

WHAT TO DO WHEN A CHILD HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED



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1. **Be Calm** – Realising that a child has been sexually abused by a family member or anyone else can take a toll on you as a parent, guardian, or caregiver. The emotions you feel are normal and they will range from shock, anger, anxiety, fear, sadness, and shame. Find a way to manage your feelings - this is important because you need to focus on making right decisions and creating a safe environment for the child. Be calm as they narrate the event to you. Don't push for every detail of the abuse if the child is not ready to tell you. Do not interrupt them when they do, and ensure that you are visibly calm.
2. **In their own words, on their own terms:** Allow them to tell the story in their own words. Do not try to help them construct what happens. With patience they will eventually be able to confide in you and share what happened.
3. **Believe the child** – Let the child know that you believe them and listen carefully to them. Acknowledge that the abuse was not their fault, and assure them that they should not feel guilty about it.
4. **Reassure the Child** - Assure the child that they are free from further harm and that they are not in trouble. Reassure them of your love and let them know they can always talk to you.
5. **Protect the Child** – You need to focus on creating a safe environment for the child. Reassure them that they are free from further harm. Immediately end the abuser's access to the child and report to law enforcement as soon as practicable.

Sexual abuse can change a child's worldview, and parents tend to panic and encourage children to suppress or forget the abuse happened. This can be very harmful and likely to affect the child psychologically in the future.

6. **Report the Abuse** - We recommend that you immediately notify law enforcement. While the reality of sexual abuse can be painful and unsettling, especially if it is within the family, ending the secrecy surrounding the event can help both you and the child to heal when the abuser is arrested and convicted for their crime.

7. **Get Medical Help** – Immediately get medical help preferably from a certified health worker who is experienced in child sex abuse. The caregiver and medical professionals should explain the procedure of any medical test or investigation they intend to carry out to the child so that they are not further traumatized.

In the event that the form of sexual abuse is penetrative (rape and forms of oral sex), request for prophylaxis treatments to prevent HIV, Hepatitis and other sexually transmitted diseases. Emergency contraceptives should be administered to adolescent girls to prevent pregnancy.

As soon as you can get a child psychologist/counsellor to assess the mental wellbeing of the child and provide therapeutic treatment. As a parent or caregiver, you may also need psychosocial support, as may the child's entire family. (Check our resource section for a list of psycho-social support providers in your area)

Encourage (but do not force) the child to settle back into a regular routine to aid their healing. Children whose parents/ caregivers are supportive tend to heal faster.

When the Abuser is a family member:

One of the hardest forms of abuse to deal with is when the abuser is a family member. The tendency is to cover up the crime so that the family can “move on”. The truth is that in such instances, the family does not move on. Trust is eroded for all time and the mental health of the child and safety of other children is jeopardized.

You must put the best interest of the child first, and consider the wellbeing of other children who may get in contact with the abuser. Sexual abusers rarely ever perform the crime just once. They are usually serial abusers who need to be identified as such and prevented from ever perpetuating this type of crime again. Please report to law enforcement as soon as you can and refuse to let the matter die till justice is obtained.

- Often you will face the challenge of family members who are in denial that the abuse occurred and insist that the issue be dropped.
- Conflicting advice on how to handle the abuse
- Insults from family members who insist that you are ‘dividing’ or ‘shaming’ the family.
- If you are not a family member, that it is a family matter and that you should mind your business.

Sexual violation of children is a CRIME and you need to act bravely in the best interest of the child. Below are some things you can do:

Take all of the steps listed earlier. In addition:

Enlist the assistance of the Department of Social Welfare of your state, or an NGO that works in this area if you feel by yourself, you will be unable to bear under the pressure to drop the matter.

If the abuser is a parent or caregiver with whom the child lives, the Department of Social Welfare or the NGO will work to obtain a child protection order and may remove the child from the abusive environment for their safety.

Enlist the help of a psychologist or a counsellor trained to handle such matters to provide psychosocial support to the family.

Schools

If it occurred at school. Insist that beyond firing the offender, that the matter is reported to the police. A fired offender will simply find the next school on which to prey on children. Take all of the steps listed earlier. In addition: Investigate to ensure that no other child has suffered abuse from the violator. In the event that they have, report the other incidences to law enforcement, and ensure that the victims get medical and psychosocial support as well.