

Children's Center

A place where healing begins

How to Respond When You Suspect Your Child Has Been Sexually Abused

If your child makes a disclosure about being sexually abused:

Remain calm. Overreacting can frighten your child or prevent your child from telling more.

Emphasize that your child did the right thing by telling. Say, "I'm glad you told." "I'm proud of you." "I believe you."

Stress that your child is not to blame. Say, "It wasn't your fault," and relay that your child will not be in trouble for telling.

Do not talk negatively about the person of concern in front of your child.

Try to document your conversation. Write down the entire conversation, capturing the child's exact words as closely as possible.

Call the child abuse hotline immediately at 971-673-7112 or your local law enforcement agency. You do not need proof to make a report.

Leave the investigating to the authorities. It is important to let the authorities handle any investigation. Do not confront the person you suspect of abusing your child.

Keep your child safe from the suspect. Seek legal counsel if necessary. You may need to find out if it is possible to take legal steps to ensure your child only has supervised visits with the person of concern, to determine whether contact can be stopped entirely, or to see whether there is some other legal recourse to keep your child safe.

Do not talk about the abuse to others in front of your child. Talking specifically about the suspected abuse where your child can hear you can be overwhelming for your child and may taint any legal investigations taking place.

NOTE: If your child has pain or injury in the genital area, get medical help right away through your child's doctor.

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If you suspect abuse but your child has not disclosed:

Tell your child that you are available to talk about any worries s/he may have. Emphasize that your child will not be in trouble for anything s/he tells you.

Read a book together that teaches touching rules and invite your child to respond. Good choices for preschoolers: *My Body Belongs To Me*, available at the Children's Center, or *It's My Body* by Lori Freeman; or for school age children: *My Body is Private* by Linda Walvoord Girard.

Ask your child only neutral questions. Neutral questions are questions such as “*Do you know anyone who has broken the touching rules?*” Avoid asking leading or suggestive questions or engaging in repeated questioning.

You can set up counseling for your child. It is important to let your child's counselor know about your concerns.

Ways to Help Yourself:

Get support for yourself. The Children's Center can provide family support and referrals to other agencies to help both parents and children.

Stay consistent. It is important that you and your child's lives stay as “normal” or consistent as possible. The exceptions to this are any changes that need to be made to ensure your child's safety.

Recognize the strength in your child. Children are remarkably resilient. In fact, children often bounce back more quickly from adverse situations than do adults. If you can recognize the resilience in your child, can provide supportive resources such as counseling should your child need this, and can continue to keep your child safe, the long-term effects of the abuse should be greatly reduced.

Contact the Children's Center with questions. The Children's Center offers families information about abuse, can help direct families to appropriate resources for themselves and their children, and may be able to schedule an evaluation of the child.

If you have any additional questions about what to do if you suspect your child has been sexually abused or about resources that are available for you and your family, please contact the Children's Center Family Support Services at 503-655-7725.