

Parent Tips for Helping Toddlers after a Disclosure

If Your Child	Understand	Ways to Help
Has problems sleeping, does not want to go to bed, will not sleep alone, wakes up at night screaming.	When children are scared, they want to be with people who help them feel safe, and they worry when you are not together. If the abuse happened at bedtime, going to bed alone may remind the child of the abuse. Bedtime is a time for remembering because we are not busy doing things. Children often dream about things they fear and can be scared of going to sleep.	If you want, let your child sleep with you. (Let him/her know this is just for now)
Worries something bad will happen.	It is natural to have fears like this after being in danger.	Remind your child and yourself that right now you are safe. If you are not safe, talk about how you are working to keep him/her safe. Make a plan on ways to keep you and your child safe. Do positive activities together to help think about other things.
Cries or complains whenever you leave him/her. Cannot stand to be away from you.	Children who cannot yet speak or say how they feel may show their fear by clinging or crying. Goodbyes may remind your child of feeling unsafe.	Try to stay with your child and avoid separations right now. For brief separations, help your child by naming his/her feelings. For longer separations, have your child stay with familiar people, tell him/her where you are going and why, and when you will be back. Let him know you will think about him/her. Leave a photo or something of

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yours and call if you can. When you come back tell him/her you missed him/her, thought about him, and did come back.

Has problem eating, eats too much or refuses to eat.

Stress affects your child in different ways, including his/her appetite. Eating healthy is important, but focusing too much on eating can cause tension and stress.

Relax. Usually, as your child's level of stress goes down, his/her eating habits will return to normal. Do not force your child to eat.
Eat together and make meal times fun and relaxing.
Keep healthy snacks available.

Is not able to do things he/she used to do (e.g., potty).

Does not talk like he/she used to.

Often when young children are stressed or scared, they temporarily lose abilities; this is the way young children tell us they are not okay and need our help. Losing an ability after child has mastered it (e.g., starting to wet bed again) can make him/her feel ashamed or embarrassed.
Caregivers should be understanding and supportive. The child is not doing it on purpose.

Avoid criticism.
Do not force your child. It creates a power power struggle.
Instead of focusing on the ability, help your feel understood, accepted, loved and supported.
As your child feels safer, he/she will recover the ability he/she lost.

Is reckless, does dangerous things.

It may seem strange, but when children feel unsafe, they often behave in unsafe way.
It is one way of saying, "I need you. Show me I am important by keeping me safe."

Keep him/her safe. Calmly hold their hand. Let him/her know that what he/she is doing is unsafe, that he/she is important, and you would not let anything happen to him/her. Show him/her other more positive ways that he/she can have your attention.

Is scared by things that did not scare him/her before.

Young children believe their parents are all-powerful and can protect them from anything. This belief helps them feel safe.

Because of what happened, this belief has been damaged, and without it the world is a scarier place.

Many things may remind your child of the abuse, and will scare him/her. It is not your fault- it was the abuse.

When your child is scared, talk to him/her about how you will keep him/her safe. If things remind your child of the abuse and cause him/her to worry that it is happening again, help him/her to understand how what is happening now is different from the abuse.

Your child is too young to understand and recognize how you did protect him/her, but remind yourself of the good things you did.

Seems “hyper,” cannot sit still, and does not pay attention to anything.

Fear can create nervous energy that stays in our bodies.

Adults sometimes pace when worried, young children run, jump, and fidget.

When our minds are stuck on bad things, it is hard to pay attention to other things.

Help your to recognize feelings (fear, worry) and reassure your child that he/she is safe.

Help your child get rid of nervous energy (stretching, running, breathing deep/slow).

Sit with him/her and do an activity you both enjoy (throw a ball, read books, play, and draw).

Even if he/she does not stop running around, this helps.

Plays in a violent/aggressive way.

Young children often talk through play. Violent/aggressive play can be their way of telling us how crazy things were or are, and how they feel inside.

If you can tolerate it, listen to your child when he/she “talks.”

As your child plays, notice the feelings he/she has and help him by naming feelings and being there to support, hold, and soothe.

Keeps talking about the abuse and the bad things he/she saw. up for both you and your child.

When your child talks about what happened, strong feelings may come help him/her calm down, help him/herself to feel safe.

If he/she gets overly upset, spaces out, or he/she plays out the same upsetting scene,

Is now very demanding and controlling.

Between the ages of 18 months to 3 years, young children often seem demanding. It can be annoying, but it is a normal part of growing up and helps them learn that they are important and can make things happen.

Remember your child is not controlling or bad. This is normal, but may be worse right now because he/she feels unsafe. Let your child have control over small things. Give him/her choices. Balance giving him/her choices and control.

Seems “stubborn” insisting that things be done his/her way.

When children feel unsafe, they may become more controlling than usual. This is one way of dealing with their fears.

Children will feel unsafe if they feel they are “running the show.” Cher him/her on when he/she tries new things.

Tantrums and is cranky.
Yells a lot –more than usual.

Even before the abuse, your child may have had tantrums. They are a normal part of being little. It is frustrating when you cannot do things and when you do not have words to say what you want/need. Now, your child has a lot to be upset about (just like you) and may really need to cry and yell.

Let him/her know you understand how hard this is for him/her. Tolerate tantrums more than you usually would, and respond with love rather than discipline. You might not normally do this, but things are not normal right now. If he/she cries or yells, stay with him/her and let him/her know you are there for him/her. Reasonable limits should be set if tantrums become frequent or are extreme.

Hits you.

For children, hitting is a way of expressing anger. When children hit adults they feel unsafe. Hitting can also come from seeing other people hit each other.

Each time your child hits, let him/her know that this is not okay. Hold his/her hands, so he/she cannot hit, have him/her sit down. Say something like, “It is not okay to hit, it is not safe. When you hit, you are going to need to sit down.”

Says “Go away, I hate you!”

The real problem is the abuse and everything that followed, but your child is too little to fully understand.

Remember what your child has been through. He/she does not mean what he/she is saying; they are angry and dealing with so many feelings.

Says, “This is all your fault!”

When things go wrong, young children often get mad at their parents because they believe they should have stopped it from happening.
You are not to blame, but now is not the time to defend yourself. Your child needs you.

Support your child’s feelings of anger, but gently redirect the anger towards the abuse. “You are really mad. Lots of bad things have happened. I am mad too. I really wish it did not happen. It is so hard for both of us.”

Does not want to play or do anything.

Your child needs you. So much has happened and he/she may be feeling sad and overwhelmed.
When children are stressed, some yell and others shut down.

Sit by your child and keep him/her close. Let him/her know you care. If you can, give words to his/her feelings. Let him/her know it is okay to feel sad, mad, or worried.

Cries a lot.

Your family may have experienced difficult changes because of the disclosure, and it is natural that your child is sad.
When you let your child feel sad and provide him/her with comfort, you help your child even if he/she remains sad. If you have strong feelings of sadness, it may be a good for you to get support. Your child’s well-being is connected to your well-being.

Allow your child to express feelings of sadness.
Help your child name his/her feelings and understand why he/she may feel that way. Support your child by sitting with him/her and giving extra attention. Spend special time together.
Help your child feel hopeful about the future. Together think and talk about how your lives will continue and the good things you will do. Take care of yourself.

Misses people you are no longer able to see after the disclosure.

Even though young children do not always express how they feel, be aware that it is difficult for them when they lose contact with people.

Help your child talk about these people. Even when we are apart from people, we can still have feelings about them by Remembering and talking about them. Acknowledge how hard it is to not be able to see people we care about. It is sad.

Parent Tips for Helping Pre-School Age Children after a Disclosure

Reactions/Behaviors	Responses	Examples of Things To Do & Say
<p>Helplessness and passivity: Young children know they cannot protect themselves. During abuse, they feel even more helpless. They may express this by being unusually quiet or agitated.</p>	<p>Provide comfort, rest, food and opportunities for play and drawing. Reassure your child that you and other grown-ups will protect them.</p>	<p>Give your children more hugs, hand holding, or time in your lap.</p>
<p>General fearfulness: Young children may become more afraid of being alone; going to sleep, or otherwise separated from parents.</p>	<p>Be as calm as you can with your child. Try not to voice your own fears in front of your child. Help children regain confidence that you are not leaving them and that you can protect them.</p>	<p>Be aware when you are on the phone or talking to others, that your child does not overhear you expressing fear. Say things such as, “You are safe from the abuse now, I know about the secret. If you start feeling more scared, come take my hand. Then I will know you need me.”</p>
<p>Regressing to earlier behaviors: Thumb sucking, bedwetting, baby-talk,</p>	<p>Remain neutral or matter-of-fact, as best you can, as these earlier behaviors may continue a while after the disclosure.</p>	<p>If your child starts bedwetting, change his/her clothes and linens without comment. Do not let anyone criticize or shame the child.</p>
<p>Fears that the offender will return: When having reminders- seeing, hearing, or otherwise sensing something that reminds them of the abuse.</p>	<p>Explain the difference between the event and reminders of the event. Protect children from things that will remind them as best you can.</p>	

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Not talking: Being silent or having
Difficulty saying what is bothering

Put common feelings into words,
such as anger, sadness, and worry.
Do not force them to talk, but let
them know they can talk to you any time.

Draw simple “happy faces,” for
different feelings on paper plates.
Tell a brief story about each one.

Sleep problems: Fear of being alone
at night, sleeping alone, waking up
afraid, having bad dreams.

Reassure your child that he/she is safe.
Spend extra quality time together at
bedtime.
Let the child sleep with a dim light or
sleep with you for a limited time.
Some might need an explanation between
dreams and real life.

Provide calming activities before
bedtime. Tell a story with a
with a comforting theme.
Explain that bad dreams come from
our thoughts inside about being
scared, not from real things
happening.

Parent Tips for Helping School-Age Children after a Disclosure

Reactions/Behaviors	Responses	Examples of Things To Do & Say
Confusion about what happened	Give clear explanations of what happened whenever your child asks. Avoid details that would scare your child. Correct any misinformation that your child has about whether there is a present danger. Let your children know what they can expect to happen next.	
Feeling of being responsible: School-age children may have concerns that they were somehow at fault, or should have been able to change what happened. They may hesitate to voice their concerns in front of people.	Provide opportunities for children to voice their concerns to you. Offer reassurance and tell them why it was not their fault.	Explain to your child that, “After a disclosure, lots of kids- and parents too-keep thinking, “What could I have done differently?” or “I should have been able to do do something.”
Fears of recurrence of the event and reactions to reminders:	Help identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. Repeatedly reassure children they are safe.	When they recognize that they are being reminded, say, “Try to think to to yourself; I am upset because I am being reminded of the abuse, but I am safe now.”
Retelling of the event or playing out the event over and over:	Permit the child to talk and act out these reactions. Let your child know this is normal. Encourage positive problem-solving in play or drawing.	“You are drawing a lot of pictures of what happened. Did you know that many children do that?” “It might help to draw about how you would like things to change to make you feel safer?”

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<p>Fear of being overwhelmed by their feelings:</p>	<p>Provide a safe place for your child to express his/her fears, anger, sadness.</p>	<p>“When scary things happen, people have strong feelings, like being mad at everyone or being very sad.</p>
<p>Sleep problems: Bad dreams, fear of sleeping alone, demanding to sleep with parents.</p>	<p>Let your child tell you about the bad dream. Explain that bad dreams are normal and they will go away. Do not ask child to go into too details of the bad dream. Temporary sleeping arrangements are okay; make a plan with your child to return to normal sleeping habits.</p>	<p>“That was a scary dream. Let us think about some good things you can dream about.”</p>
<p>Altered behaviors: Unusually aggressive or restless behaviors.</p>	<p>Encourage the child to engage in recreational activities and exercise as an outlet for feelings and frustration.</p>	<p>“I know you did not mean to slam the door. It must be hard to feel so angry.” “Maybe a walk would be good to get our bodies moving to help with the strong feelings.”</p>
<p>Somatic Complaints: Headaches, stomach aches, muscle aches for which there seem to be no reason.</p>	<p>Find out if there is a medical reason. If not, provide comfort and assurance that this is normal. Be matter-of-fact with your child; giving these complaints too much attention may increase them.</p>	<p>Make sure the child gets enough sleep, eats well, drinks plenty of water, and gets enough exercise.</p>
<p>Closely watching a parent’s responses and recovery: Not wanting to disturb a parent with their own worries.</p>	<p>Give children opportunities to talk about their feelings, as well as your own. Remain as calm as you can, so as not to increase the child’s worries.</p>	

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Parent Tips for Helping Adolescents after a Disclosure

Reactions/Behaviors	Responses	Examples of Things To Do & Say
Detachment, shame, and guilt.	Provide a safe time to discuss with your teen the events and their feelings. Emphasize that these feelings are common, and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done.	“Many teens- and adults-feel like you do, angry and blaming themselves that they could have done something.”
Self-consciousness: About their fears, sense of vulnerability, fear of being labeled abnormal.	Help teens understand that these feelings are common. Encourage relationships with family and peers for needed support during the recovery period.	
Acting out behavior: Using alcohol or Drugs, sexually acting out, accident-prone behavior.	Help teens understand that acting out behavior is a dangerous way to express strong feelings (like anger) over what happened. Limit access to alcohol and drugs. Talk about the danger of high-risk sexual activity. On a time-limited basis, keep a closer watch on where they are going and what they are planning to do.	“Many teens- and some adults- feel out of control and angry after abuse/disclosure. They think drinking or taking drugs will somehow. It is very normal to feel that way- but it is not a good idea to act on it.” “It is important during these times that I know where you are and how to contact you.” Assure them that this extra checking-in is Temporary, just until things have stabilized.

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<p>Fears of recurrence and reactions to reminders.</p>	<p>Help identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occurs after it.</p>	<p>“When you are reminded, you might try saying to yourself, “I am upset now I am being reminded, but it is different now because the secret is out, I am safe.”</p>
<p>Abrupt shifts in interpersonal relationships: Teens may pull away from parents, family, and even from peers; they may respond strongly to parent’s reactions in the crisis.</p>	<p>Explain that the strain on relationships is expectable. Emphasize that everyone needs family and friends for support during the recovery period. Encourage tolerance for different family member’s courses of recovery. Accept responsibility for your own feelings.</p>	<p>Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Say, “you know, the fact that we are crabby with each other is completely normal, given what we have been through. I think we are handling things amazingly. It is a good thing we have each other.”</p>
<p>Radical changes in attitude.</p>	<p>Explain that changes in people’s attitude after disclosure are common, but often return back over time.</p>	<p>“We are under great stress. When people’s lives are disrupted this way, we all feel more scared, angry-even full of revenge. It might not seem like it, but we will all feel better after some time passes and when we get get back to our family routine.”</p>
<p>Premature entrance into adulthood: (wanting to leave school, have a baby).</p>	<p>Encourage postponing major life decisions. Find other ways to make the teen feel more in control.</p>	<p>“I know you are thinking of quitting school, but it is important not to make big decisions right now. A crisis time is not a great time to make major changes.”</p>

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Tips for Adults after a Disclosure

Reactions/Behaviors	Responses	Examples of Things To Do & Say
<p>High anxiety/arousal: Tension and anxiety are common after a disclosure. Adults may be excessively worried about the future, have difficulties sleeping, problems concentrating, and feeling jumpy and nervous. These reactions can include rapid heart rate and sweating.</p>	<p>Use breathing and/or other relaxation skills. Take time during the day to calm yourself through relaxation exercises. These can make it easier to sleep, concentrate, and will give you energy.</p>	<p>Breathing exercise: Inhale slowly through your nose and comfortably fill your lungs all the way down to your stomach, while saying to yourself, “My body is filled with calm.” Exhale slowly through your mouth and empty your lungs, while silently saying to yourself, “My body is letting go.” Do this five times slowly, and as many times a day as needed.</p>
<p>Concern or shame over your own reactions. Many people have strong reactions after a disclosure, including fear and anxiety, difficulty concentrating, shame about how you reacted, and feeling guilty. It is expectable and understandable to feel many emotions in the aftermath of an extremely difficult event.</p>	<p>Find a good time to discuss your reactions with a family member or trusted friend. Remember that these reactions are common and it takes time for them to subside. Correct excessive self-blame with realistic assessment of what actually could have been done.</p>	<p>When talking with someone, find the right time and place, and ask if it is okay to talk about your feelings. Remind yourself that your feelings are expectable and you are not “going crazy,” and that you are not at fault for the abuse.</p>
<p>Feeling overwhelmed by tasks that need to be accomplished.</p>	<p>Identify what your top priorities are. Find out what services are available to help get your needs met. Make a plan that breaks down the tasks into manageable steps.</p>	<p>Make a list of your concerns and decide what to tackle first. Take one step at a time. Find out which agencies can help with your needs and how to access them. Rely on your family, friends, and community for practical assistance.</p>

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Fears of recurrence and reactions to reminders.

Be aware that reminders can be: people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day.

When you are reminded, you might try saying to yourself, “I am upset now I am being reminded, but it is different now.

Changes in attitude, view of the world and of oneself: Strong changes in people’s attitude after a disclosure are common, including questioning safety, trust in others, and concerns about one’s own effectiveness.

Postpone any major unnecessary life changes in the immediate future. Remember that dealing with disclosure can increase your sense of courage and effectiveness.

Getting back to a more structured routine can help improve decision-making. Remind yourself that going through a crisis can have positive effects on what you value and how you spend your time.

Using alcohol and drugs, or engaging in gambling or high-risk sexual behavior: Many people feel out of control, scared, hopeless, or angry after a disclosure and engage in these behaviors to feel better. This can especially be a problem if there were pre-existing substance abuse or addiction.

Understand that using substances and engaging in addictive behaviors can be a dangerous way to cope with what happened. Get information about support.

Remember that substance use and other addictive behaviors can lead to problems with sleep, relationships, jobs, and physical health.

Shifts in interpersonal relationships People may feel differently towards family and friends; they may feel overprotective and very concerned for each other’s safety, frustrated by reactions of a family member or friend, or they may feel like pulling away from family and friends.

Understand that family and friends are a major form of support during the recovery period. It is important to understand and tolerate different courses of recovery among family members. Rely on other family members for help with parenting or other daily activities when you are upset or under stress.

Do not withdrawal from others because you feel you might burden them. Most people do better after a disclosure to turn to others. Ask your friends and family how they are doing rather than giving advice or telling them to “just get over it.”

Excessive anger: Some degree of anger is understandable and expected after a disclosure, especially when something feels unfair. However, when it leads to violent behavior, extreme anger is a serious problem.

Find ways to manage your anger that help you rather than hurt you.

Take time to cool down, walk away from stressful situations, talk to a friend about what is making you angry, get physical exercise, distract yourself with positive activities, or problem-solve the situation that is making you angry.
Remind yourself that being angry may harm important relationships.
If you become violent, get immediate help.

Sleep difficulties: Trouble falling asleep and frequent awakening is common after a disclosure, as people are on edge and worried about adversities and life changes.

Make sure you have good sleep routines.

Go to sleep at the same time every day.
Do not have caffeinated drinks in the evening.
Reduce alcohol consumption.
Increase daytime exercise.
Relax before bedtime.
Limit daytime naps to 15 minutes, and do not nap later than 4 pm.