

How to support your child if they say they have been abused

Parents, guardians, teachers and many other caring adults strive to create safe, joyful and meaningful environments in which their children can play, grow, learn and reach their full potential.

It can feel devastating, then, when despite a family and a community's best efforts, a child molester manages to have contact with and abuse a child. When that happens, and it does, children then face the difficult challenge of summoning up their courage to reveal the abuse.

"Children often feel scared to come forward because they fear they won't be believed or could get in trouble," said Society of the Holy Child Jesus Sister Sheila McNiff, director of the archdiocesan Office of Victims Assistance Ministry for victims/survivors of sexual abuse. "They may also feel ashamed or self-blaming for what happened."

Additionally, said Sister McNiff, if the adult molester is a well-liked coach or teacher, the child may fear getting this person into trouble.

What's helpful for a child disclosing an abusive incident is for an adult to "really want to listen and to be sensitive to how much courage it took for the child to come forward," added Sister of St. Louis Margaret Fitzer, a counselor working with Victims Assistance Ministry.

In the moment of disclosure, parents should believe the child, and assume he or she is expressing the truth, said Sister McNiff. The details of what happened can be sorted out later.

Teaching Touching Safety — the program designed by VIRTUS® which is being implemented in schools and parishes of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles — offers guidelines parents and adults can follow to assure children that they are safe and that telling about the abuse was the right thing to do:

1. Let children talk. Let them tell what happened and just listen.

2. Avoid displays of shock or disgust. An adult abuser may have told the child that nobody will believe him or her. An emotional or otherwise uncontrolled response by the person the child trusts with the story may shut down the child's willingness to communicate.

3. Respect the child's privacy. Find a private place to listen to the report and write down what happened — names, dates, times and locations. This will spare children from extensive questioning later on, which can make a child feel as if trusted adults do not believe the child's report.

4. Address the child's feelings and let him or her know that you trust the child and that the story will be investigated. When a child overcomes that fear and is willing to talk, it is critical to trust the child and to

treat the child's story as if it is completely true.

5. Be honest with the child about what will happen next. Tell the child that the incident will be reported to the proper authorities and only with those people who need to know to help keep the child safe.

6. Do not scold the child. This is not the time to express anger or punish a child for having gone somewhere with a stranger or for having kept a secret. Such a reaction may confirm the child's fears about reporting and may stop the child from trusting his or her parents or other safe adults in the future.

7. Get immediate medical attention if necessary. Contact local medical professionals to determine who is best qualified to examine the child for the physical effects of sexual abuse and to test for sexually transmitted diseases, if necessary.

8. Get counseling/therapy for the child. Get the best professional help available to provide the child and the parents or guardians with the support to deal with the effects of sexual abuse.

9. Don't be surprised or upset if the child reports the incident to someone outside the family. Children become very concerned about a parent's reaction and often seek the advice and support of someone else to get through the initial period of telling an adult about the abuse.

A parent's response to a disclosure by a child has three primary goals. First, to protect the child from further abuse. Second, to stop the molester from abusing any other child. Third, to address the child's symptoms and the harm done to the child and the family.

"The opportunity to talk with a counselor will be really helpful to assist a child with their healing, said Sister Fitzer. "The child benefits from being affirmed for having come forward. They feel empowered that they helped themselves and others. The child protected other children from being hurt."

Counseling can also benefit parents. Abuse is a trauma for the family, said Sister McNiff.

Coming forward will be much easier for children if parents have an up-front conversation with children before anything harmful happens, added Sister Fitzer. "Reach agreement with a child that if they are touched in an unsafe way, they will tell you. Let them know you care and that you want them to be safe."

For the Office of Victims Assistance Ministry of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, call Sister Sheila McNiff, director, at (213) 637-7650.