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Safe Adults: What to Say and Do

Children need safe adults. Safe adults are ones who are looking out for the child's best interests and upholding the child's rights and boundaries. They consistently honor the parents' rules and those of the organizations to which they belong. Safe adults behave transparently, and there are certain actions that are expected of safe adults when it comes to protecting youth. This article provides tangible tips on what to communicate to children about their safety.



One of the persistent questions that is asked about survivors of abuse is, "why didn't they just talk about it right away?" For some, disclosing abuse can be immediate. But, for many, it can take months or even years. There are people who finally disclose in their 50s or later, and there are others who never tell a single soul.¹

When sexual abuse has occurred, it's very difficult for the youth to talk about it. They often feel ashamed and guilty, as if they were the ones who did something wrong. People tell victims the abuse was their fault. Their trust and boundaries have been violated. Youth don't always know where to turn, and sometimes the very person they trusted was the abuser. The abuser may even have threatened consequences if youth speak up. Youth frequently experience deep fear in talking about what happened to them—they're scared of people choosing to believe more influential adults, and of getting into trouble or being bullied.² This is just a snapshot of the reality of abuse.

The fact is this: most children don't disclose right away, if ever. But, sometimes they do try. What they share is often met with disbelief, shock, horror and upset—which are all valid reactions. However, these visceral reactions tend to shut down any attempt to communicate, resulting in the child "admitting" they initially made it all up.³

We have a significant amount of power as caring and safe adults. We know through our training that we can work together to prevent abuse before it occurs, and we know how to stop it right away if it does. We fortify youths' boundaries, so they know their personal rights and have confidence in tricky situations. We also strengthen our own boundaries and change our behavior so that we don't unwittingly condition a child to more easily accept the behavior of someone with bad intentions.

Not all of us are parents, but all of us are tasked with being caring adults who are protectors of children. Regardless of our actual position in ministry, we may never know when a child will see us as someone who can help them, and so we need to be prepared to hear their plea for help.

To be abundantly clear: protecting children is the primary responsibility of adults. At the same time, we must give children some tools to be able to protect themselves. This means we tell them they're allowed to say "no" to an adult or other child if they feel uncomfortable or when it has to do with their safety. That, they don't have to hug or kiss someone if they don't want to. That no one has the right to violate their bodies. And, that if they feel uncomfortable, they're allowed to leave the situation (if they can—sometimes children feel paralyzed in traumatic or uncomfortable moments) and tell a safe adult right away.

But herein lies the conundrum. We just addressed all of the reasons why it's difficult for children to talk about the abuse that happened to them, and yet we expect them to talk to us right away when something is wrong. Knowing the complex challenges that are impediments to disclosures, here are some tips for caring adults to help overcome the communication barriers that children face.

Children should know this information ahead of time, so that they're more likely to communicate when there is an issue. For your own knowledge, and for you to give to youth in your care as they navigate their relationships and understanding of safe adults:

- Tell them, when it comes to your safety, I will believe you, and you will not get into trouble.
- Tell them, if something bad happens to you, like abuse, I want you to know that it will never be your fault. And when you're ready to talk about it, I'm here to listen.
- Let them know that you'll be more capable of listening well if you're in a place without distractions. Encourage them to let you know they need to talk, so that you can clear your schedule and find a suitable, transparent place.
- Explain that if they have something that's really tough to talk about, they don't have to worry about whether you'll judge them, because you won't.
- You can encourage them to practice in front of a mirror, write in a journal or express their feelings through art if they're confused or unsure of what to say. They can share the material with you or bring it with them to talk.
- Tell them if something is upsetting to them, they don't have to tell you about it if they're scared—but they do have to talk to someone who can help. Instead, offer some other options, such as a counselor at school, or Aunt (insert name of choice).

Actual phrasing and words to practice with youth to help them initiate potential future conversations:

- "I need to talk about something, but I'm scared."
- "I don't know how to bring this up, or what to do."
- "I need some advice about something confusing. But, I don't want to tell you what happened."
- "I want to talk about this, but I know it will really hurt someone."

Sometimes youth will send up a testing question to see how you'll respond:

- Instead of talking about their own issue, they'll ask you what you think about a similar issue in the news. "What did you think of that girl who got suspended at school for being bratty to her teacher?" Or, "did you hear about that guy on the news who was really abusive?"
- Or, they'll bring up something else that happened when they really want to talk about the sexual abuse they experienced: "We had a presentation today in gym today about sexual abuse."
- Sometimes children preface their disclosure with a request for confidentiality, with

something along the lines of, "I really need to talk to you about something, but I need you to promise me you won't tell anyone. And, I won't tell you at all if you don't promise me that." As a caring adult in ministry, you may not promise this. Instead, let them know that if you are worried about their safety, you may need to communicate with someone else who can help. Usually children still disclose.

Abuse can be devastating. It can have long, and far-reaching effects. It can affect immediate relationships, and relationships in the future. Regardless of the circumstances of the abuse, including the type, the frequency, the duration or the depth of the violation of trust—trauma is trauma, and everyone is affected differently by it. Most important of all, there are avenues of healing for survivors, but it depends significantly on the level of support they experience.

Youth need to know people are watching out for their safety. What they share with you might not be abuse, but it still deserves your attention. If a child does disclose abuse, you will need to report it to the child protective services in your state. Be a support to them, and get them and their communication to the right person who can do something about it. You can do this! You have the privilege of potentially being a child's safe adult—they're counting on you.

References:

1. Broman-Fulks, et al. (2007). Sexual assault disclosure in relation to adolescent mental health: Results from the National Survey of Adolescents. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*.
2. Butler, Ian and Williamson, Howard. (1994). *Children speak: children, trauma and social work*. Published by: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.
3. Allnock, Debra. (2010). *Children and young people disclosing sexual abuse: An introduction to the research*. Published by: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

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1) If a child comes to you with a situation of possible abuse, how should you respond?

- A) Tell them that you're uncomfortable with hearing anything about abuse, and suggest that they talk to the school counselor instead.
 - B) Listen carefully, tell them they did the right thing by talking to you, and wait and see what else happens with the supposed perpetrator. You want to ensure that the facts are right before calling child protective services or telling a supervisor.
 - C) Listen carefully to the child, make sure to ask open-ended questions, tell them it wasn't their fault and that they did the right thing by talking about it. Explain the next steps, and then communicate as soon as possible with child protective services, and then with a supervisor.
 - D) Promise the child that you'll keep the information confidential because you know that's what is needed to help the youth feel comfortable talking about what happened.
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