

## Responding to Youth Disclosures or Concerns of Abuse

By The VIRTUS Programs

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### **Preview:**

As a safe adult, children and youth may disclose abuse to you, or you may observe behavior that causes you to have a reasonable belief or suspicion of abuse, which will require you to communicate your concerns.

### **Article:**

As a protector of children and youth, there may be times where a child chooses you as the person they trust enough to tell if they are being harmed. Children and youth may disclose abuse to you, or you may observe behavior that causes you to have a reasonable belief or suspicion of abuse, which will require you to communicate your concerns. A **safe adult** prioritizes the youth's safety and wellbeing. No matter what ministry or program in which you may serve—you are called to be a safe, responsible and caring adult.

When a youth discloses, we must report to the appropriate authorities. As part of that journey, here are action steps for safe adults to take when children disclose to us, or when we are speaking to them directly about possible concerns of abuse.

### **Actively listen:**

- Give the child or youth all of your attention in that moment.
- Listen calmly, without judgment.
- Listen patiently, let them speak at their own pace, with their own words. It may be tempting to try and "fill in the blanks," but the best thing to do is let the child tell their story as they choose.

### **DO NOT:**

- Be in denial about the "what" or the "who." It is not up to you to judge what they are telling you.
- Make assumptions.
- Say the words for the child (or, "put words in the child's mouth").

### **Ask limited questions:**

- Ask "what happened," "when did it happen," "where did it happen," and either—"who did it," or, "how do you know them?"
- Question only what is needed for a report.



**DO NOT:**

- Say anything to imply it was the child's fault, or that they should have somehow stopped their abuser, or told you or someone else earlier.
- Increase any guilt or shame they're feeling, or make it seem as if they should have "known."
- Interrogate, or ask detailed or leading questions.

**Maintain awareness:**

- Be mindful of your body language and reaction—even the smallest show of shock or anger about what you're hearing can stop a child from continuing to speak, or it may cause them to retract everything.
- Keep your face neutral, calm and collected. They are looking to you to be a steady adult, and they are counting on you to keep it together. They should never be placed in a situation of needing to console you.

**DO NOT:**

- Show anger, shock, horror or distress.

**Be supportive:**

- Believe them.
- Let them know you are present to help keep them safe.
- Acknowledge the courage it took to share, and that telling was the right thing to do.
- Share that what happened *is not their fault*, nor is anything that happens later.
- Reassure them that you'll only communicate the information to the appropriate people to help protect them.

**DO NOT:**

- Share your own personal experience with abuse. This situation is about the child, not about your own experiences, and in this moment their needs take priority. Talking about yourself makes the situation about you.
- Never promise confidentiality, as you may need to communicate what they tell you to the appropriate authorities to help them.
- Initiate any physical touch in an attempt to comfort the youth, as they may not want to be touched during this time, and touching them could violate their boundaries.
- Make any promises—because the reality is, we cannot guarantee what might happen next.

**Take action:**

- Afterward, when you are no longer with the child or youth, write down any notes and direct quotes to assist in reporting. Be as comprehensive as possible while the information is "fresh."



- Communicate with your state's child protective services (or local law enforcement, if this is the procedure in your state) as soon as possible.
- Report any disclosures, suspicions or concerns of abuse based on observed behavior or information that was communicated to you.
- Report even if you aren't sure if abuse is actually happening, and even when you feel that you don't have all of the facts.
- When in doubt of whether or not you should make a report, always err on the side of protecting the child and make the report.

**DO NOT:**

- Attempt to verify, investigate, or speak to the adult the child spoke about. This could compromise an investigation and is not your role.

**Conclusion**

Disclosures occur when a child attempts to discuss abuse that is occurring or that has occurred in the past. Disclosures from children and youth may be direct or indirect, and may also include an uncomfortable situation that they, or a friend, is experiencing (or has experienced). Children often have great difficulty communicating about abusive behavior they are experiencing. They might share in a roundabout way, or tell it as a "story" about someone else. These are always opportunities for you to ask youth to tell you more. Being a safe person for youth is the most important element during the disclosure and reporting process, and then communicating your concerns to the appropriate child protection agency or local law enforcement. If the possible abuse (including any inappropriate or boundary-violating behavior) involves an organization, also communicate concerns to a supervisor.

**Resources:**

For more information about reporting abuse in your state:

[https://www.virtusonline.org/virtus/Abuse\\_Reporting.cfm](https://www.virtusonline.org/virtus/Abuse_Reporting.cfm)

For more information on child abuse, and possible behavioral indicators :

[www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/whatiscan.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/whatiscan.pdf)