

When a Child Discloses Abuse by Anne Ard of Centre County Women's Resource Center

It is the conversation every parent fears most. Something just doesn't seem right with your child, something seems "off." So you ask, "What's bothering you? You seem upset." Your child might hesitate, not wanting to tell. So you push a little bit, "What is it, sweetie? You can tell me, you won't be in trouble." Then it comes, in a rush of words, or perhaps slowly, agonizingly, the story comes out. Someone has touched your child in an inappropriate way. Someone has sexually abused your child.

This conversation between you and your child is full of both challenges and opportunities. The challenges include understanding and responding appropriately to your child's physical and emotional needs as well as your own. The opportunity lies in the reality that your child's healing from the trauma of sexual abuse can begin with this very conversation.

The opportunity for healing to begin actually starts with recognizing your child's courage in disclosing sexual abuse and continues as you manage your own understandable emotional response. While you may be feeling shock, disbelief, anger, and a myriad of other emotions, it is important *not* to manifest those to your child. When you express anger or disbelief, it reinforces the belief many children have, often suggested by those who abused them in the first place, that they (the children) have done something wrong, will be in trouble, or won't be believed. So respond calmly to your child and believe what your child is telling you. Children rarely make up stories about abuse and your child needs to know that he/she will be believed, supported, and protected.

Your second response should be to thank your child for telling you and for being brave. It takes an incredible amount of courage to disclose abuse, even to the most loving and supportive parents, so let your child know that you are proud of her/him for telling.

When you start by believing, you have laid the groundwork for further healing conversations to happen. As hard as it may be, listen calmly and openly, let the child take his/her time, tell your child that she/he can tell you anything. Don't ask leading questions, and allow the child to tell you in his/her own way and on her/his own terms. According to the national child sexual abuse organization, Darkness to Light, key phrases you can say to your child include: "What happened is not your fault," "I believe you," "I'm the adult and it is my job to protect you," and "We will get through this together."

Once you have listened to your child's story, you can explain to him/her that you may need to talk to another adult to address the situation. That will help prepare your child for the next step in their healing process – talking to a trained professional who can explore the details of the abuse appropriately and refer you and your child to support and resources in your community. Your local rape crisis center can provide support to you and your child and connect you with appropriate resources in your community such as a Children's Advocacy Center. Abuse should also be reported to Childline (800-932-0313). Your local office of Child Protective Services can also provide assistance with reporting and resources.

Remember that *you* are the most important resource available to your child as he/she heals from the trauma they have suffered. Give them your attention, your compassion, your belief in them. And find ways to care for yourself in the process. Your child's trauma has impacted you as well and you will need support and compassion as you give those to your child. Healing can happen – for both of you.