

Navigation tools: Potential Abuse Indicators and Child Disclosures

By The VIRTUS Programs

Preventing and responding to child abuse is an important responsibility for all caring adults, and an essential part of building a solid foundation for a happy, healthy and productive life for youth. To best address abuse, it helps to have facts, and to be prepared ahead of time in case we are ever in a situation where we are called upon for help—whether it be during our work or ministry in the Church, or in our normal day-to-day activities. This article addresses our responsibility to young people per our role as protectors. As caring adults, we must be aware of problematic red-flag behavior that children might exhibit, along with ways to communicate with them regarding that behavior and their right to be safe, in addition to our responsibility to them and to others to communicate suspicions or knowledge of abuse to the right place.

When observing youth, there are general behavioral changes that could occur in victims of child sexual abuse. The difficulty for observers is that many of these behaviors may be symptoms of other physical or emotional problems rather than actual abuse.

Some possible indicators of sexual abuse include:

- Sudden behavioral changes
- Changes in hygiene (excessive bathing, or the opposite)
- Withdrawal and isolation from others
- Use of sexually explicit language
- Acting out sexual behaviors
- Changes in schoolwork or habits (sudden changes in grades or school enthusiasm, or significant changes to schoolwork that could appear to be positive)
- Bed-wetting, soiling undergarments and other types of regressive behavior
- Substance abuse
- Self-inflicted abuse

The caring adult will want to be aware and pay close attention when youth exhibit fear, intense dislike or detachment toward someone in their lives, and if they are extremely withdrawn or anxious. It may not be abuse, but it still must be addressed.

No matter how much work you do to prevent child sexual abuse, from time to time, predators will still attempt to prey on children. Hopefully, the children in your care will have the courage and know-how to tell a trusted adult based on their safe environment training—someone like **you**. You must understand how to respond appropriately to children's concerns, especially if you have the privilege of being a child's trusted adult, and they trust you with a disclosure.

Remember, not all children have a caring or safe adult who is looking after them for their safety. Even if it's not your child, bring any concerns about problematic behavior to the appropriate party.

Many children will deny having been abused or will even recant after initially telling. They're scared of being blamed, they're afraid that they'll be accused of lying, and they're afraid of being contradicted by a more influential person. Adults have power simply by the very nature of being adults—and in some cases, they may even have threatened the child, which makes it harder for children to disclose. They're also afraid of what their parents, family and friends may say.

How adults respond to a disclosure can make a tremendous difference in the child's ability to deal with the harm and recover. When a child comes to you with any concern—regardless of whether the situation is abusive—these tips can help reassure the child that communicating was the right thing to do.

- **Stay calm!** First, reflect now, before there's even a need, on the necessity of avoiding displays of shock, horror, disbelief or upset. Don't overreact in front of the child. Remember, the abuser has probably told the youth that adults will not believe them if they tell. Any emotional or otherwise uncontrolled response or expression of disbelief from you is likely to shut down the child's willingness to communicate. Show them that you'll listen without getting angry—and that their safety is your top priority.
- **Let children talk, and listen carefully.** Be patient. Sometimes children disclose without realizing it or they send up a 'test balloon' to see how their information might be received. Their body language might show that they're very uncomfortable, and they might even talk about the abuse as if it's a story that is happening to someone else.
- **Provide privacy without isolation.** Find a place to listen that is open, private, and safe—for everyone.
- **Limit questioning, and be careful not to ask leading questions.** Just let the child say what happened. If you can, ask open-ended questions to find out who committed the abuse, but don't attempt to determine credibility. Let professionals handle the more detailed questions.

- **Reassure the youth.** Let the child know that you believe them, and that they're safe. Keep in mind that the majority of children do not disclose, and that when they do initially disclose, there's a very large chance they're telling the truth. They need to know that it wasn't their fault, and that you'll do what you can to protect them from further harm.
- **Don't promise not to tell.** Children often preface their disclosure with a request for confidentiality. When you let them know that you must tell the people who can help stop the abuse from happening to them or anyone else, they usually still disclose.
- **Be honest.** Let them know what happens next and assure them that you'll only tell people who need to know to keep them safe.
- **Don't chastise (or scold) the youth.** Remember that predators tell children they will be in trouble if they tell. Make sure the child is reminded that communicating is the right thing to do. Tell the child they did the right thing and acknowledge how hard it can be to do. Reassure them they will be loved and protected no matter what.
- **Get help.** Make sure the child gets the medical care and counseling they need to recover and thrive—and don't forget counseling for the rest of the family.

Regardless of your specific role in any child's life, by the very nature of being an adult, you are a protector of children. If at any point, you have a suspicion (or knowledge) of abuse based on the behavior of the child or the adult—or any other factor, then you would need to report to the appropriate child protection authorities in your state. This includes suspicion or knowledge of sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, neglect, and other forms of exploitation, such as child pornography or sex trafficking.

Abuse that occurred to minors who have subsequently turned 18 should still be reported, even though the person is now an adult. Cases where the potential abuser is deceased should also be reported. Even if a child is molested by another child, swift and decisive action is necessary, as it's possible that children who are abusing others are also being subjected to abuse themselves. The first phone call in any abuse situation is to civil authorities to report the abuse. Contacting either the police or child protective services will provide greater guidance about the next steps for that particular situation.

Sometimes adults believe they need more evidence to communicate concerns. However, when someone's behavior is of concern to you, you don't need to know their intentions or reasoning, nor must you have evidence. The role of the caring adult is to report and communicate with the appropriate people, not to "wait and see" what else happens, or to personally investigate and find proof. Investigating reports is the responsibility of the child protective services in your state. There

are many instances of abusive situations that could have been prevented, or addressed much more quickly with the fast action of caring adults. You'll never know if your courageous communication will help save that child's life, or protect dozens of lives.