

## **How to Talk to a Child Who Discloses Abuse**

One thing that many people do not know about abused children is that **they often love the person who is hurting them**. This is very hard to believe but it is true. This happens because the person who is abusing them is often someone they know well and trust a lot. Children are therefore hesitant to reveal that they are being abused because they fear that they will get the person into trouble if they do so. Another reason for children not wanting to disclose abuse is that many times they have been frightened or threatened by the abuser.

The children in your care love and trust you. A child who has been abused may start talking to you about it. He may do so because he trusts you and wants to share the burden he is carrying with you. Hearing a child talking about being abused is very difficult. You may react in different ways. Your reaction is very important to the child. If you react with disgust or don't believe what he is saying, he may stop talking to you about it. He will feel that you don't trust him. This will prevent him from getting help. It also prevents the abuse from stopping.

Be very sensitive and listen carefully when a child is talking to you about abuse. Keep in mind that it is very difficult for the child to talk about being abused. This is especially hard for children who have been sexually abused. The child has gathered up all her courage to tell you about the abuse. How you handle the conversation will determine how you will be able to help the child.

### **Keep the following considerations in mind when talking to a child who is disclosing abuse:**

- Help the child feel comfortable. Talking about abuse is not easy for the child. Respect the child's privacy and talk to him in a quiet and private place. The place should be familiar to the child. This will help the child feel comfortable.
- Reassure the child that it is not her fault. Most children who are abused feel, or are told by their abusers, that they are to blame for their own abuse. It is very important to tell the child that she is not guilty and that she is not responsible for the abuse. Let them know that they have not done anything wrong.
- Don't react with shock, anger, disgust. Your reaction to that the child tells you is very important to the child. He will be watching your reaction closely. Be calm. When you react with disgust or anger, he will not feel comfortable talking to you anymore. He may also feel scared and confused. This will prevent you from acting promptly and getting help immediately.
- Don't force a child to talk. Give the child time. Let her talk to you at her own pace. If the child is unwilling to talk or seems uncomfortable, don't pressurize her to do so. If the child seems uncomfortable when talking about certain specific things, don't press her for details. You can change the topic to something that the child is more comfortable talking about.

- Don't force a child to show injuries. If the child is willing to show you his injuries, you may allow him to do so. However, when a child is unwilling to show you his injuries, you may not insist that he do so. Also, you cannot insist that a child take off his clothing so that you can see his injuries.
- Use terms and language that the child can understand. If the child says something that you don't understand, like a word for a body part, ask the child to explain or to point to the body part. Don't correct or make fun of the words the child is using. When you use the same words as the child does, it helps the child feel less confused and more relaxed. The child will feel that you understand him.
- Don't 'interview' the child. The purpose of your discussion with the child is to gather enough information so that you can make an informed report to the local CPS agency or to your supervisor. When you have the information you need, you must stop the discussion. Don't try to prove that abuse has happened.
- Ask appropriate questions. The questions that you ask the child must be appropriately worded. Choose your language carefully. This ensures that you get correct information from the child. For example, if you see a bruise on a child and you suspect that it is the result of abuse, you may say to the child, "That looks painful. Do you want to tell me how you got it" or "Do you want to talk about that bruise you have". It would be inappropriate to say, "Did you get that bruise when someone hit you?" Remember that you can do more harm by supplying a child with words and ideas. Let the child tell her own story and give you the answers.
- Don't ask 'why' questions. Why questions like, "Why did he hit you?" or "Why she do that?" will only confuse a child more. Remember that children who are abused often do not understand why it is happening. These types of questions will force them to think about the reasons for the abuse. 'Why' questions also will not give you any helpful information.
- Don't teach the child new terms or words. Don't teach the child new words or give her new ideas. This is harmful. When you do this, you are biasing the child. Also, when you teach a child a new term or word, you are changing the child's original disclosure. This is important in relation to the court and law.
- Find out what the child wants from you. A child may ask you to promise not to tell anyone. He may ask you to take him home with you. He may ask you what you are going to do. It is good to know what the child is expecting from you. This will help you in deciding what your course of action should be.
- Be honest with the child. Let the child know what you are going to do. This will build trust. Be honest about what you can do for him. Don't promise him things that cannot be done. For example- let him know that you may have to tell someone so that he will not be hurt anymore. Then he will not be surprised or afraid when he finds out that someone knows.

- Confirm the child's feelings. Let the child know that it is okay to feel scared, hurt, confused or angry.
- Be supportive. Let the child know that you are glad she told you about the abuse. Let her know that you believe her and that you care about her. Some children may think that you will not like them anymore because of what they told you. Assure her that you are still her friend.
- Remember: the safety of the child is most important. Be sensitive to and aware of the child's safety. Keep in mind that a child might be further abused if he reports that he has spoken to someone about the abuse. If you feel that the child is in danger, you must contact CPS immediately.

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