

What to do if you Suspect Physical or Sexual Abuse?

What should you do if you suspect that a child has been abused? How do you approach him or her? Or what if a child comes to you? It's normal to feel a little overwhelmed and confused in this situation. Child abuse is a difficult subject that can be hard to accept and even harder to talk about.

Just remember, you can make a tremendous difference in the life of an abused child, especially if you take steps to stop the abuse early. When talking with an abused child, the best thing you can provide is calm reassurance and unconditional support. Let your actions speak for you if you're having trouble finding the words. Remember that talking about the abuse may be very difficult for the child. It's your job to reassure the child and provide whatever help you can.

Tips for talking to an abused child

- **Avoid denial and remain calm.** A common reaction to news as unpleasant and shocking as child abuse is denial. However, if you display denial to a child, or show shock or disgust at what they are saying, the child may be afraid to continue and will shut down. As hard as it may be, remain as calm and reassuring as you can.
- **Don't interrogate.** Let the child explain to you in his or her own words what happened, but don't interrogate the child or ask leading questions. This may confuse and fluster the child and make it harder for them to continue their story.
- **Reassure the child that they did nothing wrong.** It takes a lot for a child to come forward about abuse. Reassure him or her that you take what is said seriously, and that it is not the child's fault.
- **Safety comes first.** If you feel that your safety or the safety of the child would be threatened if you try to intervene, leave it to the professionals. You may be able to provide more support later after the initial professional intervention.

If you suspect a child is being abused, it's critical to get them the help he or she needs. Reporting child abuse to child protective services or the police seems so official. Many people are reluctant to get involved in other families' lives. Understanding some of the myths behind reporting may help put your mind at ease if you need to report child abuse

- **I don't want to interfere in someone else's family.** The effects of child abuse are life long, affecting future relationships, self-esteem, and sadly putting even more children at risk of abuse as the cycle continues. Help break the cycle of child abuse.
- **What if I break up someone's home?** The priority in child protective services is keeping children in the home. A child abuse report does not mean a child is automatically removed from the home - unless the child is clearly in danger. Support such as parenting classes, anger management or other resources may be offered first to parents if safe for the child.

- **They will know it was me who called.** Reporting can be anonymous or confidential. Anonymous means you do not tell the official who you are when you call. Confidential means you do tell the official who you are and how you know the child, but you ask them to tell the family your identity. In most places, you do not have to give your name when you report child abuse. The child abuser cannot find out who made the report of child abuse.
- **It won't make a difference what I have to say.** If you have a gut feeling that something is wrong, it is better to be safe than sorry. Even if you don't see the whole picture, others may have noticed as well, and a pattern can help identify child abuse that might have otherwise slipped through the cracks. Your information may help save the child.

If you are a counselor, parent, teacher, or anyone else concerned about a child whom you suspect is being abused, the best way to begin is by talking to the child.

Start with open-ended questions. Don't assume that the child is being abused. There may be many explanations for why a child is behaving in a particular way or for how a child was injured.

If the child has a visible injury, ask how the child was injured. Ask open-ended follow-up questions to look for inconsistencies if the explanation for the injury seems implausible or doesn't match the injuries.

If you continue to suspect abuse and/or neglect call the authorities. Every state has a State Central Registry (also known as the Child Abuse Hotline) for suspected child maltreatment. Then let the authorities take it from there.

