

WHAT DO I SAY?

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS WHOSE CHILD HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED

INTRODUCTION

Your child has been sexually assaulted. You may be feeling a broad range of emotions—outrage, anger, hurt, and a sense of responsibility. Several questions may also remain unanswered. Why did this happen to my child? Could I have prevented it? Will there be any long-term effects?

When the offender is a parent, the effects on the family are even more traumatic. Did it really happen? Should I leave? Will he go to jail? How could he do this?

Your immediate concern, however, must be for the child. When a child is molested, parents often feel uncomfortable with talking about the abuse. Yet, the future adjustment of the child depends upon the responses of the parents. When a parent can be emotionally supportive and comforting, long-term negative effects can be lessened.

Studies show that one in four girls and one in six boys will become a victim of sexual assault before they reach the age of eighteen. Unfortunately, parents are neither encouraged nor taught how to talk to children about sexual assault.

The intent of this guide is to provide suggestions to parents in talking with their child, anticipating physical and emotional needs, and deciding if professional counseling is needed.

IS MY CHILD BEING TRUTHFUL?

When a child reports a sexual assault, parents often question whether the child is telling the truth or not. However, evidence indicates that children rarely make up stories about being sexually abused. Usually they are too fearful of the consequences to the offender, themselves, and the family members.

If your child tells you about being sexually assaulted, let them know that you believe them. If you question whether the abuse really occurred, talk with a child protection worker or mental health counselor.

FOLLOWING THE INITIAL REPORT

Parents often feel they are the last to find out about the abuse. After the sexual assault is reported, children are generally interviewed by a child protection worker and law enforcement officer. Within the initial interview, children are asked to give a detailed account about the sexual assault. Your child may or may not be upset about this interview.

Children often do not directly tell a parent about the molestation. They sometimes feel embarrassed, responsible, or fearful of a parent's response. Do not blame your child for not telling you sooner. Try and understand what your child has experienced. Ask how he or she felt about the interview and try to determine if anything in the interview was confusing.

WHAT DO I SAY?

When a parent talks with a child about the sexual assault, the child is helped by:

- Understanding what actually happened
- Expressing feelings about the abuse
- Knowing a parent cares
- Realizing that he/she is not responsible for the abuse

Your ability to listen to your child is important because sexual abuse evokes strong feelings in everyone. The following guidelines suggest ways a parent can talk with a child about sexual abuse.

1. Find a time and place to talk with your child as soon as possible. Choose a place where you will not be interrupted and allow sufficient time to talk.
2. Ask your child to tell you about the sexual assault. Let your child tell you what happened in his/her own words and try not to interrupt.
3. Do not pressure your child to talk. Discontinue the discussion when your child indicates a desire to stop.
Example— "I can see it's hard to talk about this. We can talk more later if you want."
4. Do not contradict your child's story. Listen and be supportive to what your child says about the abuse.
5. Do not blame your child for the sexual assault or ask "why" questions. Some-times in talking with a child, parents express anger. It may be confusing to the child as to whether you are angry with the offender or the child. Children are NOT responsible for the sexual abuse even though they may often feel to blame. A child should be assured that the offender is the one responsible.
6. Understand that your child may care about the offender. When the offender is a parent or close friend, a child may be concerned about what will happen to that person. Frequent expressions of anger by a parent about the offender may be upsetting to the child. Help your child understand that what the offender did was wrong and he needs help to stop this type of behavior.
7. Reassure your child by letting him/her know that you are sorry this has happened to them and you will protect him/her from further abuse. Let your child know that they can tell you if anyone tries to touch them in this way again.
8. Talk with other children in the family. When the offender is a parent, brothers and/or sisters need to understand that the offender, not the child is responsible. The child who has been abused should be included in the discussions if he/she wants to be.

IS MEDICAL ATTENTION NECESSARY?

Generally, children are not seriously injured by a sexual assault. However, it is advisable to have your child examined by a medical professional to check for injuries. A medical exam can reassure a child that no physical damage has occurred. An exam, however, does not necessarily confirm or disprove a child's story of sexual assault.

HOW WILL MY CHILD REACT?

Each child reacts differently to a sexual assault based on the child's personality, age, type of abuse, relationship with the offender, and reactions of family and friends.

Effects may occur over a period of weeks, months, or years following the abuse.

Common symptoms that may occur immediately following the abuse include:

- Sleep disturbances
- Loss of appetite
- Depression
- Fears
- Physical problems such as stomach aches and migraine headaches
- Regressive behaviors such as thumb-sucking, bed wetting, and baby talk
- Sexual acting out behaviors such as inappropriately kissing or touching other children or adults
- Problems at school

ATTENDING PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING

Children's reactions to therapy vary and some may not want to attend. However, when possible, it is important that a child discuss the abuse. Very few children have no feelings about the abuse. Parents can aid in their child's healing by:

- Stating that therapy can be helpful and encouraging attendance.
- Recognizing that a child may feel angry, depressed, or physically upset during treatment. When a child begins to talk about the abuse, these symptoms are frequently present.
- Talking with your child during or following counseling if needed.
- Letting the therapist know if the child has misunderstood what is said in treatment, if symptoms continue, or if the child does not want to continue.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Parents must also be concerned about their own feelings about the abuse. Following the reporting process, parents often experience many negative feelings toward their child. Even the most caring parents may feel:

- Angry that the child did not tell them sooner
- Upset that the child did not tell them first
- Fearful that the child initiated the abuse
- Hurt and embarrassed that the child was abused

Such feelings should not be expressed to the child. Parents need to find friends or a counselor with whom they can talk about these and other feelings. Talking to someone who understands will benefit you and in turn, your child.

For more information regarding sexual assault contact the Wichita Area Sexual Assault Center at (316) 263-0185.