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Protecting your Child after a Disclosure of Sexual Abuse

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Since the Penn State scandal, questions about protecting children from sexual abuse seem to be on parents' minds all the time. I am thankful for the media's spotlight on these issues. I tell my friends and family to use these stories as "teachable moments." Sit your kids down and talk to them about the issue of sexual abuse. Discuss the range of behaviors that could be characterized as sexual abuse. They can range from fondling and inappropriate tickling/touching of genitals to child pornography and rape.

At The NYSPCC, there has been a significant increase in calls for our workshop called "Safe Touches — Child Sexual Abuse Prevention," that we conduct in the NYC public schools for children between the ages of five and eight. Parent Associations have also asked for help and a special seminar was designed for them. Although it's tempting to say, "it won't happen to my child," parents need to realize that no one is immune. In fact, most perpetrators of sexual abuse are adults that the child knows, trusts or loves.

As a rule, I recommend that parents always be appropriately concerned about the adults that your child will have contact with while at school, summer camp, sleepovers, etc. Babysitters and nannies should be carefully screened too.

Parents must be armed with information. They should learn the signs and symptoms of abuse and most importantly, how to respond appropriately if their child tells them that they received an "unsafe" touch. I prefer the term "safe" and "unsafe" instead of "good" and "bad" as some touches that are good, like a vaccination, can feel bad and some bad touches, like fondling, can feel good. So, stick with "safe and unsafe." Then, have a conversation with your child about their private parts, protecting their body, actions they can take if they receive an unsafe touch and who they can tell. Work with your child to identify two or three trusted adults that they can turn to if they are upset. Finally, parents must reinforce with their child that it is NEVER their fault if they receive an unsafe touch. The blame always

rests with the adult and your job is to make sure that your child feels protected. You want to instill confidence that if something does happen to your child that you will be understanding and supportive.

Parents' reactions if a child does disclose abuse really count. Among the saddest cases that I have encountered over my career are those when a parent does not believe a child, or when a parent is furious at the child for telling the truth. I recall one case whereby the child was abused by her mother's boyfriend. The mother called the child a liar. The child, scared and devastated by her mother's betrayal, was removed and placed in foster care, as it was obvious that the mother could not guarantee her safety. Simply tragic.

Now granted, that case is the extreme. But research has shown that if there is a disclosure, the child's healing process is aided or stunted by the parent's reaction to the sexual abuse. Family support is one of the most important factors in a child's healing. I've witnessed a range of parental behaviors from shock, anger and worry to shame, guilt, confusion or even jealousy. The best way to respond is to remain calm and try to get the child to tell you what happened in his/her own words. Ask open-ended questions and let your child tell you the details. Don't ask leading questions; as this can confuse the child.

Once you have the information, you need to take action. If the alleged perpetrator is a parent or guardian of the child, the State Child Abuse Hotline must be called. Every State has a hot-line number. Just type your State and "Child Abuse Hotline" into your web browser and it will come up. In New York that number is 1-800-635-1622. If the alleged perpetrator was someone outside of the home, such as a family friend, neighbor, teacher, etc. the police should be contacted. Call 911. In either instance, these officials are trained in responding to these types of situations. You will have taken action to protect your child, and probably other children, from the perpetrator.

Seek counseling for your child and for your family. Children do heal from abuse. And, they do best when a trusted adult supports and believes them.

For more information on keeping your child safe, and, to support The NYSPCC's Inaugural Luncheon featuring a key note lecture by Sapphire, author of Push, the story behind the academy award winning movie, Precious, on Thursday, April 12th at the Pierre Hotel in NYC, visit www.nyspcc.org.