



CAC

Child Advocacy Center

STEPPING STONES

Justice & Hope for Children

A Guide through the Child Protection and
Legal Systems for Caregivers

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Welcome to Stepping Stones Child Advocacy Center

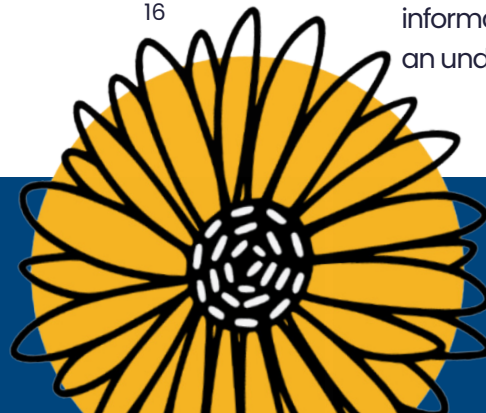
Thank you for bringing your child to Stepping Stones Child Advocacy Center, which we will refer to in this handbook as the CAC. You are here because your child may have been physically or sexually abused. At the CAC, we provide a safe and child-centered environment where we work as a team with law enforcement, child protection workers, and mental and medical health providers to conduct forensic interviews to aid in the investigative process.

When suspicions or allegations of child abuse are reported, families can feel overwhelmed and confused by the investigative process.

Our team strives to:

- Do the best we can to find out what happened.
- Make the investigation process as comfortable as possible for you and your child.
- Explain the child protection and legal system and give your child access to a medical exam when needed.
- Refer you to child-centered therapy options.
- Discuss ways you can help your child during the recovery process.
- Help your child and family begin to heal.

Remember, you are your child's best support and advocate. We are here to help you. The purpose of this handbook is to provide you with information about the process, people involved, services available, and an understanding of child abuse.



What is *Child Sexual Abuse*?

Sexual abuse occurs when a person involves or asks a child to engage in any sexual activity. Sexual abuse does not always include sexual intercourse. Sometimes older children sexually abuse younger or smaller children. Sexual acts between children become sexual abuse when one child uses coercion, force, threats, or gifts to get the other child to do the sexual acts.

Sexual abuse can be traumatic for a child. Telling someone about the abuse is often hard when a family member or other trusted person is the abuser. After a child discloses abuse, it can be confusing for the child, and caregiver when they encounter different child protection, law enforcement, and mental and medical professionals. We are all here to help you through the process.

Facts:

- Sexual abuse is common.
- When children are sexually abused, it is usually by someone they know and trust.
- It is common for the abuser to threaten to harm the child or someone else if the child talks about the abuse.
- The abuser may promise gifts in exchange for the child's silence about the abuse.
- Children reveal abuse in small pieces. Your child may tell you more details about the abuse over days, weeks, and months. Some children may not give details to their caregiver.
- Children and teenagers who have been abused are more likely to have depression or use drugs and alcohol.

What to do if your child tells you more about the abuse:

- Listen to what they tell you. Remain calm.
- Let your child tell you; DO NOT repeatedly ask your child about the abuse.
- Do not punish your child. Your child is not at fault.
- Be supportive, and let your child know you believe them.
- Write down what they tell you and tell your DCF worker and the police department.
- Reassure your child and thank your child for telling you.
- Remind your child they did nothing wrong.

Child's *Emotions and Reactions*

Each child may react differently to their abuse experience. Your child may show some of the following emotions or thoughts:

- Hurt
- Worry
- Fear of punishment
- Anxiety
- Fear of retaliation
- Anger
- Feeling alone
- Fear
- Confusion
- Guilt
- Depression
- Relief that the "secret" is known
- Shame or humiliation
- Loss of love from significant other
- "Taking back" what they said about the abuse so things are "normal" again

These emotions are natural and may occur in combination. For some children, these emotions occur time and time again. It should be remembered that children may process trauma differently than adults.

Your child may also experience physical and behavioral symptoms due to abuse. The following are a few examples:

- Nausea/upset stomach
- Withdrawal from others
- Change in appetite
- Avoidance of school/friends
- Crying
- Aggressiveness
- Nightmares
- Change in school performance
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Rebelliousness
- Anger and mood changes
- Lying
- Sexually inappropriate behavior (frequent masturbation, kissing or touching other children, looking at pornography)
- Attention-seeking
- Fears and phobias
- Running away
- Bedwetting
- Physical complaints
- Substance abuse



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Abused children sometimes do not feel good about themselves due to the abuse they have experienced. Children can develop low self-esteem and, consequently, do not perform as well in school, are reluctant to try new activities and expect not to be treated well. Children may believe they are "bad" because of what happened.

Children often believe:

- Bad things happen to bad people
- Sex is bad
- Bad things happen to me when I am bad. I feel bad, so I must be bad

A child's recovery is aided by the support the child receives. Parents can help their child rebuild self-esteem by explaining to the child:

- The child is not at fault
- Sometimes bad things happen to good kids
- The child is loved and cared about by many people

*Remember to reinforce your child:
"The abuse was not your fault.
Just because this happened, it
does not mean anything is wrong
with you. I am here to help."*



Caregiver Feelings

The child abuse disclosure and investigation process can be difficult for the entire family. Each family member will probably react differently, with different emotions. Caregivers' initial reactions may be confusing to their child. Many caregivers get upset when the abuse is discovered. Reassure your child, "I'm sad and angry this happened, but I am not angry with you."

Caregivers' Self-Care

It's very important for caregivers to take good care of themselves emotionally and physically. Do not hesitate to seek professional support if needed. Many caregivers want to put off taking care of themselves until their child is better. This is a mistake. Taking care of yourself is a critical step in caring for your child. Your child needs you to be strong and healthy, both physically and mentally. The better you can manage, the better your child will feel.

Caregivers also have varied emotions and reactions. Common emotions experienced by many caregivers include:

- Shock
- Sense of failure
- Anxiety
- Frustration
- Confusion
- Fatigue
- Depression
- Denial
- Disbelief
- Anger
- Fear
- Dismay
- Feeling alone
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Guilt
- Blaming a spouse or family member

Additionally, your child may not have first disclosed their abuse to you. This is not uncommon. Sometimes children fear their caregivers will be angry, sad, or hurt. Children might try to protect their caregivers from these feelings. Children often fear their caregivers will not believe them, especially if the abuser is a family member or close friend.

When a child first tells someone other than a caregiver, their caregivers might feel hurt, angry, or even doubt their parenting and caregiving skills. Talking about abuse is difficult. Do not allow your own feelings to get in the way of future communication with your child.

The Benefits of *Therapy*

A child's reactions to abuse vary from mild to serious effects. Some children show signs immediately, while others may have delayed symptoms. Even if your child is not showing any symptoms now, it is best to let a professional therapist assess your child. Many caregivers feel that a child should just forget about the abuse and are reluctant to let the child talk about the abuse. Unfortunately, denial will not make it go away. Most children do not just forget about abuse and need help to recover from their trauma.

The purpose of counseling is not to dwell on the details of the abuse but to help your child deal with the feelings that they are experiencing, and help your child heal. Therapy will not traumatize them. Instead, it helps children sort out their confusing thoughts and feelings about the abuse. Sometimes caregivers wonder if their child needs therapy since they "seem OK." Children often want to protect their parents and caregivers or have trouble knowing how to talk about their worries, and therapy can give them a safe way to open up.

Therapy is beneficial to children because it helps the child to:

- Develop a healthy self-image
- Learn to trust again
- Identify ways to stay safe
- Find ways to feel more in control

Here's how you can help:

1. Make a commitment to your child's therapy. Regular attendance at sessions is important to the success of the process.
2. Be positive and encouraging to your child about therapy. Let your child know they can ask the therapist any questions or tell the therapist anything.
3. If you have any questions or concerns, ask the therapist.

You may also need help dealing with your feelings as a caregiver. In most instances, when a child is sexually abused, all family members will be affected. If you were a victim of sexual abuse, your child's abuse may bring back difficult memories. A therapist may be able to help you as well since your response to the abuse will play a large part in your child's healing. It is important to assess if the child and the family can benefit from counseling in all situations.

Here's what you can do

- Talk to friends, family, or a therapist about your feelings. Many parents and caregivers benefit from the help and support of professionals.
- Ask questions. Every question and concern you have about your child is important, and we are here to answer any questions you have.
- Try to stay calm and focus on taking things day by day.



Medical Evaluation

Your child will benefit from a specialized medical evaluation. Because children often delay disclosing abusive events for weeks or even months, the medical assessment is not considered an emergency procedure in most instances. The exam is not traumatic or frightening for children. If evidence of abuse is present, the examiner will full document this for investigators. As the caregiver, you will be given a great deal of information and support at the time of the exam, along with your child.

The key to a thorough medical evaluation is the choice of the examiner. A registered nurse specifically trained in the evaluation of child sexual abuse will offer the best service to the child victim, the family, and the investigators. It is recommended that a child who discloses abuse be seen by a healthcare provider who specializes in child sexual abuse evaluations. Taking your child to the local emergency department or a primary care physician may result in an inadequate evaluation requiring referral to the child sexual abuse specialist and making it necessary to do another exam.

The primary goal of the medical examination is to assess your child's overall state of health--physically, emotionally, and developmentally--and to reassure your child about what has happened to their body. Besides looking for any signs of abuse, the examiner will provide your child with a complete physical exam, much like a school or well-baby checkup. Many children, parents, and caregivers find the exam very reassuring. It is also a good time for children to get answers to their many questions about their bodies.

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When sexual abuse is a concern, a special examination of your child's genital area will be included. If there is concern about sexually transmitted disease, swabs of the genital area and/or a urine sample will be obtained. If evidence of abuse is present, the examiner will fully document this for the investigators. This will be explained to you and your child when additional testing is necessary. In the event that a medical condition unrelated to the abuse is identified, the examiner will assist you in arranging further follow-up, if needed.

The examination is thorough but not traumatic for the vast majority of children. In fact, most children and their families find an exam reassuring after experiencing an abusive event. The examiner will try to make your child as comfortable as possible. You can be assured that your child will be treated with dignity and respect throughout the process.

Here's how you can help:

Be matter of fact. Let your child know that the examiner will check their body to ensure they are healthy.
Let your child know he/she can ask the doctor questions or tell the doctor anything.
Remind your child that it is OK for the doctor to examine them.
Ask questions. Every question is important.

Caregivers should be aware that the medical evaluation is not used as the only evidence to support or deny that abuse has occurred. A lack of medical findings does not mean your child is not telling the truth. All sexual abuse does not involve injury. Even when injuries do occur, children's bodies recover remarkably quickly. The main advantage of evaluation is that it allows a healthcare professional to assure you and your child that their body is healthy.



Your Child's Interview

The forensic interview is one of the first steps in the investigation and gives your child a chance to tell what happened in a child-centered setting where you have extra support and someone to help you obtain the services you need. Your child will be interviewed by a specially trained forensic interviewer. Team members will observe the interview from a different room while it is being recorded. You will not be able to watch the interview, but you will meet with team members afterward to learn the next steps. The CAC believes that recording a child's interview benefits the child, the investigation process, and the prosecution of child abuse cases.

A Recorded Interview:

- Reduces the number of times a child has to talk about the abuse
- Provides an accurate account of the child's disclosure
- Refreshes the memories of the child and investigating professionals prior to trial
- Potentially serves as a tool in securing confessions and guilty pleas from alleged perpetrators.

A Family Victim Advocate from Stepping Stones will meet with you during the interview. The Family Victim Advocate's job is to find out what type of assistance you, your child, and your family needs in order to cope and heal. We know that many families continue to have questions and need help after the interview. The Family Victim Advocate will stay in contact with you to ensure you can get the help you need and to be there to support you if the case is prosecuted in court.

Uses of Statements in Court Proceedings

In some select cases, a child's interview may be used instead of the child's testimony at a preliminary hearing. The preliminary hearing aims to determine whether probable cause exists in the pending case.

In almost all court trials, a child will be required to testify, and the DVD statement cannot replace the testimony. It is important to note that while a significant number of criminal charges are filed, only a very small percentage of cases actually go to trial.

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Confidential Protection of DVD Recordings

The CAC maintains strict access controls on all recorded interviews. The recorded interview is always released to the law enforcement agency and child protection worker investigating the case. Other professionals involved with the investigation or therapy of your child may view the DVD later to understand the child's situation better. Stepping Stones does not release the DVD to parties other than a prosecutor or DCF attorney unless court-ordered. In all other cases, information about you, your child, and the situation involved are kept strictly confidential.

Your Team of Professionals

There will be a team of professionals from a variety of disciplines working on your child's case. Each professional has a specific role and area of expertise. By working together, the team makes the process flow smoothly. The roles of the team members are described below.

Child Forensic Interview Specialist

The interviewer is a professionally trained specialist responsible for providing legally defensible forensic interviews when there is a suspicion of abuse or when a child has witnessed violence against another person. Their training allows them to talk with children about these sensitive topics in a way that reduces re-traumatization.

Law Enforcement Officer/Detective

The detective will continue the investigation and attempt to interview the suspect and witnesses. Sometimes gathering evidence is a slow process, so try to be patient. After completing the investigation, the detective will pass information to the district attorney's office, deciding whether to press criminal charges.

Social Worker

A licensed social worker from the Kansas Department of Children and Families may be assigned to your child. The social worker's role is to assist you in protecting your child. The social worker will help develop safety plans for your family and may refer your child for counseling or other services. The social worker is there to assist you, so don't hesitate to call on them if you feel you need them.

Family/Victim Advocate

During your CAC visit, you will meet with a Family Victim Advocate. This advocate will explain the steps of the interview process that will be taken while you and your child are at the CAC and will obtain your written acknowledgment of these procedures. Additionally, this individual will explain specialized mental health and medical resources, explore possible financial sources for services, provide information about child protection and legal systems, and outline ways that you can be even more helpful to your child. Once you leave the CAC, you will be contacted to answer any other questions you may have and provide support as the investigation continues.

Victim/Witness Coordinator

If the county attorney files criminal charges, you will be in contact with a victim/witness coordinator. This victim/witness coordinator works in the county attorney's office and will serve as a direct liaison between you and the attorney assigned to your case. The victim/witness coordinator is there to help you and your child understand the legal process. The coordinator will answer questions, explain the types of available victim assistance, and prepare you and your child for court.

Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners

Registered nurses trained as Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners who work with the team have specialized training in examining children for possible abuse. Their job is to assess the child's overall physical health, identify and document any injuries, evaluate the presence of sexually transmitted infections, and test for possible pregnancy. Remember, however, the team does not rely solely on the medical evaluation results to prove abuse. Even if the exam findings are normal, it does not mean that the abuse has not occurred.

The County Attorney/Prosecutor

The county attorney has the final decision on whether or not to file criminal charges. Many factors are considered before a decision to file charges is made. All of these factors affect the likelihood of success in court. Some of these factors are the age and maturity of the child, the child's ability to testify, the reaction of the suspect to the charges, the presence of medical evidence, and the existence of other witnesses. The prosecutor will decide which charges to file based on the abusive acts that occurred and the available evidence to support the charges. If the county attorney elects not to file charges, this does not mean abuse did not occur, simply that it cannot be proven at this time.

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The Mental Health Provider

Mental Health Professionals who work with the MDT team represent a variety of different types of providers. They can assist the interviewer from a mental health perspective to ask questions and clarify areas of concern. We can refer you to a provider of your choice with your permission. Their job is to do an initial intake with you and your child and help decide how the abuse has affected the child and family and what can be done to assist them in healing from the experience.

The Investigation Process

The investigation process is complex and can be confusing and frightening to children, and caregivers. Our goal at Stepping Stones is to make this process flow smoothly with as little discomfort to the child as possible. We will maintain contact with you for as long as needed, regardless of the outcome of the investigation.

Below are some steps in the investigation and legal process that your child may go through:

1. Allegations are reported to the authorities (law enforcement or DCF).
2. Your child is interviewed at Stepping Stones Child Advocacy Center.
3. A family/victim advocate will meet with you to discuss medical and counseling services for your child.
4. After the interview, the detective and/or social worker will meet with you to discuss how the interview went and the next steps.
5. The social worker from DCF will evaluate your plans to protect your child from further abuse. A decision to substantiate or unsubstantiate these allegations will be made by DCF. You should receive notification of your case finding at a later date.
6. Your child may be referred for a medical evaluation.
7. The detective will continue the investigation and attempt to interview the suspect.
8. The detective will turn the case over to the county attorney, and criminal charges may be filed, or the case closed due to various factors.
9. The victim/witness coordinator from the county attorney's office will contact you and assist you and your child should the case go to trial.
10. The court process begins.

The Legal System

It is important to remember that the wellbeing of your child is your main objective. Try not to invest all of your energy in the legal system. It is not essential for the recovery of your child. The best advice is to enter the legal system with no expectations. Even if it is clear the abuse has occurred, the suspect may not be convicted. If this happens, it is important to reassure your child that it is not his/her fault and, just because the suspect was not convicted, does not mean that he/she is not believed. Explain to your child that there are rules in the legal system and that sometimes even bad people can use those rules to avoid going to prison.

Sometimes, even if the police believe sexual abuse has taken place, a criminal case cannot be filed because there is insufficient evidence or the child is too young to testify. While this can be frustrating to parents and caregivers, remember that your main goal is to help your child heal from the emotional wounds caused by the abuse and to protect your child.

How to Help Your Child

1. Believe your child and let your child know it is not his/her fault.
 2. Remain calm in front of your child. Try not to talk about the abuse with other adults in front of your child. Many children have added stress from the reaction of those around them, especially their parents and caregivers.
 3. Try not to worry too much about events in the future, such as court. Many different things can happen and there will be help at each step. Try to stay calm and focus on the present.
 4. Get help for yourself in coping with your feelings. Talk to friends, family and a therapist - but remember, not when your child is there.
 5. Reassure your child that you will take care of him/her and that you are able to cope.
 6. Return to a routine as soon as you are able. Help your child find ways to feel healthy and strong. Congratulate your child for his/her successes.
 7. Consider therapy for your child. Therapy can be a very important part of a child's healing and can help you learn more about how to help your child.
 8. The single most important factor affecting the child's recovery is the level of support from the caregiver.
- What to Say to Others

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One challenge your family will face is what to say to others about the abuse. If there is no publicity about the case, you will be able to decide whom you tell. Share with your child which relatives or close friends you will tell. Let your child have a role in who is told. If you are close to your family, you might want to discuss the abuse allegations with them, as abuse can affect the entire family. It is important to remember the reactions you get from relatives and friends will be different. If you know they will react in a negative way, you may decide not to tell them. It is important to protect your child's privacy.

To help in your **conversations with others**, here are a few tips to keep in mind:

The protection of your child's privacy is extremely important. You don't "owe it" to anyone to explain what has happened. Your child has the right to when it hurts to look back. know whom you have told. You have the right to ask people you tell not to discuss this topic with others. Having responses in mind can help you feel more comfortable when the topic of abuse comes up.

It can be helpful to give your child responses that he/she can use if someone else brings up the abuse. It is okay to be firm, abrupt, or even rude to help people understand how important your child's privacy is.

Remember that you don't owe anyone an explanation. "I'd rather not talk about it" is a very acceptable answer. Other possible responses include: "It has been difficult for all of us," or "I appreciate your concern." You will also want to prepare your child for comments that he/she may encounter. If someone comments to your child how sorry they are for him/her, a good response is just a simple "thank you." Let your child know that he/she does not have to respond to any comments or questions. A good response for the child is, "My mom and/or dad told me not to talk about it right now." If other children comment or tease your child, he/she might say, "It could happen to anyone, that's why we should all know to tell an adult."

Safety Tips for Families

- Teach your children they have the right to say "NO" to an adult if that adult is bothering them in any way.
- Know everything you can about your children's activities and friends.
- Teach your children to say "NO" to touches on the parts of the body covered by a swimsuit.
- If the abuser is a family member, never let them be alone with your children. When the abuser is a teenager in your home, do not allow them to be alone with younger children.
- Only leave your children with someone you know and who has earned your trust. Listen when children tell you they do not want to be with a particular person.
- Pay attention when someone shows an unusual interest in your children by giving them gifts or money.
- Be sensitive to changes in your children's behavior or attitudes.
- Teach your children to refuse anything from strangers, including money, gifts, or rides. Monitor children's activities and participate with them. Do not allow children to play alone in fields, playgrounds, or other isolated areas.
- Teach your children to never tell anyone over the phone or at the door that they are home alone.
- Develop open communication between you and your children. Be a good listener.



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