

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. Help parents to understand some of the dynamics and possible impacts of abuse (e.g., why children do not disclose; why children may feel that they were in a real relationship with the offender, and the grief of that loss).
- Encourage parents not to blame their children for what has happened and to avoid questions that imply blame (for example, "Why didn't you just close the computer?"). It may be helpful to advise parents to try to consider and understand that the offenders gain control by manipulating and forcing children into doing things (for example, by using threats).
- Suggest to parents that they try to keep consistent routines and limits, avoiding other new and challenging experiences, and unnecessary separations from primary caregivers. This will offer comfort and security.
- The child's siblings 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 their 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. Model for parents what they can say to a child to offer comfort and support, and how to acknowledge the child's feelings.
- Children often have questions about what has happened, especially if someone they have a close relationship with has been charged with a criminal offence, and the living situation and/or access to the child has changed. It is important to encourage children to talk to someone they trust if they have questions or need support. It is perfectly fine if someone does not know the answer to a child's question. It is okay to say, *"I don't know"* or *"That is such a good question that I don't know the answer to; I will find out and tell you when I have an answer."*
- 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 they need (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.
- Encourage parents to 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. A parent's own memories may also be triggered, which can have an effect on their ability to parent.
- 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 their 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 they are 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 their efforts. The child should never be blamed for whatever happens.
- Encourage parents to try and model positive coping strategies for their children. Promoting open discussion, respecting each family member's feelings and styles of coping, finding outside supports, and maintaining a sense of hopefulness may help the healing.
- 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.
- Many parents will want to try and "fix things" right away. It can be reassuring to remind everyone that the passage of time often helps reduce stress and anxiety.