

## Child Protection Resources: What to Do If a Child Discloses Abuse

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*Adapted from Just in case: Parental guidelines in case your child might someday be the victim of sexual exploitation by National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2007*

Henry Ward Beecher, a prominent clergyman and social reformer in the 1800s wrote: “Children are the hands by which we take hold of heaven.” As parents, grandparents, and caretakers of the young, we know that young vulnerable hands must be grasped firmly during development. We create safe spaces for our children where they can feel secure and learn to trust. We are aware that perpetrators of crimes against children are crafty in executing their plans, and we need to place barriers between children and those who would harm them.

But children themselves can give us subtle indications that something may be wrong. Most children do not have the language and communication skills to talk about abusive behavior; they may lack an understanding of what is sexual exploitation or that they have been abused. Yet children who have been sexually abused often show both physical and behavioral symptoms of being abused. In children who have been abused, these behavioral changes are manifest suddenly, such as abrupt changes in eating habits and school performance or sudden onset of sleep problems or nightmares.

No one behavioral change provides firm evidence that a child has been abused. Rather, any abrupt change should raise our awareness that something upsetting is going on with the child. Younger children may regress or lose skills that they already mastered, moving back to an earlier stage of development, such as radical changes in toilet training.

In especially young children unusual fussiness, fear, or lack of interest in activities may be noticed. In some cases, behaviors may be disruptive. Other signs include inappropriate or problem behavior. Children often act out what they have seen or experienced, such as sexual activity, exhibiting adult-like sexual behaviors, language or knowledge.

We can “listen” to meaning rather than facts in our conversations with children, and we can “listen” for the unusual, such as sudden changes in their behavior.

### **What to Do**

If a child discloses abuse to you, here are some Do’s that will help the child:

- ❖ Listen and stay calm.

## What to Do If a Child Discloses Abuse

- ❖ Respect the child's privacy and potential fear or uncertainty about telling.
- ❖ Support the child and the decision to tell, no matter what he or she says.
- ❖ Express love and support with words and gestures.
- ❖ Explain to the child that he or she has done nothing wrong.
- ❖ Help the child understand it was the *offender's* fault, not the child's.
- ❖ Remember that children seldom lie about acts of sexual exploitation.
- ❖ Assure the child they can come to you at any time and tell you anything.
- ❖ Seek appropriate medical care for the child.
- ❖ Notify law enforcement and alert the child-protection, youth-services or other appropriate social services organization in cooperation with law enforcement.
- ❖ Seek out counseling or therapy for the child and the entire family.