

AFTER DISCLOSURE

Life after disclosure can be very difficult for a child. Disclosure introduces a child to many new systems outside the family - police, attorneys, counselors, Child Protective workers, physicians. After disclosure a child encounters new and unfamiliar situations such as meeting with adults, playing with different toys, talking to strangers, and being restricted from seeing a person they may love and miss.

Children who have experienced sexual abuse often feel different from other children. They may feel "damaged" or "ruined" by the abuse and may think that this damage can be seen by others. Adults may perpetuate this situation by treating the child differently following disclosure.

Children exhibiting the following behavior may need help resolving their feelings of impairment and responsibility:

- Fantasizing: believing they have outwardly, visibly changed; for instance, thinking they are pregnant.
- Drawing themselves without body parts, especially parts that were violated
- Displaying poor body image
- Expressing concern about growing up to be "normal", believing they are "not as good as before".
- Describing themselves as "ugly".
- Expressing guilt after disclosure; feeling themselves to be at fault for the results of disclosure; heightened guilt feelings.

Suggestions for a child after sexual abuse disclosure:

- Treat the child as a child.
- Do not expect the child to appear "changed". Problems that existed before the disclosure will often continue.
- Support the child's disclosure. Sanction and validate feelings and give hope to the future. "You feel bad now, and will feel better later on."
- Children need to be with children. They need to play together. Encourage the child to be with other children. Group involvement is important.
- It will help to "empower" the child should such an event occur in the future and will remind the child that children are not at fault when abuse occurs.

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- Saying "You shouldn't feel guilty" may reinforce the child's increased helplessness, feelings of powerlessness, and discourage talking about inner thoughts and feelings. Acknowledge your child's feelings. Remind him/her that adults get mixed up and confused sometimes just as children do. Remind him/her that what happened was an adult's fault. This is an empowering process in which you can help the child focus and change feelings of guilt.
- Schools are important to the treatment process. Try not to resent the disruptions caused by these children. These children may have difficulties with other children and adults. Their concentration level may be poor and ability to complete tasks low. It takes time to interrupt the victim syndrome.
- Talk with the child at the child's initiation. Let them know that they can always talk to you about things that trouble them. Do not question for details but ask how they are doing.
- Normalize the sexual abuse in a way that decreases the child's isolation. Encourage their participation in a general discussion of prevention ideas with other children.
- Let the child know what you would do should another sexual abuse event occur.