



CHILD MALTREATMENT (PART 3): HOW TO RESPOND TO DISCLOSURES OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT

The Bottom Line

Child maltreatment rates throughout the Prairie provinces and Canada are hard to know because children may or may not disclose abuse or it may be hard to tell if a child is experiencing abuse. It is crucial to know the basics of how to respond to disclosures of child maltreatment.

Appropriate Responses to Child Abuse Disclosures

- The conversation should take place in private.
- Use open-ended questions and age appropriate vocabulary, preferably with the language used by the child.
- Be aware that they may have been threatened. Take the information they have given you and form it into a simple question to receive confirmation and clarity.
- Always look directly at them during the disclosure.
- The child should know that the conversation will remain confidential except to those who must be informed (e.g., Child Protective Services, police, doctors).
- Inform them you will need to contact Child Protection Services under certain circumstances. Wherever possible, give them notice before you make the call.
- Tell them that you believe them. The effect may not be the same if belief is implied rather than vocalized. This is especially important in cases of sexual abuse.
- Assure them they made the right decision in telling an adult.
- The role of any responsible adult is to listen to, hear, and advocate for the child.
- Show them they can trust you and handle the situation with empathy, compassion and sensitivity.
- Remind them that no matter what the circumstances of abuse were or how they responded, it was in no way their fault.
- After disclosure, immediately write down all details to ensure accurate information.
- Refer to Saskatchewan Child Abuse Protocols here: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca>

Appropriate Responses to Child Abuse Disclosures (Continued)

Examples of Appropriate Responses:

- “You mentioned something happened at home. Would you like to tell me more about what happened at home?”
- “It is good that you confided in me. You are safe here.”
- “I believe you. Remember that this is not your fault.”
- “What you are going through is not easy. I am here for you.”
- “You do not have to tell me everything right away. I will do what I can to help you.”
- “I want you to know you can trust me. If you tell me someone is hurting you, I cannot keep it a secret. But, I promise not to tell anyone other than the people that need to know”

Inappropriate Responses to Child Abuse Disclosures

- It is very normal to feel shock, anger or sadness during a disclosure, but this must not be expressed to the child, so they do not fear consequences and do not experience shame or guilt.
- The child should not be led to believe everything disclosed will necessarily be kept a secret.
- Avoid leading and double-barrelled questions.
- Do not finish the child’s sentences or make assumptions. This is important to provide accurate information when reporting as well as for them to have a voice and tell their own story.
- Avoid pushing for information and asking the same question more than once.
- Avoid promising everything will be okay. Many steps following a report are no longer in the hands of the person receiving the disclosure.
- Avoid touching the child - even if you have a longstanding relationship - to avoid retraumatization. Respond according to their requests and body language.
- Do not go outside of personal boundaries. If the person receiving the disclosure has also experienced abuse, this may be re-triggering and cause psychological harm and/or unintentional overt reactions.

For original sources and documents, please visit: www.childtraumaresearch.ca