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## When a Child Discloses

By Caitlin Bootsma

As hard as it is to hear a child disclose abuse, the first thing to remember is to stay calm. Keep in mind how incredibly difficult it probably was for them to come to you, to trust you, and to share their story with you. It's also important to be aware that children may not always disclose abuse in clear terms. Perhaps they don't understand how the action was manipulative, or how to define it or describe it. Maybe they are uncomfortable saying things aloud and will hint at what happened.

They sometimes use "test balloon" statements, and share something that may seem inconsequential at first. For example, they may say something like "I don't like Coach Smith anymore, and I don't want to go to soccer practice." With a "test balloon" statement such as this, they are testing to gauge your reaction, which may determine whether or not they continue with a disclosure. If you simply give a quick response and move on, they aren't likely to continue with their discomfort or a disclosure. But, if you settle in a bit and ask open-ended additional questions to see if something is amiss, it could be an opportunity for the child to further tell you about something that is unsettling to them.



If a child does disclose to you that they are being victimized, here are some steps to take:

1. **Listen to them.** Let them fully express what happened to them and what they want to share in their own way. [Childhelp.org](#) suggests limiting your questions to: What happened? When did it happen? Who did it? How do you know them?

2. **Affirm them.** Let them know that you hear what they are saying and that you believe them. Tell them they are brave for sharing this with you.
3. **Support them.** Let them know that you are there for them and want to help them. Do not make promises not to tell anyone.
4. **Document their disclosure.** Write down any exact quotes that may be helpful to authorities later (but, do not do this in front of them while the children are speaking).
5. **Report any suspicion of abuse to the proper authorities.** As soon as possible, when the child is with another safe adult, make a report to the child protection agency in your state. You can find the reporting information by state [here](#).

Receiving a disclosure of abuse is a big responsibility. By listening well and reporting, you can be part of the process to help victim/survivors, and allow the child the opportunity to begin to heal.

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