

When a Child Discloses Abuse

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*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.
— 2 Corinthians 3:17*

It is every parent's nightmare and the fear of every teacher and caregiver of children to hear a child tell them that he or she has been sexually abused. It is not often that children gain the courage to reveal that someone has touched them inappropriately, but children *do* tell—and not surprisingly, caring adults often are caught off guard. The words are usually few, sometimes softly spoken, or sometimes shouted out in anger—but you know that when you hear them you must act quickly. Many perpetrators are quite skilled at creating shameful and conflicted feelings associated with the sexual abuse they committed against their victims. It is often not until adulthood that we hear from a victim about the terror they survived. If a child trusts you and feels safe, they may drop hints or even openly tell you about what happened to them. It is best to be prepared to act quickly for them.

One of the most important things you can do when a child discloses their abuse is not over react, despite the strong and often overwhelming emotions of anger that you are experiencing at that moment. Take a deep breath and approach the matter as calmly as possible. Be mindful of your facial expressions and your own body language and try to retain control. Be certain that you show the child great love and concern through calm, reflective words of understanding and compassion. Show them you believe them. Make them feel that they are safe. Affirm their honesty. Do not display anger or blame toward the perpetrator, as the feelings of the victim toward them are often mixed and complex.

If a child chooses to disclose abuse to you, it is because they trust you and see in you a person of integrity and goodness. In response, show them that you indeed will be this person who can and will appropriately respond. Save the emotional reaction for another time. Consider speaking to a counselor about your reaction to what happened and the feelings you are experiencing. Do not neglect yourself; tend to your needs after you have *first* attended to needs of the vulnerable person before you.

Remember that when a child discloses abuse, the response from their family, community, and church is crucial to his or her own healing and paramount to becoming a surviving thriver. Remind yourself that in each encounter with a young child or vulnerable person, the opportunity you have before you is an encounter with God. For the child too, it is an encounter with God working in and through you.

Here are some excellent tips from Dr. Dan Williams, an author who speaks from his own experience:

- When you do find out, your feelings will be overwhelming. It is very, very important to not over react. Remember, the child is scared, hesitant, and most likely was threatened to remain silent about the incidents. Warmth, understanding, a calm voice, and support are very crucial.
- Posture—if the child is small and young in age, sit down at their level. Have eye-to-eye contact and reassure them they did the right thing by sharing. Do not confront them in an abrasive manner. Because the child is likely feeling shameful, guilty, and scared, interrogation only will intensify these feelings, and also can dilute future therapy assessments by a professional.

- Explain to the child that he or she has done the correct thing and that they can always come to you. By the child coming to you to disclose, you have successfully laid the groundwork for a supportive, trusting environment.
- Reassure them this will not happen again. You need to mobilize to at least obtain the perpetrators name. Approximately thirty percent of perpetrators are family members. You must make two calls as soon as possible to the Department of Children and Family Services in your state, and to the local police department.
- Begin looking for a professional therapist who specializes in assessing and treating victims of abuse.
- Ask the child what they need from you. Until you get an appointment with a professional, you might want to look for distractions for the child. Games, movies, or a favorite meal are all good forms of distraction. This issue itself will eventually get plenty of attention, leave it to the professionals. You are neither the police department nor the therapist, be the loving, supportive, and caring adult. This will reassure them that you will be there for them.*

No one is prepared for children to disclose they have been sexually abused. There is not a single correct response. This article gives only a few structured guidelines. Again, if a child discloses abuse to you, he or she perceives you as a loving, trusting, and caring adult. Be there for them, they are asking for your help.

* Bullets above from a Blog from Dan Williams, author of *Above His Shoulder*, January 2009, Outskirts Press, Inc.

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