



Handling Child Abuse Disclosures



Founded in 1959 by Sara O'Meara and Yvonne Fedderson
PREVENTION *and* TREATMENT of CHILD ABUSE

When a child comes to you to talk about abuse they are facing, it is important to listen and act in a way to support the child and keep him or her protected. You have a responsibility to keep children safe.

Types of Disclosure

Disclosures can be direct or indirect. Most likely a disclosure will be indirect, which can mean the child does not share the details of the abuse without being prompted, or does so in a roundabout way.

An example of this is, “Sometimes my step-dad keeps me up at night.”

A disclosure can also be disguised, for example: “I have a cousin who is being abused.”

In other cases the disclosure can be through hints or gestures, or even through another child “My friend told me...”

The child is hoping that a caring parent or caregiver will get the “hint” they are offering.

Recognize the Clues

It is important to recognize the possible clues so that further questions are asked. Most children who disclose want the abuse to stop. When the disclosure is “missed” they may continue with additional hints, or not.

For many abused children, a class presentation on child abuse prevention is the first time they realize that what happens to them does not happen to everyone. Some children may try to protect the abuser, especially when the abuser is someone they love.

Support the Child

If a child does disclose abuse, never forget how hard it is for him or her to tell someone about abuse. It is hard to hear your child has been abused, and your initial reactions may be to not believe or show shock or horror, but it is important to support the child and help him/her to disclose.

Acknowledge his/her courage in speaking out. If you work with children, have a plan for supporting a child who discloses to you through the reporting period and in the days that follow. Regardless of how the child discloses, recognizing the possibility the child is being abused, believing the child, and discussing the situation with him or her further will, in most cases, bring out further details.

During the Disclosure

1 Avoid denial.

A common reaction to a child's disclosure is denial. Respect your child by listening to what he/she has to say and taking what your child says seriously. Believe what your child is telling you.

2 Provide a safe environment.

Make sure the setting is confidential and comfortable. Avoid communicating with shock, horror, or fear about anything said, even though what you are hearing is likely shocking and horrifying. Your child may interpret your reaction as your being shocked and horrified by him or her and shut down. The child needs you to be confident and supportive. Speak slowly and maintain a calm demeanor. Tell your child he/she is doing the right thing and that you will do what you can to help them.

3 Reassure your child.

Reassure your child that he/she did nothing wrong and that you believe him/her.

4 Listen and don't make assumptions.

Listen more than you talk, and avoid advice giving or problem solving. Don't put words in your child's mouth or assume you know what he/she means or are going to say. Let your child use language they are comfortable with. Let your child set the pace, **and** don't rush them.

5 Do not interrogate.

Don't ask the child a lot of questions, especially leading questions, which means a question in which you provide a possible answer - Did this or that happen? Were you at school? Did your uncle hit you on the leg? This can be confusing for your child and he/she might shut down. Don't ask your child for details. This can make it harder for your child to tell you about the abuse. Listen to the child, letting them explain what happened in his or her own words. Don't stop your child in the middle of the story to go get someone or do something else. **Limit questioning to only the following four questions if the child has not already provided you with the information:**

What happened? When did it happen? Where did it happen?

Who did it? (If the relationship of the abuser is unclear, also ask, "How do you know them?")

6 Make no promises.

Don't tell your child that you won't tell anyone what they tell you. Your child will have fears about what will happen next, so tell your child what you are going to do, what is going to happen next, and who else they will need to talk to. This will help your child to feel some control over what happens next within the boundaries of the law.

7

Document exact quotes.

It may be helpful to write down exact quotes of what your child said in case of the involvement of other parties, such as school or child protective services.

8

Be supportive, not judgmental.

Don't talk negatively. Even though your child may be disclosing terrible things that may have happened at the hands of a family member or friend, the child may still love that person and may only just be beginning to recognize that he/she was being abused. Reassure the child that he/she is not at fault and has done nothing wrong.

Don't ask questions that imply the child was at fault:

Why didn't you tell me before? What were you doing there? Why didn't you stop it?
What did you do to make this happen? Are you telling the truth?

9

Have an understanding about abuse and neglect.

Know the four kinds of child abuse: **physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect.**

10

Report any suspicion of child abuse and neglect.

If you suspect that your child or another child is being abused, report it to the proper authorities. When reporting child abuse to the appropriate authorities, it is important to have the following information: what happened, when it happened, where it happened, who did it and their relationship to the child. You will be asked for some identifying information such as your name, address, where you work, and how the child disclosed. All of your identifying information will be kept confidential.

Remember, it is the responsibility of adults to take action and keep children safe.

References

Smith, M. C. (2008). *Pre-professional mandated reporters' understanding of young children's eyewitness testimony: Implications for training.* *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(12), 1355-1365. doi:DOI: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.04.004