



## Frequently Asked Questions by Parents

### **Who do I call if my child discloses abuse?**

If your child discloses abuse and is in immediate danger, call 911. If your child is safe from the alleged perpetrator you can make a report to your county child protection agency. You can call First Witness Child Advocacy Center and an advocate will assist you in making a report to social services.

If you suspect abuse or neglect regarding children in South St. Louis County (includes areas South of Cotton, MN), please call 218.726.2012. If you suspect abuse or neglect regarding children in North St. Louis County (includes areas North of Cotton, MN), please call 218.471.7128.

### **Will my child be interviewed?**

Once a report has been made to social services or to the police, the investigators will decide if your child needs to be interviewed. Based on the age and developmental level of your child, the investigation team will decide the best and most appropriate time and place for your child to be interviewed. This could mean that your child will be interviewed at a child advocacy center like First Witness by forensic interviewers who are specially trained to talk to children. The interview is child-led and child friendly.

### **Will my child have to testify?**

There is a possibility that your child may have to testify during a criminal proceeding; however, many cases do not lead to a trial. Unfortunately, a video recorded forensic interview does not replace a live testimony of a child victim. An advocate will work with you and help you to support your child if the investigation leads to criminal proceedings.

### **Will my child be permanently scarred by this event?**

Children can and do heal from the trauma of victimization. It is important to know that one of the most important factors in your child's healing is the sense of support and safety that you can provide to them. An advocate from First Witness can help you to support the ongoing healing of your child and the rest of your family.

### **Will my child need a therapist?**

Some children may need therapy to recover and move forward from a trauma. Some children may not need mental health services. A First Witness advocate can provide short-term crisis counseling to you and your child and can help you decide if further mental health services are needed.

### **Will my child be taken away from me?**

The goal of a possible investigation is to identify what has happened and to keep children with safe caregivers who will protect them from further victimization.

### **How do I talk to my child about this event?**

Tell your child that you are proud of them for telling about the abuse event. Let them know that you are here to help keep them safe. If your child offers details regarding the abuse, listen to them but do not ask specific questions regarding the details. Tell your child that the abuse was not their fault. As a caregiver, finding support for yourself is very important during this time. If you have questions about what to say to your child, you can get support through an advocate at First Witness.

### **How do I talk to my child about body safety?**

Your child should learn that no one should touch their private body parts unless they are helping them to stay safe, healthy, or clean. No one should ask your child to touch their private parts. No one should show their private body parts to your child. No one should ask your child to touch their private body parts. Your child should never be asked to look at pictures of private body parts on a computer, television, or cell phone. It is an adult's job to help a child figure out if a confusing touch was safe or unsafe. Your child should know that it is always okay to say No about any touches to their body, even to an adult. First Witness advocates can help to teach you how to speak to your children in further detail and can also talk to your children about personal body safety.

### **Will the person who did this be charged/arrested etc.?**

When a disclosure has just been made and an investigation has just started, it is difficult to know whether an arrest will be made or charges will be filed. The decision about charging will be made based on the evidence found through an investigation. If charges are filed, they are filed by the state in cases of child sexual abuse. It is not necessarily a parent's decision to file charges in cases of child sexual abuse.

### **How will I pay my rent or other bills if the offending parent is removed from the home?**

Many things can change when a child abuse disclosure is made and an alleged perpetrator is no longer living in the home. An advocate from First Witness can help you to figure out the next steps to take in order to make a plan to keep up with your rent and other expenses.

### **Who should I tell about my child's victimization?**

While it is important to find a support network during an investigation, it is important to remember that an investigation is ongoing and too much discussion of the details of disclosure and case may hurt your child's case. You should tell as few people as possible. Do not confront or notify the alleged abuser of the allegations. This could place you and your children in danger.

### **How do I handle questions from friends and family regarding my child's disclosure?**

Remember that you do not owe anyone an explanation regarding what has happened. You can say, "I'd rather not talk about it", "It has been a very difficult time for us", or "I appreciate your concern". Remember that family members may have very strong positive or negative reactions to the abuse incident. Not all friends and family members will believe your child or be supportive of the decision to report abuse. First Witness advocates can help you to decide who or what to tell.

### **Why is the investigation taking so long?**

Child abuse investigations always take much longer than we expect. It is important to remember that your family's healing does not have to depend on the criminal justice system's investigation or response. A First Witness advocate can help to explain the investigation process and can make calls to relevant professionals to find answers.

**Note:** *It is important to validate feelings for caregivers who are often frustrated with the length of time or lack of time that is given to their child's case.*

### **My family doesn't believe my child, how do I speak with them about this?**

It is important that your child feels believed. However, it is hard for some people to believe that someone they know and trusted could hurt a child. Perpetrators will not present themselves to others in a way that makes us see them as possible risks, it is important to understand that others may not recognize an abuser who is an acquaintance or family member.

You can choose to shield your children from family members who do not believe them. An advocate can help you to figure out what to say to friends and family members who do not believe what your child has said.

### **Why is no one doing anything about a child-on-child sexual incident?**

Child on child sexual activity can be more complicated than it may seem. Children of a similar age and cognitive ability may act out sexually together without intending to harm each other. It is important to understand normal child sexual behavior so that we can identify behaviors that may alert us to the possibility of abuse.

### **How do I get reparations to cover some of the costs of various things?**

An advocate at First Witness can help you make a claim for Minnesota Crime Victims Reparations. There are various claims that may be covered.

### **Do I need an Order for Protection?**

An OFP may be needed if the alleged perpetrator could have access to your child or is continuing to contact you after being asked not to. It is also possible that the investigation team may ask you to get an OFP. Contact First Witness for an advocate to help you make the decision regarding obtaining an Order for Protection.

### **Who will help me get an Order for Protection?**

Legal advocates at the Safe Haven Resource Center can help you obtain an OFP. Your First Witness advocate can also help to facilitate the OFP process.

### **Is how I am feeling normal?**

Parents often feel like they are riding an emotional roller coaster after their child discloses abuse. All of what you are feeling is normal. Some common feelings after the disclosure are denial, anger, helplessness, lack of assertiveness, shock, numbness, guilt or self-blame, and betrayal. First Witness advocates are here to provide you a space where you can express all your feelings related to what is happening with your family.

### **I am angry with the offender. Should I confront them?**

While confronting an offender may feel like the best thing to do at the time, it is very important to remember that doing so could hurt the investigation. Do not confront the alleged offender or tell them about the allegations. This could place you or your family in danger.

### **How do I choose sides between my child who offended and my child who is the victim?**

It is possible that you can support both of your children. It is a very difficult situation to handle without support. Most parents who have an older child victimize a younger child feel very conflicted about how to support their children. An advocate at First Witness can listen and help you support both of your children.

### **Why did this happen to my child?**

The truth is...this can happen to any child because children are very vulnerable and rely on adults for most things. Perpetrators systematically groom and build trust with you and your children before the abuse occurs. It is not your fault and it is not your child's fault.

**Why didn't I notice that they were going to hurt my child?**

Through the process of "grooming" the offender has gained the trust of you and your child. Perpetrators come from all races, ethnicities, religions, and incomes. Many appear to be trusted members of our communities.

**Why didn't my child tell me? Why did my child tell someone else?**

Children sometimes will want to protect their parents from feeling sad or angry. They may have been threatened or told that no one would believe them. It is common for children to never tell when something has happened.

**Why did it take so long for my child to tell me?**

There are many reasons children do not tell! Children are often very afraid to speak out regarding the abuse. Abusers tell children no one will believe them. Abusers also may threaten them or loved ones if the child tells. Many children do not want to get the abuser in trouble. Some children may not have the words to describe what has happened to them. Other children may not want to make other family members sad or upset and so they do not disclose.

**Will my child want to talk about this with me in detail?**

Rarely does a child want to share specific details regarding their experiences. If they do, listen, but do not press for details.

**Will my ex get visits with my child if they offended on them?**

Visitation is not an issue that is necessarily decided in the criminal court process. If there is an upcoming visit with an alleged abuser, your advocate can help you plan to keep your child safe. Your First Witness advocate will also be able to help you plan for any family court proceedings that may affect visitation in the future.