

Further Resources

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, you will want to anticipate some of the questions that may arise in a meeting with community members. The following are some questions that are typical, along with preliminary suggestions for responses that may defuse an emotional situation and get people thinking in a positive direction. You will, of course, want to supplement these suggestions with your own responses in light of the specific occasion or conditions in your community. Below are some typical questions – and suggested responses – you might encounter.

I do not want to talk to my children about sexual abuse, because I do not want to frighten them. Is this really the right thing to do?

It is helpful for parents to keep in mind that:

- You, as a parent or adult, may be more uncomfortable or frightened by this than your children are;
- We provide safety information to our children in a number of other areas. (You can draw a parallel between teaching kids to “drop and roll” if clothes catch on fire [which is a pretty scary thought] or teaching kids to cross the street by looking both ways so they are not run over [which is also a pretty scary thought].)

You may want to provide audience members material that offers guidance about age-appropriate ways to talk to children about this topic such as those on the list of suggested materials included in the participant materials.

I am concerned that I really cannot tell who is and who is not a sex offender.

You are exactly right. There is no such thing as a typical sex offender. That is why it is important for you to understand common sense strategies for protecting yourself and your children that you should always follow.

To protect yourself from offenders, follow general safety guidelines, such as maintaining an awareness of your surroundings and trusting your instincts about people and situations. To protect your children, maintain open lines of communication with them – listen to your children; being available and taking time to really know your children builds feelings of safety and security.

Refer participants to handout materials with further information about protection of self, teens, and children.

How will I know if I can believe allegations about sexual assault – do people make false accusations?

The majority of victims tend to minimize sexual assault, or out of self-blame, fear, or shame do not disclose the abuse. This is particularly true of child victims. Research indicates that sexual assault is no more falsely reported than any other crime. The best approach is to believe the victim, listen to her or his allegations, offer your support, and support the victim in getting the help that s/he needs.

I am very concerned about protecting my child from this type of crime. In fact, I think if my child were a victim, I do not know how I could possibly handle it.

Perhaps the best thing to remember if you know or suspect that your child has been victimized is that they need you – more than ever – to be a calm, nurturing, and protective parent. The child has endured one of the most profound violations of her or his person. It will probably be extremely difficult for your child to disclose this to you, or to deal with the emotion of knowing that you are aware of what has happened to them. It will be even more difficult for your child if they observe you losing control of your own feelings or behavior. In order to help your child, and prevent further trauma to her or him, you have to be strong for her or him. Seek help for your child. Seek help for yourself in the form of specialized counseling to help you handle your reactions.

How can children ever recover from such an experience? (Or, if the questioner has had a child who has been victimized...) I am afraid that my child will be permanently damaged.

Children are amazingly resilient. Research suggests that children who are supported when they disclose or when the victimization comes to light heal more quickly than those who are not believed. A supportive family response and professional intervention can also help to heal child victims and their families.

Can I protect my child(ren)?

You can minimize the risk to your child(ren) by listening to their questions and concerns, talking to them about sex and sexual abuse, and ensuring an openly communicative family lifestyle where your child(ren) know they can come to you if they have questions, fears, and/or concerns.

I have heard that sometimes children willingly participate in sexually abusive activities, and that they are partially to blame.

Because of their age and the age difference between children and their perpetrators, children are unable to truly consent to sexual activity. They are never to blame for their own abuse – although they are often made to feel like willing participants because of the careful, manipulative behavior of their abusers. This further contributes to their shame and guilt. If you have the occasion to be involved with a child who has been

sexually abused – either your own child or another – one of the most healing responses is to reassure the child that they bear absolutely no responsibility for what an adult has done to them or made them do – even if they have been tricked into believing that the adult cares for them and what they were doing was “okay.”

With everything that parents hear about the dangers of abuse, how can you possibly avoid being overprotective with your children?

We all have to remember as parents that overprotectiveness and excessive fear can make our children feel helpless, whether about sexual assault or any of the other dangers that life holds. Information, common sense, and keeping lines of communication open with your children are much more productive than succumbing to irrational fear.

How will I know if my child is a victim? The thought that my child might actually be a victim and I might not know it is very worrisome to me.

The reality is that some instances of child sexual abuse never do come to light. However, the better informed you are about what to look for, the better the chance that you can know and be able to help your child. Trust your instincts; you know your child best. Any change in behavior that concerns you is probably worth evaluating.

Is the court process terribly traumatic for child victims? Might it be worse than the abuse itself?

If child victims are believed and supported, the court process can actually be a helpful experience for a child. Remember, part of the trauma of sexual assault is the loss of control over one’s own body. The court process – by believing the child, allowing the child to tell their own side of the story, and by holding the offender accountable – gives power back to the child. If the child feels empowered by the court process, the outcome can be positive. Be sure to find out in your own jurisdiction if there are special provisions made for child victims. If there is a child advocacy center where child victims can be interviewed in a child-friendly atmosphere by a skilled interviewer – this can be very reassuring to parents.

If my child were a victim of sexual abuse, would talking about it with my child afterwards make it worse?

Making the child talk when they are not ready and implying blame can make it worse. Encouraging your child to talk but not demanding or forcing information from her or him is helpful.

If I suspect someone in my family of sexually abusing my child or another child in my family or neighborhood, what should I do? Should I confront them?

Your best approach is to contact the authorities and let them investigate. If you suspect the abuse because of something your child or another child has disclosed to you, your most important role is to believe and support the child.

What do I do, or whom do I tell, if I am sexually assaulted or my child is sexually abused?

Ultimately, the choice of reporting the sexual assault of an adult is a choice that a victim must make. Perhaps the best course of action is to call a rape crisis center to explore your options and what the implications might be for you. Clearly, criminal justice authorities will encourage you to come forward and report the crime to the appropriate agency. However, victims should always be encouraged to tell a trusted person who can support them through this process. (Be sure to have information on rape crisis resources in your community to give to meeting participants. Such a question may actually be a request for help for victimization.) In the case of the victimization of a child, there are certain agencies and individuals who are required by law to report. It would be helpful for you to gather information about the statutes governing reporting in your state. (It is recommended that you have these available as resources.)

If I am sexually assaulted I do not think that I could ever recover.

Although the pain of sexual assault is profound, victims do heal. The healing process will be smoother if you seek assistance from someone, a therapist or a victim advocate, who has experience talking to sexual assault victims. Tell someone you trust what has happened – do not struggle with it alone.

I do not know how to help a friend who has been sexually assaulted.

Listening to your friend without judging her/his choices is the best thing you can do. Reinforce the message that your friend is not to blame for what happened. Be sensitive to new fears and behaviors associated with the assault (such as avoiding crowds or feeling unsafe in previously comfortable locations). Most importantly, give your friend time to heal and let her/him know you are there to listen whenever needed. (Direct participants to handouts with more information on this.)

Is sexual offending on the increase or is there just more reporting?

We do not really know. Because most sexual offenses go unreported, it is difficult to tell. There is speculation among many in the field that the implementation of new laws related to the registration and community notification of convicted sex offenders may

cause an even higher rate of underreporting (remember, most victims know their assailants and many may not want to subject them to public scrutiny). However, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey, victimization is increasing. In 1996, there were 307,100 victimizations of rape and sexual assault, and in 1999, there were 383,170 victimizations (an increase of 12.5%).

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