

Recognize, Respond, Report:

How to Make a Report of Child Abuse If I am Not a Mandated Reporter

By Ryan Prouty

Nobody likes to think about worst-case-scenarios. The worst-case-scenario with our family, friends, and especially our children. We teach our children how to be safe, but not everything can be within our control. Sometimes the worst-case scenario decides to show up and we are thrown into crisis and flooded with concern. Whether it be witnessing or being told about abuse, seeing concerning behavior, or just getting those what-ifs or icky feelings that you cannot let go of. We never know when something is going to happen, but we need to know what to do when it does.

So, what do we do? Who do we tell? Questions flood in and suddenly you are stuck and unsure of what to do, but you want to make sure you do your part to ensure someone's safety. This article will walk through the process why, when, and how to report, what could happen after you make a report, as well as how to properly support a child after they disclose to you. Reporting is one thing, but making sure you have the right questions, the right attitude, and know the steps of supporting a child who has gone through abuse is just as important as making that report.

Step 1: Recognize

One of the ways professionals who have the training to intervene in dangerous or unsafe situations, like law enforcement and social services, do their jobs is through folks that make reports to them directly. Often these reports can lead to investigations by those professionals, so it is often up to mandated reporters, folks mandated by law to report abuse, as well as the public to bring them information about suspected abuse, neglect, or unsafe situations, and concerning behavior. If you are not a mandated reporter, what can you do when you come across information that professionals should know so they can help?

Below is an infographic made specifically for mandated reporters working with children and youth in youth-serving agencies, however this can apply to anybody! Not only does this explain how to make a report, but it also lays out exactly what information you should be looking for when you make a report.

First Witness Child Advocacy Center
4 West 5th Street, Duluth
phone: (218) 727 8353 email: info@firstwitness.org
website: www.firstwitness.org

Responding to an Abuse Disclosure

1. Find a safe, quiet place to talk and stay calm

Avoid extremes of emotions. If an adult reacts to a disclosure with anger or sadness, child may shut down and refuse to talk- even if the emotion is not directed at them.

2. Let the child know that you believe them, and keep questions to a minimum

Let the child tell you their story. It is most important to know WHO did the abuse and WHAT happened. For suspected physical abuse, determine whether the incident left a mark/bruise on the child's body. **False disclosures of abuse by children are uncommon.**

3. Reassure the child that they did the right thing by telling

You can say, "This has happened to other children your age, younger, and older. Nothing about you, or anything that you did, made this happen. I am really proud of you for feeling brave enough to tell me about this."

4. Name who's to blame without vilifying the perpetrator

The perpetrator is responsible for their actions. Abuse is never a child's fault. You can tell children, "What they did was wrong. It is not your fault that that happened. It's an adult's job to keep kids safe and they did not do that. We are going to get them help so they do not hurt anyone else."

5. Let the child know that you will be reporting the abuse.

If the child is in immediate danger and it is the evening or weekend, call 911. If the child is not in immediate danger, or it is regular business hours, call social services and state that you need to make a mandated report. Follow up verbal reports with written reports within 24 hours.

6. Make a mandated report and find support for yourself.

Tell the child what they can expect next. You can say, "There are people whose job it is to make sure kids are safe. They might want to talk to you more about what you told me."

IF THE ALLEGED PERPETRATOR IS A PARENT OR PRIMARY CAREGIVER, DO NOT TELL THEM THAT THE CHILD DISCLOSED OR THAT YOU MADE A REPORT.

Call First Witness if you feel you need emotional support and want to speak with an advocate.

A lot of individuals like teachers, therapists, advocates, and folks that work with children and youth are mandated to report disclosures of abuse or unsafe situations from kiddos and report when they have concerns of abuse or neglect. While anybody can make a report, if you do not have the mandated reporter obligation, you most likely have not received the training for making a report to social services or law enforcement. This diagram, plus the steps listed in the next section, could be extremely helpful for both yourself and for somebody you know. Having this information could be a vital factor in helping professionals get the information they need to conduct investigations needed to ensure a child, youth, or family's safety.

Step 2: Respond

Recognizing abuse, whether it be witnessing it or a child telling you about it, requires a response. That response can make all the difference for that child or youth getting help, holding the perpetrators accountable, and starting or continuing the process of their healing. One of the key elements of making reports, that is often overlooked, is how to appropriately respond to disclosures of abuse from kiddos and youth, the language to use, and what to tell them after they disclose. When it comes to disclosing abuse, whether it be your own child or not, it can be incredibly scary and takes a huge amount of courage and bravery – do not take this lightly. If a child or youth discloses to you, that means a lot!

The first step in having that conversation is to make sure you have a calm demeanor, not showing big or intense emotions, and making sure they know you believe them. Letting them know that they are not in any trouble for what they are telling you and that you are there to listen and support them can make an enormous difference for them as they talk through something traumatic. As they talk through whatever may have happened, getting basic information like who is the abuser, what happened, and how often does it happen, are all you need. It is not your job to ask all the questions – getting that basic information of who, what, and when is what is most needed. You should not investigate further as this basic information is enough for professionals to do the investigation and follow-up. After they have said all they wanted to say (which can vary in amount), you should let them know you are going to tell someone whose job it is to protect kids/teens. They had enough trust to tell you and you do not want to break that trust by informing a professional without telling the child you are doing so. Using this approach is going to ensure they are not further harmed by too many questions right off-the-bat, lets them know they are being heard and believed, that they are not in trouble, and that a professional will get involved to make sure that the child or youth is safe.

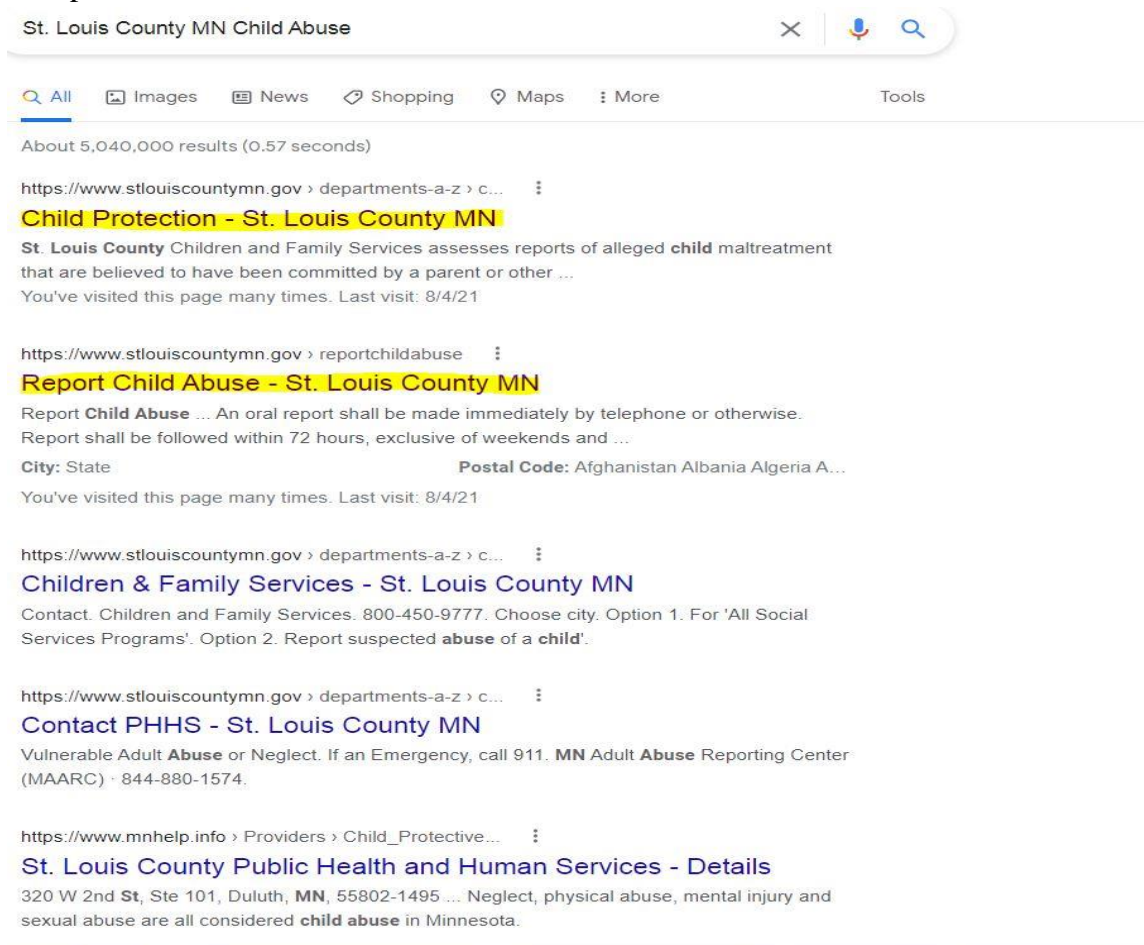
You can always call to make a report with social services, or you can call First Witness for general questions about reporting or about a specific situation. For any immediate danger or emergency situations, always call 911. When making a report, often social services or law enforcement will want a **Who** (who was abused, hurt, etc., and who was the perpetrator) and the **What** (what happened). Sometimes, multiple red flags can come up at once with kiddos, such as sudden sleeping problems, unexplained cuts or bruises, lack of interest or isolation, etc. Information like this can also be helpful but is not necessary. Even if you do not have all the details, but have concerns, you should always call to make a report and explain your concerns. Allow the professionals to assess the situation and decide on next steps. It can be hard to know

what to do, but it is always better to talk to somebody than not. You can always call First Witness and talk to an advocate about your concerns if you are uncertain if you need to make a report.

Step 3: Report

When you reach a point where you know you must report, how do you do it? While it can be different depending on the county you are in, the process is generally the same everywhere. Most often social services investigators work an 8:30-4:30 schedule, Monday through Friday. If it is outside of that timeframe and/or is an emergency, always call 911. If it is within typical business hours, your point of contact should be your local child protective services. Sometimes when we are in crisis, we do not always have the mental capacity or ability to think about which option will be best. If you ever find yourself confused on who may be best to contact, always resort to calling 911 as law enforcement will cross-report any relevant information to child protective services.

For whichever county you are in, you can Google (or whatever search engine you use) your “County”, “State Initials”, then “Child Abuse” and the top search options should give you the information you need. For example, in the image below, I typed in “St. Louis County MN Child Abuse” and I got this information. Once I click on the links, I can find the phone number to make a report.



Once you get to the image below (again this is specifically St. Louis County's page) you can find phone numbers, commonly asked questions, and more.

CHILD PROTECTION
Home / DEPARTMENTS A-Z / Public Health & Human Services / Children & Family Services / Child Protection

ABOUT PUBLIC HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

ADULT SERVICES

BUSINESS SERVICES

CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES

- Child Care
- Children's Intellectual Disability
- Children Mental Health
- Child Protection**
- Child Support
- Clarity Project
- Family Support Services
- Family Housing Support
- Foster Care

St. Louis County is committed to protecting our most vulnerable residents - our children.

St. Louis County Children and Family Services assesses reports of alleged child maltreatment that are believed to have been committed by a parent or other household member, as well as provide ongoing support to families. Our goal is to engage families in a partnership to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of their children. This also encompasses a vision of partnering with community members to help support and nurture children and families.

The following criteria are used to determine when to perform a child maltreatment assessment in accordance with Minnesota Statutes [Screening-Criteria-Alleged-Child-Maltreatment.pdf](#).

For more information visit the [Minnesota Department of Human Services \(DHS\) Child Protection website](#)

- Who should report?
- When should I report?
- Why should I report?
- What will I be asked?
- Where do I report?
- Free training available to mandated reporters

REPORT ABUSE

In an emergency call 9-1-1 to reach your local Law Enforcement agency.

Report Child Abuse

Initial Intervention Unit (IIU)
Duluth
218-726-2012
Fax: 218-725-5118
[Email](#)

Initial Intervention Unit (IIU)
Virginia
218-471-7128
Fax: 218-471-7503
[Email](#)

If you are a mandated reporter and you have reportable information, you must report immediately to social services, law enforcement, or a county sheriff, and a written report is asked for within 72 hours. If you are within the general public, you do not have a required reporting timeline. However, the sooner the better when it comes to situations of abuse or concerns of potential abuse. Often when you make a report over the phone, they will also ask for a written version of that report as well. Agencies can walk you through how to make that written report. An image of what that written report can look like is seen below.

REPORT CHILD ABUSE
Home / DEPARTMENTS A-Z / Public Health & Human Services / Children & Family Services / Child Protection / Report Child Abuse

Minnesota Statutes Section 626.556, Subdivision 7: Any professional who knows or has reason to believe a child is being neglected or physically or sexually abused, or has been neglected or physically or sexually abused within the preceding three years, shall immediately report the information to the local welfare agency, agency responsible for assessing or investigating the report, police department, or the county sheriff. An oral report shall be made immediately by telephone or otherwise. Report shall be followed within 72 hours, exclusive of weekends and holidays, by a report in writing.

ST. LOUIS COUNTY CHILD MALTREATMENT REPORT

ORAL REPORT INFORMATION

Did you call this report in? Yes No

MANDATED REPORTER INFORMATION

Reporter Name

Agency

Phone

Email

Relationship to victim

Mandated Reporter Agency Mailing Address

Street Address

After you make your report, folks will assess the incident you called about, and decide to either “screen it in” which means they will open a case to investigate the allegation, or they will “screen it out” which means they do not currently have enough information to be able to start an investigation. Regardless of whether it is screened in or out, if you make a report, it is always saved in a database. If another report is made regarding the same child or alleged perpetrator, investigators can then see a pattern of concern and that could allow for an investigation as more information arises. It is always worth reporting abuse, concerns of abuse, or those gut-feelings regarding the safety of a child or youth. Reporting child abuse is a critical step in ensuring safety for a child. Reporters are always protected from retaliation and are kept completely confidential. In the end, it is better to always play it safe and make a report than to not make a report and wish you had.

Witnessing, or even having suspicions of abuse, neglect, or unsafe situations is never something anyone wants to go through, but knowing who to tell or report to can make a difference for not only yourself, but for whoever needs help. Sometimes, we do not have all the answers, and that is okay, but following your gut and keeping an eye out for concerning behavior is something we all can do. You can always call First Witness at 218-727-8353 and talk to an advocate about any questions regarding abuse, reporting, problematic sexual behavior, or anything else. You can also reach out to social services or call 911 for emergencies. As previously mentioned, even if you do not have all of the concrete proof, your concern for another person is a valid enough reason to reach out.

At the end of the day, the folks whose job it is to keep children and youth safe cannot know everything – they rely on mandated reporters of all kinds, as well as the public (parents, family members, community members, etc.), to get valuable information so that they can investigate situations and ensure safety for children, youth, and families. While it is not your job to investigate a situation or make the decision about what is or is not abuse, following your gut and your instincts, keeping your eye-out, and making reports can make a true difference.

Nobody likes worst-case-scenarios, but knowing what to do and who to call before you are in one is the best chance of keeping yourself, or somebody else, safe and protected.

Here is a short list of local counties and the number to contact for a report of child abuse or maltreatment:

Local Counties	Phone #
St. Louis County Social Services- Duluth	218-726 2012
St. Louis County Social Services- Virginia	218-471-7128
Carlton County Public Health & Human Services	218-879-4511
Lake County Social Services	218-834-8432
Cook County Social Services	218-387-3000
Douglas County (WI) Health & Human Services	715-395-1304