



# What To Do If Your Child Is Sexually Abused

*A guide to helping parents of sexually abused children*



## A Guide to Helping Parents of a Sexually Abused Child

*Despite the fact that one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused by their 18th birthday, many parents don't know what to do once they suspect or learn that their child has been sexually abused. This guide will help you make decisions that will allow your child to better recover from child molestation.*



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### Learn the Signs of Molestation

Parents, your child, depending on their age, may not be able to directly tell you that what is happening or has happened is sexual abuse. It is your responsibility to be aware of your child's discomfort, behavior, and attempts to reach out.

Any one sign doesn't mean that a child was sexually abused, but the presence of several suggests that you begin asking questions and consider seeking help.

### Signs more typical of younger children

- An older child behaving like a younger child (such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking)
- Has new words for private body parts
- Resists removing clothes when appropriate times (bath, bed, toileting, diapering)
- Asks other children to behave sexually or play sexual games
- Mimics adult-like sexual behaviors with toys or stuffed animal
- Wetting and soiling accidents unrelated to toilet training

### Signs more typical in adolescents

- Self-injury (cutting, burning)
- Inadequate personal hygiene
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Sexual promiscuity
- Running away from home
- Depression, anxiety
- Suicide attempts
- Fear of intimacy or closeness
- Compulsive eating or dieting

## Sexual Abuse Behavioral Signs

### *The child may:*

- Have an unusual knowledge of sex or act seductively
- Fear a particular person
- Seem withdrawn or depressed
- Gain or lose weight suddenly
- Shy away from physical contact
- Run away from home.



#### Behavior to look for:

- Has nightmares or other sleep problems without an explanation
- Seems distracted or distant at odd times
- Has a sudden change in eating habits
  - Refuses to eat
  - Loses or drastically increases appetite
  - Has trouble swallowing.
- Sudden mood swings: rage, fear, insecurity or withdrawal
- Leaves “clues” that likely provoke a discussion about sexual issues
- Writes, draws, plays or dreams of sexual or frightening images
- Develops new or unusual fear of certain people or places
- Refuses to talk about a secret shared with an adult or older child
- Talks about a new older friend
- Suddenly has money, toys or other gifts without reason
- Thinks of self or body as repulsive, dirty or bad
- Exhibits adult-like sexual behaviors, language and knowledge



### If You Suspect Sex Abuse



#### Listen to Your Child & Stay Calm

Sexual abuse can change a child's view of the world. Regardless of how devastated you are, your child needs to believe that they will be okay. Your child will look to you for cues that they will be okay and that they are not in trouble. The best way you can reassure your child that he or she hasn't done anything wrong is to stay calm and be supportive.

#### Believe What They Say

It is important to avoid saying anything that conveys distrust or disbelief. Even simple phrases, such as "Are you sure?" can cause the child further pain and make them feel that no one will believe them. Child molestation victims will often change their story or pretend that they were joking or kidding in order to avoid further disbelief.

Appropriate and helpful responses include:

- "I am glad you told me, thank you."
- "You are very brave and did the right thing."
- "It wasn't your fault."
- "I am proud of you for telling me."

Let them know you love them. If the disclosure is hard to believe, keep reminding yourself that false disclosures are extremely rare.

#### Do Not Interrogate Your Child

Learning that your child has been sexually abused may bring feelings of helplessness and anger. While you may have the best intentions in wanting to ask questions or take action, it can make a detective's job - and achieving justice - much more difficult.

#### Reassure Your Child

Tell them that the molestation is not their fault. A child's greatest fear is that he or she is responsible for what happened to them.



### **Protecting Your Child**

No parent wants to think that they're endangering their own child, yet many parents and guardians deny the situation in front of them out of refusal to accept that a trusted family member, coach or babysitter could have possibly done something so horrific as to sexually abuse a child. Being marginalized and disbelieved causes immense additional damage to the victim and it can put your child, and others, in further danger. Parents must remember that no one is prepared for this moment, but they must put the welfare of their child first.

#### **Do:**

- Your foremost responsibility is to ensure the safety of your child. If the suspected predator is a family member or trusted adult, such as a coach, you must ensure that your child is safeguarded from contact with that individual.
- Minimize your questions so as not to influence your child's memory/ understanding
- Minimize who talks to your child
- As soon as you have a very basic understanding, contact the police IMMEDIATELY.

#### **Don't:**

- Do not express doubt. Don't even give yourself permission to think it. No matter how painful this accusation and the potential consequences, your responsibility is to the safety of your child.
- Do not confront the suspected predator or attempt to discover any additional evidence. It could muddle facts, or worse, alert the predator of your suspicions.

### **Call the Police. Work with them.**

Once you have contacted the police, a detective will ask to speak with your child. While it is your right to remain in the room, understand that children often withhold important information in the presence of their parents.

Many victims struggle with feelings of guilt and responsibility for their sexual assault - a child more so. Just like children are inclined to feel responsible in the event of their parent's arguing or a divorce, children traumatized by sexual assault may not have internalized that this is not their fault.

As such, it is often difficult for a detective to gain a full and accurate understanding with a parent in the room. If you have any doubts or questions, try and speak with the detective separately. Understand that your child is taking cues from your actions and emotions.

#### **Do:**

- Consider the best interest of your child and allow a detective to interview them in private
- Assure your child that this is ok
- Ask the detective separately what the investigation will entail
- Be prepared for multiple interviews

#### **Don't:**

- Do not openly express doubts or undermine a detective's efforts. Remember, they are trained professionals who understand the delicacy and emotional needs of your child at this time. Their goal is to help you achieve justice and to protect others from a potential predator.

#### **Important:**

You are legally allowed a victim's advocate to be present during the interview. This is an option you may consider if you feel uncomfortable or out of the desire to do the best for your child. However, the least-traumatic path is a swift interview and returning your child to a safe environment as soon as possible. As advocates are often not held to the same standard of training as detectives, their presence may interfere.

### **Get Professional Help ASAP**

The consequences of child sexual abuse last a lifetime. Your child has been violated in the most personal way possible and the ramifications of that can be overwhelming. An unfortunate number of parents decide that the best path is to hope the situation will fade away or that their child will simply forget. Others assume counseling will further traumatize their child.

But decades of extensive research shows otherwise: Lifelong effects include increased health risks, a tendency towards substance abuse and promiscuity, emotional problems, difficulty making and maintaining healthy relationships.

Understand that the desire to avoid seeking professional attention is selfish and misinformed. There are therapists trained specifically to help sexual assault victims who can offer your child invaluable tools to reduce their risks of living under the shadow of their sexual abuse. Specialized counseling may even be available thru the victim witness assistance program available in most counties.

A specialized counselor will know how to help your child begin to talk about the shame, pain and guilt he or she is feeling. The counselor will offer your child support for their pain, while helping them discover that there is hope. You cannot expect your child to speak completely openly with you about these issues right now, given the natural desire of a child not to upset a parent. He or she needs a safe place to process feelings where only his or her feelings matter.

When kids are not given such a place, they often "act out" their tangled emotions on others. You'll want to explain to your child that they need to be open with their counselor, no matter how embarrassed they are and that sharing these shameful feelings and thoughts is how we heal from our shame and guilt.

#### **Do:**

- Seek counseling for your child as soon as possible
- Ask the police for recommendations or possible assistance
- Consider counseling for yourself and your family to help cope with the trauma

#### **Don't:**

- Assume this will "just go away"
- Invalidate your own feelings by ignoring therapy options for yourself

### Contact an Experienced Attorney

Victims and their families have two avenues of seeking justice, criminal and civil.

The District Attorney pursues criminal justice, and if found guilty, will see that your child's predator is locked up as punishment for his or her crimes.

However, many victims are not aware that civil action can provide them with compensation that will be necessary to lead a full and productive life, including ongoing therapy and medical costs. Civil action also can provide a sense of closure or justice when taken against an institution that failed in their responsibility to protect your child.

#### Do:

- Choose a child molestation attorney with a strong background in child sex abuse cases. They possess the expertise necessary to best help your child heal and to navigate the legal system without interfering with the criminal process.

#### Don't:

- Do not seek advice from an attorney without a proven record of representing child molestation victims.

- Do not ignore the option to pursue civil justice. Each state has a different law that allows victims of child molestation victims a set amount of time to file a lawsuit for civil justice. Once that time has passed, so has the opportunity to bring their predator, or any additional responsible parties, to justice.

The right child molestation attorney will be your advocate and will fight to protect the rights of you and your child in an effort to hold the perpetrator(s) accountable for their reprehensible actions in criminal court while also making it easier for you to seek civil action against those responsible for sexually violating your child.





### Getting Started

Confronting a predator who has victimized you or a member of your family takes courage. To aid in the process, Keep Kids Safe has established a list of preferred attorneys who will help you and are actively involved in holding predators and the institutions that enabled their behavior accountable for their actions. These attorneys have demonstrated a commitment to victims throughout each step of the process.

#### **Corsiglia McMahon & Allard, LLP**

[www.child-molestation-attorney.com](http://www.child-molestation-attorney.com)

(408) 289-1417



The law firm of Corsiglia McMahon & Allard has a national reputation and a proven record of holding child molesters and their enablers accountable for their negligent actions.

Mr. Robert Allard has been the driving force in uncovering the largest sexual abuse scandal in amateur athletics in the United States and twice has been honored by major swimming publications for his work in making the sport of swimming safer through litigation and advocacy.

Lauren Cerri has represented numerous child sex abuse victims against individual perpetrators and institutions. In teaming up with Mr. Allard to protect children, Ms. Cerri says that she is frequently asked, "How do you what you do? Isn't it difficult?" Her response is, "How can I not do what I do?"

#### **Estey & Bomberger, LLP**

[www.childmolestationvictims.com](http://www.childmolestationvictims.com)

(800) 925-0723



The mission of Estey & Bomberger is to end the sexual abuse of our community's most precious commodity – our children.

Founding partner Stephen Estey's knowledge and expertise has allowed the firm to successfully represent numerous victims of institutional sexual abuse.

In 2010, Estey obtained a \$30,000,000 verdict in the case of John Doe vs. Giarretto, the largest sexual abuse settlement ever awarded in California to a single recipient. In 2012, Estey represented a victim of Martin Stobbe, a teacher at Queen Anne Elementary School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The jury in that case awarded \$23 million to the victim following a 15-day trial.

## What To Do If Your Child Has Been Molested

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### **The Reeves Law Firm**

[www.thereeveslawfirm.com](http://www.thereeveslawfirm.com)

(256) 355-3311



Mr. Reeves has practiced law for 24 years and has represented children as a guardian ad litem for victims of child sexual abuse and helped injured children recover for their injuries in civil cases.

He has taught trial skills to attorneys in Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia and Wyoming. Mr. Reeves has also taught, adjunct, at the University of Alabama School of Law.

In 2008, Reeves was elected to the City Council for Decatur, Alabama where he led the funding of projects that resulted in millions being spent to help children with the arts, sports and recreation, and education. In 2011, he was recognized by his alma mater, the University of North Alabama, with the Political Service Award."

*No representation is made that the quality of the legal services to be performed is greater than the quality of legal services performed by other lawyers.*

### **Saeed & Little, LLP**

[www.sllawfirm.com](http://www.sllawfirm.com)

(317) 721-9214



Jon Little started his career as a law clerk in the County Attorney's office in Flagstaff, Arizona in 2007. Since then he has tried numerous civil and criminal cases to jury across the US.

Within a year of graduating law school Mr. Little started what was to become the first of several cases against United Swimming for harboring known-child molester coaches inside their organization for decades. Due to the advocacy of Mr. Little and Robert Allard the United States Olympic Committee created the first Safe Sport program in the history of Olympic Sports in 2010.

Mr. Little focuses his practice on helping the victims of institutionally protected molesters fight for cultural change to protect future children particularly in athletics.

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If you have questions or would like more information about us, please e-mail attorney Robert Allard at [info@keepkidssafe.com](mailto:info@keepkidssafe.com)