

When a Child Alleges Sexual Abuse by an Educator or other School Staff:

An Educators' Guide to Appropriate Response and Support



CHALLENGES OF STUDENTS' ALLEGATIONS OF EDUCATOR ABUSE

As educators, you play an essential role in children's lives. Often, the safe classroom environment enables children to disclose troubling experiences to you. Child sexual abuse (CSA) is common and has serious and multiple negative consequences. Thus, you should be prepared to respond to these disclosures. This document addresses the types of responses that contribute to the best outcomes for children in an educational setting.

A child's allegation to you that he or she has been sexually abused by a colleague (or other school staff in a position of trust) presents challenges. You may not know what to believe and what role to take. You may doubt that the educator could have engaged in sexually abusive behavior toward a child.

Skepticism about a student's allegations is more likely when the student has had prior academic, emotional, or behavioral problems. You and fellow educators must keep in mind that students with these vulnerabilities are the very ones most likely to be chosen as victims by perpetrators of sexual abuse.

While confusion, anger, disbelief, fear, and/or the desire to defend an accused teacher are understandable responses, they can have serious consequences for the child or other potential victims, who may experience ostracism, rejection, or increased mental health difficulties. When a child alleges sexual abuse in the school setting, your role—both as a professional and as a mandated reporter—is to protect the child.

CONSEQUENCES OF INAPPROPRIATE RESPONSES

Significant research indicates that children who are disbelieved or unsupported after sexual abuse disclosures have significantly worse long-term mental health outcomes. They are more at risk of experiencing posttraumatic stress, anxiety, and depression and at risk of developing negative beliefs about themselves and other people.

Failure to remain neutral about a student's disclosure of sexual abuse, could contribute to a child's perception that adults do not care about children's sexual abuse; do not want to hear about their experiences; or their related problems. This may make it less likely that other students who have experienced sexual abuse will disclose. This may lead to these students experiencing serious and long-term negative academic, medical, and mental health effects associated with sexual abuse.

EDUCATOR'S ROLE FOLLOWING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ALLEGATIONS

Educators are not responsible for investigating or proving the truth about the allegation of sexual abuse. Educators have two roles: to report and to support.

Report: According to each state's reporting laws, educators are *mandated to report disclosures or reasonable suspicions of child sexual abuse* to Child Protective Services (CPS). Most schools have procedures in place to help you with this reporting. Failure to report can have serious consequences for you and for your school. In many states, educators can lose their teaching license and/or be subject to criminal charges for failing to report disclosures or reasonable suspicions of child sexual abuse. You can familiarize yourself with the requirements of mandated reporting in your state by checking:



{ <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/responding/reporting/how/>
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/manda/> }

Support: Provide practical and emotional support to children who disclose sexual abuse by a colleague. Children should be able to continue to attend school as comfortably as possible. This may require the child, parents, and school personnel discussing together how to create a learning environment that is devoid of questioning or judgment. You can take steps to ensure that the child feels safe physically, emotionally, and socially, in the following ways:

STEPS

- During interactions with the child and other students, convey acceptance and neutrality regarding the allegations, regardless of your personal feelings about the case.
- Emotionally support students by validating difficult feelings.
(For example, if the student expresses sadness, say, "I can see you feel really sad.")
- If the abuse occurred in the school setting, refer the child to a setting outside the school for specialized evidence-based or trauma-focused assessment and treatment instead of providing mental health services at the school.
- At all times, maintain confidentiality.

RESPONDING TO AND SUPPORTING OTHER STUDENTS

If other students learn about the allegations, they will likely have questions and strong reactions. They may be prone to side with the student who has disclosed the abuse or to disbelieve and bully him or her. Direct children to a professional so they can ask questions, express their feelings, and receive support.



There are other measures educators/schools can take:

- Provide—while not revealing any information about the specific situation—general information about child sexual abuse to students in small group formats. This link provides appropriate materials for such discussions: www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/sexual-abuse.
- Create a safe educational environment for students after disclosures of sexual abuse by an educator. Review your school's policies to ensure that students are protected from verbal and physical threats and other negative interactions. Make every effort to ensure that students do not experience verbal or physical threats, harassment, or other negative interactions related to the disclosure.
- Discuss with students the effects of social media, including online bullying and other negative interactions. Emphasize that when other students post personal information, they make everyone vulnerable.
- Maintain a neutral stance and respect confidentiality.

RESPONDING TO THE MEDIA

Members of the media may approach educators or students with questions about the sexual abuse allegations. Educators are generally advised against communicating with the media concerning the allegations, given the potential effect such communications could have on the well-being of the child involved, the alleged perpetrator, and the objectivity of the abuse investigation. Schools should prohibit students from communicating with the media during school hours. While educators cannot control what students do outside of school, discuss with students why such communications are not appropriate. Tell students—and all parents—that they have a role in creating a place of safety for others, and they can do this by respecting the privacy of each individual in the school community.



RESOURCES:

<http://www.nea.org/home/62845.htm>

stopbullying.gov

NCA website to locate CACs

<http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/>

National Center for Victims of Crime:

<https://victimsofcrime.org/media/reporting-on-child-sexual-abuse/child-sexual-abuse-statistics>

Rape Abuse & Incest National Network RAINN

<https://www.rainn.org/statistics>

Darkness to Light, D2L.org http://www.d2l.org/site/c.4dCIJOkGclSE/b.9314267/k.3928/Child_Sexual_Abuse_Statistics.htm?gclid=CMWa26C6itACFVclgQod32QHTQ

Sexual Assault and Prevention Awareness Center @ Univ of Michigan

<https://sapac.umich.edu/article/52>

WomensHealth.gov

<https://www.womenshealth.gov/publications/our-publications/fact-sheet/sexual-assault.html>

NCTSN school webpage

<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel>

CSA webpage

<http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/sexual-abuse>

PFA for Schools

<http://www.nctsn.org/content/psychological-first-aid-schoolspfa>