

# What to think, who to tell, how to feel, and more for parents

*Saying and doing the right things are critical to your child's recovery. Children need reassurance that you believe them, love them, and will continue to support and protect them.*

## **How should I treat my child now?**

Children do not always know what is happening to them when they are being abused. Abusers most often gain their trust and the family's trust before abusing them. Children may feel something is *not quite right*, but may not be at an age where they can identify the problem.

The sexual abuse and events that happen following disclosure can be very confusing to children, especially young children. They may interpret emotions from you as something they did wrong. Children just are not old enough yet to separate strong

emotions directed at the abuser or the situation from something directed at them. Children are attuned to reactions adults display in response to their behaviors.

Instead, children often "tell" about abuse without words. They may act out, become aggressive, become passive, change their eating patterns, regress to habits of an earlier age, and alter their sleep schedule. All of this is because they may not have the developmental capacity to speak about the issue. These actions are their way of releasing emotions in a physical way.

## **Children learn to identify and name their emotions in age-appropriate ways**

For instance, when children enter school, teachers help shape their emotions in socially acceptable ways, like talking instead of hitting someone when they are angry. But abuse and sexual abuse are far beyond a child's ability to understand. Abuse creates a cluster of emotion no child has experience necessary to cope.

Help your child attach a word to their feelings. When they seem afraid, talk about fear. When they act out with aggression, talk about anger. This helps channel behavior into a preferred and acceptable behavior.

## **How can I discipline my child?**

You will still need to discipline your child. Be fair, consistent, and have a plan. If discipline has been loose in the past, build in discipline predictably. Tell them what they can expect so they can learn limits and expectations.

## *Your mental health matters, too*

You may feel shock, anger, guilt, fear, denial, shame, and many other perfectly normal emotions. But they are not always an accurate attribute or contribution to the situation. *Blame and shame for the abuse falls on the offender. Express your emotions apart from your child.*

- ❖ Don't be afraid to cry, talk, express anger, and laugh.
- ❖ Find time to relax and exercise.
- ❖ Stay busy with family and friends and work.
- ❖ Accept things you cannot change.
- ❖ Focus on positive things in your life, and don't ask for help.

## **Who should know about the abuse?**

You are in control of who knows. Everyone at the CAC and in the criminal justice system will work to

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maintain strict confidentiality. But parents of younger children may find it helpful to tell a teacher, a principal, or a coach *some* details. You can make a judgement about that decision. But a teacher who knows about the abuse may be able to provide more support through the school. A coach may be able to understand the child's behavior and how loss and defeat are handled.

For older children, consider how they will feel about certain people knowing. Discuss it with them and make decisions with their feelings in mind.

## **Having your child share information**

You need to help your child decide who is appropriate to discuss their abuse with. Therapists, teachers, and maybe church leaders, but not everyone at school or distant relatives, for instance.

They may need your help in learning how to deflect or share information. **They may also need help becoming a resource for children who themselves are being abused and are trying to disclose.**

## **How do I respond when others ask me about my child's abuse?**

If other families are involved in the investigation, you should wait until the investigation is over before talking details with them. It can harm the case otherwise.

Recognize this is a difficult and challenging conversation and most people who ask are themselves trying to show support in a difficult moment. However, you don't have to answer anyone's questions unless they have a reason to

know, like your DCS caseworker, siblings, grandparents, etc.

If you do decide to answer questions, recognize they may become emotional. They may cry, get angry, or feel immense stress.

Use your judgement if they tend to become over-emotional or have a condition. And if you do tell someone else, you have every authority to ask they keep it confidential.

## **How to deflect**

If you do not want to discuss the situation with someone, simply say, "I'd rather not talk about that right now."