

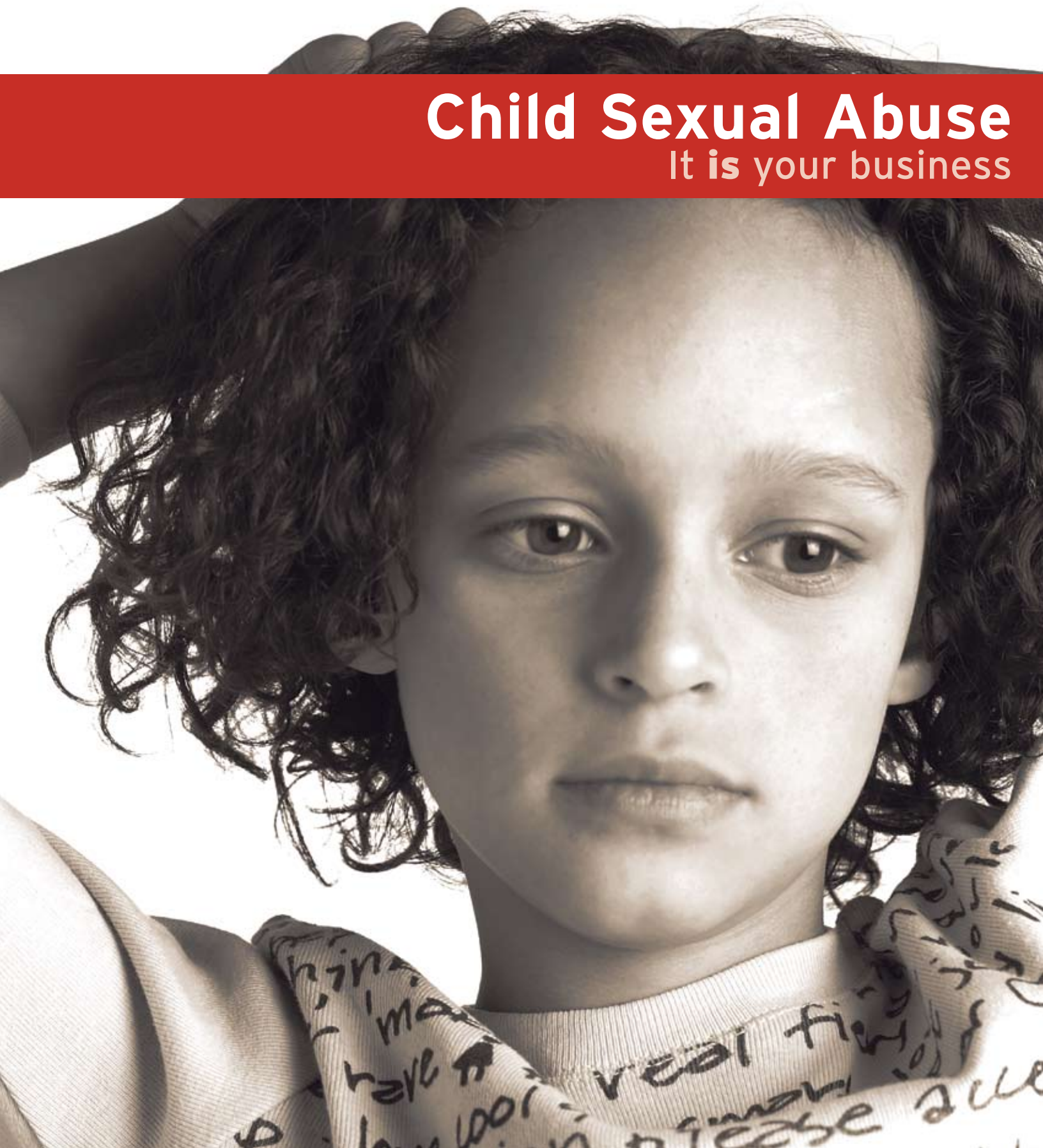


CANADIAN CENTRE for
CHILD PROTECTION™

www.protectchildren.ca

Child Sexual Abuse

It is your business



Child Sexual Abuse – It is your business

Child sexual abuse is a serious problem within our society and occurs more frequently than people realize. It is important to understand what child sexual abuse is and to recognize behaviour that may signal a child in distress. Adults have a responsibility to protect children from sexual abuse.

What is sexual abuse?

This list is not meant to be exhaustive

Contact sexual abuse

- Touching and fondling genital area
- Touching and fondling breasts
- Forcing touching of other's genital area
- Oral sex
- Vaginal or anal intercourse
- Vaginal or anal penetration with object or finger

Non-contact sexual abuse

- Online luring to meet for sexual encounter
- Invitation to sexual touching online and/or offline
- Voyeurism ("Peeping Tom")
- Exposure to sexually explicit material
- Child pornography (child abuse images taken)
- Sexually intrusive questions or comments
- Asked to masturbate or watch others masturbate
- Exposure to sexually explicit acts
- "Flashing" genitals

How can risks be reduced?

Be vigilant of situations and behaviour that seem strange and present risk.

Screen and check child protection policies at organizations and activities that the child attends.

Supervise the child. Know where s/he is.

Accompany the child to public areas (washrooms, stores, etc.) and to activities.

Communicate to the child that s/he can talk to you about anything. Pay close attention to changes in behaviour – it can be a sign of distress.

Rehearse "What if" scenarios to help the child anticipate responses to dangerous situations that s/he may encounter.

Teach assertiveness skills - how to send an "I mean business" message.

Label body parts using correct terms. Explain that s/he should not let anybody touch his/her private parts.

Model appropriate boundaries between adults and children. Healthy adults are not interested in companionship from children. Children are friends with other children and adults are friends with other adults.

What is concerning behaviour?

(particularly regarding children 12 years and under)

It is important to pay attention to changes in a child's behaviour – children communicate how they are feeling through their behaviour. If you notice any of the behaviour below from a child, do not automatically conclude s/he has been victimized – this may be one of several possibilities. Rather, provide support and assistance to help figure out what is causing the child's distressing symptoms.

- 1. Advanced sexual knowledge** The child has sexual knowledge beyond her/his level of development. This may include information about certain smells, sounds, tastes, and/or visual details of sexual activity.
- 2. Sexualized behaviour** The child acts out explicit sexual behaviour. This could be with toys, peers or adults. The child masturbates excessively, and does not respond to limits placed on her/his behaviour.
- 3. Withdrawn/Depressed** The child becomes increasingly withdrawn. S/he resists playing with usual friends and withdraws from activities previously enjoyed.
- 4. Decline in school performance** The child's performance at school declines and her/his grades drop.
- 5. Distressed around a particular adult** The child shows distress or resistance to spend time with a particular adult.
- 6. Excessively seeks time with a particular adult** The child excessively seeks time with a specific adult, as s/he is given extra attention, gifts or privileges.
- 7. Aggressive** The child seems agitated and acts out aggressively towards others (e.g. yelling, hitting, putting others down).
- 8. Self-destructive** The child is physically harming her/himself and sharing feelings indicating a lack self-worth (e.g. I wish I was dead, I shouldn't be alive, what's the point in living?).
- 9. Physical symptoms** The child shows physical signs of abuse in the genital region (e.g. pain, bleeding, discharge).

Understanding Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is a serious problem. While reporting of child sexual abuse has increased over the last thirty years, it still remains vastly undisclosed. Adults have a responsibility to actively protect children.

Sexual abuse is a process. It often begins before sexual touching starts.

Who sexually abuses children?

Child sexual abusers can be anyone. They are usually known to the child and have access to him/her in some capacity. Offenders use a variety of techniques to control children; in extreme cases, this can involve psychological terror, the use of threats and physical violence. More typically, however, a subtle approach is used to gain control and repeated access to the child. Prior to committing a sexual contact offense, the offender often organizes a plan to reduce the likelihood that the abuse will be revealed. The offender gains the child's trust, as well as the trust of adults around the child. This process is referred to as "grooming."

What is grooming?

Grooming is the way an adult manipulates a child into cooperation and continued access for the purpose of sexually exploiting that child. In order for an adult to sexually abuse a child two things are typically required:

Access to the child

Time alone with the child

Grooming behaviour

Although not all child sexual abuse involves grooming, it is a common process employed by offenders. It usually begins with subtle behaviour that may not initially appear to be inappropriate, such as paying a lot of attention to the child and being very affectionate. Many victims of grooming and sexual abuse do not recognize they are being manipulated, nor do they connect how the grooming was a part of the abuse process.

Adult behaviour to pay attention to:

- An adult seems overly interested in a child
- An adult frequently initiates or creates opportunities to be alone with a child (or multiple children)
- An adult becomes fixated on a child
- An adult gives special privileges to a child (rides to and from practices, etc.)
- An adult befriends a family and shows more interest in building a relationship with the child than with the adults
- An adult displays favouritism towards one child within a family
- An adult finds opportunities to buy a child gifts
- Caters to the interests of the child, so a child or the parent initiate the contact

Activities that can be sexually arousing to adults who have a sexual interest in children; or that are used as part of a grooming process:

- Bathing a child
- Walking in on a child changing
- Deliberately walking in on a child toileting
- Asking a child to watch the adult toileting
- Tickling and "accidentally" touching genitalia
- Activities that involve removing clothes (massage, swimming)
- Wrestling in underwear
- Playing games that include touching genitalia (playing doctor)
- Telling a child sexually explicit jokes
- Teasing a child about breast and genital development
- Discussing sexually explicit information under the guise of education
- Showing the child sexually explicit images
- Pictures of children in underwear, bathing suits, dance wear, etc.

Teaching children personal safety

Some offenders will test a child's personal safety awareness and whether or not there is risk the child will tell an adult. Offenders are less likely to victimize a child if they think the child will tell. Teach your children about personal safety strategies (see Seven Safety Root Strategies at the Kids in the Know website: www.kidsintheknow.ca).

Disclosure of Sexual Abuse

While it's devastating to think of a child having to come forward and disclose sexual abuse, every parent hopes their child would do so if such a violation were to occur.

We teach children to tell a trusted adult if anyone touches them inappropriately, then cross our fingers that this will be enough for them to come forward if needed. In reality, a child's decision to disclose sexual abuse doesn't rest solely with the child; the likelihood of disclosure also relies on the behaviour of the protective adult figures in the child's life.

How have you increased the likelihood that your child would tell if s/he was sexually abused? Would you know if your child was trying to disclose? What do you think a disclosure would sound or look like?

Disclosure is typically more a process than a one time event.

Disclosing abuse takes incredible courage.

Myths

- If a child is sexually abused s/he will immediately come and tell
- Children disclose immediately after the abuse and provide a detailed account of what has occurred
- Children are more likely to disclose if directly questioned by their parent or an adult authority figure who can help

Facts

- Disclosure of sexual abuse is often delayed; research indicates that just 30% of child abuse victims disclose during childhood (Robins, 2000). Children often avoid telling because they are either afraid of a negative reaction from their parents or of being harmed by the abuser. As such, they often delay disclosure until adulthood.
- A common presumption is that children will give one detailed, clear account of abuse. This is not consistent with research; disclosures often unfold gradually, and may be presented in a series of hints.
- Children might imply something has happened to them without directly stating they were sexually abused – they may be testing the reaction to their 'hint.'
- If they are ready, children may then follow with a larger hint if they think it will be handled well.
- It's easy to miss hints of disclosure of abuse. As a result, a child may not receive the help needed.



How do I Know if a Child is Disclosing?

Hints of disclosure

- What disclosure might sound like:
 - “I don’t want to go to _____’s house anymore.”
 - “I don’t like _____ anymore.”
 - “Please don’t go! Please don’t leave me with_____.”
 - (Child desperately tries to avoid being left alone with a certain individual)
 - “I don’t like it when you’re gone...I feel uncomfortable when you aren’t here...”
 - “I’m not comfortable with...”
 - “I’m bad...”
 - “You’ll be mad at me...”
 - “_____ gets mad a lot...”
 - “_____ did things to me...”
 - “_____ does bad stuff to me that I don’t like...”
 - “_____ plays games with me that I don’t like...”
- What disclosure might look like:
- Freezing emotions – not showing emotion
 - Excessive sadness and worry
 - Extreme aggressiveness and risk-taking behaviour
 - Sudden resistance to being alone with a person whose company s/he previously enjoyed.

Don’t immediately conclude that behavioural changes are because of sexual abuse – this is only one of many possibilities.

What should I do?

Listen carefully

Be sure to listen carefully, but don’t assume you’re receiving a disclosure of sexual abuse; there could be several explanations for signs of stress.

Clarify

Clarify to make sure you have heard and understood the child correctly – this will also show him/her that you are listening carefully and taking him/her seriously. A child who is disclosing something may appear afraid and uncomfortable.

A clarification could sound something like:

- “I’m sorry, I’m not sure if I heard you correctly - can you please tell me again what you said?”
- “I’d like to be sure that I understand what you’re saying - can you please tell me again what you said?”
- To prompt the child to share more information without leading him/her, you could say, “Tell me about that,”

What if the child doesn’t say anything more?

Don’t press your child to disclose, as s/he may not be ready or may not have more to share. If you’re concerned and your instincts tell you something is wrong, consult with your family doctor for a referral to a specialist who can advise you further.

Through a Child’s Lens

- Children don’t always use words or gestures that an adult would use, so disclosure may not immediately make sense. It’s important to try and listen to the child through his/her lens.
- Disclosures often come out in pieces, and may not make complete sense from an adult perspective.
- Children may find correct sequencing/ordering of events difficult
- Children may have difficulty organizing details
- Children are literal with language
- Children aren’t always able to easily or freely describe what happened, especially if their knowledge of sexual behaviour is limited

Disclosure Process

In the past, disclosure has been described as a one-time event. In fact, disclosure typically occurs anywhere from an all-at-once occurrence to a process spanning hours, months or years. If the process is interrupted, sexual abuse may not be fully disclosed until adulthood.

A change in your child’s behaviour should be further explored, regardless of whether sexual abuse is believed to be the reason or not. A change may indicate the child is distressed.

Denial

It’s not uncommon for children to deny abuse, even after disclosure. This is especially the case if the child is questioned by an adult authority figure. It is important for adults to understand that children are often hesitant, and may seem confused or uncertain during a disclosure. Adults must be careful not to disregard a child’s possible disclosure just because it appears vague or inconsistent, or fluctuates and/or seems unbelievable. If s/he denies abuse, or appears hesitant and/or unclear, don’t assume that the child doesn’t need adult assistance.

How to Respond to Disclosure of Sexual Abuse

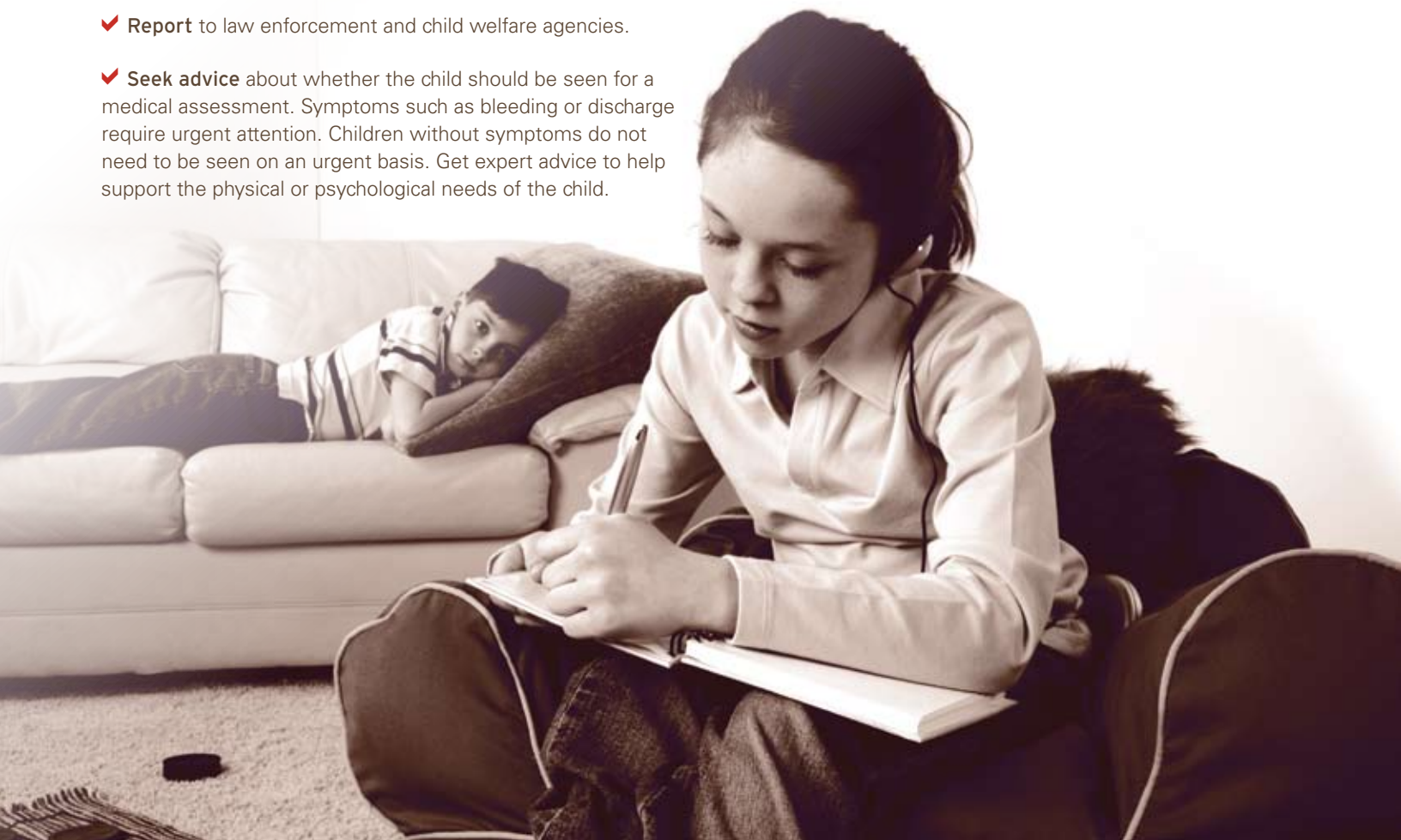
How should I react?

- ✓ **Control your reaction.** Be careful not to over- or under-react. Be aware of your facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice, as the child will be sensitive to your reaction.
- ✓ **Don't pass judgment.** Communicate "it was not your fault". If your body language and verbal language don't match, the child is more likely to believe your body language.
- ✓ **Praise the child for telling.** It takes tremendous courage to disclose sexual abuse. A child will assume responsibility for the abuse, as his/her mind is incapable of processing it any other way. Assure the child that it is not his/her fault, and that s/he did the right thing by telling you.
- ✓ **Protect the child from overexposure.** Respect the child's need for privacy and make sure his/her experience is only shared with those who need to know. This can help reduce a child's feelings of shame and embarrassment.
- ✓ **Show affection.** Parents/teachers are sometimes cautious about comforting a child after hearing they have been sexually abused. Research indicates that children who have disclosed abuse need comforting, support and understanding.
- ✓ **Promise the child** that you will promptly take steps to see that the abuse stops, and quickly follow through.
- ✓ **Report** to law enforcement and child welfare agencies.
- ✓ **Seek advice** about whether the child should be seen for a medical assessment. Symptoms such as bleeding or discharge require urgent attention. Children without symptoms do not need to be seen on an urgent basis. Get expert advice to help support the physical or psychological needs of the child.

What action should I take?

You must report any disclosure or suspicion of abuse to local law enforcement and child welfare agencies. Remember – it is not an individual's responsibility to prove abuse; it is the child welfare agency's job to investigate. It is an individual's responsibility to report any information about a child who may be in need of protection.

- ✓ **Document** your observations on a calendar (e.g. behaviour, incidents, comments, other signs).
- ✓ **Spend time** with the child and create opportunities for her/him to share with you. Children are more likely to talk to adults while engaged in other activities (e.g. engaging in sports activities, games, cooking, crafts, etc.).
- ✓ **Trust your instincts.** Remember that disclosure is typically a process, not a one-time event. It may come out a little at a time, and may not be a clear-cut disclosure. The child may talk of inappropriate behaviour, feelings, or refer to her/himself as "damaged" or "bad". If you suspect a child has been abused, report it.



Reporting Sexual Abuse

How do I know if I should report?

Minimizing or denying what appears to be a disclosure (and that may signify a child in need of protection) is common. Concerns often revolve around worrying about interfering, being wrong, and causing problems for the family.

It's an adult's legal responsibility to report any allegations or suspicions of abuse - not to investigate or prove abuse. Investigations will be carried out by the child welfare and law enforcement agencies. Child sexual victimization can only be reduced through the action of protective adults.

All people who have any information that a child is or might be in need of protection must report it to child welfare agencies.

After Disclosures

Children are typically very concerned about the adult's reaction - especially a parent's - and the potential impact of disclosure. The period after a disclosure can be very stressful, and varying levels and types of support will be needed. (see *How to Respond to Disclosure of Sexual Abuse*)

How can I increase the likelihood of disclosure?

- Build your own awareness about sexual abuse
- Build your child's awareness about personal safety using developmentally appropriate education material
- Educate your child about sexual development
- Monitor your child's relationships and activities
- Keep family lines of communication open
- Build a positive relationship with your child
- Be emotionally available for your child
- Notice and respond to changes in your child's typical behaviour patterns

Children, especially adolescents, may first disclose to a friend.

If something doesn't seem quite right, parents should trust their instincts.





CANADIAN CENTRE for CHILD PROTECTION™
Helping families. Protecting children.

www.protectchildren.ca

The Canadian Centre for Child Protection is a registered charity dedicated to the personal safety of all children. It operates Cybertip.ca and Kids in the Know.

cybertip!ca® CANADA'S NATIONAL TIPLINE

Cybertip.ca is a web portal for receiving and addressing reports of online child sexual exploitation. This includes child pornography (child abuse images), online luring, child sex tourism, and children exploited through prostitution. Since January 2005, Cybertip.ca has been operating as Canada's national tipline.

For more information visit www.cybertip.ca



Kids in the Know is an interactive safety education program for children from Kindergarten to High School. Lessons on child personal safety and sexual exploitation are created for specific age ranges and distributed throughout the program.

For more information visit www.kidsintheknow.ca.



Sources: K. Babcock, T. Cavanagh-Johnson, S. Cooper, Crosson-Tower, M. Duke, L. Ellerby, Finkelhor, E. Gil, Government of Canada, Kendall-Tackett, D. Lindsay, S.L. Robins

For more detailed information, please contact the Canadian Centre for Child Protection at our **Toll-Free Number:** 1.800.532.9135 and **visit our website at** www.protectchildren.ca

© Canadian Centre for Child Protection Inc.