

Helping Children Who May Have Been Sexually Abused

A Guideline for Parents and Caretakers

The possibility that a child has been sexually abused may be considered for a variety of reasons: Parents or other adults may be concerned by something the child says or does, by some general change in the child's behavior or by a physical complaint. After the concern has been discussed with the child's physician, Children's Protective Services and/or with Law Enforcement, further evaluation may be arranged with a specially trained physician or nurse practitioner.

In cases where the information gathered through careful evaluation indicates that the child has been sexually abused, there is a need for both counseling and legal follow-up to protect the child from further abuse and to help the child recover from the emotional trauma that he/she may have experienced. In Whatcom County, law enforcement and Children's Protective Services personnel are trained and experienced in helping caretakers and children through the legal process which may follow documentation of sexual abuse.

Since sexual abuse of children can occur without causing physical changes, and since many of the symptoms of abuse shown by children may be general responses to stress, it is often difficult to "prove" that sexual abuse has occurred, and it is never possible to "prove" that it has not. Where careful evaluation does not suggest that sexual abuse has occurred, the child who is showing withdrawn or acting-out behaviors may be referred to counseling or other social support services. It is possible that additional information may be obtained during counseling that will help clarify the question of whether sexual abuse did or did not occur.

Whether or not evidence of sexual abuse is documented, adults are likely to be concerned with their own reactions to the possibility that a child has been sexually abused. A common concern is that the adult's reactions may add to the child's fears or confusion. In addition, adults may be uncertain about whether or not to question the child or how to respond if a child volunteers information. The following are general guidelines to assist caretakers with these concerns. It is also helpful to

identify some involved professional who can be contacted, as needed, for help with these concerns.

- If the child volunteers information, try to accept it in a calm and reassuring manner, but avoid questioning or pressing a child for details. Avoid expressing doubts, even if what the child says doesn't seem to make sense. If a child gives new information, this should continue to be reported to Children's Protective Services, law enforcement, and other involved health or social service providers.
- Maintain, as much as possible, the child's normal routine and expectations. Regular daily patterns of activities and limits are reassuring and will help the child understand that he/she is not changed or different because of what happened.
- Help the child build self-esteem in different ways during this period. Emphasize and reinforce positive qualities and abilities.
- It may be necessary to help the child understand that some behaviors are not acceptable, but try to do so in a reassuring manner without punishing or blaming the child.
- Remember to consider your own needs for support and reassurance. Because of the sensitive nature of child sexual abuse, the parent may want to select a trusted family member or a health/social service professional with whom to share feelings and concerns.

While there is no way to totally protect children from any possibility of sexual assault, you can promote your children's self-esteem and help them develop safety skills. For suggestions, see: [Safety Skills for Young Children](#)

For additional information, see:

Resources: Child Protection Services & Law Enforcement

http://www.co.whatcom.wa.us/health/pdf/child/children_who_may_have_experienced_sexual_assault.pdf

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