

What to Do When A Child Discloses Abuse or Neglect

Every ten seconds, a child abuse report is made in the United States; and approximately five children die daily as the result of abuse and neglect. In the Scott and Rock Island Counties alone, twenty school buses could be filled with children who have been abused and neglected.

Child abuse and neglect negatively impacts thousands upon thousands of kids in this country every year, and often these children continue to feel the effects into adulthood.

Should your child, or any child, disclose abuse or neglect to you, are you prepared to handle the situation effectively and know the right follow up steps? We have outlined important points for you so that you are ready should it happen.

Listen carefully

Child abuse disclosures are typically a process, not a single event. Sometimes children are trying to tell us something for a while before we understand. Tune in to the children around you. Listen to what they are saying (verbally and non-verbally).



Remain Calm

A child will be feeling many things during this time. It is essential you remain calm in that moment. Later, ensure you get help from your own support network. Hearing stories of abuse or neglect can be very challenging to deal with even for adults.

Respect the child's privacy

Speak to the child in a quiet space away from others.

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Remind the child

Remind them that they were right for telling you and it is not their fault. Be sure to tell them that you believe them (remember, false reports are rare). And assure them that you will get them help.

DON'T make promises you can't keep

It is important not to promise a child to keep their information a secret-- you know you have to get help for them. Additionally, if they are disclosing abuse or neglect, you know that another person has already violated some trust. Be sure you are an adult that they can count on.

Acknowledge the child's feelings

Children will be feeling a lot of different things, both in the moment of speaking with you, and in general as well. Some emotions can include grief, shame, fear, sadness, and many others.

Acknowledge those things: "That must have been _____ (scary, etc), I'm sorry that happened to you."

Allow the child to lead the discussion

Allow the child to tell you what happened in his/her own words. You may ask for clarification if necessary, but do not ask a lot of questions of the child. Investigators and specially trained interviewers are the professionals in this area. It is NOT YOUR JOB to investigate the situation – only listen so that you can make the report. Most children fully disclose only one time. Additionally, don't ask closed-ended questions. Instead, ask for clarification on things like, "who is he?" but if the child doesn't answer, then don't ask again. Make the report.

NEVER ask a child "why?"

We don't understand why people hurt children, and certainly children never will either! Asking "why?" is inappropriate and implies blame. Additionally, don't ask a child why they never told anyone before. The important thing is that they are telling you now. We never want to lay blame on the child.

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What to Do When A Child Discloses Abuse or Neglect

Keep the child informed

Tell the child about what might happen next. Tell them you are getting help. If you don't know what will happen next, tell them you don't know. Be honest.

Call the hotline and authorities

Call for help immediately! If a child is in immediate danger, dial 911. Additionally, the hotline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If the lines are busy, be sure to leave your number to be reached later. Have as much information as possible when making the call, but it's okay if you don't know everything! Give what you know.

State of Iowa Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-362-2178

State of Illinois Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-252-2873

If necessary or if a child is in immediate danger call 911

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Originally posted on the Now What? Blog on 4.8.21 The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to

1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention
2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse
3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors

Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.

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