

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

(Dealing with Child Sexual Abuse)

The assault of a child is always a crisis. Parents and family members often feel overwhelmed and may ask for advice on what to do. It is generally best to go slowly. Focus on the needs of the child and don't expect too much too quickly. The following suggestions may be helpful. Tell the child that:

You are glad that she/he told you.

Do not pressure the child. Go slowly. Many children do not tell their parents about the assault until sometime later. They may feel guilty about not telling their parents sooner.

Let them know that you are glad they told you.

You believe what she/he has told you.

It is very unusual for children to make up stories about sexual assault. Often, they have difficulty describing the specifics of the assault. This does not mean that they are not telling the truth. Remember, young children may not have the mental skills necessary to recall the specific time and place of the assault.

If a relative has assaulted the child, the child may have an especially difficult time confiding in someone. Because of the child's feelings of loyalty and dependence, he/she may prefer to talk with someone outside the family.

You know it is not their fault.

Many children assume the guilt for their assault and for the crisis that may result because they reported the assault. Reassure the child that they did not do anything wrong. Avoid making threats about what will happen to the offender. This may make the child feel more guilt. Often, it is best to simply state that what the offender did was not right and that you will try to get the offender some help so that no one else will be hurt.

You are sorry about what happened.

You or the parents should not assume what the child is feeling. Parents need to keep their feelings and reactions separate from those of the child. Remember to focus on the child's concerns and not yours. The parent may be very angry. Be sure the parent lets the child know that while they may be angry, they are not angry with the child.

You will do your best to protect and support the child.

The medical and criminal justice system is often very unpredictable. For this reason it is best to make no promises about what will happen. The parents should simply tell the child they will do their best to protect them.

The decisions regarding medical care and police reporting are very difficult for the parent. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers. The parent's goal should focus on protecting the child from future abuse, helping the child recover from the effects of the assault, and protecting other children from the offender. The parents need to take an active part in accomplishing these goals.

The child should be included in the decision-making process as much as possible. They should not, however, be asked to make decisions which are beyond their ability. Perhaps, the child could help pick the doctor they are most comfortable with for the medical examination. The child may be overwhelmed by difficult decisions, but should be given as much control as is reasonable. Parents should be cautioned not to over-protect the child.

A recommended book in this area is *No More Secrets: Protecting your Child From Sexual Assault* by Caren Adams and Jennifer Fay, Impact Publishing, P.O.Box 1094, San Luis Obispo, CA 93406