



Understanding a Child's Disclosure

If a child tells another person that he or she has been sexually abused, it is called a “disclosure.” Disclosure of abuse can be a scary and difficult process for a child. A child who has been sexually abused may take weeks, months, or even years to fully reveal what was done to him or her. Many children never tell anyone about the abuse.

Here is some general information about the process of disclosure:

- Girls are more likely to disclose than boys
- School-aged children tend to tell a caregiver
- Adolescents are more likely to tell friends
- Very young children tend to accidentally reveal abuse, because they don't have as much understanding of what occurred or the words to explain it

Children are often reluctant to tell anyone about being sexually abused. Some reasons for this reluctance may include:

- Fear that the abuser may hurt them or their families
- Fear that they will not be believed or will be blamed and get in trouble
- Worry that their parents will be upset or angry
- Fear that disclosing will disrupt the family, especially if the perpetrator is a family member or friend
- Fear that if they tell they will be taken away and separated from their family

Disclosure can be particularly difficult for younger children who have limited language and developmental abilities. If the child does not understand that the abuse was wrong, this may also lead the child not to tell.

I have heard that some children who have disclosed sexual abuse later ‘take it back.’ Does this mean they were lying?

No. In fact, attempting to “take it all back”—also known as recantation—is common among children who disclose sexual abuse. Most children who recant are telling the truth when they originally disclose, but may later have mixed feelings about their abuser and about what has happened as a result of the disclosure. Some children have been sworn to secrecy by the abuser and are trying to protect the secret by taking it back. Some children are dealing with issues of denial and are having a difficult time accepting the sexual abuse. In some families, the child is pressured to recant because the disclosure has disrupted family relationships. A delay in the prosecution of the perpetrator may also lead a child to recant in order to avoid further distressing involvement in the legal process. A very small percentage of children recant because they made a false statement.

This article has been adapted from *Information for Parents and Caregivers: What to Do If Your Child Discloses Sexual Abuse*, which was originally developed by the Child Sexual Abuse Committee of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, comprised of mental health, legal, and medical professionals with expertise in the field of child sexual abuse. The original article may be accessed at <http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/disclosure.pdf> and in Spanish at http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/disclosure_sp.pdf