

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention

How to Handle a Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure

If a Child Tells You About Sexual Abuse

Your response matters.

You don't need to investigate, fix everything, or have all the answers. Your role is to listen, believe, and help keep the child safe. Read on for additional guidance.

What a Disclosure Might Look Like

Children don't always disclose abuse clearly or right away.

A disclosure may be:

- **Direct:** A child directly states what is happening to them, such as "Someone touched me."
- **Indirect:** A child does not share the details directly but communicates through hints or gestures, such as "I don't want to go there anymore." or "Sometimes my sibling keeps me up at night."
- **Partial:** Shared in small pieces over time
- **Delayed:** Months or years after the abuse
- **Behavioral:** Changes in mood, sleep, behavior, or boundaries
- **Disguised:** A child relays information indirectly through another person, like "What happens if my friend tells their mom that someone was touching their private parts? Would their mom believe them?"

Any abuse disclosure, no matter how it's shared, should be taken seriously. False reports made by children are extremely uncommon.

Here's What NOT to Do:

- **Make promises you can't keep:**
 - Don't agree to secrecy or promise confidentiality. You may need to report.
 - Don't promise that things will immediately get better. In reality, things may get worse before they get better, but conveying this to the child may cause greater anxiety.
- **Ask leading/detailed questions or pressuring the child to give more details.** Remember, you are not an investigator.
- **Show shock, anger, disbelief, or blame.**
- **Confront or making judgmental comments about the person who may have caused harm.**

How to Respond in the Moment

What to Do:

Helpful Things to Say:

Stay calm, listen, and find a quiet place to talk.

"Let's find a quiet place where we can talk."

Thank the child for telling you.

"Thank you for telling me."

"You did the right thing. I'm really glad you told me."

Express that you believe them.

"I believe you."

Let them use their own words.

"Tell me more."

"What happened next?"

Reassure them that they are:

- Not in trouble
- Not at fault for the abuse.

"This is not your fault. You did nothing wrong."

"You are not in trouble."

"Nothing you did caused this."

Respond matter-of-factly. Even if the story is difficult to hear, it is important not to register disgust or alarm to avoid frightening the child.

Calm tone, neutral facial expressions, and steady body language are just as important as words.

"I'm sorry this happened to you."

"I know this can be hard to talk about."

"You're not alone."

Explain reporting and any next steps:

- Explain that you must tell someone else in order to get help.
- Let the child know that someone else may also need to talk with them and explain why.

"I can't keep this a secret, but I will only tell people whose job is to help keep you safe."

"I may need to tell some other adults so we can get you help."

"Someone else may talk with you too, so they can help keep you safe."

"I'll explain what happens next, so you know what to expect."

After a Disclosure: Follow These Steps

- 1 **Prioritize safety.** Make sure the child is not in immediate danger. If the child cannot safely return home, contact the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and/or local police immediately.
- 2 **Write down what the child shared** using their exact words, as soon as possible. You will need to use the child's language when making the report.
- 3 **Protect the child's privacy** and limit the number of people with whom you share the information.
- 4 **Follow reporting requirements**
- 5 **Get support** for the child and yourself.

Mandatory Reporting in Massachusetts

In Massachusetts, **certain professionals are mandated reporters** including educators, childcare providers, healthcare providers, and many youth-serving staff.

If you are a mandated reporter:

- You must make an immediate verbal report to the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) when you have reasonable cause to believe a child has been abused or neglected.
- A **written report (51A)** must be submitted within **48 hours**.

If you are not mandated reporter:

- Consult with your supervisor and your organization's reporting lead.
- Follow your organization's internal reporting procedures.
- If you are not associated with an organization, you can still report any suspected abuse by calling the Massachusetts DCF **Child-At-Risk Hotline: 800-792-5200**

Need Help Now?

- **Emergency:** Call 911
- **DCF Child-At-Risk Hotline:** 800-792-5200
- **MACA:** 617-573-9800 to find the nearest Child Advocacy Center
- Talk with your child's pediatrician about local referrals and resources

This resource was developed by the Children's Trust of Massachusetts, a statewide public-private organization dedicated to preventing child abuse and neglect by addressing its root causes and strengthening the systems that support families.



Learn more at ChildrensTrustMA.org and SafeKidsThrive.org.