

A Caregiver's Response to Child Sexual Abuse



The disclosure of child sexual abuse can impact the entire family system. If you are a parent or caregiver of a child who has survived sexual abuse, you may want to seek support from family, friends, or a counselor at your local rape crisis center. You may even want to connect with other parents or caregivers who are going through a similar experience. If you are able to work through your own feelings, you will be better able to support your child.

You may be experiencing many emotions right now. Often parents or caregivers will have feelings of anger, sadness, and guilt about what has happened to their child. You may have clear

feelings of anger at the person who abused your child, or you may feel confused, especially if the person who abused your child is also someone that you love and trust.

Recognize your own feelings; they are likely a very typical response to the trauma your child has experienced. Also know that your child may have different feelings than you, and that's okay. They may be experiencing feelings that are very overwhelming for them. Let your child know that whatever feelings they are experiencing, are ok and that there are many ways to safely express these feelings.



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What can I say after my child discloses to me or after the interview at the child advocacy center?

- Thank you so much for telling me. That must have been a really hard thing to do.
- I believe you and what happened is not your fault.
- You're a really brave kid for talking about what happened.
- I bet you have a lot of feelings about what happened; all of those feelings are okay.
- I'm always here to listen when you need to talk; do you feel like talking now?

Effects of child sexual abuse may be similar to those reactions experienced by adults after a sexual assault. Changes in behavior are perhaps the most important thing to note in children, since this is how they primarily communicate. Children may be irritable or have outbursts of anger, experience nightmares or have difficulty sleeping, display regressive behavior such as thumb sucking or bed wetting, and have trouble concentrating or have a drop in grades at school.

Caring for a child after a disclosure of sexual abuse can be challenging. The disclosure of sexual abuse creates a crisis for many families. Parents and caregivers may assume that once a child has disclosed that they will feel safe and return to everyday functioning. While children are very resilient and can heal from abuse, this healing takes time and patience.

What can I do to help my child moving forward?

- Maintain consistent rules and structure to increase feelings of safety.
- Give choices whenever possible to allow a greater sense of control.
- Allow children to express ALL feelings; assist them in expressing those feelings in safe ways.
- Recognize your child's strengths and help her/him to see her/his own resilience.
- Listen, believe, and support your child; your support is more important than anything else right now. 



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