

DO'S & DON'TS WHEN THERE IS A DISCLOSURE

If you suspect that a child may have been abused or is at risk for abuse, it is not up to you to try to prove your suspicions. Trying to do this may contaminate or ruin the investigation and may put the child at further risk. If you suspect a child is being or has been abused or if a child/adult discloses abuse, you must report this information to a child protection agency. The investigation will be done by people who are experts.

If you have seen or heard something that makes you suspect child abuse, remember to:

CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS

- Try to be calm and relaxed.
- Do not look shocked, disgusted or say mean things about who you think may have abused the child.
- If you feel that you cannot control your feelings, call your supervisor or a trusted friend to talk.

OFFER COMFORT

Support children by letting them know that:

- they were very brave to tell
- you are glad they are telling you about this
- you are sorry that this has happened to them
- they are not alone – this happens to other children too
- you will do everything you can to help
- you are there to love and support them
- you want them to tell you the truth – it won't make you mad, shocked or embarrassed

Do not say things like:

- "How can you say those things about ...?"
- "Liar."
- "You must be mistaken."
- "How could you let him/her do those things to you?"

- “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

Children may “take back” what they have said (this is called recanting). These children continue to need your love and support.

BE AWARE OF THE CHILD’S AGE & SKILLS

- Accept the words a child uses (including “slang” words) to describe what happened. Some children do not know the right words for body parts or sexual behaviours. Do not correct or change the words the child uses – it is extremely important for the investigation that the child’s words are used when telling what happened.
- Do not use words that may frighten the child, for example rape, incest, child abuse, wife assault or jail.

ASK QUESTIONS THAT LET THE PERSON TELL WHAT HAPPENED IN HIS/HER OWN WORDS

- “Can you tell me more about that?”
- “What happened next?”
- “How did you get that bruise?”

Do not:

- ask questions that suggest what happened or who did it, for example “Did you get that bruise because Mommy hit you with a brush?”
- question what the child tells you, for example, by asking “Are you sure it was Uncle Ted?”
- interrupt or add your own words when the child/adult stops talking.
- ask children “why” something may have happened – many children may think you are blaming them for what happened.
- try to change the mind of a child who has recanted or changed his/her story
- keep on asking questions because you want to try to prove or disprove abuse

RESPECT THE PERSON WHO DISCLOSES

- If a child/adult is telling, listen.
- If a child/adult is quiet, do not try to make him/her talk.
- Do not force a child to undress if you suspect s/he may have injuries.
- Do not show off a child’s injuries to others.

TELL THE CHILD WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT

- Do not make promises you cannot keep, for example, do not agree to keep what the child said a “secret.” It is important to explain to the child that some secrets must be shared in order to get help, or to keep people from being hurt. Tell the child the information will be shared only with people “whose job it is to help kids.”
- Answer the child’s questions as simply and honestly as possible. Do not make up answers. For example, if a child asks, “Will Daddy have to go to jail now?” you can only say, “I don’t know. Other people decide that.”
- Do not tell the child to keep any of your discussions with him/her secret.

(Adapted from Rimer & Prager, Reaching Out: Working Together to Identify and Respond to Child Victims of Abuse, 1998)