



What to do if you suspect a child has been sexually abused.

The following guidelines should be used when responding to children who hint or disclose that they have been sexually abused:

What do I say?

If a child even hints in a vague way that sexual abuse has occurred, encourage him or her to talk freely. Don't make judgmental comments.

- Tell the child you understand and take them seriously. Child and adolescent psychiatrists have found that children who are listened to and understood do much better than those who are not. Your response to him/her is critical to the child's ability to resolve and heal the trauma of sexual abuse.
- Tell the child they did the right thing in letting you know. A child who has a relationship with the abuser may feel guilty about revealing the secret. They may be afraid if the abuser has threatened to hurt the child or other family members for telling.
- Tell the child that it's NOT their fault. Most children believe that somehow they caused the abuse or may even view it as a form of punishment for imagined or real wrongdoings.
- Finally, offer the child protection, and promise that you will promptly take steps to see that the abuse stops.

What should I do?

Report any suspicion of child abuse to Cuyahoga County Department of Children & Family Services by calling 216-696-KIDS. You may also choose to contact the local police department. Remember that it is not your job to decide whether abuse has occurred or not – professionals will investigate. It is your job to keep children safe and report if you suspect abuse.

Parents should **consult with their pediatrician** or family physician, who may refer them to a physician who specializes in evaluating and treating sexual abuse such as a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE). Pediatric SANEs are nurses who have been specifically trained to provide comprehensive care to young sexual violence victims. The examining nurse will evaluate the child's condition and treat any physical problem related to the abuse, gather evidence to help protect the child, and reassure the child that he or she is all right. There are multiple SANE units in Cuyahoga County: Fairview, Hillcrest, Huron, and Marymount hospitals.

Children who have been abused should have an **evaluation by a child and adolescent psychiatrist** or other qualified mental health professional to find out how the sexual abuse has affected them, and to determine whether ongoing professional help is necessary for the child to deal with the trauma of the abuse. The Cleveland Rape Crisis Center offers free comprehensive healing and advocacy services as well as a 24-hour hotline.

When a child tells you about sexual abuse, a supportive, caring response is the first step in getting help for the child and reestablishing their trust in adults.

Resources:

If you would like to talk to someone about your suspicions, whether to report or what to do, call Cleveland Rape Crisis Center's **24-hour, confidential, anonymous hotline at 216-619-6192.**

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. *Responding to Child Sexual Abuse*. No. 28; Updated July 2004.