

How To Respond To A Disclosure Of Sexual Abuse¹⁰

How you respond to a disclosure is very important. Here are some general "Do's" and "Don'ts" for when a child discloses sexual abuse...

- **DO** immediately tell the child you believe them. Children rarely make up stories about sexual abuse.
 - **DO** tell the child that they were right to tell you and that they were very brave to do so.
 - **DO** acknowledge that it is difficult to talk about such things.
 - **DO** tell the child this has happened to other children and they are not the only one.
 - **DO** tell them that they are not responsible for what happened and did not deserve it.
 - **DO** tell them that sometimes adults do things that are not OK (avoid saying that the offender is "sick").
 - **DO** allow the child to tell you at his or her own pace. Don't worry if s/he stops talking for a while - silences are OK. You don't have to rush in to fill the gaps.
 - **DO** use the child's language or vocabulary.
 - **DO** ensure that the child feels safe following disclosure. You may need to stay physically close to give an extra sense of security - the offender may have used threats.
 - **DO** everything you can to support, comfort and reassure the child.
 - **DO** write down as much as you can as soon as you can about the disclosure, including a detailed description of the context of the disclosure.
 - **DO** let the child know that you are going to tell some people who can help him or her.
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- **DON'T** make promises you can't keep - especially if you are asked to keep it a secret.
 - **DON'T** panic or show that you are shocked. It is important to remain calm and in control of your feelings.
 - **DON'T** give the impression that you might blame the child (e.g. don't ask: "why did you let him?" "what were you doing there anyway?" or "why didn't you tell me before?").
 - **DON'T** ask intrusive questions. Listen but don't pry. Respect the child's need for privacy.

Remember, when a child discloses they are likely to feel...

- **Guilt:** Children often blame themselves for the abuse and often feel guilty for telling.
- **Ashamed:** Children often are ashamed about the abuse itself.
- **Confused:** Children are often confused about their feelings for the perpetrator.
- **Scared:** Children are often fearful of the repercussions of telling. They may be scared of the perpetrator, scared that the abuse may recur, or that their family will break up.

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