



A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

When It's Someone You Love

What to do when a child tells you they have been sexually abused, and the person they name is inside your family.

Start here

If a child is in immediate danger, call 911.

To report suspected abuse in Florida, call the Florida Abuse Hotline at 1-800-962-2873 or report online at reportabuse.dcf.state.fl.us. You do not need proof. You do not need to be sure.



Why we wrote this

Much of what is taught to prevent child sexual abuse is written for children. Teach them the words for their body parts. Teach them that no adult gets to ask them to keep secrets. Teach them to tell a grown-up they trust. Center for Child Counseling does a great deal of that work, and it saves children.

But when a child does tell or you have a concern that your child has been abused by someone you know, everything that happens next belongs to the adults. It can be especially difficult when the person is someone you love. A brother. A grandfather. A stepparent. A family friend who has been at every holiday for twenty years. Yet there is little guidance to help parents navigate this situation.

That is the moment families get stuck. Not because they don't care about the child, but because nobody ever told them what to do, and because the pressure to stay quiet starts almost immediately and usually comes from people they love.

This guide is for that moment. It is not about recognizing the signs. You already saw something, or a child already told you. This is about the next few days.

The first hour

Here are a few key responses your child needs from you in that moment.

Do this

- **Keep your face calm.** Children read your reaction and decide whether telling you was safe. Shock, disgust, anger or tears can read to a child as "I have ruined something."
- **Believe them, out loud.** "I believe you." Those three words matter more than anything else you will say.
- **Thank them.** "I'm so glad you told me."
- **Take the blame off them.** "This is not your fault. You did nothing wrong." Say it even if the child hasn't said they feel guilty. Most do, and most don't say so.
- **Tell them what happens next.** "I'm going to get help from people whose job is keeping kids safe. I'm not going anywhere."
- **Write down their exact words.** As soon as you can step away, write what the child said in quotation marks, and what you asked. Add the date and time. Not your interpretation. Their words.

Do not do this

- **Do not interview the child.** No "who," "how many times," "where were his hands." Investigators are trained to ask in ways that will both not further harm the child and won't negatively impact a possible case. A well-meaning parent's questions can damage a case beyond repair. Listen to whatever the child offers and stop there.
- **Do not promise secrecy.** If the child asks you not to tell, do not make that promise. Tell them the truth about what you have to do to keep them safe.
- **Do not confront the person.** Not a phone call, not a text, not a conversation at the kitchen table. It gives them time, it gives them a story, and it puts pressure straight back onto the child.
- **Do not wait for more evidence.** That is not your job, and waiting is how years go by.

Most children do not tell you all of it

Very few children sit down and give an adult the whole account. Far more often a child offers one small piece and then watches your face to decide whether there is going to be a second piece. Most often the communication is not direct. It could look like a change in behavior. A question at bedtime. Something said sideways in the car. A drawing. A comment that doesn't fit.

This is why your reaction in the first thirty seconds matters so much. A child who gets a frightened, angry or dismissive response usually stops sharing and may not try again for years. What they need to see is that you can hear it without coming apart.

You also do not need the whole story to act. A fragment is enough to call the hotline.

If the abuse may have happened in the last few days

Call the Florida Abuse Hotline right away and tell them how recently you believe it happened. If a child has disclosed something that occurred within roughly the last three to four days, there may be physical evidence.

Do not bathe the child, wash their clothes or bedding, or clean anything up until you have spoken to the hotline or law enforcement and asked what they need. If the child needs medical care, say what happened when you arrive, so the right exam is done.

You do not have to be sure

This is where most families stall. They think reporting requires certainty, and they are terrified of being wrong about someone they love. Making a report is never easy. But it is the correct thing to do if you have concern that a child has been sexually abused.

Florida law asks for reasonable cause to suspect, not proof. You are not deciding whether abuse happened. You are handing the question to people whose job it is to answer it.

What Florida law actually says

Every person over the age of 18 in Florida is a mandatory reporter. Under section 39.201, Florida Statutes, this is not limited to teachers, doctors, and clergy. It includes you.

Members of the general public may report anonymously if they choose.

Anyone who reports in good faith has immunity from civil and criminal liability under section 39.205.

Knowingly and willfully failing to report, or preventing another person from reporting, is a third-degree felony. If a relative is telling you not to call, they are asking you to commit a crime.

Florida Abuse Hotline: 1-800-962-2873 (1-800-96-ABUSE). Online at reportabuse.dcf.state.fl.us. Available 24 hours a day. If a child is in immediate danger, call 911 first, then call the hotline.

What you will hear in the days after

This is the part nobody prepares families for. Within hours of the family finding out, the pressure starts. It rarely sounds like a threat. It usually sounds like reason, or love, or grief.

Knowing what to expect ahead of time makes it much easier to hold your ground.

What gets said	What it actually is
<i>"Let's keep this in the family. We can handle it ourselves."</i>	A request to move the decision away from the only people who can investigate it or stop the abuse. Families cannot assess risk to other children and cannot enforce anything.
<i>"You're going to destroy this family."</i>	Placing responsibility for the family's pain on you because you reported a concern, rather than recognizing the concern that led to the report. Reporting is the response to a concern for a child's safety.
<i>"I'll stay away. I'll never come around again. You don't need to report it."</i>	An offer to trade a child's safety for silence. It also leaves the person free to be near other children, in other families, with no one warned.
<i>"If you report this, there won't be anything left of me." "I'll kill myself."</i>	Frightening, and not yours to resolve. It is also one of the most common things said at this moment. Make the report. Then, if you believe someone is at risk, call 988 or 911 for them. You are allowed to do both.
<i>"The child misunderstood." "Kids make things up." "She's always had a big imagination."</i>	Children very rarely fabricate sexual abuse. What they far more often do is delay telling, tell only part of it, or take it back when the adults around them get upset.
<i>"He's attracted to women. He has a wife. It's not possible."</i>	One of the most common and most mistaken beliefs about abuse. Sexual abuse of children is driven by access and opportunity, not by adult sexual orientation. Who someone dates tells you nothing about the risk they pose to a child.
<i>"But she loves him. She hugs him. She isn't afraid of him."</i>	Almost exactly what you would expect. Most children who are abused are abused by someone they are attached to and want to please. Affection and fear coexist in the same child, easily.
<i>"This supposedly happened two years ago. Why now?"</i>	Delayed disclosure is the rule, not the exception. Children tell when they finally feel safe enough, or old enough, or when something happens that makes it impossible to keep holding.
<i>"You need to be a hundred percent sure before you ruin his life."</i>	Certainty is not the standard, and it is not available to you. Reasonable suspicion is the standard, and you have it.

One line to have ready

You will be asked, repeatedly, to explain and defend yourself. You don't have to. Pick one sentence and use it every time.

"I'm not going to discuss the details. There's an open investigation, and my focus is on my child."

What happens after you call

Families are often blindsided less by the process itself than by how slow and how uncertain it is. Here is a realistic picture.

The call

A counselor at the hotline will take your information and decide whether the report meets the criteria to open a protective investigation. They may ask things you don't know. "I don't know" is a completely acceptable answer. Reports of sexual abuse also go to law enforcement.

The interview

If the report is accepted, your child will likely be interviewed once, by a specially trained forensic interviewer, while the investigator and law enforcement observe. This is deliberate. It exists so your child tells it one time instead of five.

Here in Palm Beach County

In Palm Beach County, this work is done through Camelot Community Care's Child Protection Team – Palm Beach, on Greenwood Avenue in West Palm Beach. Child Protection Teams are authorized under Florida law and coordinated through the Department of Health, which is why the staff you meet may have a state email address. Their role is consultation and assessment in suspected abuse cases, working alongside the investigator and law enforcement.

You will not arrange this yourself. The investigator schedules it and contacts you.

You will most likely wait in another room. That is not a sign that anyone doubts you. It is so no one can later argue that you influenced what your child said.

How to prepare your child: "We're going to a place where you'll talk to someone whose whole job is listening to kids. All you have to do is tell the truth. You're not in trouble, and I'll be right here."

Do not rehearse with them. Do not tell them what to say.

The medical exam

A medical exam may be offered. It is important to know that an exam often does not find physical signs of sexual abuse. This does not mean the abuse did not happen or that your child was not believed.

The waiting

- It will take longer than you expect. Weeks, often months.
- You may be told very little. Investigations are confidential, including from you at times.
- Charges may never be filed. That is a decision about evidence and provability. It is not a ruling that your child lied.
- **Your child may take it back.** Recantation is common, especially when a child can feel the family coming apart. It is not proof that the disclosure was false. Keep believing them.

When it reaches you a different way

Roughly four in ten children who tell anyone tell a friend rather than an adult. That means many families learn about abuse secondhand, and those situations get talked out of existence more often than direct disclosures do. The obligation is the same.

Your child tells you about another child

Report it. You are not required to talk to the other family first, and in most cases you should not, because it might put that child in imminent harm. Call the hotline and give what you know, including that it came to you through your own child. Then tell your own child they did the right thing, because they will be worried they betrayed a friend.

Another parent tells you about your child

Take it seriously even if your child denies it when you ask. Denial at that moment is extremely common and is not evidence of anything. Report and let the trained people ask the questions.

A school reported it and that is how you found out

Your first feeling may be anger that no one called you first. Florida law puts the duty to report on the person who has the concern, and it is often better for the child that the report came from outside the family. Direct your energy at supporting your child, not at the school.

If the person is another child

A large share of child sexual abuse is committed by older or more powerful children rather than adults. A sibling. A cousin. A neighbor's teenager. Families find this even harder to report, it feels like choosing between two children and the demise of the family.

Both children need help, and only reporting gets it.

- It is reportable. The law covers abuse by a juvenile, and these reports are routed accordingly.
- Separate them now. If both children live in your home, they cannot share a room or be alone together while this is sorted out. This is not a punishment, and you can say so plainly to both.
- Sexual behavior between children is not automatically abuse. Age difference, power, coercion, and secrecy are what distinguish it from developmentally expected curiosity. You are not the one who has to decide if harm has been caused.

- Children with sexual behavior problems respond well to treatment, better than adults do. Reporting early is genuinely the better outcome for the child who caused harm, not just the one who was harmed.
- Get both children their own therapists. Not the same one.

You were probably groomed too

People who abuse children rarely focus only on the child. If they are a family member or someone you know well, they naturally have unquestioned trust with the whole family. Access to the child is what they need and trust is how access is granted. They are helpful. Maybe they babysit. They are wonderful with kids. They are often the one everybody likes.

So, when you think “there is no way he would do this,” that feeling is real and it is also the intended result of years of grooming effort. The family’s trust may be a result of how carefully that said ‘trust’ was built. It should not be used to decide whether abuse occurred.

This is also why the guilt hits so hard afterward. You did not miss something obvious. You were shown something else on purpose.

Keeping your child safe in the meantime

- **No contact.** Do not allow your child to be alone with the person involved in the disclosure. Be cautious about relying on supervision by someone who does not take your child’s disclosure or your concerns seriously. Your child’s safety comes first.
- **Don’t ask your child to keep telling the story.** Your child should not have to repeat what happened to relatives or others to convince them or prove anything. Listen when your child wants to talk, but avoid asking for details or repeatedly questioning them.
- **Keep adult conversations away from your child.** Children often hear more than adults realize – including conversations in another room. Try not to discuss the allegation, investigation, family conflict, or other adults’ reactions when any children could be in earshot. They cannot understand the complexity and hearing the adults’ stress will often make them feel they are to blame for the pain the adults are experiencing.
- **Pay attention to changes in your child.** You may notice changes in sleep, eating, school, mood, behavior, or how much your child wants to be around others. Regression, clinginess, nightmares, and anger are all common. So is appearing completely fine. There is no single way a child responds after a concerning or traumatic experience.
- **Get them to a therapist who treats childhood trauma.** Do not wait for the investigation to finish. Treatment does not interfere with a case.

Think about who else had access

This is the hardest question to sit with and the most important one. People who abuse children very seldom abuse only one. Think honestly about the other children this person has spent time alone with, in your family and outside it, going back years.

Tell the hotline. You do not have to be the one who contacts those families, and you generally shouldn’t. Give the names and let investigators do their job.

If photographs or video may exist

If your child mentions being photographed or recorded, or being shown images, say so explicitly when you report. It changes what investigators do and it can involve federal law.

Do not search the person's phone or computer, and do not take their devices. It can compromise the case and in some circumstances, it can put you at legal risk. Tell law enforcement instead.

If images of your child have been shared online, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children can help get them removed. Its CyberTipline is at report.cybertip.org, and its Take It Down service is at takeitdown.ncmec.org.

What your child needs most is you

Here is the finding that should carry you through the next several months. Across decades of research, the strongest predictor of how a child recovers from sexual abuse is not whether the case is prosecuted, and not how severe the abuse was. It is whether the child has at least one adult who believes them and stays actively supportive.

You cannot control the investigation. You can control your response and support of your child.

Say these out loud to your child, more than once

"I believe you."

"It was not your fault."

"My job is to keep you safe, and I am doing it."

"You can talk to me about this if and when you're ready. I am here to listen."

Then keep ordinary life going. School, bedtime, soccer, birthdays, driver's ed. Normal is not denial. For a child whose world just tilted, normal is evidence that they are still safe.

This is the part of the science that gets the least attention. Adversity is not the only thing that shapes a child. Positive experiences shape them too, and they are not canceled out by what happened. A steady relationship, a place where a child belongs, ordinary days that go the way they are supposed to go, and room to have feelings about it. Those are the things that build a child back, and every one of them is inside your reach right now. That is what Center for Child Counseling means by Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE), and it is the reason we tell parents the truth about how much rests on them without apologizing for it.

The family may split, and that is not your failure

Be ready for this, because it is the part that grinds people down.

Some of the people you love will not believe your child. Some will be angrier at you for reporting than at what was done. You may be called dramatic, disloyal, or worse. Holidays will change. You may lose relationships permanently, including ones you expected to keep.

You are not required to change anyone's mind. You are not required to hold the family together. Those are not the same job as protecting a child, and trying to do all three at once is what exhausts people into silence.

Find one or two people who are fully supportive of you and let the rest be what it is for now.

You need support too

Parents and caregivers in this position carry something heavy and largely unrecognized. Grief for the child. Guilt for not seeing it sooner. Rage. And sometimes real love for the person accused, which is confusing and not shameful.

- Get your own therapist. This is not indulgent. A caregiver who is regulated is the single most useful thing in the house.
- If you are in crisis, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.
- If the person accused is your partner, you are also facing decisions about housing, money, and custody. Talk to an attorney and ask about a victim advocate.
- Eat, sleep, and let people bring you food. This is a months-long stretch, not a week.

If your teenager does not want you to report

Older children often disclose and then immediately ask you not to do anything. They are afraid of the fallout, and their concerns are valid. Disclosure is not easy. This is one of the few times where you have to override your child, and you can do it with respect.

- Be honest that you are going to make the call, and why. Do not pretend the decision is theirs when it isn't.
- Give them control over what you can. Whether they are in the room when you call. Who in the family gets told and when. What they want you to say if a relative asks.
- Name what they are afraid of instead of arguing them out of it. "You're worried Grandma will blame you. That might happen, and it still won't change what I think or what I do."
- Expect anger at you, possibly for a while. It is not a sign you did the wrong thing by reporting.

Numbers to keep

Immediate danger 911

Florida Abuse Hotline 1-800-962-2873 · reportabuse.dcf.state.fl.us · 24 hours

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Call or text 988

Child Protection Team – Palm Beach (561) 433-3544 · after hours (561) 629-0350

Online images of a child report.cybertip.org · takeitdown.ncmec.org

Center for Child Counseling (561) 244-9499 · centerforchildcounseling.org

Safety and prevention education beKidSafe.org

This guide is general education, not legal or clinical advice, and it is not a substitute for the guidance of an attorney, a physician, or a licensed therapist working with your family. If you are unsure whether to report, call the Florida Abuse Hotline for assistance.

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