

Responding to Disclosures of Child Sexual Abuse



Whether you're a child's parent, relative, friend, teacher, or someone else they trust, the following points are important to keep in mind when a child tells you they have been sexually abused:

REMAIN CALM

Do your best to remain outwardly calm. It can be difficult to hear about the harm someone has experienced – especially a child. If your immediate response is one of sadness, shock, dismay, or anger, that's okay and normal. Take a deep breath.

Explain that what someone did to them is not okay and that you are not upset with them. Let them know that you are sad/mad that someone has hurt them in this way, not because they told you and not because they have done anything wrong. Reassure them that what happened is not their fault.

THANK THEM

Thank you for telling me this. I am very glad that you told me. I will do what I can to help you with this.

Thank them for trusting you with their story. Let them know that you will do what you can to help them with this.

LISTEN

Take your time, I am here to listen.

Listen actively and attentively. Keep in mind that this may be the first time they have talked about the harm they experienced. Let them tell their story in their own way and at their own pace. Allow them to express their feelings openly and without fear of judgment.

Do not ask the child for details about the abuse they have experienced as this can compromise a Children's Services or Police investigation. When reporting child sexual abuse, you only need enough information to suspect that sexual abuse has occurred. Investigators will gather the information and evidence needed to determine what happened and what the next steps will be.

Often, you do not need to know the details of what happened to provide support.

BELIEVE

I believe you.

The most important thing you can do for someone who discloses is to accept that what you're being told is the truth. Often a child's biggest fear is that they won't be believed.

Even if you know everyone involved, assume that what you are being told is true. It is very rare for children to lie about sexual abuse.

Clearly demonstrate, through your calm, accepting, and encouraging responses, that you do believe them.

TELL THE CHILD THIS IS NOT THEIR FAULT

This is not your fault. You have done nothing wrong. You are not in any trouble.

Many children struggle with thinking the abuse was their fault and they worry they will get in trouble for what happened. Reassure them that no matter what happened or how they responded, the abuse is not their fault. The only person responsible for what happened is the person who harmed them.

Helping a child to understand that the abuse was not their fault is important as this can reduce feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame.

SUPPORT THE FEELINGS

It's okay to feel sad. I understand why you feel confused.

A number of feelings can arise however, sometimes children do not have the words to express how they are feeling. Support the child to identify and express their feelings. Let them know that it is okay to feel the way that they are feeling.

ASK BEFORE YOU TOUCH

Would you like a hug right now?

Although you may be someone who has a longstanding relationship with the child, don't automatically assume that touch – even a gentle hug or snuggle – will be comforting to them. Model consent and respect for personal space and boundaries. Ask if they would like a hug. If they do not, try not to take their reactions personally. Simply say okay, I am glad that I asked.

DON'T MAKE PROMISES

I am going to do what I can to help you with this problem.

Tell the child that you're going to get them some help with this problem, but don't make promises that you may not be able to keep. If the child asks you not to tell anyone, let them know that this is not the kind of secret that you can keep. In the moment you will not know how the authorities will respond, how the child's parents or caregivers will respond, nor will you know what is going to happen to the person who harmed them.

REPORT THE SEXUAL ABUSE

All people in Alberta have a legal obligation to report the sexual abuse of a child to Children's Services. You can find the contact information for your local Children's Services Office online or you can call the Child Abuse Hotline 24 hours a day at 1-800-387-5437. If you're unsure what to do you can call or text Alberta's ONE LiNE for Sexual Violence at 1-866-403-8000 for referral information.

Do not contact the parent or caregiver if the child has been sexually abused by them, always contact Children's Services first. This can be difficult, but it is important for safety and investigative purposes.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

It is never easy to hear that a child has been sexually abused. It is natural to worry about the child's well-being and to wonder if you responded in a good way or followed up appropriately. While being sure to respect the child's privacy, find someone to talk to about your feelings, such as a counsellor or support worker at a sexual assault center.