



HANDLING DISCLOSURE

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Children may disclose sexual abuse in a variety of ways. They may come in private to talk directly and specifically about what is going on. Unfortunately, this is one of the less common ways for children to disclose.

More common ways include:

- **Indirect hints:**

e.g. "My brother wouldn't let me sleep last night", "Rabbi Abrahams wears funny underwear", "My morah gives me a lollypop when I bend down", "Daddy's trying to poison me", "my babysitter keeps bothering me". Children may talk in these terms because they haven't learned more specific vocabulary, feel to ashamed or embarrassed to talk more directly, have promised not to tell or for a combination of these reasons. Gently encourage children to be more specific within the limits of their vocabulary but bear in mind that in order to make a report, you do not need to know exactly what form of abuse has taken place.

- **Disguised disclosure:**

e.g. "I know someone who is being touched in a bad way", "What would happen if a girl told her mother she was being molested but her mother didn't believe her?". Here children might be talking about a friend or sibling but are just as likely to be talking about themselves. Encourage them to tell you what they know about the "other child". It is probable that children will eventually tell you who they are talking about.

- **Disclosure with strings attached:**

e.g. "I have a problem but if I tell you about it, you promise not to tell anyone else", Most children are all too aware that some negative consequences will result if they break the secret of abuse; often the offender uses the threat of these consequences to force the child to remain silent. Let children know you want to help them and that the law requires you to make a report if any child discloses abuse; just as the molestation itself is against the law so too would it be against the law for you not to report. Assure the children you will respect their need for confidentiality by not discussing the abuse with anyone other than those directly involved in the legal process who might include the school nurse or counselor, school principal and/or the state protective service investigator.

Suggestions for responding to disclosure:

- Find a private place to talk with the child.
- Do not panic or express shock.
- Express your belief that the child is telling the truth.
- Use the child's vocabulary.
- Reassure the child that it is good to tell.
- Reassure the child that it is not her/his fault, that she/he is not bad.
- Determine the child's immediate need for safety.
- Let the child know that you will do your best to protect and support her/him.
- Let the child know what you will do.
- Report to the proper authorities.

Providing Ongoing Response: Ways to respond to the abused child that will help build the child's self-esteem and sense of safety and security:

- Maintain contact with the caseworker or therapist and the non-offending parent(s). You can be helpful in the treatment process and they can be helpful to you in dealing with the child in the period following the disclosure.
- Refrain from touching a child who has been sexually abused. For these children, all touch may mean sexual touch. A non-intrusive touch such as an arm around the shoulder should be given only with caution and the child's permission. The caution has to do with whom you are doing it for. If the touch is for yourself, don't do it!
- Do not tolerate inappropriate behavior. If a child is acting out sexually with other children, respond to the behavior as you would with any inappropriate behavior. Assure the child that you like her/him but what she/he is doing is not okay. The same would be true for other inappropriate touching. For excessive masturbatory behavior, you would add that school is not the appropriate place to touch him/herself.
- Teach and model appropriate behavior. Do not allow the child to climb all over you. You can sit the child on a chair next to your chair (or near you on the floor) and be very close together. Sometimes it is appropriate to refuse touches in a gentle, assertive way.

Creating An Environment To Hear A Disclosure:

- **Listening:** Children are very frightened of your finding out their "secret" They often try to push you, the teacher, away. They present things to you in a matter of fact way. You need to learn to be able to create an environment that says "I see you, I care, I want to hear, I will listen carefully".
- **Asking:** Make sure that you ask in a gentle, non-threatening way. Normalize whatever they say, "This happens to other kids too, they feel this way too". Avoid frightening words like *abuse* or *rape*. Invite them into a discussion but *be careful not to prompt answers*.
- **Validate:** Validate the child after they have told you their "secret". Make them feel safe.
- **Do's and Don'ts of Child Abuse Disclosure:**
 - DO NOT promise or guarantee any particular outcome, i.e. "it won't be reported, no one will know besides me, everything will be just fine".
 - DO be clear about whom you will need to tell and who does not need to know.
 - DO offer to be there with them if the child needs to talk to school personnel, Department of Children Services or Law Enforcement.
 - DO NOT use facial or verbal expressions that communicate disgust, disbelief, i.e. "Oh, that is awful!"
 - DO be calm but get support immediately from your director/supervisor.
 - DO take any "Uh-Oh" or "Red Flag" feeling to your principal or Rav. Discuss any rumors or concerns with supervisor.

IT IS NOT YOUR JOB TO BE AN INVESTIGATOR OR JUDGE. HOWEVER, AWARENESS, SUSPICION AND CONCERN ABOUT ABUSE IS A WAY TO CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR THE CHILD