



What Parents and Caregivers Can Do About Child Sexual Abuse

The Nassar sexual abuse case has led many parents and caregivers to question, “What would I do if a child shares with me that he or she has been sexually abused?” The first step in putting a stop to child sexual abuse is for parents and caregivers to believe the child. Not only does it stop the abuse from happening again; it stops the offender from hurting another child.

When children disclose that they may have been violated by an adult or another young person, we must believe that what they are saying is true and take action to find help right away. It’s not a time for denial or to question the child’s accuracy. It’s not a time to evaluate the character of the offender or determine whether or not they are capable of committing something so horrific. It’s a time to act and be persistent until you are able to obtain more information about what happened and help the child begin on a journey to his or her healing.

When a child’s cry for help falls on deaf ears, the cycle of abuse may continue, or escalate; a culture of denial is perpetuated, and the trauma of the experience manifests itself in other areas of the child’s life. Child sexual abuse is likely the most prevalent health problem children face with the most serious array of consequences, including: PTSD, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, teen pregnancy and motherhood, homelessness, obesity, and suicide, among many others. No child should have to be faced with these consequences alone, which is why getting connected to counseling services as soon as possible is a vital step in a child survivor’s healing process.

Child sexual abuse allegations very rarely turn out to be false. Less than 8% of disclosures are fabricated, and most false allegations are made by adults involved in a custody dispute.

Here is what you can do if a child discloses sexual abuse to you, or if you witness or suspect that a child has been sexually abused:

How to React Responsibly

- A disclosure of sexual abuse means that a child has chosen you as the person he or she trusts enough to tell. The child has broken through secrecy, fear, and shame - even if only for a moment.

- Discovery of abuse means you've witnessed a sexually abusive act by an adult or youth with a child, or you know by another way that the abuse has taken place.
- Suspicion means you've seen signs in a child, or you've witnessed boundary violations by adults or other youth. Suspicion means, at a minimum, you need to set some limits or ask some questions.
- Offer your support by telling the child you believe him or her and assure the child that what happened is not his or her fault.
- Make a report to Children's Protective Services if there has been a disclosure or you suspect any type of abuse: 855-444-3911.

What Happens Next?

- After you have reported to Children's Protective Services, a confidential investigation will begin.
- The child will participate in a child-friendly forensic interview, offered at the Children's Advocacy Center, where trained interviewers will obtain more information about the abuse.
- Children's Protective Services and law enforcement will determine what legal action will be taken, if necessary, and ensure that the child will be able to return to or be placed in a safe environment.
- Therapists will schedule counseling sessions with the child and family to begin on a path toward healing.

We know how scary all of this can be, but there is a network of advocates who are ready to support child sexual abuse survivors and their family every step of the way.

The Children's Advocacy Center of Kent County offers a training for adults to prevent child sexual abuse, Stewards of Children®. For more information about the Stewards of Children® training, contact the Children's Advocacy Center at 616-336-5160.