

DID YOU KNOW . . .

That an adult's response to a child's disclosure of abuse has a huge impact on the child and the subsequent investigation? It can even have a serious impact on the court case, if there is one. Knowing the best way to respond to such a situation, should you ever have to do so, is an important component of every parent's or professional's skill set.

Let's start with parents. At a recent conference, we learned that the majority of children disclose to the mother while she is doing the dishes after dinner. Now, if you are like most busy mothers, your mind is racing while doing dishes. You are thinking of all the things on your "to do" list, worrying about bills, trying to figure out how to be in three places at once the next day to cover all your children's needs, etc. The last thing you expect is to have a child start talking to you about being abused! But this very situation happens more than you might think, because there is no way to predict when a child will feel ready to share this horrible burden. What is important is that you are ready; that you prepare yourself in advance for the possibility. First, it is crucial that you have taught your children about personal safety and/or supported the curriculum provided by the Diocese on abuse prevention. Second, and equally important, is that you have created and maintained an atmosphere in your home that encourages open and honest communication with you.

So now that you have that, what do you do when your child starts to disclose? The most important thing you can do is to remember to **respond** rather than **react**. Most parents are horrified at even the suggestion that a child may be abused, and rush to hug or comfort the child; or parents react by showing their own distress or anger at the news. What do you think this does to a child, especially a young child? The younger the child, the more that child watches significant adults for a reaction. If the child is just beginning to disclose and the parent, or any trusted adult, cries out in anguish, shows anger toward the alleged abuser, or demonstrates any number of extreme (albeit justifiable) emotions, that child is likely to shut down and may never tell the rest of the story. What children need more than anything at a time like this, is for the adult to remain calm and collected. Simply listen attentively. I'll repeat that—listen attentively, but DO NOT show your own emotion. That can wait, since what is most urgent at this time is that your child feel safe enough to unburden himself of all that he has been carrying regarding the abuse.

At this point, I would imagine that many of you reading this will think I have lost my mind; that no parent who loves a child can be dispassionate at a time like this. Trust me; it is absolutely essential that you remain calm. For nearly a decade as a child abuse investigator, I listened to very young children share all the nightmarish details of their abuse with me, and believe me, there is nothing that I have not heard at this point. Even without being a parent to those children, I wanted desperately to wrap the children in my arms and take them someplace safe forever, especially when it was a parent doing the abusing. But, I also knew that to cry or show disgust toward the perpetrator was the last thing I should do, because I might never get the full story from that child if I did.

Also, very young children can mistake the adult's reaction as being toward the child, as if the adult is disgusted with or angry at the child. When a child finally has the courage to come forward, that child needs full support and no hint of judgment, even if it is misperceived judgment. Any child who discloses is also testing the waters, generally by sharing a little bit first to see what the adult's reaction is. Therefore, if the reaction is emotional and over the top, the child may feel that it simply isn't safe to share more. This has a twofold negative effect: 1) the child may never get the help that is needed to heal if all of the abuse cannot be disclosed; and 2) if there is a court

case against the abuser, the offender may not get the full extent of the law because not all of the circumstances were known.

This leads to another very important reason for adults to remain calm. Most of us who love children want to see justice done. In many states, offenders can be found “guilty” in the child welfare system but not in the criminal justice system unless certain types of evidence are available. Often, physical evidence is gone in less than 24 hours, making the child’s statements the main evidence against the accused. If a parent has reacted strongly in a negative way, the child may never be willing to testify, thereby leaving the accuser free to do it again and again.

Conversely, if a parent stays calm but is overly concerned with the child’s struggle to share the abuse, and starts filling in the gaps, it is equally problematic. The parent may suggest things that the child later adds into his or her own story, thereby leaving questions as to the credibility of the child if some of the parent’s “information” is proven to be false. When cases go to court, the defense attorney’s job is to discredit evidence and particularly, witnesses. If a young, impressionable child gets confused because of a parent’s input, or feels that the parent wanted the child to say something, even if it isn’t true, you can see how that could hurt the case.

A corresponding concern is a parent who investigates too much and ruins the case. Notice that earlier, I said that parents should **listen** attentively. I did not mention asking questions for a reason—that is for trained professionals only! If a parent, however well-meaning, starts asking questions that are considered to be “leading,” a good defense attorney can take the case apart in court. Young children, as mentioned before, watch adults for cues and seek to please adults. Therefore, if we as the adults start asking questions that encourage certain disclosures, they can taint the case, suggest answers, and muddle the truth. Many examples could be given, but what parents need to remember is not to ask anything at all; just listen and support the child. In the final analysis, we should listen, accept what we are told, and then call professionals immediately.

It is fine for a parent to say, “I am so sorry this happened to you. I am going to take you to the doctor so we can make sure you’re okay.” If the child asks if you have to tell anyone else, or asks you to promise not to tell, remember this: never, never, NEVER lie to the child!! If your child is like many others, a visit to the doctor, or the possibility of telling a stranger, such as an investigator, can be terrifying. However, an adult should never lie to the child or trick her into going. The best course of action is to explain that what happened is something that the adult should never have done and that it has to be reported. Always remember to put the blame on the offending adult. The parent/caretaker can explain to the child, in age-appropriate language, that it is important to tell someone so that the person cannot do this to any other children. Don’t even use the word “hurt,” if at all possible. Try to keep the language as neutral as possible.

If there is any reason to suspect that there may be physical evidence, take your child to the doctor or emergency room **immediately**. Do not look for evidence yourself; just take your child to a professional who is trained in both investigation and the collection of evidence. Once again, any case against an abuser is stronger when you can testify that you did not attempt to locate or handle evidence, and the professionals can testify to a clean “chain of custody” of the evidence. In many communities, there are professionals in the Emergency Room who have SANE training, which stands for sexual assault nurse examiner. They are trained to provide exams that are as easy as possible for a victim. Alternatively, there may be a local sexual assault organization with employees who are trained to accompany a victim, however young, to the ER. In other communities, there is a Child Advocacy Center (CAC), and once the authorities have been contacted, the child can be referred to the CAC where only one exam and interview have to take place for all professionals. (See links at the end of this article for local resources.)

Those of you who are not parents, but are professionals working with children, may think I have forgotten you. I haven't, and hopefully, you have read the sections above for parents, since they are equally important for professionals who are not in the child's home. However, there is an additional issue for those who work with children but who are not the parents of those children, and that is terminology. It is absolutely essential that you prepare yourselves for any words that a child may use when disclosing abuse. In most instances, those reading this are working in Catholic settings and as such, do not expect to hear children use street language to describe body parts. However, children do hear words on television, in movies, and from perpetrators and those words may not be ones that the adult is comfortable hearing. *Please* remember that a child's disclosure of abuse is not the time for a grammar lesson, or any type of correction. It is a time to accept what the child is saying with whatever language the child uses. There is plenty of time later to give alternative words to use. A well-intentioned adult may correct a child in the midst of disclosure, only to cause the child to stop talking entirely. No matter how distasteful it may be, using the child's words when listening will allow the child to feel supported and understood.

So, as a recap, please remember these points if you ever find yourself in a situation where a child is disclosing abuse to you:

- Listen and respond; don't react emotionally
- Remain calm and attentive
- Let the child tell the story and do not ask questions
- Do not correct the child's use of words
- Tell the child that you are glad s/he felt comfortable talking to you about this
- Report the abuse to the proper authorities as soon as possible
- Take your child for a medical exam immediately, if you have any reason to believe there may be physical evidence. Do not try to examine the child yourself!

Finally, get help for the child and for yourself. If your child has been a victim of abuse, it impacts the entire family and it is necessary for all family members to have support in order to emerge from the situation healthy and whole. God willing, your family will never have to deal with abuse of a child, but it is always better to be prepared. And, it may not be your child, but another child who looks up to you and trusts you, choosing to disclose to you rather than anyone else. Be prepared. Role play with other adults so that all of you are ready, should a child need you.

Next month, we will explore this topic further, covering some warning signs for parents and adults to watch for when children have been abused but are afraid to tell. If your child is dealing with these issues currently and you need assistance, or if you would like further information on this topic, please contact Debora at the Office for Child Protection at (508) 674-4681. We are here to help in any way that we can. Protecting God's children is our mission!

Debora Jones

Resources

1. Children's Advocacy Center of Bristol County website: <http://www.cacofbc.org/>

2. Massachusetts Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence website:
http://www.janedoe.org/safety/safety_dv_shelters.htm
3. Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women website:
<http://www.mass.gov/women/resources/SADV.htm>
4. Massachusetts Rape Crisis Centers website:
http://www.mass.gov/Eeohhs2/docs/dph/com_health/violence/rape_crisis_center_list_large_print.pdf