

## ***Dealing with Family on Suspicions or Disclosures of Abuse***

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One of the critical factors in a child's ability to recover from sexual abuse is the response of the family to the disclosure. Supportive, sympathetic responses can dramatically impact the long-term consequences of the abuse.

The more distant the relationship between the victim and the offender, the more likely the disclosure will receive a supportive reaction. It appears that the level of support for victims is impacted by the amount of emotional connection and economic dependence in the relationship.

When the perpetrator is a parent or a sibling, the likelihood that he or she will be reported to authorities is significantly diminished if the relationship is close. For example, in one study where the available information indicated that the family was unsupportive of the victim, 86 percent of the cases involved a father or brother. In all, only 31 percent of the victims of incest by fathers or brothers received substantial support from the family following disclosure, while 65 percent of the victims of uncles and cousins received a supportive response.

How do you deal with suspicions or disclosures of family-based abuse? You deal with them in the same way that you deal with the same suspicions or disclosures of abuse by someone outside the family—and *that* is the challenge.

Your response to suspicions or to disclosures by a child has three goals:

- **First**, protect the child from further abuse.
- **Second**, stop the perpetrator from abusing any child.
- **Third**, address the child's symptoms and the harm done to the victim's family and, when applicable, the extended family.

The first two goals are essential to creating an opening for healing to occur.

The first thing to do when you suspect abuse or when a child discloses abuse is to **REPORT to the civil authorities. Regardless of the relationship—regardless of the possible consequences—regardless of the probable reaction from the rest of the family—report to the people who are responsible for conducting investigations and protecting children.** And, you must immediately take all the necessary logistical precautions to protect the child from further abuse. If necessary, remove yourself and the child from the family home or decline to participate in family activities or events.

You may also need to advise others in the family about the allegations to make sure that no other children are placed at risk during the investigation. However, you should leave this to the authorities unless the circumstances place a specific child in imminent danger. Civil authorities have a reasoned process by which allegations are investigated. Telling others about the complaint can often compromise the investigation—and that may ultimately increase the risk for you and your child.

Make sure that the alleged perpetrator is never left alone with any children. Keep children in sight when the alleged perpetrator is around—or, in the alternative, keep your eye on the alleged perpetrator and make sure that he or she is never alone with children.

Many find it harder to confront a family member suspected of sexual abuse than someone outside the family. As a result, taking these actions and removing yourself and the child or children from the situation may be difficult. However, as responsible adults, we must set aside our concerns and considerations and be supportive of the victim. Taking steps to make sure that children are safe and incest is no longer “the family secret” will have long-term positive effects for the child and, ultimately, the entire family.

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