



When a Child Talks About Sexual Abuse...

Child sexual abuse is one of those topics no one wants to confront. Despite our best efforts to keep our children safe, sometimes the unthinkable happens. You should be prepared to respond appropriately, should your child tell you he or she has been sexually abused.

When a child tells an adult he/she has been sexually abused, the adult may feel uncomfortable and may not know what to do or say.ⁱ It is always important to listen, respect and support children who talk to you about an experience of sexual abuse. There is no perfect way to talk to them, but below are some guidelines to understanding and responding.ⁱⁱ

Some of the ways children tell others about their experiences of sexual abuse may include:

- Through play, such as with dolls or through drawings.
- Through behavior, i.e. nightmares, angry outbursts, insomnia, appetite changes.
- Telling others with whom they feel safe.
- Indirectly, i.e. “Uncle John wears funny underwear.”
- Saying things such as “A friend at school told me her dad was hurting her. What should I do?”
- Asking questions about sexual abuse.

Here are some things to consider when responding to child sexual abuse disclosure:

- Stay calm and try not to appear shocked or angry. Children often internalize the reactions of adults by believing they have done something wrong.
- Tell them you are glad they told you.
- Let them know sometimes bad things happen and they are not alone in having something happen to them.



- Let them talk at their own pace.
- Do not promise things you cannot be sure will happen, i.e. “I will make sure that person goes to jail.” or “I promise not to tell anyone else.”
- Don’t blame the child for what happened.
- Most importantly – tell the child you believe him/her.
- Immediately report the situation to your local child protection agency (1-877-KYSAFE1) (1-877-597-2331) or the local police.

What are some thoughts or feelings children may express?

- Many times children believe they could have stopped the abuse if they had tried harder.
- They may believe they are bad and they did something to deserve the abuse.
- Many times children fear no one will believe them.
- Children may believe they have destroyed their family or they will be removed from their family.
- Sometimes children fear their family will not love them anymore.
- Children may appear confused when telling the story since they may not have the developmental capacity to understand the abuse.



Some possible effects of child sexual abuse may include:

- Low self-esteem, believing they are stupid, ugly or bad.
- Regressive behaviors such as bedwetting or thumb-sucking.
- Problems sleeping or eating.
- Becoming angry and aggressive towards others.
- Behavior and/or performance problems at school.
- Guilt about the abuse, blaming themselves for it happening.
- Self-destructive behavior such as self-injury or cutting.

After you've reported child sexual abuse, get help for your child, yourself, and the rest of your family.ⁱⁱⁱ If the offender is a family member or friend, decisions will need to be made about contact and visits with the child. Seek help from your local child protection agency (1-877-KYSAFE1), mental health treatment services (<http://dbhdid.ky.gov/kdbhdid/>), Children's Advocacy Centers (<http://www.kacac.org/>), or 1-800-CHILDREN (1-800-244-5373) a statewide helpline for parents. Choose a counselor with special training and experience in working with child sexual abuse to support your child and family through the investigative process. The counselor can also give you information about how to best support yourself, your child and your family.

Your child's therapist will help you understand the best ways to support your child through the healing process. Some general guidelines are:

- Keep home life as normal as possible.
- Make sure your child knows you love and support him/her.
- Realize your child will be fearful. Reassure him/her this will lessen over time.
- Let your child talk about feelings and be sure to create opportunities for this to happen.
- Don't ignore sexualized behavior and play; this behavior indicates continuing distress and should be redirected in a simple, matter-of-fact, and supportive way.
- Expect difficult behavior and respond in a consistent, firm, but gentle manner.



It is important to remember there is effective treatment available to help you and your child move forward towards a healthy and happy future. Children can recover from sexual abuse, with the help of protective, supportive adults in their lives, including a therapist specializing in child sexual abuse services.^{iv}

- i *Facts for Families. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*
- ii *Fact Sheet: Responding to children talking about sexual abuse. CASA Forum Centres Against Sexual Assault*
- iii *Get the Facts. Committee for Children (www.cfchildren.org/)*
- iv *Coping with the Shock of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse. National Child Traumatic Stress Network*



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