A HANDBOOK FOR CAREGIVERS

Information and resources for non-offending parents or guardians of children who have been sexually abused and have been seen at the CAC

CHILDREN'S Advocacy Center
of Kennebec & Somerset Counties
A program of the Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center
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CHILDREN’S ADVOCACY CENTER MISSION
The mission of the Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC) of Kennebec & Somerset Counties is to provide a safe, neutral and child-centered place for coordinated evaluation of children following an allegation of sexual abuse. Using evidence-based best practices, the CAC multi-disciplinary team members are committed to the minimization of trauma through a streamlined, non-repetitious and timely evaluation process. Accessible, on-going support for children and their non-offending family members/legal guardian will always be of paramount importance to the CAC team.

PURPOSE
The purpose of the Children’s Advocacy Center Program is to provide and promote closer coordination, communication, and collaboration among child abuse response agencies in order to better serve children, their families, and the community in the aftermath of child sexual abuse.

COMMON QUESTIONS FROM PARENTS
This time can be confusing for parents. It is common for parents to be flooded with questions as they try to do what is best for their children. We encourage you to seek support from the Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center’s Advocacy services to help answer questions and provide you with resources and support during this time.

WHY DIDN’T MY CHILD TELL ME SOONER?
Children often times don’t tell anyone. It is not a reflection on you as a parent. Often young children don’t know exactly what is happening to them; they may feel something isn’t right but not have the vocabulary to identify what is happening. Older children may have a whole other set of reasons and concerns about disclosing, including caring about the abuser,
threats from the abuser, shame, fear, etc. It is important to not blame the child or yourself for their inability to tell you. Children rarely lie about such an intense and painful topic. In fact, statistics indicate that children tell the truth 92-98% of the time. Your response to the disclosure of abuse is critical to the child's ability to resolve and heal.

**SHOULD I TREAT MY CHILD DIFFERENTLY NOW?**
Children need to be treated with sensitivity under any circumstances. A child who has been sexually abused may need more reassurance of your love and support than usual. Continuing to follow regular household routines is usually best. Children often find comfort in the predictability that a routine offers.

**WHO SHOULD KNOW ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED?**
With younger children, parents make the judgment about who to tell based on determining what will ultimately benefit the child. If the child is school-aged, it may be beneficial for a teacher to know about the sexual abuse because they can provide support to the child in the school environment. Also, if the sexual abuse has impacted your child in such a way that it will influence or affect others, those who are caretakers of your child may need to be informed. The information should not be too detailed but enough for them to plan how they might respond to these behaviors.

For older children, it is important to consider how they may feel about certain people knowing. Engage them in conversation about this and make decisions with their feelings in mind.

**HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD NEEDS THERAPY?**
Most children who display behavioral or emotional changes may benefit from some form of therapy. The type and length of treatment is based on every child's differing needs. However, all children benefit from immediate love, nurturing and support from significant people in their lives. Sometimes you can have the greatest impact on the child.

(This section was developed by the King County SA Resource Center, Renton WA)

**WHAT IF MY CHILD DISCLOSES SOMETHING ELSE?**
Sometimes after a forensic interview a child may remember or decide to tell you more about what happened to them. If this happens it is important to contact Law Enforcement and/or DHHS right away.
SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND:

- Keep calm
- Listen to the child
- Be supportive
- Write down what the child says and/or your observations
- Let the child tell their own story but leave the questioning to the professionals (This is critical to ensuring the integrity of the investigation)
- Report it (see information on page 14)
- Seek your own support and information (see resources on page 14)

WHAT NOT TO DO

How you react to a child who discloses sexual abuse can make a huge impact:

- Don't overreact
- Don't make assumptions
- Don't question the child (Investigators are trained to ask the right questions)
- Don't make promises you may not be able to keep (i.e. “the offender will go to jail” or “you will never have to see them again”)
- Don't confront the offender (this could both harm the child further and damage the case)

SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO

- Return to a normal routine as soon as possible.
- See that your child receives therapy as soon as possible. Trying to sweep the problem under the rug usually causes more problems because it won't go away.
- Find help for yourself. You don’t have to do it all on your own. Contact the CAC for assistance.
- Teach your child the rules of personal safety. Tell them what to do if someone tries to touch them in an uncomfortable way.
- Be careful not to question your child about the abuse. If you do,
you can jeopardize the case in court against your child's abuser. Specially trained professionals at the CAC will interview your child to obtain the necessary information without harming the case or causing further trauma. If your child wants to talk about it, listen supportively, but do not probe.

- Keep your child away from the person suspected of the abuse. This is to protect you, that person, and the child.
- Avoid discussing the case with other victims or their families.
- Never coach or advise your child on how to act or what to say to professionals or investigators. This could seriously damage the case.
- Avoid the suspect.
- Your child may need extra sense of physical security. Stay close, and assure your child that you will keep him/her safe.
- Remember to give attention to your other children.

**IMPACT OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**
The impact of sexual abuse is unique to each child but there are many common elements. Some possible effects are:

**PHYSICAL**
- Sudden weight loss or gain
- Abdominal pain
- Vomiting
- Vaginal infections
- Changes in eating patterns

**BEHAVIORAL**
- Sleep disturbances
- Nightmares
- Compulsive masturbation
- Sex play inappropriate for child’s age
- Behavior consistent with an earlier age
- Detachment from others
- Insecurity

**EMOTIONAL**
- Mood swings
- Flashbacks

**DIFFICULTY IN SCHOOL**
- Inability to concentrate
- Drop in academic performance
- Change in peer relationships
- Change in interests

**ANGER/HOSTILITY**
- Physically aggressive
- Verbally aggressive
- Acting-out behavior
- Self-abuse
- Withdrawn/isolated

**DEPRESSION**
- Low energy
- Irritable
- Low or no interest in previous activities

The presence of these symptoms does not always mean that your child has been sexually assaulted (it is possible if your child has been sexually assaulted that they may not show any symptoms). They are most easily explained as a child’s response to fear and anxiety. Since children do not possess adult language skills, they tend to “tell” how they feel through action and behavior. If you know that your child has been sexually abused, very likely s/he has already shown many of these responses.

*(This section was developed by the King County SA Resource Center, Renton WA)*
TIPS TO HELP PROTECT CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

• Teach children accurate names of private body parts

• Avoid focusing exclusively on “stranger danger.” Keep in mind that most children are abused by someone they know and trust

• Teach children about body safety and the difference between “okay” and “not okay” touches

• Let children know that they have the right to make decisions about their bodies. Empower them to say no when they do not want to be touched, even in non-sexual ways (e.g., politely refusing hugs) and to say no to touching others

• Make sure children know that adults and older children don’t need help with their private body parts (e.g., bathing or going to the bathroom)

• Teach children to take care of their own private parts (i.e., bathing, wiping after bathroom use) so they don’t have to rely on adults or older children for help

• Educate children about the difference between good secrets (like surprise parties—which are okay because they are not kept secret for long) and bad secrets (those that make the child feel “yucky” or confused)

• Trust your instincts! If you feel uneasy about leaving a child with someone, don’t do it. If you’re concerned about possible sexual abuse, either call DHHS, local law enforcement, (see reporting information on pg. 14) or the Statewide Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Line 1-800-871-7741
SUPPORT SERVICES FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY

After your child has been interviewed at the Children’s Advocacy Center, there are support services available to you and your family provided by the Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center. These services can include the following:

- A 24-hour confidential support line for questions, concerns and support
- Support and accompaniment to appointments related to the investigation such as law enforcement interviews, meetings at the District Attorney’s Office, court hearings, etc
- Support and accompaniment with filing for Protection from Abuse orders (PFA) and accompaniment to court hearings regarding PFAs
- Emotional support for you and your family through this process as well as ongoing support after the process
- Access to Non-offending Parent Support Groups
- Questions and clarification of what has happened so far and how to find out information about your case
- Help with referrals for other services for you and your child
- Informative website www.silentnomore.org

All of these services are free and intended to help you and your family in navigating the different systems and dealing with what happens next. To contact the Support Line, day or night call 1-800-871-7741

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

There are many pieces to the investigation of child sexual abuse; therefore there may not be an easy answer about what happens next. This is something you can discuss with an Advocate from the Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center, who can help find out information about your case, when new information is available. Some things to keep in mind:

- You will receive follow up calls from an advocate at one week and one month following the interview
• The alleged perpetrator may not be arrested right away, if at all
• The video of your child's interview is sent with the investigating officer as evidence in the investigation and will be kept confidential and secure
• Generally, the decision whether or not to criminally charge the suspect is a result of coordination and collaboration between the investigators and the District Attorney's office. Immediate safety issues may impact the decisions that are made at that time

**VICTIM’S RIGHTS IN MAINE**
Victims of Crime are entitled to the following basic rights:

- To be treated with dignity and respect
- To be assisted by criminal justice agencies
- To be informed about the criminal justice system
- Whenever practicable, to be notified of plea agreements and the right to comment on them
- Whenever practicable, to be notified of all judicial proceedings, including time and place of trial
- Whenever practicable, to be notified of the proposed dismissal or filing of a complaint, information, or indictment before the action is taken
- To have input at sentencing
- To request restitution
- To request compensation from the Victim Compensation Board for unreimbursed medical and medically related expenses for victims of violent crimes upon request to the Department of Corrections
- To be notified of defendant's release from institutional confinement in all felony cases
- To be provided with a pamphlet containing certain statutes which pertain to victim's rights

*(Provided by the State of Maine Department of Corrections)*
WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma can be any event that when witnessed or experienced by a child or adolescent, is extremely distressing to them. These events are often in situations where the children feared for their lives or the lives of others. There are many different kinds of trauma including:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Exposure to violence
- Loss of a significant loved one
- Natural disaster
- House fire
- Car accident

WHAT ARE SOME REACTIONS TO TRAUMA?

Each person can react in different ways to a traumatic event based on many things, such as age when the trauma occurred, the severity of the trauma, and the amount of time that has passed since the trauma. Some possible symptoms/effects include:

- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares and/or not wanting to sleep alone
- Difficulty not thinking about the event
- Increased fear in both safe and risky situations
- Feelings of shame or guilt
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty staying still
- Thoughts about death or dying
- Low self-esteem
- Mood swings
- Drop in grades/performance at school
- Irritability and problems with anger control
- Efforts to avoid talking about the event or doing things that remind the child about the event
HOW CAREGIVERS SOMETIMES FEEL WHEN ABUSE HAS BEEN REPORTED

When abuse is reported, parents or caregivers sometimes feel as if they are on a roller coaster of emotions. This is normal. The report can affect your life in many ways, and it takes time to adjust. The following are some of the common thoughts and feelings of caregivers. You may feel one or more of these, or you may move from one to another.

1. **Denial.** Your first reaction may be not to believe or accept the possibility that abuse really happened. Or you may believe it happened but that no real harm was done. Caregivers often experience denial because it is too overwhelming to accept that the abuse occurred and there will be after-effects. For some people, it takes time to overcome denial and face the realities of abuse.

2. **Anger.** At times, you may feel angry at yourself for not protecting the child. You may feel angry at the perpetrator for what s/he did. You may even feel angry at the child. Be honest about your feelings and share them with a trusted person or group.

3. **Helplessness.** You probably do not know what to expect and might feel that things are out of your control. Some parents may fear that their children will be taken away. Your Family Services Coordinator and/or Support Advocate can help you stay informed of how your child’s case proceeds through the system.

4. **Lack of assertiveness.** You may feel invisible and think there is nothing you can do to help the situation get better. We will help you to learn what you can do to be an advocate for your child and yourself.

5. **Shock, numbness, repulsion.** You may have memories of being abused as a child, which may lead to shock, numbness, and repulsion for the new situation you find yourself in. If so, you may need to seek therapy for yourself to recover from the abuse.
6. **Guilt, self-blame.** You may feel it is your fault. The offender is responsible for the abuse. Not you. The best thing you can do now is support your child and learn all you can about how to make things better. Reading this handbook is a good first step.

7. **Hurt and betrayal.** It is normal to feel hurt from the loss of your child’s innocence. You also may have lost a spouse or partner if that person was the offender. You may even have lost friends. It is very important to take time to grieve for these losses.

8. **Concern about money.** You may be worried about finances because of lost income. An advocate or DHHS social worker will work with you to help you get on your feet.

9. **Fear of violence.** In homes where violence is common, you may fear the offender will try to harm you or your children. If so, call the Family Violence Project’s helpline at 877-890-7788. FVP is the domestic violence agency serving Kennebec and Somerset counties.

10. **Fear of drug or alcohol abuse.** You may be afraid that you or the offender will abuse drugs or alcohol because of the stress or that one of you may have a relapse to an old addiction. If you need help, call Maine General Medical Center at 877-777-9393.
TO REPORT SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE
MAINE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES-
CHILD ABUSE REPORTING HOTLINE
1-800-452-1999
YOUR LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY
You may call them directly or if the child is in immediate danger call 911
DISTRICT ATTORNEY’S OFFICE
Kennebec County: 623-1156
Somerset County: 474-2423

SEXUAL ABUSE SUPPORT SERVICES
Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center
www.silentnomore.org  1-800-871-7741

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SUPPORT SERVICES
Family Violence Project
www.familyviolenceproject.org  1-877-890-7788

MENTAL HEALTH AND COUNSELING SERVICES
Kennebec Behavioral Health
www.kbhmaine.org  626-3455

Edmund Ervin Pediatric Center
www.mainegeneral.org  872-4303

Crisis & Counseling
www.crisisandcounseling.org  626-3448  Crisis Line: 621-2552

Community Health and Counseling Services
www.chcs-me.org  623-3712

TRANSPORTATION
Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP)
www.kvcap.org  877-5677

MEDICAL
Spurwink Child Abuse Clinic
www.spurwink.org  879-6160 or 1-800-260-6160
### CONTACTS RELATED TO YOUR CASE

#### Investigating Law Enforcement

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#### Family Services Coordinator

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Children's Advocacy Center  207-861-4491

#### Support Advocate

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Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center  207-377-1010 or 1-800-871-7741

#### Other

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The support services offered by the Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center are free and confidential. These individualized services are offered to families whose lives have been impacted by sexual abuse/sexual violence. Many families find these services helpful as they are navigating several different systems and dealing with what happens next.

You are not alone. There is someone who will listen. Please call any time

1-800-871-7741