

What To Do If a Child Discloses Abuse

It is not uncommon for a parent or professional working with children to be the first person to whom a child discloses abuse allegations. Properly handling this situation helps the child, as well as the parent or professional. The following suggestions are important for parents and professionals to be aware of when a child discloses abuse:

Do...

- Practice your response before the situation arises.
- As a professional, understand your school/agency/clinic's policy for reporting allegation of abuse.
- Let your body language tell the child that you hear what he/she is telling you and that you believe them.
- Write down the exact words the child used in the disclosure and during your interactions. The words the child uses are significant, therefore accuracy is very important.
- Thank the child for having the courage to report this to you. The child needs to know that disclosing to you is the right thing to do. Some things to say are "Thank you", "I Believe you", "We will get you some help to deal with this", or "I am going to just listen if you need to talk"
- Inform the child, as soon as possible, of what will happen next with the reporting.

Do NOT...

- Use shocked or disbelieving body language when a child discloses to you.
- If you are skeptical, try not to express your doubts to the child. Don't try to talk the child out of what he/she is telling you.
- Do not hover over the child when he/she is disclosing – this is a position of power and may intimidate the child.
- Don't suggest or guess that the child might have been abused – this can impair the investigation and prosecution process.
- Do not make a conclusion about the validity of the allegation. This is the responsibility of the investigators, judge and jury.
- When a child "chooses" you to make their disclosure, avoid letting the "I'm special" feeling get in the way of responding in the best interest of the child.
- Do not discuss the allegations with anyone, including non-essential co-workers and relatives. This betrays the child.
- Avoid discussing the disclosure of the allegations with the child's peers around. The child deserves privacy.
- **MOST IMPORTANT – Do not ask the child ANY questions.** Children need to be interviewed by a specially trained interviewer at the Child Advocacy Center where the interview is recorded and the assistance from a multidisciplinary team can be used to ensure the best outcome for the child. Children should only be asked questions about their disclosure ONE time. The more people who ask questions the more the child may be traumatized and the more tainted their statement may become. If the case goes to court, each person who questions the child ultimately risks damaging the child's statement.

If you need to report child abuse please contact Child Protection Services or Law Enforcement Dispatch. If you have questions or concerns about child abuse, neglect or the reporting process and would like further information please contact the Child Advocacy Center of the Black Hills at (605) 716-1628.



CHILDREN'S HOME SOCIETY

What If...?

The "What If" Dialog

The "What If" Dialog is designed to assess a child's understanding of a situation, and most importantly, to provide teaching moments for parents/guardians and/or counselors. The "What If" Dialog can be used individually with children or in groups. Throughout these instructions the "Discussion Leader" will be implied as the parent/guardian or counselor who is leading the "What If" Dialog.

Introducing the Child Safety Discussion

Begin this discussion by explaining it is important to know what to do if.....there is a tornado, they lose their backpack, they have a toothache, someone touches them, or someone hurts them? Let them know you want to talk about safety and knowing what to do if something happens to them

Let them know the following:

1. Everyone should be safe
 1. No one should hit or hurt you
 2. No one should bully you
 3. No one should call you bad names or curse words
 4. No one should ask you to take drugs or drink alcohol
2. Everyone has private parts
 1. Private parts are the parts of your body covered by a bathing suit. Boys and girls have different bathing suits because we have different private parts
 2. They need to stay covered most of the time.
 3. If someone looks or touches your private parts it is important you tell a trusted adult
 4. If someone touches your private parts it is NOT your fault

Be cautious of using phrases such as "good touch," "bad touch," "private touch," or "secret touch" (or any similar touch descriptor). **That approach asks a child to determine the intentions of an adult.** The child ONLY needs to know to tell an adult; the adult can determine if it is an appropriate type of touch.

3. If something happens to you it is important to tell someone
 1. Telling a trusted adult is the right thing to do
 2. If you tell an adult and they don't believe you, keep telling until someone hears you
 3. Telling a friend is okay too but telling an adult is better
4. Who can you tell?
 1. Ask them to tell you someone they could tell
 - a. Have them draw 4 people they could tell
 - b. Have them share their pictures
5. There are all types of safety situations for kids such as private parts, bullying, getting hurt, stranger danger and others. Let's Play "What If" to learn "What would you do if.....?"

Play the What If Game using the deck of cards (if available)

- a. Ask child to pick a card out of the deck. Each child will read (help them if needed) the What If question out loud and answer the question
 - i. If they don't want to answer open it up to the group for answers
 - ii. Praise if they get it right
 - iii. Gentle correction of wrong (Actually it would be better to)

Beginning the "What If" Dialog

Instruct the child that you will be asking questions about situations and inviting them to share their reaction of what they would do. You may start with questions about safety plan topics, such as "What if you were at the mall and got lost; what would you do?" or moral topics, "What if someone in front of you dropped a ten dollar bill; what would you do?"

After several topics of safety have been discussed, the topic of sexual touching may be introduced. If the child is young, it may be best to divide this discussion into two sessions, introducing the sexual touching in the second session. With all children it is important to remind them of the guidelines before every session. The following includes samples of questions to ask the child:

- What if someone touched your private parts and said it was an accident; would you still tell?
- What if someone touched you and wanted you to keep it a secret?
- What if your best friend told you someone was touching their private parts?
- What if someone touched your private parts and said someone would get mad if you told?
- What if someone you really love touched your private parts and you didn't want them to get in trouble?
- What if someone touched your private parts and said they would hurt someone if you told?
- What if someone wanted you to touch their private parts?
- What if you told someone about someone touching your private parts and they didn't believe you?

As the child responds, look for opportunities to reward their initiative of telling an adult. When they respond incorrectly, use this as a teaching moment to help the child understand the correct course of action to take. Here is an example:

Q: What if someone touched your private parts and said it was an accident; would you still tell?

A: Nope! Because it was an accident.

Response: Actually, no matter if it is an accident or not, you still get to tell me. (Avoid using "have to" or "supposed to.")

Additional questions about other safety topics may be added at the discretion of the Leader. Here are some examples of questions that address domestic violence, drug use, pornography, and bullying:

- What if you saw an adult hit another adult?
- What if you saw an adult hit a child?
- What if you knew about someone who uses drugs?
- What if someone wanted to take pictures of you without clothes?
- What if someone wants you to do drugs/drink alcohol?
- What if someone at school was bullying you?

If Discussion Leaders want to get creative they can make more cards in which children can pick a card from the deck and then answer the question. This will allow for discussion about all types of safety. Other items might be added such as “What if someone knocks on the door and you are home alone?” or “What if someone approaches you online?” Suggestions for household questions might also include, “What if someone says their dog got out of the yard?” or “What if someone says they lost the key to their house?” Most importantly, this discussion allows a dialog to be opened between children and their parents/guardians in a relaxed manner, and also allows counselors to work with children on tough issues.

IMPORTANT –

During these dialogs it is imperative to keep the conversation light and relaxed. It is important to praise a child when they respond correctly and gently correct when they need more guidance.

Also, it is important NOT to use the phrases: “No one is supposed to touch,” “Do not let anyone touch those parts,” “Bad people might touch those parts.” Use of these phrases tends to imply the child is responsible for “allowing” or “letting” the touch happen. The child’s ONLY responsibility is to tell about the touching. Whether or not this is an appropriate touch is not the child’s concern.

Avoid telling children that only specific people can touch them their “private areas.” Doctors, parents, step-parents, and other people who are “allowed” to touch children’s genitals have been convicted of abusing children.

* In cases where a child has already been abused, simply change the questions from “What if someone... “ to “What if someone.... again?” or “What if someone else...?”

If you have questions, please contact the Child Advocacy Center of the Black Hills (605) 341-7337

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CHILDREN'S HOME SOCIETY

Keeping Kids Safe

Knowing What is Normal

In order to know if a child's behavior is of concern, we need to understand what is "normal" sexual behavior for the child's age. As an example, looking and touching of both same and opposite gendered playmates is fairly normal; however, anything oral-to-genital, genital-to-genital, or insertion of anything into the genitals is not normal, and should create concern. Children rubbing or touching their genitals is rather common. However, a child who will not stop this behavior when asked, or rubs/touches to the degree where they cause injury to themselves, is not normal.

Many resources exist to help guide parents and professionals to recognize and respond to sexualized behaviors by children. A simple, straightforward, but comprehensive, resource for both parents and professionals is *Updated 2011 Understanding Children's Sexual Behaviors* by Toni Cavanagh Johnson. This book and other materials related to concerning behaviors by children can be reviewed and ordered at www.tcavjohn.com.

Sleep-Overs

Many children are sexually abused while they are sleeping or in vulnerable situations such as changing or toileting, while staying overnight without their parents. Some offenders begin to touch while children are sleeping and progress to touching while the child is awake, and some specifically target "hard sleepers" because they are able to touch these children with a lessened chance of being caught.

When we allow children to stay the night at other people's homes we may increase the chance of sexual abuse. Although the offender may not be the parent in the home, they are often older siblings (Yes, both teenage boys and girls have been convicted of sexual abuse), neighbor children, or relatives of the family. We often know the families we allow our children to spend time with, but seldom know all the people our children may be exposed to while in their care.

Also, children are told to tell right away if someone touches them inappropriately. When children are allowed to stay overnight they may be forced to wait until morning to tell. It is unrealistic to think a child would ask to use the phone to call and "tell on" the person who just touched them. Some children never tell because they believe they will get in trouble for not telling "right away."

When making decisions regarding sleep-overs or overnight stays parents need to use discretion and it is imperative for children to have a way to communicate with their parents if something occurs they are not comfortable with or if they need to return home at any time. (See the "Code Word" example below as a way to provide children with this option.)

Code Words

Every child should have a "code word" they can say to a parent or guardian to indicate they feel uncomfortable, need to go home, or need to be reassured. This should be a word the child can say out loud in front of friends or other adults without losing face or feeling embarrassed or scared. This word should be something the child can say to alert the parent, so it should be a common word, but a word that is seldom used in everyday conversation. Some parents use the child's favorite superhero, so when

the child is feeling unsafe, they just have to say “Batman” and the parent know to get them out of that situation or provide the reassurance they need.

Some parents might use two words, one to mean things are okay and one to mean things are not okay. An example would be “Chicken” and “Fish.” When a parent calls and asks how the child is doing, the child can respond with “Chicken” to indicate things are okay, or “Fish” to indicate things are not going okay. Those words allow the child to casually say them without anyone suspecting they are calling for help, and also allow the parent to assess the situation without asking for a detailed response.

In some cases parents may use the code word as a way to prompt a “fake argument” so the child won’t lose face but the parents knows they need to get out of a situation quickly. For example, if a teenager says the code word the parent would respond with “You need to come home right now” and the teen responds back “I don’t want to come home now.” The parent argues that the teen doesn’t have a choice and then heads over to pick up the teen. One parent told me it is the only time his teenager has permission to be snotty with him.

Secrets

Trying to teach a child to distinguish whether something is a “good secret” or a “bad secret” can be treacherous. Describing the difference between the words “secrets” and “surprises” may help a child determine the difference: “Secrets” are often kept so someone does not get in trouble or embarrassed, and “surprises” are kept for a happy ending.

Think of someone saying to your child “Don’t tell your mom or dad. It will be our little secret.” Even if the person was talking about going to get ice cream it would still not be okay for children to think it was okay for someone to keep secrets with them from their parents. Parents are encouraged to teach children that mom and dads are supposed to know ALL secrets. Use the “What If Dialog” to talk about situations where someone might ask a child to keep a secret.

Teenagers

As most people know, teenagers do not always make the wisest decisions. In fact, we often expect teenagers to make many questionable decisions before they get it right. Unfortunately, despite the poor decision-making ability they have at times, they also can serve as convenient babysitters, and helpers for parents and youth-serving organizations. As teenagers go through puberty they experience hormone surges, which combined with their lack of full frontal lobe development (the part of the brain used for reasoning and problem solving), can increase their risk to make poor decisions regarding sexual behaviors.

Due to these poor choices we need to keep teenagers safe from themselves and children safe from teenagers. A significant percentage of child sexual abuse cases each year are the result of juvenile offenders. Often these teens have no known prior offenses and seem to reflect acts of curiosity, rather than predatory actions. We have seen both teenage boys and girls initiating these sexual acts with younger children. Regardless of the motivation, sexual acts by teenagers can have devastating results for the child, as well as for the teenager.

Many adult men will attest that teenage boys often experience erections without much provocation. Something as simple as a thought or benign commercial could result in an erection. This dynamic may lead to unintended results in a seemingly harmless situation. An example of a well-intended interaction turning sideways can be seen as a teenage boy volunteers in the children’s ministry in his church; while reading books to young children, one of the children climbs into his lap. The child squirms

around on his lap, resulting in an erection. This situation could go several different directions: The teenage boy may dismiss the entire situation and decide it was nothing he could control and the erection did not imply anything; the teenager may begin to experience humiliation and wonder if there is something wrong with him for becoming aroused as a young girl or boy sits in his lap; or, he may decide he likes the easy gratification, and makes having children sit on his lap to read a regular activity. Of course we would hope he would have the self-insight to recognize the totality of the situation, but in reality most teens don't have that level of self-awareness.

In many cases it not feasible to completely dismiss teens from babysitting or being put in a role of supervising children. However, if parents/organizations have teens interacting with young children, there needs to be some safety guidelines in-place; one option is the "Nanny Cam." These devices are reasonably affordable and could be used to help adults supervise teens in charge of children.

Professionals

"Molesters Do Not Wear an Ugly Mask. They Wear A Shield of Trust."

Patty Rase Hopson

Parents are often reassured by someone's title that they are not a danger to their children. There can be a false sense of security when the title "doctor", "pediatrician", "police officer", "coach" "teacher" or other title are used that seems to imply the person would not harm a child. Child molesters understand this same concept and plug themselves into these fields for this very reason. Although the majority of professionals working in these fields do care for children and promote child safety, there is a small percentage of predators who create enormous devastation before they are ever discovered. It is shown that serial offenders have, on average, 360 victims before they are caught the first time.

A child pornography ring was recently busted, and people in 47 states were arrested. The ring focused primarily on children under the age of five, with the greatest emphasis on infants and toddlers. The AP reported: "Federal authorities say those convicted included teachers, clergy, law enforcement, lawyers, doctors, coaches, and others who came into regular contact with minors." Ultimately, parents should make the rule that a person's title does not grant them free reign over their children, and does not make that person above reproach regarding concerning behaviors.

Sexualized Children

It is not uncommon for children who have experienced sexual abuse to act-out sexually with other children; it is important for parents and professionals to understand this dynamic. In some cases one child's acting-out can lead to many children acting-out. We have to protect children who have been sexually abused from putting themselves and other children into dangerous situations which can lead to additional trauma. Parents can become frustrated, with one stating "Last month my child was the victim of sexual abuse, and now people are calling me to tell me my child is touching their children inappropriately." This is the reason it is vital for children to be enrolled in play therapy for help before sexualized behaviors become out-of-hand. It is suggested Trauma-Focused Cognitive Therapy be used, as it is evidence-based and has shown the best results with children who have experienced trauma.

Rule of 5's

Given the above information on the poor decision making of teenagers, it is safe to say most children have some difficulties making decisions. In order to help children practice a life-time habit of learning to thoroughly evaluate choices and consequences, we teach them the Rule of 5's. The Rule of 5's consists of thinking ahead 5 minutes, 5 hours, 5 days, and 5 years. Children do not automatically think

through situations to get the best outcome for themselves which often results in unintended consequences. We have to help children practice the art of critical decision making with both small and big decisions.

We start teaching the Rule of 5's when children are old enough to grasp the concept of fast forwarding a DVD and being able to anticipate what is going to happen in 5 minutes. The idea is to teach children to "fast-forward" in their head 5 minutes, 5 hours, 5 days, and 5 years. Ultimately we are teaching them to be able to anticipate the consequences of both positive and negative choices. It is important to teach examples of both positive and negative situations. To help illustrate, one of each is given in the first example below.

Example:

Children – Positive – "I know you don't want to eat your veggies but let's fast-forward 5 minutes from now. What is it going to be like to be you eating your yummy dessert? What is the best decision to make?"

Children – Negative - "I know you don't want to pick up your toys but let's stop and fast-forward 5 minutes from now. You will just be getting out of time-out and you still have to pick up your toys. What is a better choice?"

Tweens/Teens – "I know you are mad at your friend, but let's fast-forward 5 minutes from now. Is your friendship going to be better or worse if you send that mean text? What is a better choice?"
(Interestingly, I ask myself the same question when I am tempted to send an angry text to my husband – 5 minutes from now will my marriage be better or worse because of this text?.....)

Example:

Children - "I see you are upset but let's fast-forward 5 hours from now. If you keep throwing a fit you will have to go to bed early. What will it be like to be you 5 hours from now when everyone is up and you have to go to bed early? What is a better choice?"

Tweens/Teens – "I see you are upset but let's fast-forward 5 hours from now. If you keep arguing or having a bad attitude you will probably be grounded by the end of the day. What is going to be like to be you when you are grounded from your friends/phone/computer 5 hours from now? What is a better choice?"

Example:

Children - "It looks like you really want to spend all your allowance right now but let's fast-forward 5 days from now. We are all going to the dollar store on Friday. What will it be like to be you when all the kids get to spend money and you don't have any? What is a better choice?"

Tweens/Teens – "I know it might seem like a good idea to put off all your laundry and chores till this weekend but let's check it out. What is it like to be you in 5 days when we all get to sleep-in or go places and you have to stay home to get all your stuff done? What is a better choice?"

Example:

Children – I don't recommend using 5 years with younger children because they have a difficult time comprehending what 5 years from now would really mean to them.

Tweens/Teens: "Anyone who has sex has a chance at getting pregnant even if they use protection. If you get pregnant, you get 3 choices; you can have the child, give the child up for adoption, or have an abortion. So 5 years from now you get to say 'I have a child', 'I gave a child up for adoption', or 'I had an abortion.' If you don't like the sound of any of those in 5 years, what is a good decision to make?"

It can be just as helpful to have children challenge us with the Rule of 5's with our choices and behaviors.

Example:

Child – "Mom, you said you didn't want to eat ice cream today. What will it be like to be you 5 minutes from now after you eat the ice cream? Will you feel good about yourself? What is a better choice?"

If we help children practice the Rule of 5's we teach them to think ahead and learn to take responsibilities for making decisions that reflect their true desires rather than their immediate impulses. Ultimately children, tweens/teens, and adults all benefit from using the Rule of 5's. When children watch us practice those same rules it helps reinforce the rewards for critical thinking.

Forced Affection

Most people would agree that it is adorable when toddlers begin giving hugs and kisses. Even with the right motivation, parents can get in the habit of forcing children to give hugs and kisses to people when they would rather not. Common statements such as "You are going to hurt Grandma's feelings if you don't give her a hug" or "Uncle wants a kiss, go give Uncle kisses" creates a double standard for children. We love that they feel love, happiness or joy and therefore show affection but then we force that same affection regardless of how they feel. Unfortunately this can send a message that we give affection because it is polite not because they do actually feel affectionate at that time for that person.

As we attempt to teach children healthy boundaries this conflicting information may suggest to the child it is okay to touch people and have people touch them (hugs and kisses) when they are not comfortable with the touch or the person. Parents are encouraged to make hugs and kisses optional. In addition, it is helpful to give children options such as handshakes or high-fives as a way of showing affection to people or other children that don't know well.

Internet Safety

Every day there are new developments in technology which put children at a higher risk to be victimized by online predators. As previously mentioned, children often make poor decisions which can be extremely dangerous when made with social media and other on-line outlets.

Parents and professionals who work with children should attend an internet safety course at least once every 6 months. Given the fluid nature of technology and how quickly information can be outdated it is essential that we stay current with the information needed to protect our children and our homes from the dangers associated with the Internet and social media.

Boundaries in Place

There are so many unknowns when we venture into the arena of parenting. We can set out with the best of intentions or have our plans carefully outlined but then... Kids happen. Unfortunately many parents have not decided what is "too much" or "too far" or "too little" or "too *fill in the blank*." What is too much sugar or too much television may be easily corrected if we get it wrong. But something

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such as knowing too little about a friend before allowing alone time with that friend or playing too violent of a video game may not be as easily corrected. Once we say yes, it is difficult to justify our reasoning and difficult for children to accept why we will not allow them to continue with the behavior.

If we don't know our boundaries it is tough to set those guidelines for children and let them know what we expect of them. In a lot of cases, the boundaries change as the child ages. If we know when they are allowed to date, drive, wear makeup, get a job, if/when they are allowed to stay overnight, and other decisions ahead of time it is much easier to educate our children of those boundaries and expectations. Making those decisions as they arise can subject parents to the constant exploring of parental boundaries which children are notorious for pushing and challenging. We may not know the answer to every situation but knowing the boundaries for the big ones is essential.

Be Prepared to Say No

There is a trend I have seen firsthand of parents taking the role of friend rather than parent. Children have plenty of friends but what they NEED are parents willing to set limits. It is just as easy to say "no" to everything as it is to say "yes". Parents have to find a healthy balance of allowing children to learn, grow, make mistakes and learn from their mistakes. As parents, we need to be prepared to say "no" when it counts and more importantly to mean it.

I challenge parents to think of their child walking towards a vicious dog. What would it take to get their child to hear "No"? Some parents have said it would take them using the child's middle name, some say they would have to yell or scream, while others say they would have to run and grab the child. The question remains, when it counts will your child hear your "No?"

The key is to start when the kids are young. It is easier to train a 1 year to listen than it is to try to get them to respect your decisions after 2 years of inconsistent discipline and leadership. If they won't listen to your instruction at 4 years old, the odds of them listening and obeying at 10 years old greatly diminishes without serious and purposeful intervention. At some point children get to an age where it is physically impossible to make them do what we ask so we have to teach them to listen and obey out of love and respect.

Ultimately, parents train their children how to listen to them. If we teach children our "no" means "maybe" then saying "no" may not have the desired impact we would like. This means that we may not say no as often but when we do it means what we intent the child to hear and act accordingly.

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