

Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure

What do I do if a child tells me about being sexually abused?

Whether you're a child's parent, relative, friend, teacher or someone else they trust, the following points are important to keep in mind when a child is disclosing sexual abuse or assault:

Try to stay calm. Child sexual abuse is a shocking thing to hear about. It would be best if you react calmly and with composure, but sometimes that isn't what happens. If your immediate response is one of shock or dismay or anger, quickly explain to the child that what happened to them is not OK and that your primary concern is them and their safety. Be sure to emphasize that they haven't done anything wrong.

DO NOT ask the child for details about the abuse, as this can further traumatize the child and compromise the criminal investigation. To report sexual abuse you only need enough information to make you suspect that sexual abuse has occurred. It's up to the authorities to gather details and evidence to determine whether this has happened and what the next steps will be.

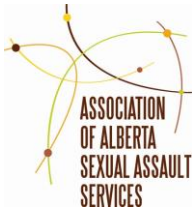
Tell the child you believe them. The most important thing any adult can do for a child who discloses is to accept that what you're being told is the truth. Often, a child's biggest fear is that the people they love won't believe their story. No matter what your relationship with the child may be, clearly demonstrate, through your calm, accepting and encouraging responses, that you do believe them.

Tell the child that this was not their fault. Reassure them that no matter what the circumstances were or how they responded, the abuse is not their fault. Responsibility for what happened belongs entirely with the offender, and it's extremely important that the child is told this because it helps to reduce feelings of guilt, denial and self-blame. Sexual abuse is NEVER the child's fault.

Ask before you touch. Although you may be someone who has a longstanding physical relationship with the child, don't automatically assume that touching – even a gentle hug or snuggle – will be comforting to them right now. At this point, uninvited touch may remind them of the physical contact experienced while they were being hurt.

It's up to the child to decide whether hugging or holding will be comforting or stressful, so respond according to their words and body language. Try your best not to take their reactions personally.

Don't make promises. Tell the child that you're going to get them some help with this problem, but don't make promises that you may not be able to keep. You don't know how the authorities will respond to the report, you don't know how the child's parents or other family members will respond, nor do you know what will happen to the offender.



Report the sexual abuse. You have a legal obligation to report the sexual abuse of a child to the authorities. Local child abuse hotlines and the police and child protection services telephone numbers can be found in the front of most telephone books as well as online. If you're unsure about who to call, you can call or text Alberta's One Line for Sexual Violence at 1-866-403-8000 for referral information.

DO NOT contact parents if their child discloses sexual abuse; you must always contact the authorities first.

Take care of yourself, too. Hearing a disclosure of sexual abuse from a child is often extremely difficult emotionally. Adults will naturally worry about the child's wellbeing, that they haven't responded to the child properly or followed up properly, and it's very disturbing to imagine someone hurting a child in this way.

If you have your own history of sexual abuse or assault, this may trigger memories of your abuse. It may be important for you to find someone to talk to about your feelings. You need to respect the child's privacy and only talk to someone who is in a position to do the same. This could be a colleague or supervisor (if this disclosure occurred while you were in your work role), a counsellor or a sexual assault service in your area.