

## What To Do If You Suspect Abuse

What to do if you suspect a child is being abused.

- \*Ask open ended questions.
- \*DO NOT SUGGEST what happened. DO NOT LEAD the child to say things.
- \*Use words for sexual contact the child can understand.
- \*Tell the child it is okay to talk about even if someone told them not to.
- \*Reassure the child that it is not their fault and they are not "bad."
- \*Tell the child they did the right thing by telling.
- \*Be supportive.
- \*Limit the discussion for a short period of time. Do not press the child.
- \*Temper your reaction. Stay calm. If you explode, the child may regret telling.
- \*Let the child know what you are going to do about the report.
- \*DO NOT INVESTIGATE or try to handle the case yourself. You may damage potential legal actions.
- \*Reinforce to the child that they will be believed and they will still be loved.

### Keep in mind...

You may be angered by what has happened or is happening. Suspend your reactions in front of the child. You do not want to frighten a child to make them feel bad about what happened to them. Find adults to discuss your feelings with away from the child.

It is possible no legal action will be taken. Remember you need to be supportive for the child. That is your love. You cannot dictate what the "system" will do.

**Who do you contact?**

*If you suspect sexual abuse within a family...*

Contact social services in the county in which the family resides and tell them the child's name, parent's name, address (if known) and why you suspect abuse.

*If you suspect someone other than a family member...*

Contact the police or sheriff's office in the area in which the offense took place. Tell them of your suspicions.

*If you suspect your child is a victim of sexual abuse...*

Contact a physician who is familiar with sexual abuse to see the child.

**Common Reactions of Parents:**

When their child is violated, parents may feel violated, too. They experience feelings similar to those of their child: self-blame, anger at self and abuser, guilt, embarrassment and fear. They tend to want to overprotect their child to ensure the child's safety; however, the child may view this as punishment or lack of trust.

When parents have also been victims of sexual abuse, it may be difficult for them to separate feelings regarding their experience of abuse and that of the child. These parents may need to receive help to deal with their own abuse experience.

**Points to help parents talk to a child who has been sexually abused:**

Remember, a child may not have the vocabulary to talk about the sexual abuse.

This child often does not tell anyone about the abuse due to fear of not being believed. In some cases the victim has been told not to tell, threatened with harm, or told he or she will get into trouble if the "secret" is told.

It is important that parents stay calm and have their feelings under control when they talk to their child. How sexual abuse affects a child depends in part upon the parent's reaction. If parents become overly upset and angry, a child may think that she or he is bad or has done something wrong. When parents react in a concerned, caring, supportive and loving manner, the child feels freer to express feelings about what happened.