



Responding After Disclosure – Some Helpful Hints

Some Do's:

Children who have supportive, caring, and understanding caregivers usually experience less ill effects than those children who do not. You play a very important role in your child's recovery by providing reassurance, safety and love; your child needs to know that you support them and that you believe them.

Below is a list of things you may choose to say to your child after they have disclosed sexual assault:

- "Thank you for telling me. I believe you".
- "I am sorry this happened to you".
- "You don't have to worry about taking care of me; the adults are responsible for taking care of things".
- "I know this was not your fault".
- "I am so proud of you for telling me; that must have been really hard to tell".
- "I am sad/angry/upset this happened to you. You may see me cry but that is ok. I am not sad/angry/upset at you at all and I can take care of myself".
- "This has happened in other families, we are not alone and we will get through this together".
- "I am sorry I did not realise this was happening to you. Now I know what you were trying to tell me".

Let your child know that you may need to tell other people about what has happened so they can help, such as the police, counsellor, teacher.

Remember that the experience of sexual assault often undermines children's sense of safety. Children may become more clingy, be afraid at bedtime, or need to have you near them more frequently, all of which are very common and normal behaviours. Children often need a lot of reassurance during this time so please do not fear you may be 'spoiling' them by giving them the security, reassurance, and attention that they need.

Some Don'ts:

When a child is sexually assaulted parents can often feel an array of emotions: sadness, grief, rage, disbelief, numbness, to name a few. You have every right to feel whatever you are feeling, and allowing yourself to be sad or angry or to cry shows your child that this behaviour is acceptable and reasonable. However, it is important to explain your feelings and reactions to your child when you experience them and to reassure them that they are not responsible for you feeling this way.

Children often believe they are the cause of everything that happens in their world and can feel they are to blame for your responses and reactions too. It is wise to keep explosive reactions and behaviours such as “I want to kill the ___” “This family has been destroyed” for other adults. Children can understand and deal with their care-givers emotions when they are not too overwhelming or scary.

Below is a list of things that can be unhelpful to a child after disclosure:

- Be careful not to put too many limits on your child's play or activities any more than you need to feel peace of mind – they may see this as a form of punishment.
- Don't make promises you can not keep, such as ‘You never have to see him again’, or that the perpetrator will get what they deserve/go to jail.
- Don't urge your child to ‘forget about it’.
- Do not berate your child because they didn't tell you about the abuse sooner – children have very good reasons (both real and imagined) as to why they don't tell about their abuse and this type of questioning can increase their feelings of guilt.
- Don't ask them why they didn't say ‘No’. This question assumes that the child had a choice in being assaulted. They didn't.
- Don't let your child feel as though they are responsible for any pain or disruption in the family because they told about what was happening to them.
- Do not to play the role of investigator and ask direct questions about the how's, what's and why's of the assault – sometimes children can not find the words, feel embarrassed, feel it's their fault, or feel the pressure in your reaction and may decide to ‘forget’ the whole thing. Also, this line of questioning is not helpful in terms of any police involvement there may be now or in the future.
- Don't assume they are lying about their experiences – children do lie, most often as a way to avoid punishment or getting into trouble, but they do not lie about sexual matters.