

# What to Do If Your Child Discloses Sexual Abuse



Information for Parents and Caregivers

## What is disclosure?

*Disclosure* is when a child tells another person that he or she has been sexually abused. Disclosure can be a scary and difficult process for children. Some children who have been sexually abused may take weeks, months, or even years to fully reveal what was done to them. Many children never tell anyone about the abuse. In general:

- Girls are more likely to disclose than boys
- School-aged children tend to tell a caregiver
- Adolescents are more likely to tell friends
- Very young children tend to accidentally reveal abuse, because they don't have as much understanding of what occurred or the words to explain it

### Fast Fact

Sexual abuse affects many families. It is estimated that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused.<sup>1</sup>

Children are often reluctant to tell about being sexually abused. Some reasons for this reluctance may include:

- Fear that the abuser may hurt them or their families
- Fear that they will not be believed, or will be blamed and get in trouble
- Worry that their parents will be upset or angry
- Fear that disclosing will disrupt the family, especially if the perpetrator is a family member or friend
- Fear that if they tell they will be taken away and separated from their family

### Fast Fact

In studies of adults who were sexually abused as children, 2 out of 3 said they never told anyone about the abuse during childhood.<sup>2</sup>

Disclosure can be particularly difficult for younger children who have limited language and developmental abilities. If the child does not understand that the abuse was wrong, this may also lead the child not to tell.

## What should I do if I suspect my child has been sexually abused?

If you think your child may have been sexually abused, it is okay to talk to your child about it. You may first want to access some resources to learn more about child sexual abuse, such as The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's *Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet* at <http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/asset.do?id=1216>.

It is important to remain calm in speaking to children who may have been sexually abused. You can ask children directly if anyone has touched their bodies in a way that they did not like or has forced them to do things that they did not want to do. If you are concerned about talking to your child about abuse, you might want to seek help from your child's pediatrician or a mental health provider who is knowledgeable about child sexual abuse.



Children whose parents or caregivers are supportive heal more quickly from the abuse.

## Therapy Can Help

To learn more about how therapy can help your child overcome the effects of sexual abuse, see The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's video, *The Promise of Trauma-Focused Treatment for Child Sexual Abuse*, available at <http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/asset.do?id=1151&video=true>.

For help finding a therapist, try:

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's *Finding Help* page: [http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr\\_gethelp](http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr_gethelp)
- The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy's *Therapist Locator* page: <http://www.therapistlocator.net>

## What should I do if my child discloses sexual abuse?

Your reaction to the disclosure will have a big effect on how your child deals with the trauma of sexual abuse. Children whose parents/caregivers are supportive heal more quickly from the abuse.<sup>3,4</sup> To be supportive, it is important to:

- **Stay calm.** Hearing that your child has been abused can bring up powerful emotions, but if you become upset, angry, or out of control, this will only make it more difficult for your child to disclose.
- **Believe** your child, and let your child know that he or she is not to blame for what happened. Praise your child for being brave and for telling about the sexual abuse.
- **Protect** your child by getting him or her away from the abuser and immediately reporting the abuse to local authorities. **If you are not sure who, to contact, call the ChildHelp® National Child Abuse Hotline at 1.800.4.A.CHILD (1.800.422.4453; [http://www.childhelp.org/get\\_help](http://www.childhelp.org/get_help)) or, for immediate help, call 911.**

- **Get help.** In addition to getting medical care to address any physical damage your child may have suffered (including sexually transmitted diseases), it is important that your child have an opportunity to talk with a mental health professional who specializes in child sexual abuse. Therapy has been shown to successfully reduce distress in families and the effects of sexual abuse on children. Many communities have local Children’s Advocacy Centers (CACs) that offer coordinated support and services to victims of child abuse, including sexual abuse. For a state-by-state listing of accredited CACs, visit the website of the National Children’s Alliance (<http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org>).
- **Reassure** your child that he or she is loved, accepted and an important family member. Don’t make promises you can’t keep (such as saying you won’t tell anyone about the abuse), but let your child know that you will do everything in your power to protect him or her from harm.
- **Keep your child informed** about what will happen next, particularly with regard to legal actions. (For more information on helping abused children cope with the stress of dealing with the legal system, see the National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s factsheet, *Child Sexual Abuse: Coping with the Emotional Stress of the Legal System*, available on the web at [http://nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/caring/emotionlaimpactoflegalsystem.pdf](http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/emotionlaimpactoflegalsystem.pdf)).

I have heard that some children who disclose sexual abuse later “take it back.” Does this mean they were lying?

No. In fact, attempting to “take it all back”—also known as *recantation*—is common among children who disclose sexual abuse. Most children who recant are telling the truth when they originally disclose, but may later have mixed feelings about their abuser and about what has happened as a result of the disclosure. Some children have been sworn to secrecy by the abuser and are trying to protect the secret by taking it back. Some children are dealing with issues of denial and are having a difficult time accepting the sexual abuse. In some families, the child is pressured to recant because the disclosure has disrupted family relationships. A delay in the prosecution of the perpetrator may also lead a child to recant in order to avoid further distressing involvement in the legal process. A very small percentage of children recant because they made a false statement.

**Books That Can Help**

Freeman, L. (1987). *It’s MY body: A book to teach young children how to resist uncomfortable touch*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press. Ages 3-8; also available in Spanish.

Lowery, L. (1995). *Laurie tells*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, Lerner Publishing Group. Age 11 and up.

Otteweller, J. (1991). *Please tell! A child’s story about sexual abuse*. Center City, MN: Hazelden Foundation.

Stauffer, L., & Deblinger, E. (2003). *Let’s talk about taking care of you: An educational book about body safety*. Hatfield, PA: Hope for Families. Version for preschool children also available.



## The idea that something like this could happen to my child is completely overwhelming. What can I do to cope with my own feelings?

If you suspect that your child has been abused, try to get support by talking to someone else before talking to your child about the sexual abuse. If your child has already disclosed the abuse, hearing the details may be profoundly upsetting to you, particularly if the abuser is someone you know and thought you could trust. (For more information on such “intrafamilial” sexual abuse, see the National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s factsheet, *Coping with the Shock of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse: Information for Parents and Caregivers*, available at [http://nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/caring/intrafamilialabuse.pdf](http://nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/caring/intrafamilialabuse.pdf).)

Your feelings may range from denial, anger, and sadness, to frustration and helplessness. If you yourself are a survivor of child sexual abuse, the discovery that your child has been abused may also bring up your own painful and unresolved feelings and memories. Getting help for yourself is an important part of being able to get help and support for your child. You can contact the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) at 1-800-656-HOPE or [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org) for help finding support in your area. The U.S. Department of Justice’s Office for Victims of Crime (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/>) has resources and a web forum to communicate with others on topics such as child abuse, victim’s rights, court preparation, and more.



### Books That Can Help

Adams, C., & Fay, J. (1992). *Helping your child recover from sexual abuse*. Vancouver, WA: University of Washington Press.

Brohl, K., & Potter, J.C. (2004). *When your child has been molested: A parents' guide to healing and recovery*. (Revised ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint.

Daugherty, L. (2006) *Why me? Help for victims of child sexual abuse (even if they are adults now)*. (4th ed.). Roswell, NM: Cleanan Press, Inc.

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2. London, K., Bruck, M., Ceci, S.J., & Shuman, D.W. (2005). Disclosure of child sexual abuse. What does the research tell us about the ways that children tell? *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 11 (1), 194-226.
3. Paredes, M., Leifer, M., & Kilbane, T. (2001). Maternal variables related to sexually abused children’s functioning. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25 (9), 1159-1176.
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# Coping with the Shock of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse



Information for Parents and Caregivers

## What Is Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse?

*Intrafamilial sexual abuse* means sexual abuse that occurs within the family. In this form of abuse, a family member involves a child in (or exposes a child to) sexual behaviors or activities. The “family member” may not be a blood relative, but could be someone who is considered “part of the family,” such as a godparent or very close friend.

The discovery that someone you love and trust has sexually abused your child is extremely stressful and can bring up intense feelings of shock, rage, confusion, denial, disbelief, and guilt. Dealing with these reactions—and helping your child recover from the abuse—requires time, strength, and support from your extended family, your community, and from professionals in law enforcement, child protection, and mental health services. Although it may be difficult, it is important to notify law enforcement if your child discloses sexual abuse. This is an important step in keeping your child safe.

Facing the reality of intrafamilial sexual abuse can be painful. But by ending the secrecy surrounding sexual abuse, you can help your family to heal and protect and nurture your child so that he or she can grow into a healthy, successful adult.

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## The Effect of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse on Children

**Did you know?**  
More than half of all children who are sexually abused are abused by a parent or other relative.<sup>1</sup>

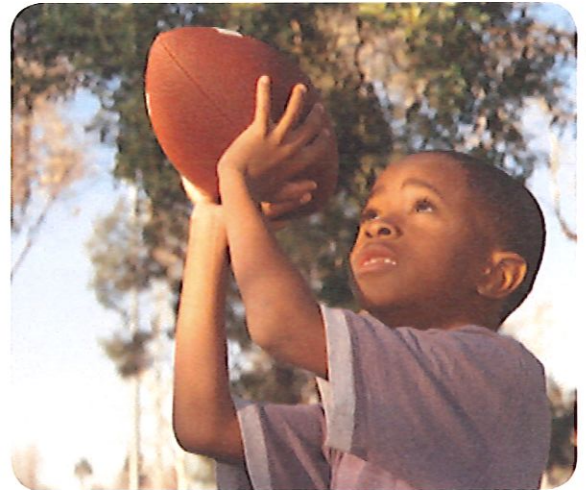
When children are abused by adults who are supposed to protect them from harm, their ability to trust and rely on adults may be shattered. Knowing that the abuser is liked—or even loved—by other family members makes it all the more difficult for children to tell others about the abuse.

Children who have been abused by a family member are more likely to blame themselves for the abuse than those who are abused by someone outside the family unit. This is particularly true of older children, who may be all too aware of the effect that disclosing the abuse will have on other family members.

As a result, it can take victims of intrafamilial sexual abuse weeks, months, or longer to let anyone know that they've been abused,<sup>2</sup> and even longer to reveal all the details. Children from cultures that frown on talking about sex or sexuality (**See Box**) may be even more reluctant to tell.

After disclosing, children and adolescents who have been sexually abused by a family member are often tormented by self doubt, self blame, fear of the abuser, and distress over what their disclosure has done to the family. Sometimes, in a desperate attempt to make everything better in the family, they may change their story or even deny that the abuse occurred.

Recanting, or “taking back” the disclosure is common and does not mean that children were lying about the abuse. When the abuse is caused by a family member, children may feel pressure to recant because of how the disclosure is affecting the family or because of a lack of family support.



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### Cultural Challenges

Virtually every culture has spoken and unspoken rules about sex and sexuality. These rules can make it even more difficult for children to ask for help when they have been abused

For example, in cultures that place a high value on female virginity, a girl who has been sexually abused may feel that she has been disgraced and is now “damaged goods” whom no one would want to marry. This can lead to feelings of shame that in turn lead to further secrecy.

Boys who have been sexually abused may experience shame and self-doubt. Boys who have been sexually abused by a male may struggle with a commonly-held misconception that this makes them gay.

Although your cultural beliefs are important, it is necessary to focus on the physical and emotional health of your child. Remember that the sexual abuse is not your fault and does not reflect negatively on your family or you as a parent. Seek guidance from people in your community that you trust, such as religious leaders, medical professionals, or others who will be supportive.

Seeking help from a counselor who specializes in child sexual abuse can help your child and your family to cope with what has happened. Counseling can reduce the stress and other effects of sexual abuse on your child and your family. With the proper help, your child and the family can overcome and heal from the abuse that has occurred.

### The Effect of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse on the Family

Sexual abuse of a child by a trusted adult also puts tremendous strain on relationships within the family. Some family members may find it hard to believe the abuser could do such a thing, and take sides (or feel pressured to take sides) over who is telling the truth. Family members may also struggle with how to manage their divided loyalties toward the abuser and the victim. Even in families that accept that the abuse occurred, reactions to the abuser may run the gamut from “lock him up and throw away the key” to “hate the sin but love the sinner.” Tensions may arise when different family members have different opinions about loyalty, fairness, justice, forgiveness, and responsibility.

If you are a mother whose child has been abused by a spouse or boyfriend, it can take a great deal of courage to stand up for your child. Some of the challenges you may face include:

- Dealing with family members who don't believe the abuse occurred or who continue to maintain their relationship with the abuser
- The possibility of economic hardship if you are financially dependent on the abuser
- Possible loss of friends and acquaintances when they learn your partner is a child abuser
- Making sense of conflicting advice from friends, family, or religious leaders—who may think you should forgive the perpetrator—and child protection and legal authorities who expect you to end your involvement with the perpetrator

For many mothers, the greatest challenge is dealing with their own reactions to the child's disclosure. If your child tells you that he or she has been sexually abused, your response can play a powerful role in his or her process of healing from the abuse.

## Coping with Your Own Reactions

Your initial reactions to the disclosure of sexual abuse by a family member may include shock, rage, confusion, denial, and disbelief. If you yourself were a victim of sexual abuse as a child, the disclosure may stir up even stronger reactions and confusion (**See Box**).

Do not be surprised if you go through a painful period of doubting your child, particularly if the abuser is someone you love or depend on, such as a spouse, boyfriend, or grandparent. Because the abuser is almost certain to deny the abuse, you may find yourself in the difficult position of having to decide which family member is telling the truth, and having to weigh the consequences of believing one over the other.

For many parents, it is relatively easy to believe that abuse has occurred when the victim is a very young child. But **when the victim is an adolescent, many parents find themselves doubting the truth of what their child has told them.**

Adolescence is a rocky time for parents and children alike, when tensions run high and tempers flare. Sadly, adolescents who have been sexually abused are even more likely to exhibit the kinds of behavior problems that lead to tension, resentment, and miscommunication.

If your child is an adolescent, you may find yourself wondering if he or she was in some way responsible for the abuse. You may wonder whether he or she could have resisted, or question why it took so long for him or her to tell you. If your child disclosed the abuse to someone else—such as a teacher or friend—you may also be dealing with feelings of confusion, anger, and guilt about his or her not confiding in you. And if the abuser is your spouse or partner, you may even find yourself feeling betrayed, as if your partner and child were “cheating” on you.

### Echoes of Past Pain

For much of human history, children who revealed sexual abuse were rarely believed or supported. Children who disclosed abuse faced negative reactions ranging from being told to keep quiet—or forget—about the abuse to being berated and punished for “telling lies.” In addition to suffering from the effects of the abuse itself, such children grew up feeling betrayed and abandoned by the people who should have protected them.

If you are a survivor of child sexual abuse, the discovery that your own child has been abused—especially by a family member—can bring up a host of painful and unresolved feelings and memories. Getting help for yourself is an important part of being able to provide support for your child. You can **contact the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) at 1-800-656-HOPE or <http://www.rainn.org>** for help in finding support in your area.

As painful as these reactions can be, they are not unusual, and **working through your doubts and fears will be critical not only to your child's recovery, but to your own.**

It is important to remember that power takes many forms, and that your adolescent may have felt coerced in ways that were not directly physical. For example, if your partner is in a position of power and has control over financial resources, over disciplining the adolescent, and over your attitude and reactions to your child, your child may have been afraid that rejecting sexual advances or fighting back would only cause more problems in the family. In fact, many perpetrators “buy” their victims’ silence through veiled or overt threats of all the bad things that could happen if their victims disclose the abuse.



### One Family's Story

Christina was a 12-year-old girl whose father, Michael, had been sexually abusing her for more than a year. One night, a neighbor called the police to report a violent argument between Christina's parents. When the police and Child Protective Services representative interviewed Christina, she told them what Michael had been doing to her and was removed from the home.

At first, Christina's mother, Joanna, did not support or believe her daughter. Joanna was financially dependent on her husband and terrified of his violent temper. A recent immigrant, she had no family in the States, and was embarrassed to talk about Michael's behavior with her few friends. When Michael had been violent with her in the past, Joanna had always told herself that it was because she was not a good enough wife, but that he was a good father and could be trusted with their daughter. It took Joanna several months to recognize that she was a victim of domestic violence, and to accept that her daughter had indeed been sexually abused.

The hardest part for Joanna was to realize just how wrong she had been and to let go of her illusions about Michael. It was crucial for Joanna to receive help that would allow her to understand that the problem lay with Michael, not with her. Once she could acknowledge this, she was able to believe her daughter, and to begin healing from her own experience of abuse. Only then could Christina and Joanna restore the trust in their mother-daughter relationship.

Don't let your natural and understandable feelings of confusion and doubt override the fact that **the perpetrator is always at fault.** If, in the heat of your own pain and distress, you accuse your adolescent of betrayal instead of acknowledging that your child was the victim, he or she may begin to experience dangerous—and potentially damaging—self-doubt. This can be particularly devastating if he or she experienced normal sexual arousal during the abuse, even though it was unwanted and forced. This is not unusual and should not be taken as evidence that the adolescent “wanted” or was seeking out the abuse.

If you are struggling with feelings of anger or betrayal towards your abused child or teen, ask yourself: “What would it take for me to 1) believe my child, 2) not be angry at my child, and 3) not feel betrayed by my child?”

The answer is often revealing. For many parents:

- **Believing** your child means facing the fact that a person you have trusted and loved has betrayed, lied to, and used you and your child
- **Letting go of anger** means redirecting your anger away from your child and towards the person who perpetrated the abuse
- **Letting go of feeling betrayed** means recognizing the real source of the betrayal—the perpetrator. To move forward, you will need to accept that much of what you believed about this person was not true. By letting go of old beliefs, you can help your child—who has also been betrayed—to heal more fully



Even parents who believe their child from the start may struggle with guilt at not having been able to prevent the abuse, or not realizing that something was wrong before the child told. In such cases, it is helpful to remember that even though hindsight is 20/20, none of us have the power to read minds or predict the future. Many of the “clues” that seem clear when looking back are nonspecific behaviors (for example, increased irritability, poor sleep, etc.) that even a mental health professional may not have recognized as signs that the child was being sexually abused.

## Moving Forward

Non-offending parents are the single most important resource that children have after they have experienced intrafamilial abuse.<sup>3</sup> As hard as it may be to report sexual abuse that has been perpetrated by a family member, this is the best thing you can do to help your entire family heal, including the person who perpetrated the abuse. If you are not sure who to contact, call the ChildHelp® National Child Abuse Hotline at 1.800.4.A.CHILD (1.800.422.4453; [http://www.childhelp.org/get\\_help](http://www.childhelp.org/get_help)).

Effective treatment is available to help you and your child move forward—together—towards a happy and healthy future.<sup>4,5</sup> Children can recover from sexual abuse, with the help of protective, supportive parents. For more information on treatment options, see The National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s video, *The Promise of Trauma-Focused Treatment for Child Sexual Abuse*, available at <http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn/asset.do?id=1151&video=true>. Many communities have local Children’s Advocacy Centers (CACs) that offer coordinated support and services to victims of child abuse, including sexual abuse. For a state-by-state listing of accredited CACs, visit the website of the National Children’s Alliance (<http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org>).



Children can recover from sexual abuse, with the help of protective, supportive parents.

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