

# How to Handle Suspicions or Disclosure of Abuse

## Reporting Procedures

All states have child abuse reporting laws. If you work with children and you know of, or have reasonable cause to suspect physical or sexual child abuse, you have an obligation to report the information to your superior or to a child protection or law enforcement agency.

Your organization should have a written abuse and neglect reporting procedure, including whom you should notify – for example, the Principal, Agency Director, Psychologist, Social Worker, Doctor or Nurse. Either you or one of the above individuals should then contact the Department of Social Services or similar child protection or law enforcement agency in your town to report the disclosure or your suspicions. Usually, you are required to make an immediate phone report followed by a written report.

Familiarize yourself with your agency's policies and procedures and follow them. For teachers and many other types of child care workers, failure to report child abuse is against the law and could result in criminal or civil penalties. You may also be subject to penalties by your employer, including the loss of your job.

Remember, certainty about abuse is not required. It is enough that the reporter has grounds for suspicion, based on physical or behavioral indicators, or what the child or caretaker says. You and the staff of your organization are not investigators and it is best to leave the investigation up to the proper authorities. In all states, reporters of suspected child abuse are immune from liability when a report is made in "good faith."

## What to Do for the Child

Children who are exposed to KIDS AND COMPANY<sup>®</sup> are more likely to disclose an abusive situation. During or after presenting the program, it is possible that a child may tell you that he or she has been or is being abused. However, this does not usually occur when the subject is first introduced. You, as a leader, should be prepared for this.

If a child confides in you or gives you hints regarding abuse, it is very important that the child feels that you believe him/her. It is not easy for children to talk about these experiences, and they often feel guilty or responsible. They may even have been told that they, or someone they love, will be harmed if they tell.

## If a Child Discloses Abuse, Follow the Guidelines Below:

Speak to the child in a neutral, safe, private place, if possible in the presence of a mental health professional. Ask the child to tell you what happened in his/her own words. Be supportive through encouragement, belief, empathy and lack of blame. Comments such as the following will help the child feel better about telling you:

"I'm really glad you told me."

"It was the right thing to do."

"Thank you for trusting me with this problem."

"It took a lot of courage to tell me."

"This has happened to other kids."

"I need to tell some other people who work to protect children."

"We will work together to try and get you help."

"It is not your fault!"

- Do not say anything bad about the abuser since it is often someone that the child loves or care for.
- Do not make promises that you are not certain about such as saying that the abuser will be sent away or put in jail or that you will make sure the abuse stops.

Note: Sometimes children "test" trusted adults by saying "I want to tell you something, but you have to promise to keep it to yourself, to keep it a secret." In this case be gentle and honest. Explain that some secrets must be told, especially if someone is being hurt or is in danger.

- Tell the child that it is not his/her fault and that he/she has the right to feel safe.
- Respond to questions or feelings the child has with a calm attitude. Do not push the child to talk in detail about it. On the other hand, don't try to silence the child; this may make him/her think that it was wrong to confide in you.
- If the child does not seem upset when telling you about the abuse, do not assume that he/she has not been abused or that the abuse has had no effect. Most children who have been abused learn to hide their feelings at a young age and are usually afraid of what will happen if they tell about it.
- Encourage the child to tell you right away if the abuser continues to sexually or physically harm him/her, or if she/he becomes frightened or confused by what is happening.
- Don't confront the offender, especially in the child's presence; let the authorities deal with the person.
- Respect the privacy of the child by not telling any more people than necessary about the abuse. Even when you need advice or support from a co-worker, you may want to refer to the child as a "child" instead of by his/her name. Treat the child in the normal manner at your agency or school.
- After a report has been filed and during the investigation by the social service agency, the child will be under stress. By telling about the abuse, the child has upset the

family system. It is a necessary, but difficult, first step in protecting the child and beginning the healing process.

- The child may find it hard to pay attention during lessons. By breaking down learning tasks into small, simple steps, the child may be better able to succeed.
- The child's friendships with youth workers and other children may stop. You may need to assist the child in dealing with his feelings and problem solving to help him/her keep his/her friendships.
- In general, the child will need support and encouragement without being singled out and made to feel different from the rest of the children.