

HELPING FAMILIES WHEN A CHILD HAS BEEN ABUSED

Coping with the crisis of a child's abuse and disclosure can be distressing and exhausting for parents/caregivers. It is the parent's response to the child's disclosure that is so important to the child's recovery. Parents need help staying calm and steady for their children, providing stability and reassurance while everyone is coping with what happens after suspicions of child abuse are disclosed. Parents may ask staff/caregivers for information and advice. The following information will assist in helping those who are in need of support.

- A child's experience of abuse may cause tremendous stress and disruption in the family. A difficult period for children and families is to be expected. Suggest to parents that they try to keep consistent routines and limits, avoiding other new and challenging experiences, and unnecessary separations from primary caregivers.
- The child's brothers and sisters may be afraid of what is going to happen, or feel guilty for not protecting the child. It is possible that other children in the family may have been abused.
- Children communicate in their own way. Tell parents to let the child talk about what happened using his/her own words, without the parent adding words or asking leading questions. This may confuse the child and affect the investigation.
- Parents can encourage children to talk by being good listeners and trying to stay calm no matter what the child says. Tell parents what they can say to a child to offer comfort, and to give healing messages.
- Tell parents to accept any temporary regression in their child's behaviour. It may be advisable for parents/caregivers to supervise the child more closely, setting clear limits on aggressive, hurtful behaviours. Children need to be reassured that their feelings, fears, and behaviours that seem "babyish" or out of control are normal after this type of experience – with time they will feel more like themselves.
- Some children may need nighttime comforts and strategies to cope with bedtime fears. If asked, a child may be able to tell parents what s/he needs (e.g., a night light, leaving the bedroom door open at night). It is helpful to try to protect children from re-exposure to frightening situations and reminders of the abuse.
- This is a time when parents may question their beliefs about themselves as parents and protectors, their ability to judge people, feelings about the world as a safe place, and justice. It is important to get help or advice, not only for their children, but for themselves. Staff may direct parents to the appropriate community resources to help with emotional, economic, legal and/or safety issues.

- They should talk about their own feelings with someone they trust. It is normal for parents to feel helpless and guilty especially if they feel that they did not protect their child. Many parents think about things over and over trying to understand what has happened, being fearful that the abuse will happen again.
- Although parents' feelings need to be acknowledged, remind them that expressing their feelings to the child and minimizing or exaggerating the child's trauma may result in overwhelming and frightening a child. Children should not have to worry about whether or not his/her parents are coping – it is the job of grown-ups to look after the children.
- Recommend to parents that they tell the child's doctor about the allegation of abuse. Parents may want the doctor to check the child for health reasons and/or to discuss getting help. The child may also need reassurance if s/he is worried about anything.
- Advise parents to contact a child protection agency with their suspicions, concerns or questions. Parents can help the investigation by cooperating.
- Suggest to parents that they keep notes on further developments or disclosures, and their observations of their children's behaviour. This information may be helpful to the investigation and to the support people working with the child and the family.
- Reinforce to parents that even if legal proceedings do not result in charges or a conviction, the child is to be believed, and to be congratulated for his/her efforts. The child should never be blamed for whatever happens.
- Parents must decide whether or not, and when, to tell others about the abuse. Suggest to parents that they listen to the children's feelings as to who should be told. Ask them to respect the children's rights to privacy and confidentiality.
- Suggesting family outings and fun activities will help to reduce the stress for everyone.
- Remind everyone that "time heals."