

When a Child Discloses Abuse

by Lori S. Kornblum and Daniel Pollack

You are a teacher, a child care worker, a program administrator, or any other person who has contact with children. One day, you observe a child engaged in highly abnormal sexual play, for example, putting a doll's head close to the child's genital area, or "humping" another child. You know from experience working with children that this is unusual. Perhaps a child hints that they may have been physically or sexually abused. What should you do?

First, keep calm. Do not display exaggerated facial expressions. This may cause

the child to shut down. Children often test the waters when they disclose abuse. If the adults around them are calm, the child is more likely to open up about what happened. If the adults around the child react emotionally or forcefully, the child may clam up. You may never find out what happened, and if the child is being abused, you may unwittingly allow the abuse to continue.

Next, find out some basic information. You need only enough information to determine whether you have a "reasonable suspicion" that abuse or neglect occurred. If you work with children, you are likely a mandated reporter. If you have reasonable suspicion, you will need to notify the proper authority. How do you get to this determination? We advocate a simple interview, sometimes called a minimal facts interview. In Wisconsin, the Department of Justice helped develop an interview technique called "Safe, Simple, Smart" interviewing. The principles are the same; the goal is to get very basic information. The interview is a scaled-down version of a more thorough forensic interview that might be conducted by law enforcement, child protective services (CPS), or a multi-disciplinary team. This type of interview usually takes place at a child advocacy center, and best practice is to record the interview.

A minimal facts interview consists of a few basic steps:

- rapport building
- finding out basic information
- closing the interview.

This type of interview is minimal and may only take a few minutes. It is best to talk in a private area and not rush. Give the child as much time as they need to disclose at their own pace, in their own manner. The main point is to gather enough information to know if you should report, but not so much that you contaminate the law enforcement and/or CPS interview. Listen carefully and convey sensitivity, dignity, and respect.

Building rapport begins with a short conversation with the child, especially if you do not already know them well. This is just to get them adjusted to you and comfortable talking. You also want to find out how the child talks. You should introduce yourself casually: "Hi, my name is Mary. I'm a child care teacher. Do you know what child care teachers do?" In rapport building, ask open-ended questions that the child can answer such as, "Tell me about lunch today." This gives the child practice talking and you can get to know how the child shares information.



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As you converse with the child, do not make any corrections. Even if the child says they had ice cream and you know they did not, if you correct the child, you are using this as a teaching moment, not a discovery moment. Just keep that information in the back of your mind. If the child tells you they had ice cream when you know they did not, say, "Oh, tell me more about the ice cream." You may find that they are talking about a different day, or they are calling something ice cream that is not, or something else entirely. If the child is disclosing and just spontaneously wants to keep talking, let the child talk. Try not to interrupt or stop a disclosing child, as you never know if or when you'll have another chance to establish rapport.

Once the child is comfortable with you, move into the disclosure or discovery phase. Research has shown that we get the best results when asking open-ended questions. Examples are:

- "Tell me about the game you were playing just now."
- If a child has disclosed abuse, such as their parent hitting them, say, "Tell me about your parent hitting. When does that happen?" However, only mention something this specific if the child has disclosed it. Otherwise, you are asking a leading question—putting words into the child's mouth.

The only follow-up questions you should ask are, "Tell me more," or "What happened next?" or "And then, what happened?" Throughout this process, do not attempt to teach or judge. Do not try to teach the child the names of body parts, or good touch/bad touch. If you want to know where on the body the person has touched or hurt the child, just ask the child. If you suspect the genital area, you can ask, "What does that part do?" Most children have explanations

for what the genital parts do, such as "it pees" or "it poops."

Once you have enough information to give you reasonable suspicion of abuse or neglect, you need to close the interview using the following steps:



Photo by Ksenia-Makagonova

- Thank the child for telling you this information. Let them know that they did the right thing by sharing and that you are taking their words very seriously.
- If the child engages in self-blaming, assure them that whatever may have happened is not their fault.
- Let the child know that you need to tell some other people so they can help the child. Do not ever promise to keep this a secret.
- Ask the child if there is something else they want to ask. If you can answer their question, fine. If not, let the child know that you need to check further. Do not guess.

- Be sure that immediately after disclosure the child is, in fact, as safe as possible.

Your next step is to document what the child has told you by writing down every detail you remember. Use the child's words. Do not summarize. Use direct quotes; your detailed notes may help with the case later. A note that says, "Child said they were hit" without details is not particularly helpful. All notes should include pertinent dates, times, locations, names, and the relevant context.

Next, make the call to CPS or law enforcement. Do not procrastinate, especially if you are a mandated reporter. Keep in mind that CPS usually has a slower response time than law enforcement. For instance, if the child has disclosed that mom's boyfriend has been sexually abusive, and the child is ten minutes from being picked up by mom, and you do not know whether the boyfriend is in the house, it is reasonable to call the police.

Finally, do not tell the parent or guardian what the child has disclosed unless you are certain that they are not the alleged perpetrator, or that they will tip off the perpetrator. Allow the authorities to disclose this information when the time is right.

Every organization whose staff works with children should have a minimal fact interview protocol in place, along with mandatory periodic training. Solid information is our best line of defense against child abuse. We must do everything we can to improve our information collection capabilities, thereby enabling us to protect every child in our care.