

CLIENT HANDOUT

How to Respond to Suspected Child Abuse

By Douglas J. Besharov*

If your client thinks that someone is abusing his/her child or your client thinks that (s)he is losing control and may be hurting the child, the suggestions below may help the client through this most difficult of times.

You must be alert to the possibility that your child may have been abused by a baby-sitter, a teacher or a custodian at your child's school, a day care worker, the older sibling of a playmate, a relative, a spouse or ex-spouse, or his or her companion. It can happen to anyone's child.

Focus on your child's needs. You will feel many powerful emotions if your child is abused, ranging from anger to bitterness to betrayal; you may even feel vengeful towards the perpetrator. But your prime concern must be your child, who, with your help, will have the opportunity to recover.

Vent your feelings to a good friend, a clergyman, or a mental health professional. Never direct them to your child, who may already be afraid and confused. Your child's response may be shaped by your reaction, especially in sexual abuse cases, in which some children tell only part of what happened, holding back the rest to see how you react; if you react too strongly, you may not learn the whole story. It helps to remember that once the victimization has come to light, it will probably stop.

Begin by supporting your child. Commend him or her for telling you about the abuse. One of a child's worst fears is that he or she is somehow to blame for the incident. Alleviating this guilt is of utmost importance. A child also needs to know that it is alright to talk about the abuse. Tell your child that you are glad he or she told you about the situation, so you could help. Be direct. Say, "I'm glad you told me," or "I'll do my best to protect you."

Assure the child that you will do your best to make sure that this does not happen again. Be sure not to make this promise, however, unless you can keep it. The loss of trust is a major consequence of sexual abuse, and the child needs to regain the ability to rely on adults. Empty promises cannot do that.

* This material is derived from Besharov, *Recognizing Child Abuse: A Guide for the Concerned* (Free Press 1989). The author is a Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, DC.

Address your child's other questions and concerns. Try to allay any fears about threats the abuser may have made, such as that the child will go to jail. Make sure that the child knows that this could never happen. Uncertainty is stressful for us all, but especially for children. As best as you can, tell your child about any medical, legal, or counseling process that he or she may need to go through.

Respect your child's privacy. Do not share the details of the abuse with many people. To do so may stigmatize him or her, with the effects felt long after the crisis. Tell your child that you will only tell people who need to know—the people who are going to help.

Verify the facts as best you can. Some experts assume that the child is telling the truth when they report child abuse. After all, children rarely lie about being sexually abused; to know much about it, they generally have to go through the experience. Nevertheless, you must keep open the possibility that there may have been a mistake or misunderstanding or even that your child could be lying.

If your child tells you of an incident, question him or her carefully. You could ask, for example, "is someone touching you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable?" Do not pressure your child and *absolutely* do not ask leading questions. While leading questions can help a child open up and talk about an uncomfortable situation, they can also implant your worst fears into the mind of an impressionable young child. If others tell you they suspect that something has happened to your child, ask for specific details.

If the incident occurred at a day care center, you may ask friends who also have a child there whether they have noticed any unusual behavior or physical symptoms in their children. But if you believe that your child was abused, do not go to the center to talk about your concern. Instead, make a report to the appropriate licensing agency or the police.

Having your child confront the accused perpetrator is not a good idea because it could be an overwhelmingly stressful and damaging experience. (There may be times during an investigation that the child and the perpetrator will be in the same courtroom, but every effort will be made to help the child feel comfortable and safe.) The only time that you should even consider a confrontation is when your child has accused a close family member and you have such serious misgivings about your child's veracity that you have *already* decided not to file a report. (In such cases, consider having your child seen by a professional. Making an untrue allegation of sexual behavior is neither common nor normal.)

☑ **Get a medical examination for your child.** The child may require treatment or evidence may need to be preserved. Do not assume that an examination is unnecessary merely because the child seems all right. For example, when a child reports that someone "touched me," the abuse may have been more severe. It is usually best to have the examination immediately after disclosure, provided, of course, that the child's emotional state allows it.

In cases of sexual abuse, the purpose of a medical examination is to assure the child that he or she is all right, to determine the extent of abuse, to check for sexually transmitted diseases or any injuries that may need attention, and to gather evidence. In older girls, it may also be necessary to check whether they are pregnant.

Get a physician with the experience and training to detect and recognize sexual abuse when you seek a special medical examination for your child. The best sources for referrals are sexual abuse treatment programs in the community, children's hospitals, and medical societies.

☑ **Report the abuse.** The best way to protect your child—and other children—from the same perpetrator is to make a report. Suspected abuse by a babysitter, day care personnel, or any other nonhousehold member should be reported to the police immediately. Suspected abuse by a parent, stepparent, guardian, or any other household member should be reported to the child protective agency or the police.

To protect your child's interests, you will need to learn about the child protective system. The aftermath of a report can be frightening and frustrating for both you and your child. As one mother explained, "I reported my daughter's abuse and we were immediately thrown into the various systems: interviews with social services, therapists, an officer from the sensitive crimes unit of the police department, and the district attorney's office."

Although most of the professionals assigned to your case will be concerned about you and your child, they probably will be too busy to explain everything that is happening or everything that will happen. Also, they may not tell you about the options in how the case can be handled.

☑ **Consider counseling for your child and for yourself.** Some children need counseling to remedy the effects of the abuse. Dealing with such issues as soon as possible could prevent problems from developing later. Be sure to select a therapist with the appropriate expertise.

Worry about yourself, too. Talk the situation over with someone. You will have many feelings about the abuse, feelings that need to be expressed to someone you trust. By using another adult as an outlet, you will be better able to help your child. You may also consider seeking professional help.

But most important, do not blame yourself. Sexual abuse is an unpleasant reality in our society. The vast majority of abuse occurs in situations in which the child knows and trusts the adult. You cannot protect your child from all risks.

Are You Losing Control?

The first step is to recognize that you have a problem. The next step is to do something about it. If you think that you may be hurting your child or that you may do so, seek help.

Knowing what to expect from children can put things in perspective. Many communities offer classes and workshops that cover such topics as how children grow up, why they act the way they do, and how to discipline them. You may learn for example, that your own children do not misbehave any more than do others. Look for these programs in day care centers, hospitals, public libraries, and churches.

Talking with someone about how you feel can be helpful. This person may be a close friend or family member who listens well or even a parents' "hotline" where trained volunteers will help you work out some of your problems. Family or individual therapy can also help. Many communities have support groups that give parents a chance to meet with other parents who are having similar problems dealing with their kids.

☑ **How to find help.** Many different programs provide help for parents who have problems caring for their children. Call them to find out more about what they offer. Most programs will not even ask your name. Many are free or will make special arrangements if it is hard for you to pay. If the program you call is not right for you, feel free to ask for help in finding one that is.

Parents Anonymous (PA) is a self-help group for parents who have taken out their anger on their children or feel that they may do so. Find the telephone number of the chapter in your community in the white pages of your local telephone book or by calling (800) 421-0353 (outside California) or (800) 353-0386 (inside California).

Parents United provides self-help for sexually abusive parents, as well as child and adult victims of sexual abuse. For information, call (408) 280-5055.

Yellow pages. Look under the heading "Social Services Organizations." Most of these organizations will have a name that includes the word "Family," "Families," "Parents," "Parental," "Child," or "Children." Also, many local mental health associations have information about group and individual counseling services.

Public libraries. Some public libraries offer information and referral services to help you find out what is available in your community. If your library does

not, the reference librarian may have this information at hand or know where to find it quickly.

Church counseling services. You may feel more comfortable talking with someone with a religious orientation. See what your church offers. Besides counseling, it may have inexpensive child care programs and discussion groups for parents.

Public social service agencies. The telephone number for the public programs in your community are in the white pages of your local telephone book under the name of the county and then under the "Department of Social Services," "Human Services," "Human Resources," or "Public Welfare." There

may be a special listing for "children's programs" or "child welfare services."

☑ When you call. If you cannot tell the purpose of a program by its name call and ask what it does. If you do not feel comfortable with what a program says it does, call another one. If you do not know where else to call, ask for the names of agencies that may be able to help you. Someone may not be available the minute you call, but do not give up.

Remember. Most human service professionals are required to report suspected child abuse and neglect. If your situation seems serious enough, they will make a report to the local child protective agency.