

What to do if You Suspect Abuse

Go to a Private Place and Talk to Your Child

Many children believe they are still keeping the offender's secret even though their eating and/or sleeping patterns have changed, or their behaviour has become noticeably regressive or different in some other way. If you observe these behaviour changes and suspect your child has been sexually abused, ask him or her, "I'm wondering if someone has been touching you in a way you don't like or don't understand."

A child who has not been abused will probably react with surprise or disbelief that you could even think in such a way. If she has not been abused, but is behaving in a way which tells you something is wrong, asking if she has been abused may help her talk about what is really bothering her.

A child who has been abused may not admit it immediately. Remember she has been subjected to threats, bribes and extorted promises to keep the matter secret. Confronted by such a question, the abused child may retreat from you, look at the floor, cry or show other symptoms of nervousness. At this point you might say why you are asking: "I've noticed you've been spending a lot of time with, you've been having nightmares and you're not eating well. That's why I've been wondering ...". If you remain gentle and calm, the child will begin to tell what happened, probably in a tentative, sketchy manner at first.

Believe Your Child

Children do not lie about being abused. They cannot imagine, on their own, such a thing. In a private, quiet place *listen* to what your child has to say. Gently ask questions such as, "Has someone been touching you in a way that makes you feel bad?" and "Can you show me how he was touching you?" so that you fully understand what is going on.

As difficult as it may be, try to *remain calm*. You may feel outrage towards the offender, but a child would probably interpret this reaction as your being upset with her.

Reassure Your Child

Tell her that she was right to have told you, that she has done nothing wrong, and that you will protect her from the offender.

Disclaimer

Mosac is unable to screen all these resources for professional soundness, effectiveness or suitability for individual cases. Therefore this information is provided as an aid to you, rather than a recommendation by us. We hope it is useful. We welcome any positive or negative feedback you may have. If you know of any other resources that may be of help please do let us know. Some resources may require a fee.

Reassure her by talking with her, holding her, helping her get to sleep, whatever she needs – for as long as she needs it. If the child needs you to be with her for the rest of the day, stay with her.

Call Child Protective Services (CPS) or the Police

You must report the child's experience to either the police or CPS within 24 hours. Use your judgement as to when and how to call. Some children are vastly reassured by hearing their parents call to report; others are upset by this. In this second case, it will be best to wait until the child is otherwise occupied before you call the CPS or the police. Either way, be sure to tell the child that a police officer, and a person from an agency which helps children, will be coming to hear her story.

Offer Continuing Love and Support

The child may be burdened with guilt, feeling responsible for both the offence and all the difficulties attendant on her revealing what has happened. This feeling is magnified when the offender is a family member and the household is forcibly separated as a result of her disclosure.

Most often, the prosecutor's case against the offender is based primarily on the victim's statement. It may seem to both you and your child that too many repetitions of the story are required, or that your child is questioned too closely. Your job during this time is to be by your child's side, offering your constant love and support. You may need to reassure your child quite often that this process is necessary to make sure she and other children are safe and that the offender gets the help he needs.

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