

# RESPONDING TO A DISCLOSURE

If a child has disclosed sexual abuse to you, you have a very important job. The child is trusting you to help them and these simple steps can guide you:

- Law enforcement officials and detectives ask you **NOT TO QUESTION THE CHILD** because it may compromise the investigation, hinder them from being able to remove the child from a dangerous environment, and/or hinder possible prosecution of the offender. Let them share whatever they want to tell you without prompting or coaching.
- Concentrate on the immediate needs of the child. Reassure them that you will help them in every way that you can.
- Take every disclosure seriously! It is not uncommon for kids to keep their abuse a secret for a long time before they get up enough courage to tell someone.
- Control your emotions: Don't panic. It is important that you don't frighten the child by your reaction! The child is looking to you for help. Show them you are able to help by being calm. It is normal to feel fear or anger but your job is to listen and respond to the situation. Do not blame, punish or embarrass the child.
- Reassure the child and thank them for telling you. **Tell the child that the abuse was not their fault.** Let them know that you care very much about them.



- Do not make promises you cannot keep. The child's trust has most likely been broken already by someone close to them. If they want to tell you a secret, it is important to assure them you can keep it a secret as long as they are not in danger. If the child tells you they are being hurt, you must report it and the child should know that. Quick fixes are unlikely in child abuse situations, but do tell the child that God cares and He will help you to help the child.

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- The child might want assurance that something is going to be done about their situation right away. Reassure the child that they have taken the first and most important step by telling someone and let them know that the best thing to do to keep them safe is to report it.
- **Write down everything the child has told you, even if you think it isn't important.** Be sure to document dates and use the child's own words.



- Determine the child's immediate safety. Take whatever steps you need to ensure that the child won't be in danger of harm (such as retaliation from an abuser who discovers that the child has exposed the truth). Alert the police and/or Child Protective Services.

**NOTE:** Following this next disclosure tip may be the most critical element in protecting the child from further harm. While it is appropriate to tell the police and/or Child Protective Services about the disclosure, **IT IS NOT ADVISABLE TO TELL ANYONE ELSE.** —As difficult as this may seem, this includes the parents or caregivers.

- It is often difficult to tell exactly who might be involved in the abuse and impossible to tell who might go to the suspect and tell them about the disclosure. Often one or more of the child's caregivers turns out to be an accomplice to the abuse. This could result in the suspect destroying evidence, preparing an alibi, retaliating, or harming someone else. The best course of action is to keep the number of people aware of the investigation to an absolute minimum. This will help to preserve the integrity of the investigation and will yield the best results for the victim(s).

***Keep sexual abuse disclosures confidential. Refuse to talk about them with others in your church or organization who don't absolutely need to know. Stop gossip when you hear it, to protect those in involved!***

