

Office of Child and Youth Protection Safe Environment Training

Responding to Children's Disclosures of Abuse
Information for Clergy, Employees and Volunteers

What is child abuse?

Child abuse is defined by law as harm or threatened harm to a child's health or safety by the person responsible for the child's health or welfare, including sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.

Physical Abuse: Non-accidental physical injury to a child under the age of 18.

Sexual Abuse: Sexual exploitation of a child or adolescent for the sexual gratification of another person.

Neglect: Failure by a caretaker, either deliberately, or through negligence, or inability to take those actions necessary to provide a child with minimally adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, supervision, emotional stability and growth, or other essential care; provided, however, that such inability is not due solely to inadequate economic resources or solely to the existence of a handicapping condition.

Emotional Injury: An impairment to or disorder of the intellectual or psychological capacity of a child, as evidenced by observable and substantial reduction in the child's ability to function within a normal range of performance and behavior. Extremely harsh, critical treatment of a child may cause emotional injury. This can include punishment and verbal assaults that may involve belittling, scapegoating and rejection.

Who is required to report child abuse?

State law requires every person, private citizen or professional who has reasonable cause to believe that a child under 18 is being abused or is in danger of being abused, must report the suspicion of abuse to the Department of Families and Children (DCF) or the police department. Failure to report suspected abuse is a crime legally and wrong morally. No person, regardless of his or her relationship with the child or family, is exempt from reporting suspected abuse. A person reporting in good faith is immune from both civil and criminal prosecution.

Reporting is not an accusation or a proven fact. It is a request for an investigation to gather facts and protect the child from harm. **You do not need to prove the abuse prior to reporting.**

Your role is not to be an investigator, therapist, or social worker. Do not try to probe or gain more information. Your primary responsibility is to report. Investigation and validation of child abuse reports are the responsibility of DCF and/or law enforcement officials.

A child or minor should never be made to repeat his/her disclosure to a colleague or supervisor so a suspicion can be confirmed and a report made. Multiple interviews before DCF or law enforcement can taint an investigation and possibly jeopardize the safety of the child.

If additional incidents of abuse occur or are suspected after the initial report has been made, another referral to DCF with additional concerns and information should be made.

How to Respond to a Child's Disclosure of Abuse

Children disclose abuse in a variety of ways. They may disclose through very direct and specific communication, but that is not usually the case. More often the child will disclose through indirect means such as: "Our neighbor wears funny underwear," or "My brother bothers me at night." The child may disguise the disclosure by talking about a friend or sibling, but is just as likely to be talking about her/himself.

If a child discloses during a Religious Education class and you do not have someone to cover the class while you talk to the child privately, acknowledge the disclosure and continue with the lesson after your acknowledgement. The disclosure should never be discussed in front of the other students. Make sure you do follow up with the child.

If your students keep a journal or log of their thoughts as part of a class, mention to the students if you will read these journals throughout the year. If you read any information that should be reported due to the content, you are obligated to report this information to DCF. If students are to keep journals but you will not be reading them, mention this as well, so that a student will not use this format to disclose possible abuse.

If a child/youth discloses to you:

Do--

- Listen to the child without interruption.
- Let him/her talk openly about the situation. You may say something such as, "I'm glad you told me that." If you feel you need more information on the disclosure (such as if he/she says something like "My uncle touches me,"—you need to know a little more to be sure what the child means), only ask an open-ended question, such as, "Tell me more about that," and when he/she does, acknowledge with an "Okay." Do not ask any other questions of a specific nature.
- After this conversation, record in writing as accurately as you can what the child said. This will be important when you phone DCF.
- Support the child with active listening.
- Keep your own feelings under control.
- Use the child's own vocabulary.
- Tell the child that there is help available.
- Be supportive.
- Reassure the child that you will do your best to support him/her.
- Seek out your own support person(s) to help you work through your emotional feelings about the disclosure (if needed), keeping in mind the confidential nature of the information you may be sharing. Share your feelings, not identifying information about the child.

Do NOT--

- Suggest answers to the child.

- Express panic or shock.
- If the child asks you not to tell anyone about what he/she just disclosed to you, do not promise confidentiality. As you know, you are required by state law to call DCF.
- Probe for more information.
- Try to determine for yourself if the allegation is valid.
- Correct or criticize the child's choice of words or language.
- Ask a lot of questions.
- Conduct an investigation.
- Call the child's parents.
- Convey anger or impatience if the child is not ready to discuss the abuse.
- Make negative comments about the perpetrator.
- Stand over a child while he/she is disclosing abuse.
- Suggest to a child that you think he/she may have been abused.
- Discuss this report with anyone other than DCF and your immediate supervisor.

Suggested response to disclosure: "Thank you for sharing that with me."