



## How to talk to a child about child abuse and neglect disclosures

It is not uncommon for a small number of children to disclose abuse following classroom presentations about child abuse or personal safety. Disclosure is made to a person the child trusts, feels safe with, and believes can help. It is imperative that teachers, administrators, and staff at the school be aware of such presentations and the possibility for increased numbers of disclosures. Responding to the disclosure is a HUGE responsibility.

**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 round-about 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 person 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.

**Supporting the Child:** If a child does disclose abuse never forget how hard it is for him or her to tell someone about abuse. Remember, you are the one the child chose to tell. How you respond will impact his/her decisions about who and what to tell in the future. Acknowledge his/her courage in speaking out. Have a plan for supporting a child who discloses to you. 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. Take what the child is saying seriously. Remember it is not up to you to verify the abuse, but to get the details the child is willing to share and report it to the proper authorities. As a mandated reporter it is your responsibility to report the abuse, don't assume someone else will.

**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 may be shocking and horrifying. The 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.

**3. Reassure the child.** Reassure the child that he or she did nothing wrong and that you believe them. Tell the child that he/she did the right thing by coming to you. The child may have been told that no one will believe them if they tell or may have been threatened in some way if they told. How you respond will influence what the child chooses to tell other people about the situation. The child chose to tell you because he or she feels safe with you and believes you will help.

**4. Listen and don't make assumptions.** Use reflective listening, i.e., listen more than talk, and respond with affirmative statements such as "that must have been very difficult for you." Avoid advice giving or problem solving. Don't put words in the child's mouth or assume you know what they mean or are going to say. Let the child use language they are comfortable with. Let the child set the pace, don't rush. The response to the disclosure of abuse is critical to the child's ability to resolve and heal the trauma of abuse.

**5. Do not interrogate.** Don't ask the child a lot of questions, especially leading questions. A question in which you provide a possible answer - Did this or that happen? Were you at home? Did your dad hit you on the leg? This can be confusing for the child and the child might shut down and try to answer your question instead of telling you what they are comfortable talking about. Don't ask the child for details. This can make it harder for the child to tell you about the abuse. Listen to the child, letting him/her explain what happened in his or her own words. To get the information needed for a report and to not ask leading questions, 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? (How do you know him/her if the relationship is unclear).

It is important that the person the child initially begins to disclose to be the one that finishes the interview of the child. Never stop a child in the middle of their story and ask them to tell it to the nurse, principal, etc. The child chose YOU to disclose to. If they wanted to disclose to the nurse or principal, they would have approached them first. We want to minimize trauma, by minimizing the number of people who asks the child questions.

**6. Make no promises.** The child is fearful of many things--they could get taken away from their family; the person who hurt them could go to jail; their parent will be angry with them. All of these things could happen. Don't tell the child they won't. Also, don't tell the child that you won't tell anyone what they tell you. Tell the 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 the child to feel some control over what happens next within the boundaries of the law. As a mandatory reporter, you are required by law to tell.

**7. Document exact quotes.** Don't write what you think the child meant and don't summarize. Listen carefully to the child and write down what the child says, even if they use slang or unpleasant language. This information will be important to convey in the report.

**8. Be supportive, not judgmental.** Don't talk negatively about the family. Even though the child is disclosing terrible things that may have happened to them at the hands of a loved one, the child may still love that person and may only just be beginning to recognize that they are being abused. Reassure the child that he or she is not at fault and have done nothing wrong. **Don't ask questions that might imply the child was at fault like--**

- 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. Respect the child's privacy.** Don't share with anyone who doesn't have a need to know what the child

disclosed to you.

**10. Have an understanding about abuse and neglect.** Know the four kinds of child abuse: physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect and how your state law defines abuse. Understand the symptoms of each type of abuse.

**11. Seek Advice.** If you need advice, or you think a child is in danger, you should seek the advice of the school administration. If a child's disclosure involves a school employee or school volunteer, do not confront the alleged perpetrator, but rather seek immediate assistance from your school's administration and follow the procedure for reporting. If a child discloses to you, consult your school's counselor or administration for support throughout the process.

**12. Report any suspicion of child abuse and neglect.** Learn what your school's policy is for making reports to child protective services or law enforcement. Some schools have policies on who at the school handles all reports. When reporting child abuse to the appropriate authorities, it is important to have the following information: what happened, when it happened, where it happened, and who did it. You will be asked for some identifying information such as your name, address, where you work, and how the child disclosed.

**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.chilyouth.2008.04.004*