

Upon Learning of a Sexual Abuse Allegation in School Frequently Asked Questions

Learning of a sexual abuse allegation in the school your child attends may be disturbing. Your first concern might be whether your child has been harmed. We hope this handout will offer you some guidance on how to have a conversation with your child and family, and how to find support and resources in our community.

How do I prepare myself to talk with my child?

Talk with other adult family members or friends that you trust to remain calm and keep your child's best interests at heart.

Think about any experiences you have had in the past that might help you speak to your child in a calm and reassuring way. Also, reflect on any past experiences that might make this situation more difficult for you. If needed, take some time to yourself to reflect and process those experiences.

How do I bring the subject up?

Plan your discussion with your child and think about what you want to say. While it's important for you to talk to your child soon, a few hours or a good night's sleep may give you time to digest the information and help you approach this issue in the best way possible.

What do I say?

You know your child best, so there's no script we can give you that will be perfect for every child. Generally, it makes sense to ask your child some casual questions to decide if your child knew this counselor and how well he was known by the child.

- Who was your school counselor at _____?
- Did you ever talk with Mr. _____?
- What was he like?

The first two suggestions were questions that can be answered by your child with one or two words, or "yes" or "no". If your child responds "yes," ask an open-ended question that might elicit a longer answer.

- What did you think of Mr. _____?
- Were you comfortable around him?
- Did he say or do anything that made you uncomfortable?
- Can you tell me more about that?

Take your child's lead here- if they do not have any specific response that concerns you, let it drop and revisit the topic with them every once in awhile to see if they have any new questions or things they want to talk about.

What do I say to my child about the case?

You can offer the facts as you know them. For example, a former student has reported that a counselor at the school touched the student in an inappropriate way. This was reported to police who investigated the incident and determined that there was evidence to indicate that a law was broken. The counselor was arrested and charged with a crime.

You may also want to explain to your child that the school staff wants all students to be safe at school and they are taking additional steps to do that. Other suggestions for you as a parent are as follows:

- Listen to your child's feelings and follow the child's lead.
- Avoid over-explaining or offering more details than your child is asking for.
- Check in occasionally with your child in the following weeks to see how your child is doing.
- Your child might ask why somebody would do something like this to children. One good answer is "I don't understand how someone would do that, either. The person would be making bad choices and not caring about children."

How can I tell if something might have happened to my child?

It is important for parents to know that not all children tell about their abuse in the same way. Some kids will not disclose with words, but with behavior. If you are concerned about your child, please consult with one of the agencies listed later.

What do I do if I think something happened to my child?

This is an incredibly difficult situation for you as a parent/caregiver. However, as your child's primary caregiver, you should be aware of the fact that your response to any disclosure will influence how your child will heal. As much as you might want to, it is important that you do not make any promises to your child that you may not be able to keep.

If your child senses that you cannot handle or cope with the information they have told you, they may feel a need to look after and protect you, thereby depriving your child of the critical support that they need from you. Be aware that children often disclose in stages and at any point may shut down.

Here are some ways of coping with the situation you may be facing:

- Take a deep breath and try to stay calm. There are people who will help you sort through this.
- Be patient. If something has happened, this will likely be a difficult thing for your child to share with you.
- Let your child tell you about what happened in the child's own words and pace rather than pressing for details.
- Listen to what your child is telling you, and believe them.
- Acknowledge what your child is feeling and how difficult it is for them to tell you.
- Let your child know how proud you are of them for having had the courage to tell about what happened
- Reassure and comfort your child.
- Let your child know that you will do everything in your power to keep them safe.
- Remember it is not your job to investigate. If you have concerns about something your child says or about a concerning behavior please contact one of the agencies listed.

What resources are available?

If you have information or think something may have happened to your child, you may call the Iowa City Police Department, and ask to speak to Detective D.J. Steva at 356-5284.

There are also several local agencies that are prepared to help you. When you call, let them know that your child attend(s/ed) Lemme or Grant Wood Elementary and that you have some questions or information, would like emotional support, or need a referral.

- **United Action for Youth (UAY) 338-7518**
- **Rape Victim Advocacy Program (RVAP) Business: 335-6001 (8 AM-5 PM) or RVAP Crisis Line (24 hrs.) 335-6000**
- **Mid-Eastern Iowa Community Mental Health Center (CMH) 338-7884**

Do these resources provide confidentiality?

Any kind of sexual abuse of a child under 12 years of age at the time the crime happened requires that a report be made by any counselor, therapist, teacher, or medical professional who has knowledge of the crime. UAY and RVAP are prepared to talk with you and help you sort out your options, even if you choose not to give your name.

Information is also available online. Here are a few sites you might find helpful:

Rape Victim Advocacy Program

<http://rvap.org>

UI Child Protection Program downloadable brochures

<http://www.uihealthcare.com/depts/childrenshospitalofiowa/childprotection/brochures.html>

Stop It Now! A Campaign to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse

<http://www.stopitnow.org/>

Prevent Child Abuse America

<http://www.preventchildabuse.org/>

[Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website](#)

In addition to moving the application to a larger database server, this update will support an interface to the National Sex Offender Public Registry.

www.nsopr.gov/

Common Myths and Facts About Child Sexual Abuse

Myth: Child sexual abuse is uncommon.

It is generally believed that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused before age 18, likely by someone they know.

Myth: Children make up stories or lie about sexual abuse.

While children do make up stories, they seldom lie about sexual abuse. Moreover, children who have not been abused do not usually have explicit knowledge of intimate sexual behavior. Statistics indicate that the vast majority of child sexual abuse reports by children are true.

Myth: Abuse is most often committed by strangers.

Most abuse is committed by someone the victim knows and trusts.

Myth: Offenders are monsters or look sleazy, cruel or unusual.

Offenders come from all walks of life and look like ordinary people. Most use coercion with their victims. They can be fathers; grandfathers; uncles; brothers; stepfathers; cousins; mothers; grandmothers; aunts; sisters; stepmothers; babysitters; coaches; teachers; doctors; social workers; religious leaders; neighbors: in short, they can be anyone. The key is: what they do, not who they are.

Myth: Acts like fondling, French kissing, or touching, for example, are not really sexually abusive, and don't really harm the young person.

Offenders will often make such claims in defense of their behavior. Any form of direct or indirect sexual contact with a young person by an adult, an older child, or a sibling who is more mature, is abusive and harmful. Every individual has a unique reaction to sexual abuse regardless of the type, extent or duration of the abuse.

Myth: The child or youth is at fault for encouraging or allowing the sexual abuse to happen.

Adults are responsible for their own behavior. A child or youth is never responsible for sexual behavior displayed by an adult.

Myth: Sexually abused children and youth are scarred or damaged forever.

Many children and youth who have been victims of sexual abuse do heal and go on to lead productive and fulfilling lives, especially with early caring and effective intervention. In most cases, sexual abuse leaves no visible physical marks on a person, and no one can "tell" or will know that a person has been abused unless the person is told.

Myth: Children and youth who have been sexually abused by a member of the same sex grow up to be homosexual.

The sex of the person who commits the abuse does not determine the victim's sexual orientation. In several studies, 85-95% of convicted sex offenders were heterosexual. In fact, many are in a heterosexual relationship with an adult spouse or partner, or have access to other consenting adult sexual partners.

Myth: Children and youth are sexually abused because their parents/caregivers neglected to care for, or supervise them properly.

Offenders work hard to look like a good person to others and hide their deviant behavior from the community. Further, they groom their victims by normalizing inappropriate behavior. They use a range of tactics to gain access to their victims. However, offenders alone are responsible for their own behavior. Most offenders are experts in manipulating both the victim and the people who care about the child.

Summary

Sexual abuse happens in every community. How the community comes together to help victims, reduce risk, hold offenders accountable, and support each other makes a positive and healthy difference in everyone's life. Our kids look to us when they are confused or hurt; we look to each other. Together, parents, schools, and communities can make a safer place for children to live, learn, and grow.

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