

HOW CAN A PARENT RESPOND TO A DISCLOSURE?

Many parents wonder why their child did not immediately tell them about the abuse/assault. This is not unusual, and does not reflect upon your relationship with your child. Many children are very sensitive to the pain and grief that such a confidence will cause their parents and so they tell someone else such as a teacher or neighbor. Sometimes the child's feelings of fear or self-blame prevent them from telling anyone, and the abuse/assault is discovered accidentally. No matter what way parents find out about the abuse, they have a central role to play in their child's recovery. Reach out for support for your child and yourself.

Hearing a disclosure: How you respond is critical. Some of the thoughts that may be running through your mind are:

- Worrying about your child and yourself
- Unsure of how to respond or what to say
- Unsure of your child's comments and information
- Not sure if your child has been abused
- Angry with the abuser or even your child

Here are some suggestions on how to respond:

Listen to your child. Pick a calm, quiet time and place when your child is likely to be receptive and confiding. Be on the same eye level as the child. Say that you want to listen and help. Let the child use his or her own words and speak at his or her own pace. It is okay if they are not ready to talk.

Avoid interrogating your child. You do not need to gather all the details or determine exactly what occurred. This role is for investigators. You can gently encourage your child to talk by saying, "tell me more," "what happened next?" or "how were you feeling?" **Do not ask** "why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Stay calm. Your own strong emotional reactions may frighten or upset your child. He or she may feel the need to comfort and protect you, which may lead to silence or even a denial of the abuse. Of course you will probably feel upset and your child will sense that. You can acknowledge how difficult it is for both of you to discuss this. You can express how sorry you are that this happened, but that you are glad he/she told you so you can help.

Reassure your child. With both your words ("I believe you"; "this wasn't your fault") and your actions (time, attention, affection, etc.). Do not make promises you can't keep, such as "if we go to court, the abuse will go to jail." Reassure your child that you will do everything in your power to keep them safe and that you will need to tell someone whose job it is to help in these kind of issues.

One discussion will not be enough. Children need to know that they can bring the subject up again; help them with their questions and worries.

As much as possible, **continue family life as normal.** Your child is the same child as before, and should be expected to follow the same rules and consequences, contribute with the same chores, and have the same privileges. You may decide upon certain changes to help protect all of your children; it should be made clear that this is for safety and not as a punishment for what happened.