

# Handbook

*for Parents/Caregivers*



**Granite State  
Children's Alliance**™

New Hampshire's Network of  
Child Advocacy Centers



# Welcome to the Child Advocacy Center

Your child is here because of concerns about possible abuse.

## **Our goals are to:**

Do the best job possible in finding out what happened;

Work with the legal system to help the child;

Help you understand the child protective and legal systems;

Help your children and family begin to heal.

*We hope this handbook will help you understand more about child abuse. We also hope it will help you understand the system we use to respond to a report of abuse.*

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# What *is* Sexual Abuse?

Sexual Abuse occurs when a person forces a child to have any form of sexual contact or makes a child perform sexual acts. Sexual abuse may involve touching private parts (clothed or unclothed), penetration, forced sexual acts between children, or making the child view, read or participate in pornography. These acts are abuse even when the offenders say they were gentle and did not hurt the child.

Sexual abuse does not always mean sexual intercourse. Sometimes older children abuse younger or smaller children. Sexual acts between children become concerning when one child uses coercion, force or violence to get the child to do the acts. Young offenders should be reported to social service agencies so they can receive help.

Sexual abuse is overwhelming to children, especially when an adult is involved. Most children are taught to trust adults. They tend to believe what adults tell them rather than rely on their own feelings. This trust of adults can work against them in two ways:

1. If the offender tells them that what is being done is okay, they may doubt their own feelings that it is not.
2. If the parent's initial reaction to the child's abuse disclosure is "this can't be true" the child may wonder if his/her own feelings are mistaken.

Children almost never tell about abuse to "create problems." More often they fear that telling will make people angry at them. It is extremely difficult for children to report abuse.



# Understanding *a* Child's Disclosure

Only 1 in ten children tell of the abuse while they are a child. There are many reasons why kids don't tell right away. It may be fear of not being believed. The relationship with the offender is a big factor. Often the offender is in a position of power and a trusted adult in the child and family's life. The offender may use threats against the child, other family members, even pets. There may be fear about changes or a disruption in the family and/or extended family. It is important to remember that disclosing abuse is a process that takes place over time and not an event that happens once.



# Signs Sometimes Shown *by* Children *who* Have Been Abused

Children may have some of the following symptoms as a result of abuse. Children react differently depending on age, extent of abuse, support from others and their relationship with the offender.

**The following are indicators or warning signs that something is occurring with the child that should be looked into. In some instances, there might not be any abuse, as these behaviors can be a result of many different stressors. It is important to consider the child and any health or behavioral issues they have when noting these signs:**

*Nausea/upset stomach*

*Regression with toileting*

*Excessive masturbation*

*Changes in sleep patterns*

*Withdrawal from others*

*Clinging to parents*

*Change in school performance*

*Knowledge of sex that is age-inappropriate*

*Sexually explicit language*

*Change in appetite*

*Excessive or ongoing nightmares*

*Anger and mood changes*

*Avoidance of school/friends*

*Aggressiveness*

*Rebelliousness*

*Fears and phobias*





## Why *it is* Important *to* Support Your Child

The single most important factor affecting the child's recovery is the level of support from the parents and/or caregivers. It is simple. If you do everything you can to support your child, the ability to recover is much greater. If you feel conflicted about your child's disclosure because of a relationship you have with the offender, that is not uncommon. It is critical to support your child's disclosure despite those feelings.



# Ways You Can Support Your Child

## Provide Safety, Love & Support

Let them know it is okay to cry or be mad. Make sure your child understands it is not his or her fault. Do not coach or pressure your child to talk about the abuse, but if they want to talk about it, it's okay to listen without questioning.

### Here are some things you can say that will help you support your child:

I believe you.

It is not your fault.

I am glad I know about it.

I am sorry this happened to you.

I will take care of you.

I am not sure what will happen next.

Nothing about YOU made this happen.

It has happened to other children too, you are not alone.

You do not need to take care of me.

I am upset, but not with you.

I am angry with the person who did this.

I am sad. You may see me cry. That's okay. I will be able to take care of you.

I am not mad at you.

You can still love someone but hate what they did to you.



## Some things you can do:

Return to a normal routine as soon as possible.

See that your child receives therapy as soon as possible. Avoiding or minimizing the abuse usually causes more problems because the effects of abuse will not go away without help.

Find help for yourself. You do not have to do it all yourself. Contact your local crisis center for assistance.

Teach your child the rules of personal safety. Talk to them about what to do if someone tries to touch them in an uncomfortable way. There are resources at the end of this booklet on how to have that conversation if you need them.

Be careful not question your child about the abuse. If you do, you can jeopardize the case in court against your child's abuser. Specially trained professionals at the Child Advocacy Center will interview your child to obtain necessary information without harming the case or further traumatizing your child. If your child wants to talk, listen, but do not probe.

Keep your child away from the person suspected of the abuse. This is to protect you and your child.

Avoid discussing the case with any other victims or their families.

Never coach or advise your child on how to act or what to say to professionals or investigators. This could have negative consequences on the integrity of the case and future prosecution.

Your child may need an extra sense of physical security. Stay close. Assure your child you will keep him/her safe.

Remember to give attention to your other children, if you have them.

Do not share any information on social media.



# What happens *in the* Investigation?

**Following are basic steps to an investigation of child abuse:**

1. Someone reports suspicion of abuse to authorities, either law enforcement or the Division for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF).
2. An interview with the child is conducted, usually at the Child Advocacy Center.
3. If necessary, a medial exam is conducted.
4. Law enforcement and/or DCYF will continue the investigation, which may include an interview with the alleged offender.
5. A team of professionals (discussed in the following section) will meet to discuss the case and decide how to manage it. The team consists of a forensic interviewer, law enforcement officer, prosecutor, social worker and medical/mental health professionals.
6. The law enforcement officer and/or a victim witness advocate and the DCYF worker will be in contact with the family as the case progresses.



## Who's *on* My CAC Team?

At the Child Advocacy Center, we are fortunate to have a highly trained team of professionals who respond to child abuse reports. There is an Investigative Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) and the general MDT. The Child Advocacy Center coordinates the investigative MDT team, who are present at the CAC for the forensic interview of the child, observing the interview. Each team member has a slightly different role and responsibility, which is described below:

### **THE FORENSIC INTERVIEWER:**

A forensic interviewer is a person who has had specialized training in conducting interviews of children who may have been abused or witnessed serious crimes. The interviewer's training and skill ensures that reliable information is elicited from the child in a legally, clinically, and culturally sound manner. The forensic interviewer coordinates the investigative MDT for the interview at the Child Advocacy Center and conducts the interview.

### **THE LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER:**

Local, state and/or county police departments have investigators on their team. They interview non-offending parents, suspects and other witnesses and gather evidence from the scene of the alleged event.

### **THE CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICE WORKER:**

The role of the Division for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) is to help protect your child. The DCYF workers conduct interviews and develop safety plans. They may refer you and/or your child to counseling or other community agencies.

### **THE COUNTY ATTORNEY/PROSECUTOR:**

The prosecutor leads the team and has the final decision as to whether charges against the offender will be filed. Consideration is given to many factors affecting the likelihood of success in court. These are: age and maturity of the child, the child's ability to testify, whether or not the suspect has confessed, presence of physical evidence and whether or not there are other witnesses. Prosecution may not happen in all cases.





## **VICTIM/WITNESS ADVOCATE:**

The Child Advocacy Center works closely with the Victim/Witness program at the local County Attorney's Office. This program helps families understand their rights in the criminal justice system including applying for victim compensation. Victim/Witness Advocates track cases as they come in for prosecution, work with the family to prepare for trial, accompany them to court and provide other necessary support services.

## **THE MEDICAL PROVIDER:**

The medical provider is a member of the team and has many years of experience in examining children when there are worries of abuse. The exam for sexual abuse involves a regular check-up but includes a closer look at the private areas. A light and a screen are used to enlarge the area, to look for any small changes or scars. Tests may also be done for sexually transmitted diseases. The medical team works to make sure the exam is not scary or painful. It is important to know that the exam may not prove if the child has been abused or not. Eighty percent of all children who have been abused have normal exams, thus the team does not rely on these alone to prove abuse. The exam does allow the provider to assure the child that his or her body is OK. It is also important to treat any health problems the may have.

## **CRISIS CENTER ADVOCATE:**

A crisis center advocate is available to provide support to non-offending parents and family members who have come with the child to the CAC interview. While the interview is in progress, the crisis center advocate provides emotional support, information and referrals regarding community supports available to children and families. The crisis center advocate is not part of the investigation or interview and does not discuss the confidential conversations with the team unless they are made aware of unreported abuse that must be reported. It is the choice of the family members who accompany the child if they wish for the advocate to remain and provide support services.



# How *the* Legal System Responds *to* Abuse

The legal system can be confusing and frightening to children and families.

Part of this confusion stems from the fact that two different “legal systems” can be working on the same case at the same time. There are two different court systems that may work on a child abuse case: Criminal Court and Civil Court. Both courts may work on the same case at the same time, but they have different purposes. Not all cases involve both court systems.

The Criminal Court is concerned with the guilt or innocence of the offender and often uses a trial to decide on the suspect’s guilt or innocence. The criminal court process focuses on issues such as:

*Is there evidence to prove the child was abused?*

*What illegal acts occurred?*

*If proven guilty, what punishment should the offender receive?*

THE CRIMINAL COURT process can take a very long time. It may be a year before it even gets to a courtroom. Your Victim/Witness Advocate through the County Attorney’s Office will keep you informed as to where the case is in the process.

THE CIVIL COURT is concerned primarily with the safety of the child and focuses on issues like custody, supervised visitation and counseling. A number of different court hearings can be held to decide these issues. The decisions in the civil system do not depend on whether the criminal system finds guilt or not.

## How *do* I Work *with* My CAC Team?

The system is responsible for protecting children and holding offenders accountable. It is important to be open and honest with the investigative team.

**Here are some basic tips for working with professionals in the system:**

**Be calm and reassuring to your child.** Do not coach your child on what to say. It is important for the words to come from your child and in your child's own time.

**When you are asked for information, try to provide as many facts as you can.** Do not try and guess if you do not know the answer to a question—it is much better to say you do not know.

**Your feelings are important.** Feelings are valuable in giving investigators insight, so tell how you feel and why you feel that way. Although only facts are allowed in court, feelings can help give investigators ideas for how to proceed.

**Cooperate.** You might feel as if the investigators are prying into your personal life. It is necessary and vital to the case and your child's welfare to get information about the facts.

**Always be honest.** Even when the truth may not seem favorable to yourself or others.

**Try not to overreact.** It is a difficult time and emotions are probably running high. Losing control can hurt the case and overshadow the needs of your child.

**Love, support and protect your child at all costs.** If the alleged offender is a significant person to you, it can be difficult to balance your feelings for him or her with the need to protect your child. Remember that your child has only you to make healthy, protective decisions.





## What Can I Say *to* Others?

It is important to remember that cases involving children are confidential. Investigators are not able to share information about your child with members of your family or the community.

It is challenging to decide what to share with others about the abuse. Your child may feel embarrassed and/or responsible. If there is no publicity or public awareness, you can decide whom you will tell. Let your child know which relatives or friends you plan to tell and let your child have some choice about who will be told.

Sometimes an extended family member is the first person to learn of the abuse. It is not uncommon that a child may tell someone other than a parent. This is not a reflection of your relationship you have with your child. Understand that your child may have been trying to protect your feelings by telling someone else. Your child may have felt that person could tell you in a less upsetting way.

If you are especially close to our family, you will probably want to talk with them about your child's abuse and how it has affected the family. It is important to keep in mind how these relatives usually react to stressful situations. Their reactions may include hysteria, horror, obvious distress, sincere concern, embarrassment, disgust, disinterest or unnecessary questioning for details. If you know they will react in a negative way, you may not want to share the information with them unless it becomes necessary. It is important to maintain your child's sense of privacy. On the other hand, be careful not to make it a "dirty secret," as this could cause additional shame for your child.

## Comments you can expect from others abuse the abuse

“What exactly did he/she do to your child?”

“Are you sure your child didn’t make it up?”

“Why didn’t you know it was happening?”

“If it were my child, I’d just move away.”

“Your poor child must be feeling really guilty.”

**You do not owe anyone an explanation.** Keep in mind most people have very little knowledge about sexual abuse and even less about the investigative process. You can say, “I’d rather not talk about it.” Or simply explain “It’s been a difficult time for your family” and you “appreciate the concern.”

Adults are the people most likely to say something to your child. You may want to tell your child that someone may say something like “I am sorry about what happened to you.” Let your child know that he/she does not have to respond to any comments or questions. If they feel comfortable they can respond with a “thank you” or can respond however they feel is appropriate.

## How to deal with social media

Social media is an outlet for many things and can be a source of information and/or comfort. It is not a place to share detailed information about what is happening with your family, especially during something as difficult as an investigation of child sexual abuse. Do not share any information about the investigation and/or the process you and your child are engaged in with law enforcement and/or Department of Children, Youth and Families.

This may be especially challenging if your child’s case is being reported by the news media and may appear on social media sites. It is crucial to stay away from the comments section and not participate in any online conversations about the case. It may jeopardize the investigation, the potential for prosecution and ultimately the well-being and safety of your child.



# Reading List *For* Non-Offending Caregivers

Adams, C. and Fay, J. (1995). Helping Your Child Recover from Sexual Abuse. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Ashley, S. (1992). The Missing Voice. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

Bailey, R. (2013). Safe Kids, Smart Parents: What Parents Need to Know to Keep their Children Safe. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks.

Bass, E. and Davis, L. (2008). The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse. New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishing.

Bear, E. and Dimock, P. (1988). Adults Molested as Children: A Survivor's Manual for Women and Men. Orwell, Vermont: Safer Society Press.

Byerly, C. (1992) The Mother's Book. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

Case, J. and Hagan, K. (1988) When Your Child Has Been Molested. New York: Lexington Books.

Myers, J. (1991). Incest: A Mother's Nightmare. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Rosenzweig, J. (2015). The Parent's Guide to Talking About Sex: A Complete Guide to Raising (Sexually) Safe, Smart and Healthy Children. New York, New York: Skyhorse Publishing.

Wickland, P. (1995). Sleeping with a Stranger: How I Survived a Marriage to a Child Molester. Holbrook, Massachusetts: Adams Publishing

# Contact Names and Numbers

Child Advocacy Center \_\_\_\_\_

Family member \_\_\_\_\_

Friend \_\_\_\_\_

Law Enforcement \_\_\_\_\_

DCYF \_\_\_\_\_

Prosecutor \_\_\_\_\_

Crisis Center \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Learn more at [www.cac-nh.org](http://www.cac-nh.org)



# New Hampshire Child Advocacy Center Locations:

## The Hillsborough County Child Advocacy Center

Nashua, New Hampshire  
603-889-0321

Manchester, New Hampshire  
603-623-2300

## The Greater Lakes Child Advocacy Center

Laconia, New Hampshire  
603-524-5497

## The Monadnock Region Child Advocacy Center

Keene, New Hampshire  
603-352-0413

## The Child Advocacy Center of Carroll County

Wolfeboro, New Hampshire  
603-569-9840

## The Child Advocacy Center of Coos County

Groveton, New Hampshire  
603-636-1999

## The Child Advocacy Center of Rockingham County

Portsmouth, New Hampshire  
603-422-8240

## The Merrimack County Child Advocacy Center

Concord, New Hampshire  
603-219-0627

## The Child Advocacy Center of Grafton and Sullivan Counties at DHMC

Lebanon, New Hampshire  
603-653-9012

## Strafford County Child Advocacy Center

Dover, New Hampshire  
603-516-8100

