
*Supporting you
in supporting them...*

A HANDBOOK FOR CAREGIVERS



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Welcome to the Child Advocacy Center

*Your child is here because of concerns about possible abuse.
Our goals are to:*

- Do the best job possible in finding out what happened;
- Work with the legal system to help the child;
- Help you understand the child protective and legal systems;
- Help make the process as comfortable as possible for you;
- Help your children and family begin to heal.

We hope this handbook will help you understand more about child abuse. We also hope it will help you understand the system we use to respond to a report of abuse.



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Table of Contents

What is Sexual Abuse?	2
Signs Sometimes Shown by Abused Children.....	3
Why It is Important to Support Your Child.....	3
Ways to Support Your Child.....	4
How the Legal System Responds to Abuse.....	5
How Do I Get Ready for Court?	6
What are the Limits of the Legal System?.....	7
What Happens in the Investigation?	8
Who's on my CAC Team?.....	8
How Do I Work with my CAC Team?.....	10
What Can I Say to Others?.....	11
Reading List for Non-Offending Caregivers.....	13
Contact Names & Numbers	back cover

What is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse occurs when a person forces a child to have any form of sexual contact or makes a child perform sexual acts. Sexual abuse may involve touching private parts (clothed or unclothed), penetration using an object, forced sexual acts between children, or making the child view, read or participate in pornography. These acts are abuse even when offenders say they were gentle and did not hurt the child.

Sexual abuse is also known as molestation and exploitation. Sexual molestation does not always mean sexual intercourse. Sometimes older children molest young or smaller children. Sexual acts between children become molestation when one child uses coercion, force, or violence to get the other child to do the acts. Young molesters should be reported to social service agencies so they can receive help.

Sexual molestation is overwhelming to children, especially when an adult is involved. Most children are taught to trust adults. They tend to believe what adults tell them is true rather than to rely on their own feelings. This trust of adults can work against them in two ways: 1) if the molester tells them that what is being done is OK, they may doubt their own feelings that it is not, and 2) if a parent's initial reaction to the child's molestation report is "This can't be true," the child may wonder if his or her own feelings are mistaken. Children almost never tell about abuse "to create problems"; more often, they fear that telling will make people angry at them. It is extremely difficult for children to report abuse.

Reference: *When Your Child Has Been Molested* by Kathryn B. Hagan

Signs Sometimes Shown By Abused Children

Children may have some of the following symptoms as a result of abuse:

- Nausea/upset stomach
- Crying
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Withdrawal from others
- Clinging to parents
- Change in school performance
- Sexually inappropriate behavior
- Lying
- Change in appetite
- Nightmares
- Anger and mood changes
- Avoidance of school/friends
- Aggressiveness
- Rebelliousness
- Fears and phobias
- Attention seeking

Your local Child Advocacy Center and other community agencies offer services to help your child overcome the effects of trauma. Children react differently depending on age, extent of abuse, support from others and their relationship with the offender.

Why It Is Important to Support Your Child

The single most important factor affecting the child's recovery is the level of support from the parents or caregivers; it is this simple. If you do everything you can to support your child, the chances of recovery are much greater. If you feel torn between loyalty to your child and loyalty to the offender, the Child Advocacy Center has services available to help you sort it out.

Ways You Can Support Your Child

Provide safety, love and support.

Let them know it is okay to cry or be mad. Make sure your child understands it is not his or her fault. Don't coach or pressure your child to talk about the abuse.

Here are some things you can say that will really help your child:

- I believe you.
- I know it's not your fault.
- I'm glad I know about it.
- I'm sorry this happened to you.
- I will take care of you.
- I'm not sure what will happen next.
- Nothing about YOU made this happen.
- It has happened to other children, too.
- You don't need to take care of me.
- I am upset, but not with you.
- I'm angry at the person who did this.
- I'm sad. You may see me cry. That's all right. I will be able to take care of you. I am not mad at you.
- You can still love someone but hate what they did to you.

Some things you can do:

- Return to a normal routine as soon as possible.
- See that your child receives therapy as soon as possible. Avoiding or minimizing the abuse usually causes more problems, because the effects of abuse will not go away without help.
- Find help for yourself. You don't have to do it all yourself.
- Teach your child the rules of personal safety. Tell them what to do if someone tries to touch them in an uncomfortable way.

- Be careful not to question your child about the abuse. If you do, you can jeopardize the case in court against your child’s abuser. Specially trained professionals at the Child Advocacy Center will interview your child to obtain the necessary information without harming the case or further traumatizing your child. If your child wants to talk about it, listen supportively, but do not probe.
- Keep your child away from the person suspected of the abuse. This is to protect you, your child and the accused.
- Avoid discussing the case with other victims or their families.
- Never coach or advise your child on how to act or what to say to professionals or investigators. This could seriously damage the case.
- Avoid the suspect.
- Your child may need an extra sense of physical security. Stay close, and assure your child you will keep him or her safe.
- Remember to give attention to your other children.



How the Legal System Responds to Abuse

The legal system can be confusing & frightening.

Part of this confusion stems from the fact that two different “legal systems” can be working on the same case. These two systems are the “criminal” system and the “civil” system. In addition, there are two different court systems that can work on a child abuse case, Family Court and Circuit Court. These courts have different purposes.

The Circuit Court is concerned with the guilt or innocence of the accused and often uses a trial to decide on the suspect’s guilt or innocence. The criminal trial focuses on issues such as:

- Is there evidence to prove the child was abused?
- What illegal acts occurred?
- If proven guilty, what punishment should the offender receive?

THE CIRCUIT COURT process can take a very long time. It may be a year before it even gets to a courtroom. Your Victim/Witness Advocate will keep you informed at all times as to where the court is in the process.

THE FAMILY COURT is concerned primarily with the safety of the child and focuses on issues like custody, supervised visitation and counseling. A number of different court hearings can be held to decide these issues. The decisions in the civil system do not depend on whether the criminal system finds guilt or not.

** In both systems the Child Advocacy Center can help provide support for children and families in the event that there has to be testimony in Court.*

How Do I Get Ready for Court?

If there is to be a trial, your Family Advocate will take your child to the courtroom and show him/her around well ahead of the actual trial date. You will also be involved in this process. Giving the child an early look at the courtroom and preparing him/her on what to expect can ease some of the child's fears, which may include:

- Seeing the abuser again
- Not wanting to go
- Wanting it to be over
- Wondering where you will be

If you are a witness, you will not be allowed in the courtroom when your child is testifying. In some cases, it might be easier on your child not to have you there. However, your child should never be in the courtroom without a trusting friendly face, so make sure your Family Advocate, a best friend or a relative stays with your child at all times.

What Are the Limits of the Legal System?

Always remember that the well-being of your child should be your objective. Don't lose yourself in the legal system, because it is only one step in the process, and it is NOT essential to your child's recovery. The best advice is to enter the legal system without expectations, because the more you expect from the system, the harder the experience is likely to be.

Another thing to remember: day after day, therapists who talk with adult survivors of child sexual abuse hear them say, "My parents didn't do anything about it." However, your child will never say that if you do everything you can to help him/her understand that you will not tolerate abuse. This is very important.

Celebrate when it is over. No matter what the outcome, conviction or not, tell the child it is over. You and the child did your best, worked hard and put in a lot of time. Celebrate a job well done.

WEST VIRGINIA DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROGRAMS

Crisis services are available to anyone affected by sexual or domestic violence at any point in the process, from the first day to years later. Domestic Violence Programs can be accessed 24-hours a day for emotional support, information and referrals and 24-hour accompaniments to emergency rooms, police stations and courts. Domestic Violence Advocates may help provide support services to non-offending parents and other caregivers during investigative interviews at West Virginia's local Child Advocacy Centers. Domestic Violence survivor support groups are offered for parents, teenagers and adult survivors of sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse. In addition, domestic violence centers provide education and awareness programs in area schools and throughout the community. To reach the program near you, contact the 24-hour toll-free statewide hotline at **1-800-799-SAFE**.



What Happens in the Investigation?

Following are the basic steps to an investigation of child abuse:

1. Someone reports suspicion of abuse to authorities, either law enforcement or Child Protective Services (CPS).
2. An interview with the child is conducted, usually at the Child Advocacy Center.
3. If necessary, a medical exam is conducted.
4. Law enforcement and/or CPS will continue the investigation, which may include an interview with the alleged offender.
5. A team of professionals (discussed in the following section) will meet to discuss the case and decide how to manage it. The team consists of a law enforcement officer, prosecutor, social worker and medical/mental health professional, victim advocate and CAC staff.
6. Someone from the team will be in contact with the family as the case progresses.
7. The case may be referred to Family or Circuit Court, or some other plan may be made for managing the case. If the case is forwarded to the Prosecuting Attorney's office, the non-offending caregiver will be told a point of contact in that office.

Who's on My CAC Team?

At the Child Advocacy Center we are fortunate to have a highly trained team of professionals who respond to child abuse reports. The roles of the team members are described below.

THE PROSECUTING ATTORNEY: The prosecutor leads the team and has the final decision as to whether charges against the offender will be filed. Consideration is given to many factors affecting the likelihood of success in court. These are: age and maturity of the child, the child's ability to testify, whether or not the suspect has confessed, presence of physical evidence and whether or not there are other witnesses. Prosecution may not happen in all cases.

THE LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER: Local, State and/or County Police Departments have investigators on the team. They interview children, non-offending parents, suspects and other witnesses and gather evidence from the scene of the alleged event.

THE CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICE WORKER: The role of Child Protective Services (CPS) is to help protect your child. The CPS social workers conduct interviews and develop safety plans. They may refer you and/or your child to counseling or other community agencies.

THE MEDICAL PROVIDER: The medical provider is a member of the team and has experience examining children when there are worries of abuse. The exam for sexual abuse involves a regular check-up but includes a closer look at the private parts. Tests may also be done for sexually transmitted diseases. The medical team works to make sure the exam is not scary or painful. You should know that the exam may not prove if the child has been abused or not. Many children who have been abused have normal exams, thus the team does not rely on these alone to prove abuse. The exam does allow the provider to assure the child that his or her body is OK. It is also important to treat any health problems the child may have.

ADVOCATE(S): The role of the advocate is to help reduce trauma for the child and non-offending family members. Advocates have many different services they may provide:

- greeting and orientation of children to the CAC
- crisis intervention and support at all stages of investigation and prosecution
- updating the family on case status and court information
- providing tours of the courthouse/courtroom
- securing transportation to interviews, court, treatment and other case-related meetings
- providing referrals for mental health and medical treatment

THE MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDER: The role of the mental health provider is to provide specialized, trauma-focused services to your child and non-offending family members. Mental health treatment for non-offending parents or guardians may focus on support and coping

strategies, information about sexual abuse, dealing with issues of self-blame and grief, family dynamics, parenting education and abuse. The mental health provider will also provide services to your child which include:

- trauma-specific assessment and treatment
- family/caregiver participation
- referral to other community services as needed

How Do I Work With My CAC Team?

The system is responsible for protecting children and holding offenders accountable. The more information and cooperation you give the team of professionals working in the system, the better job they can do on the case.

Here are some basic tips for working with professionals in the system:

- Be calm and reassuring to your child. DON'T coach your child on what to say. It is important for the story to come out in your child's words and in your child's own time.
- When you are asked for information, try to provide as many facts as you can. Cases are built on the four W's: who, what, when and where. Don't try to guess if you don't know the answer to a question – it is much better to say you don't know.
- On the other hand, your feelings are important. Feelings are valuable in giving investigators insight, so tell how you feel and why you feel that way. Although only facts are allowed in court, feelings can help give investigators ideas for how to proceed.
- Always be honest, even though the truth may not seem favorable to yourself or others. In the long run, you will be much better off.
- Try not to overreact. It is a difficult time and emotions are probably running high. Losing control can hurt the case and overshadow the needs of the innocent victim, your child.
- Love, support and protect your child at all costs. If the alleged offender is a significant person to you, it can be very difficult to balance your feelings for him or her with the need to protect your child. Remember that your child has only you to make healthy, protective decisions.

- Cooperate. You will probably feel as if investigators are prying into your personal life, but this is necessary and vital to the case and to your child's welfare. The sooner the facts come out, the sooner the case can be resolved and you can return to a more normal life.
- You may feel that investigators do not care because they avoid showing emotions. In fact, investigators do care, and part of that caring involves remaining objective and calm in the face of extremely emotional situations.

What Can I Say To Others?

One challenge your family will face will be what to say to others about the abuse. Your child may feel embarrassed and/or responsible. If there is no publicity or public awareness, you can decide whom you will tell. Let your child know which relatives or friends you plan to tell and let your child have some choice about who will be told.

Sometimes an extended family member is the first person to learn of the abuse. You may feel hurt that someone knew before you. However, understand that your child may have been trying to protect your feelings by telling someone else. Your child may have felt that person could tell you in a less upsetting way than your child could.

If you are especially close to your family, you will probably want to talk with them about your child's abuse and how it has affected the family. It is important to keep in mind how these relatives usually react to stressful situations. Their reactions may include hysteria, horror, obvious distress, sincere concern, embarrassment, disgust, disinterest, or unnecessary questioning for intimate details. If you know they will react in a negative way, you may not want to share the information with them unless it becomes necessary. It is important to maintain your child's sense of privacy. On the other hand, be careful not to make it a dirty secret, as this could cause more shame in your child.

Comments you can expect from others about the abuse:

“What exactly did he do to your child?”

“Are you sure your child didn’t make it up?”

“Why didn’t you know it was happening?”

“If it were my child, I’d just move away.”

“Your poor child must be feeling really guilty.”

Remember, you don’t owe anyone an explanation. “I’d rather not talk about it” is an acceptable response, or simply say “It’s been a very difficult time for all of us.” “I appreciate your concern” is another response you might want to use, or it may be easier to just nod as an acknowledgement of what someone says.

Keep in mind that most people have very little knowledge about sexual abuse. For example, in response to the comment about your child feeling guilty, you could say that children always feel unnecessary guilt in these cases until they are assured that they are not responsible in any way for what happened. As a parent, you might also be experiencing some guilt, and as a result you may feel defensive. In that case, a good response is “Parents do their best, but we’re only human.”

Adults are the people most likely to say something to your child. You may want to tell your child that if someone says, “I’m sorry about what happened to you,” she should just respond with a simple, “Thank you.” Let your child know that he does not have to respond to any comments or questions.

Reading List for Non-Offending Caregivers

Adams, C. and Fay, J. (1995). Helping your child recover from sexual abuse. Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press.

Ashley, S. (1992). The missing voice. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

Bear, E. and Dimock, P. (1988). Adults molested as children: A survivor's manual for women and men. Orwell, Vermont: Safer Society Press.

Byerly, C. (1992). The mother's book. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

Case, J. and Hagan, K. (1988). When your child has been molested. New York, New York: Lexington Books.

Myers, J. (1991). Incest: A mother's nightmare. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Ovaris, W. (1991). After the nightmare. Holmes Beach, Florida: Learning Publications, Inc.

Wickland, P. (1995). Sleeping with a Stranger: How I survived a marriage to a child molester. Holbrook, Massachusetts: Adams Publishing.

Your local Child Advocacy Center:



West Virginia Child Advocacy Network
State Office
Charleston, WV
(304) 414-4455
wvcan.org

Other emergency numbers:

Friend _____ Number: _____ Cell: _____

Family member _____ Number: _____ Cell: _____

Taxi _____

Other _____

WV Coalition Against Domestic Violence: **1-800-799-SAFE**
Child Abuse & Neglect Hotline: **1-800-352-6513**