody's shame. By getting effective outside help, everyone involved has an opportunity to begin the journey towards recovery.