

Talking with Your Child About Suspected Sexual Abuse

Signs of sexual abuse in children are often difficult to recognize. Many signs can go unnoticed by parents and guardians. Signs of child sexual abuse can occur in behavioral, physical, or verbal capacities.

Behavioral signs may include regressive behaviors like bedwetting and thumb sucking, angry outbursts, fear of being alone with specific individuals, sexually acting out with toys, nightmares, and not wanting to remove clothes.

Physical signs include bruising in the genital area, pain while using the bathroom, blood or discharge from mouth or private areas.

Verbal signs include inappropriate sexual talk or a sudden shift in their desire to talk.

If you suspect or worry that your child has been sexually abused, here are some suggestions for talking to your child.

1. **Educate yourself prior to talking with your child.** Learn about signs of trauma, facts vs. myths, and helpful resources. One recommended source provided by The National Child Traumatic Stress Network can be found at: <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/caring-kids-what-parents-need-know-about-sexual-abuse-webinar>
2. **Find a good place to talk.** Have the conversation in a comfortable place, like their bedroom. Make sure distractions are limited; turn off televisions, computers, and other distractions. Try to avoid having other people in the room as victimized children are likely to be embarrassed or nervous.
3. **Try to be casual in tone.** A serious tone can scare a child and may limit their willingness to talk. Treat this as a conversation, not an interview.
4. **Reassure your child that he/she is not in trouble.** Children who have been sexually abused can think that they have done something wrong. Reiterate the importance of speaking truth while ensuring your child that he/she has not done anything wrong.

5. **Use open-ended questions, not leading questions.** Open-ended questions often start with “Tell me about...” and allow for a descriptive response. Leading questions often start with “Did you...” and are answered with a yes or no. Try and avoid yes/no and either/or questions. Here are some examples of appropriate questions:

- *Tell me about games you and (insert name) played.*
- *What are some of your feelings about (insert name)?*
- *Adults don't usually ask kids to keep secrets. Why do you think that is? If an adult does, it is important to tell mommy or daddy. If you have a secret and you haven't told mommy or daddy, you are not in trouble. Now would be a good time to tell me. I am here to listen.*

6. **Reflect their nonverbal cues.** For example, “I can tell you upset,” or “it seems like you are thinking deeply about these things.” Statements that reflect feelings help validate your child’s experience.

7. **Allow for silence.** Victims are often ashamed and scared to talk. Abusers can threaten their victims in order for them to maintain their silence. If they don’t respond immediately, don’t push them. Be patient.

8. **Ongoing conversation.** Let your child know he/she can always approach you about the topic.

If you think your child has been sexually abused, seek out a trained professional (i.e. pediatrician, therapist) for further help. The professional will be able to walk you and your child through appropriate actions and abuse reporting.

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