

Children's Center

A place where healing begins

Ways Children Tell

Many abused children do not tell. Sometimes children do not tell because they think no one will believe them.

Example: "I told my mom and she said she never wanted to hear talk like that again."

Example: "I told my aunt that my uncle touched me and she said she was sure that I had misunderstood, that my uncle was probably just playing."

Children may not have the vocabulary to talk about sexual abuse and may not know how to tell. They may tell in vague terms. It is up to caregivers to "read between the lines" and ask some clarifying questions.

Example: "I don't like our neighbor anymore."

Sometimes children may think they have told, but in reality have not been understood.

Example: "Mrs. Johnson wears funny underwear."

If children have been taught to always obey grown-ups because grown-ups know what is best, they may take to heart an abuser's assurances that "it's okay" or they may give promises to the offender not to tell, which they are then afraid to break.

Example: "Grandpa told me it was our special secret."

The telling may not be in words, but by a change in behavior. Since children may not be able to tell directly, it is important to be sensitive to their signals. Sudden change in behavior of particular note:

- A child may be reluctant to go to a particular place, or to be with a particular person.
- A child may show an unusual interest in the genitals of other people. S/he may try to express affection in inappropriate ways, such as "French kissing," or trying to touch a parent's private parts.
- Other signals can include: Serious behavior or sleep problems, fears, regression, fall in school performance, depression, or unusual aggression (although these behaviors can signal other problems too). See the Children's Center handout entitled *Indicators Concerning for Sexual Abuse* for more behavioral "clues."

How to Respond if a Child Reports Abuse

It is important for caregivers to plan ahead how they might respond if a child or youth discloses abuse. Disclosure is usually a process for children, not a one-time event. Therefore, children may “test the waters” to see if the listener can handle what they might say. It is up to the caregiver to let the child know that s/he is able to hear more and can handle hearing anything the child wants to say. Caregivers need to remember that their job is to be approachable, calm and supportive.

Do: Deliberately remain calm (showing rage for the offender may result in the child trying to protect that person).

Say: I'm glad you told; I'm proud of you.
I believe you.
It wasn't your fault.
You're not the only one this has happened to.
I feel sad/angry that this happened to you.
I will work to keep you safe; you will be taken care of (if you are a caregiver).

Do not ask the child why s/he didn't say “no” or tell sooner, because that can cause guilt.
Do not alert the person the child has talked about. Work to keep the child safe from further abuse.

Do not ask questions.
Do not urge the child to forget it.
Do not talk about your own abuse history.

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

Explain to the child that other grown-ups may need to know and that it is okay to talk to the helper adults.

Call the **Child Abuse Hotline** right away at 971-673-7112 or your local law enforcement agency. If indicated, they will arrange for the child to be interviewed by someone specially trained.