

If Your Child Experiences A Sexual Assault

If your child experiences a sexual assault, making the decision to tell a parent is one of the hardest things they will do after the assault. What happened is a traumatic event in the life of your child. It is very common for survivors of sexual assault to blame themselves. They anticipate it will hurt you to know what happened to them. They are unsure of how you will react. They are fragile and it is difficult for them to risk the possibility of experiencing a negative reaction from you that will further traumatize them. For these and other reasons, your child may delay telling you about the assault.

It is common for people who have experienced trauma to want to avoid anything that reminds them of the experience. Telling a parent will make the assault seem more real for them. There is a strong urge to act like this never happened, put one foot in front of the other and just try to keep going. People can do this for varying periods of time. Sometimes this causes a delay in telling loved ones or reporting their experiences. If your child makes the choice to tell you they have experienced a sexual assault, it is because they need your love and support.

What they need from you:

Believe them. This is the single most important thing you can do.

Do not blame them. Do not criticize your child for the way they were dressed or blame them for how much they had to drink or for using drugs. Do not chastise them for going somewhere or being with someone you think put them at higher risk. Don't blame them for being naïve or for trusting someone who proved themselves to be untrustworthy. Doing any of these things will create distance between you and your child and will not be helpful for their healing and recovery.

Offer to help without taking control away from them. It will be tempting for you to want to take control of their situation now because you have a need to feel in control and keep them safe. They have a need for control over their own bodies and their own circumstances because control has been taken away from them in the most intimate way possible. You do not want to be one more person that forces them to do anything they do not want to do at a time where they are extremely sensitive to feeling out of control. Offer to come and be with them, but listen to what they have to say. Offer to let them come home temporarily, but do not insist that they do.

Do not pressure them to report to police or other authorities. It is very likely that you will feel angry that this has happened to your child. Do not take your anger out on them. It is not their fault that someone chose to prey upon their

vulnerabilities. Let your anger fuel you to find ways to help your child and seek a variety of resources for support. Research all of the available options for reporting and let them know what their options are for medical help, counseling, reporting, academic assistance, and peer support. As your child feels validated, understood, and believed, they will become more willing to consider options related to reporting or trying to hold this person accountable for their actions.

Keep what they tell you confidential. This is your child's story to tell. It is a very difficult time for both you and your child. Your child will want to have control over who knows about what happened to them. It will take time for them to feel comfortable with other people knowing. Do not talk about what happened to your child, even with your best friend, spouse, or pastor, without your child's permission. Do not pressure your child to give you this permission. Go at their pace, not yours. If you need to talk to someone, speak to a trained professional who specializes in sexual assault or trauma. They can give you specific advice to help you and your child.

Avoid questions that start with the word "why."

Healing takes time and survivors of trauma often move at a slower pace than you might want or expect. This is a direct result of experiencing trauma. Be patient.

As someone who loves someone who has experienced a sexual assault, you will experience your own reactions and you will have your own set of needs, too. These needs are separate from and might conflict with the needs of your child.

You will be angry and may have a strong desire to see the perpetrator held accountable and punished. Your child will take much longer to access and be able to express any anger about the situation and will want to avoid anything that will put them in contact with the perpetrator.

It is important to find ways to take care of yourself while also respecting the healing process for your child. There is no one right way to handle this situation. Every person and every situation is different. There are many campus and community resources available to provide medical, emotional, academic, and legal support to both you and your child.