Responding to a Disclosure of Sexual Abuse: Helping the Client and Supporting the Investigation

Children’s Advocacy Services of Greater St. Louis

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Disclosure of sexual abuse is a process, not an event.

Sorenson and Snow, 1991
TYPES OF DISCLOSURE
Sorensen and Snow, 1991

• ACCIDENTAL
Abuse Revealed By Chance

• PURPOSEFUL
Child Makes Conscious Decision to Tell
EXAMPLES OF ACCIDENTAL DISCLOSURE

- Witness to the event
- Directly asked
- Physical evidence
- ID as victim (photographs)
- Sexual behavior
- Inappropriate statement
- Shared confidence
- Diary
Examples for Purposeful Disclosure

- Education/prevention awareness
- Anger
- Proximity to perpetrator
- Concern for other victims
STAGES OF DISCLOSURE
SORENSEN AND SNOW, 1991

• DENIAL
• TENTATIVE
• ACTIVE
• RECANTING
• REAFFIRMING
Initial Interview Disclosure
Sorensen and Snow, 1991

• 72% denied the allegations

• 17% went into tentative disclosure

• 11% went directly into active disclosure
Prevent Recantation

- Provide safety for the victim
- Provide support for the victim
- Provide corroboration for the victim’s statement
- Reduce stress/trauma to child

* These efforts will also create an environment supportive to reaffirmation.
So, what does this research tell us?

It is our duty to protect the child from further risk by **not** dismissing an allegation that involves an initial denial, tentative disclosure, or recantation.
WHAT IS A CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER (CAC)?

The purpose of a Child Advocacy Center is to provide a comprehensive, culturally competent, multidisciplinary team response to allegations of child abuse in a dedicated, child-friendly setting.
Who Comprises the “Investigatory Team”? 

Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) may consist of:

- Law Enforcement
- Children’s Division
- Prosecution
- Family Court
- Victim Advocacy
- Children’s Advocacy Center
- Medical Professional
- Mental Health Professional
PURPOSE - MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM (MDT) APPROACH

• To provide a coordinated response among the agencies involved in the investigation of child abuse of a serious or criminal nature.

• Response involves:
  • Written protocols
  • Members are routinely involved in investigations
  • Implemented procedures for routine sharing of information
COMPONENTS OF A CAC

- Child Friendly Facility
- Forensic Interviews
- Multidisciplinary team approach
- Victim Advocacy

- Case review and case tracking
- Therapeutic intervention
- Medical exams
WHO ARE THE CHILDREN REFERRED TO THE CAC?

✓ Forensic Services
  ✓ Child Demographics
  ✓ Who can refer

✓ Clinical Services
  ✓ Child Demographics
  ✓ Who can refer
YOU HAVE CONCERN FOR A CHILD...

WHAT DO YOU DO?
Cursory Interview Defined

• An interview conducted for the purpose of obtaining factual information as a part of a potential criminal investigation.
  • Neutral
  • Open-minded, objective
  • Fact-finding (Who, What, Where), NOT detailed (How, Why)

• For the purpose of gaining MINIMAL FACTS to:
  • Assess the child’s safety;
  • Determine the need to call the CA/N Hotline or notify law enforcement
Initiating Contact – First with the Caregiver (If possible)

• Speak to caregiver in private

• Find out
  • What they know about allegations
  • How did they find out about allegations
  • When did they learn of allegations
  • How did they respond
  • Do they believe their child
  • Does the alleged perpetrator have access to their child or other children
The Cursory Interview Setting

✓ If possible, talk with the alleged child victim outside the presence of the parent(s) or caregiver(s), or any other adults/children.

✓ If the caregiver must be present, ask them not to participate in the interview.

✓ Find a quiet, comfortable place to talk with the child.
Contact With Child

- If during contact with the child he/she begins to talk freely about the abuse, do not stop him/her.
- Document the child’s statement as close to verbatim as possible.
- Don’t interrupt.
- Offer reassurance when needed.
- Don’t make assumptions.
TYPES OF QUESTIONS

- Open-ended
- Focused/specific
- Multiple choice
- Yes/no
- Misleading
Examples of Types of Questions

Indirect

Open-ended (narrative inviting):
“Tell me about that.”
“Tell me everything you remember about what happened.”
“Tell me more about that.”

Focused/Specific (tied to previous statement):
“Tell me what happened on the bed.”
“Tell me about school.”
EXAMPLES OF TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Direct

Multiple Choice:

“So did it happen at your dad’s house, mom’s house or somewhere else?”

“So did it happen one time or more than one time?”

“So were your clothes on, off, or something else?”
EXAMPLES OF TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Direct

Yes/No:

“Did someone touch you in a way that you didn’t like?”

“Has someone made you do something that was not okay?”

Follow up with:

“Tell me all about that.”
If you ask a Direct Question and do not follow it up with an Indirect (open-ended) Question, you may be leading the child to give inaccurate information.
NEVER ask Misleading Questions which include the answer within the question and can include a “tag on” statement which pressures the child to agree with you.

“Bob made you have sex with him, didn’t he?”
QUESTIONS SHOULD BE:

- **Simple & Concrete**
  - “Tell me all about what you were doing.”
  - “Tell me what Sammy was doing.”
  - “Tell me all about the hotel you mentioned.”

- **Not Complex and Abstract:**
  - “What were you and Sammy doing?”
  - “What jurisdiction were you in?”
CURSORY INTERVIEW STAGES

✓ Rapport
✓ Incident Inquiry
✓ Closure

✓ Establish Safety, if possible
RAPPORT

• Introduce yourself to the child.
  Example:
  • “My name is ___ and one of my jobs is to talk to kids (teenagers).”

• Try to spend time (length of time will vary depending on the age of the child) talking about things they are experts about (start with family, friends, activities, pets, school).

• Depending on the frequency of contact, be sensitive to asking too much too soon.

• This step would not be necessary if a relationship has previously been established with the child.
Transition from Rapport to Incident Inquiry

Ask the child,

• “Do you know why I am here to talk to you?”

• “Do you know what we are here to talk about today?”
If.....

the child begins to talk about the allegations, continue to ask open-ended questions to determine:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
Incident Inquiry

If the child says they do not know why you are there, but had previously told someone else about the abuse, ask:

• “Is someone worried that something may have happened to you?” or
• “Have you talked to someone about something that happened to you (that was not okay)?”
• “Tell me about what you told ________?”

If the child says yes continue with open ended questions
Incident Inquiry

If the child still has not talked about the allegations, ask:

- “Has someone done something that isn’t okay with you?”
- “Has someone ever hurt you?”
- “Is there anyone you are scared to be around/don’t feel safe around?”
CLOSURE

If the child does not talked about the allegations to you and you are still concerned, contact the CAC (314) 535-3003 to discuss the case.

During Closure:
✓ Ask the child if something were to happened that he/she didn’t like, who could he/she tell?
✓ Thank the child for talking with you
Stop the interview when you have determined:

- Who
- What
- Where

Describe the CAC to the child.
REMEMBER IF YOU SUSPECT CHILD ABUSE...

- Call the Missouri Child Abuse/Neglect Hotline at: 1-800-392-3738

- Remember Mandated Reporters: “...reasonable cause to suspect that a child has been or may be subjected to abuse or neglect or observes a child being subjected to conditions or circumstances which would reasonably result in abuse or neglect, that person shall immediately report... No internal investigation shall be initiated until such a report has been made. As used in this section, the term "abuse" is not limited to abuse inflicted by a person responsible for the child's care, custody and control as specified in section 210.110, but shall also include abuse inflicted by any other person.”
If Possible, Meet with Parent/Caregiver

• Explain the importance of not talking about the allegations with friends and family who might share the information with the alleged perpetrator.

• Advise the parent to avoid having conversations or phone calls about what happened in front of their child.

• Explain the importance of them not questioning their child regarding the allegations. If their child brings it up, advise them to listen without commenting or questioning. Later, document exactly what he/she said.
Explaining the Process

• Explain to the parent/caregiver what they can expect in the investigative process:
  • Children’s Division – Hotline call
  • Notification of Law Enforcement, if appropriate
  • Possible referral to CAC
    • Parents won’t be able to observe interview
    • Interview does not take the place of child’s testimony
Things to Remember

- DO NOT introduce the name of the alleged perpetrator until the child has used it.

- If the child discloses, use the same names for body parts as the child.

- The age, amount of trauma, and/or developmental abilities of the child may determine the amount of information they can give.

- If it is believed to be in the child’s best interest to be referred to a CAC, stop the interview when you have determined who, what, and where.
More Things to Remember

✓ Never EVER ask *why* it happened.

✓ Don’t ask why the child didn’t tell sooner.

✓ Reassure the child that it is not his/her fault and that he/she is not in trouble (with you today).
MORE THINGS TO REMEMBER

✓ Remain neutral when talking to the child.

✓ Do not react with shock, horror or indifference.

✓ Don’t ever try to guess possible acts of abuse and look to the child to confirm what you say.

✓ Listen to the child’s statements, but don’t ask for details about how the abuse was experienced – leave that to the forensic interviewer.

✓ Do NOT offer the child something in an attempt to encourage them to tell you something.
IF THE POTENTIAL VICTIM DOES NOT SPEAK FLUENT ENGLISH…

• Ask if it is OK to use an interpreter from their community
• In an attempt to ensure interpreter is not allied with trafficker do not use children, neighbors, friends, adults familiar to the trafficker and/or child
• Request interpreter provides verbatim interpretation and avoid side conversations with the child
• Explain the interpreter’s role and confidentiality
• Be sensitive to cultural and religious differences
*NOTE*

- Even children who are interviewed at a CAC may still have to testify in court.... Please **do not** tell the child or caregiver they will never have to testify in Court.

- Additional resource:
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