

How to Talk To Your Child About Sexual Abuse

Believe your child. It is extremely rare for children to lie about sexual abuse, and it is vital that you not deny or ignore what the child is telling you. If in doubt, err on behalf of your child.

Protect your child immediately from the suspected offender. You can start repairing the damage at once by assuring your child that the abuse will not continue.

Reassure your child that it is not his or her fault, and that you are glad she or he told you. Many children feel guilty and have been told by the offender that the abuse was their fault and they will be blamed for it.

Help your child work with the professional who will handle the case. Police and caseworkers deal with victims of abuse, and they may differ in their skills and sensitivity. You may need to be a strong advocate for your child. You can help your child interact with these professionals by staying with the child and reassuring him or her during questioning; or you can request that your child be interviewed by a specialist trained in child sexual abuse or trained in interviewing children.

Get a medical exam at once for your child even if he or she appears to be unhurt. You need this to protect your child's health, as well as for possible evidence. Cultures of the throat, vagina, rectum and urethra may be necessary to test for venereal disease. Not all physicians know how to examine for sexual abuse. Ask your local Office of Protective Services to identify a physician trained in diagnosing sexual abuse, or call the local branch of the American Academy of Pediatrics or the American Medical Association in your state.

What else can I do?

The discovery of sexual abuse, especially if it's incest, is a terrible upheaval for a family. Know that you're not alone, and that life *can* return to normal after a time. During the initial crisis period, try to remember:

- Allow your child to express his or her feelings, and keep your own feelings about the abuse separate. For example, if a loved family member is the offender, your child may have mixed feelings of love, anger, hurt, and betrayal. You may want

to punish the family member - by vowing, for example, that "your father will go to jail," but your child may fear that and be further frightened by it. Whatever the child's feelings, allow them to be expressed.

- Find someone trustworthy to talk with, to unburden yourself. You are likely to have a flood of painful and confusing feelings, and you may need help sorting them out. Take care of your own feelings, for your child's sake as well as your own.
- Don't give in to the response "It's better to forget about it." Your child and you *will* recover, but it takes time. Let your child continue to work it out. He or she may still need to talk about it months later.
- Try to keep a calm environment and resume as normal a life as possible. Protect your child but don't make him or her feel too isolated or different. Many parents feel distressed at the premature sexualization of their children and may feel that through abuse they become "damaged goods." Children need to feel whole and undamaged; your determination to treat them as usual is crucial. Take life one day at a time and handle problems as they come up. You don't have to solve everything in one day.

How to Talk with Children About Sexual Abuse

Parents must realize that teaching your children about sexual abuse is as important as any other rule of health and safety, and one must approach it that way. Parents don't worry about scaring their children when cautioning them to be careful of cars, for example, but you do explaining that cars can be dangerous, and that there are safety rules to protect children. Parents can bring the subject of sexual abuse into daily life and make it part of ongoing talks with their children about safety, rather than presenting it as a one-time-only lecture or an unnatural subject.

By becoming acquainted with these basic facts yourself, you will be able to teach them to your children in your own way and in your own words. Children need to know that:

- *Their bodies belong to them and no one has the right to touch them without permission.* Children have traditionally been taught to comply with adults' requests, but they need to know that, regarding touching, they have the right to say NO, even if the touch seems accidental or even if the person touching is a relative or trusted adult. Obviously, children need to know the names of parts of

their bodies, whether the words are correct words or special words used among the family. One way to explain private parts is to say that they are the parts of the body covered by a swimming suit.

- *There are different kinds of touching.* Talk about touch that feels good (hugs, comforting), touch that feels bad (hitting, pinching), and touch that makes children feel "funny" or uncomfortable or scared, or that gives them a feeling of "uh-oh." For example, discuss the reaction they might have if someone touched their private parts, made a request that seemed odd, or "accidentally" touched them. Children need to know that no matter what it feels like, an older person should never touch their private parts, unless they are being medically examined.
- *They can trust their feelings about kinds of touching and always ask a trusted adult if they're not sure. If the first adult doesn't respond, keep asking or telling until someone does respond.* Most children, even young ones, can tell when another person's touch or request or behavior makes them feel scared or "funny" or uncomfortable. They need to be encouraged to trust those feelings so that they can *recognize* behavior that can lead to sexual abuse. It may be helpful to play a "what if" game with children to clarify their feelings and practice ways to deal with a situation. For example, you can say "What if someone put his hand on your bottom?" Children can think about what they could do about it (for example, say "I don't like that!" and run away and tell someone). If children aren't sure how they feel, they should be encouraged to ask a trusted adult about any behavior that confuses them.
- *They can tell their parents or a trusted adult about anyone whose behavior makes them uncomfortable or who touches their private parts or who asks them to touch someone else's private parts; they need to keep telling until someone believes them.* Children must be free to ask about adult behavior that confuses them, even when it is behavior not related to sexual abuse.
- *Being asked to keep an unpleasant secret may mean danger of sexual abuse.* Sexual abuse cannot take place unless it is kept secret from adults who care for the child. No adult or older child has the right to ask or tell your child to keep an unpleasant secret. Explain to your child the difference between a good secret and a bad secret. A good secret is something pleasant and fun and exciting when it is later shared with others - for example, a surprise birthday party, or when Daddy secretly brought the puppy home. But a bad secret feels like a burden, it doesn't make a person feel good, and it is intended never to be shared with others. Your child can say, "No! My family doesn't allow bad secrets."