

What to Do If Your Child Discloses Sexual Abuse



Information for Parents and Caregivers

What is disclosure?

Disclosure is when a child tells another person that he or she has been sexually abused. Disclosure can be a scary and difficult process for children. Some children who have been sexually abused may take weeks, months, or even years to fully reveal what was done to them. Many children never tell anyone about the abuse. In general:

- Girls are more likely to disclose than boys
- School-aged children tend to tell a caregiver
- Adolescents are more likely to tell friends
- Very young children tend to accidentally reveal abuse, because they don't have as much understanding of what occurred or the words to explain it

Fast Fact

Sexual abuse affects many families. It is estimated that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused.¹

Children are often reluctant to tell about being sexually abused. Some reasons for this reluctance may include:

- Fear that the abuser may hurt them or their families
- Fear that they will not be believed, or will be blamed and get in trouble
- Worry that their parents will be upset or angry
- Fear that disclosing will disrupt the family, especially if the perpetrator is a family member or friend
- Fear that if they tell they will be taken away and separated from their family

Fast Fact

In studies of adults who were sexually abused as children, 2 out of 3 said they never told anyone about the abuse during childhood.²

Disclosure can be particularly difficult for younger children who have limited language and developmental abilities. If the child does not understand that the abuse was wrong, this may also lead the child not to tell.

What should I do if I suspect my child has been sexually abused?

If you think your child may have been sexually abused, it is okay to talk to your child about it. You may first want to access some resources to learn more about child sexual abuse, such as The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's *Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet* at <http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/asset.do?id=1216>.

It is important to remain calm in speaking to children who may have been sexually abused. You can ask children directly if anyone has touched their bodies in a way that they did not like or has forced them to do things that they did not want to do. If you are concerned about talking to your child about abuse, you might want to seek help from your child's pediatrician or a mental health provider who is knowledgeable about child sexual abuse.

Therapy Can Help

To learn more about how therapy can help your child overcome the effects of sexual abuse, see The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's video, *The Promise of Trauma-Focused Treatment for Child Sexual Abuse*, available at <http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/asset.do?id=1151&video=true>.

For help finding a therapist, try:

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's *Finding Help* page: http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr_gethelp
- The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy's *Therapist Locator* page: <http://www.therapistlocator.net>



Children whose parents or caregivers are supportive heal more quickly from the abuse.

What should I do if my child discloses sexual abuse?

Your reaction to the disclosure will have a big effect on how your child deals with the trauma of sexual abuse. Children whose parents/caregivers are supportive heal more quickly from the abuse.^{3,4} To be supportive, it is important to:

- **Stay calm.** Hearing that your child has been abused can bring up powerful emotions, but if you become upset, angry, or out of control, this will only make it more difficult for your child to disclose.
- **Believe** your child, and let your child know that he or she is not to blame for what happened. Praise your child for being brave and for telling about the sexual abuse.
- **Protect** your child by getting him or her away from the abuser and immediately reporting the abuse to local authorities. **If you are not sure who, to contact, call the ChildHelp® National Child Abuse Hotline at 1.800.4.A.CHILD (1.800.422.4453; http://www.childhelp.org/get_help)** or, for immediate help, call 911.

- **Get help.** In addition to getting medical care to address any physical damage your child may have suffered (including sexually transmitted diseases), it is important that your child have an opportunity to talk with a mental health professional who specializes in child sexual abuse. Therapy has been shown to successfully reduce distress in families and the effects of sexual abuse on children. Many communities have local Children’s Advocacy Centers (CACs) that offer coordinated support and services to victims of child abuse, including sexual abuse. For a state-by-state listing of accredited CACs, visit the website of the National Children’s Alliance (http://www.nca-online.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=3999).
- **Reassure** your child that he or she is loved, accepted and an important family member. Don’t make promises you can’t keep (such as saying you won’t tell anyone about the abuse), but let your child know that you will do everything in your power to protect him or her from harm.
- **Keep your child informed** about what will happen next, particularly with regard to legal actions. (For more information on helping abused children cope with the stress of dealing with the legal system, see the National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s factsheet, *Child Sexual Abuse: Coping with the Emotional Stress of the Legal System*, available on the web at http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/emotionlaimpactoflegalsystem.pdf).

I have heard that some children who disclose sexual abuse later “take it back.” Does this mean they were lying?

No. In fact, attempting to “take it all back”—also known as *recantation*—is common among children who disclose sexual abuse. Most children who recant are telling the truth when they originally disclose, but may later have mixed feelings about their abuser and about what has happened as a result of the disclosure. Some children have been sworn to secrecy by the abuser and are trying to protect the secret by taking it back. Some children are dealing with issues of denial and are having a difficult time accepting the sexual abuse. In some families, the child is pressured to recant because the disclosure has disrupted family relationships. A delay in the prosecution of the perpetrator may also lead a child to recant in order to avoid further distressing involvement in the legal process. A very small percentage of children recant because they made a false statement.

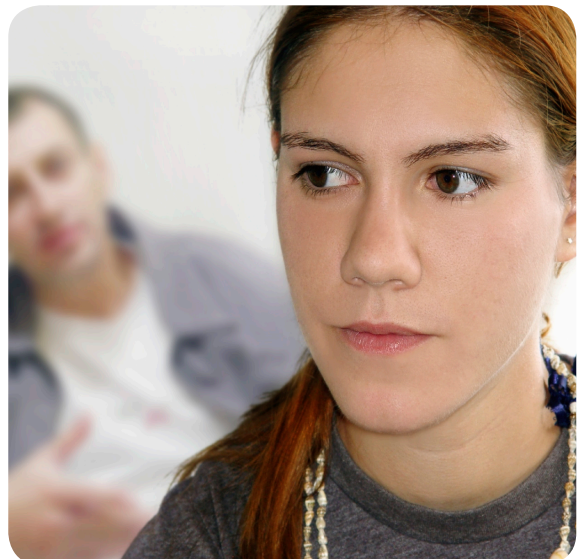
Books That Can Help

Freeman, L. (1987). *It’s MY body: A book to teach young children how to resist uncomfortable touch*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press. Ages 3-8; also available in Spanish.

Lowery, L. (1995). *Laurie tells*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, Lerner Publishing Group. Age 11 and up.

Ottenweller, J. (1991). *Please tell! A child’s story about sexual abuse*. Center City, MN: Hazelden Foundation.

Stauffer, L., & Deblinger, E. (2003). *Let’s talk about taking care of you: An educational book about body safety*. Hatfield, PA: Hope for Families. Version for preschool children also available.



The idea that something like this could happen to my child is completely overwhelming. What can I do to cope with my own feelings?

If you suspect that your child has been abused, try to get support by talking to someone else before talking to your child about the sexual abuse. If your child has already disclosed the abuse, hearing the details may be profoundly upsetting to you, particularly if the abuser is someone you know and thought you could trust. (For more information on such “intrafamilial” sexual abuse, see the National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s factsheet, *Coping with the Shock of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse: Information for Parents and Caregivers*, available at http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/intrafamilialabuse.pdf.)

Your feelings may range from denial, anger, and sadness, to frustration and helplessness. If you yourself are a survivor of child sexual abuse, the discovery that your child has been abused may also bring up your own painful and unresolved feelings and memories. Getting help for yourself is an important part of being able to get help and support for your child. You can contact the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) at 1-800-656-HOPE or www.rainn.org for help finding support in your area. The U.S. Department of Justice’s Office for Victims of Crime (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/>) has resources and a web forum to communicate with others on topics such as child abuse, victim’s rights, court preparation, and more.



Books That Can Help

Adams, C., & Fay, J. (1992). *Helping your child recover from sexual abuse*. Vancouver, WA: University of Washington Press.

Brohl, K., & Potter, J.C. (2004). *When your child has been molested: A parents’ guide to healing and recovery*. (Revised ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint.

Daugherty, L. (2006) *Why me? Help for victims of child sexual abuse (even if they are adults now)*. (4th ed.). Roswell, NM: Cleanan Press, Inc.

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Data and Statistics*. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Retrieved January 12, 2009 from: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/ace/prevalence.htm>
2. London, K., Bruck, M., Ceci, S.J., & Shuman, D.W. (2005). Disclosure of child sexual abuse. What does the research tell us about the ways that children tell? *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 11 (1), 194-226.
3. Paredes, M., Leifer, M., & Kilbane, T. (2001). Maternal variables related to sexually abused children’s functioning, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25 (9), 1159-1176.
4. Lovett, B.B. (2004). Child sexual abuse disclosure: Maternal response and other variables impacting the victim. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 21 (4), 355-371.

This product was developed by the Child Sexual Abuse Committee of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, comprised of mental health, legal, and medical professionals with expertise in the field of child sexual abuse.

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.