DOS AND DON'TS FOR TEACHERS
UPON HEARING A DISCLOSURE OF ABUSE

"Sometimes a child's teacher is the very first person to whom a child may disclose allegations of sexual abuse (or other abuse and neglect issues)," said C. Curtis Holmes, Ph.D., of the Psychological Service Center in Warner Robins, Georgia. "It is best to assume this will eventually happen to you and to be prepared."

Holmes offers a list of 15 dos and don'ts for teachers when confronted with a situation which leads them to suspect that a child is being abused.

DO:
Practice our response before you are in the real situation.

Pay close attention to your body language. Give the child signals that you are hearing what he/she says and that you can help.

Know the school’s policy for reporting and be familiar with each step.

School policy usually designates one person as the reporting agent (such as the principal or counselor). Invite the child to listen as you tell this person what has been said to you and to add or correct anything you say which is not clear or is inaccurate. This can be empowering for the child, who then becomes the "expert" because he/she has the correct information. It is also a check on whether the story remains consistent.

Take the next step (such as telling the principal) as soon as possible so the child does not wait any longer than necessary to learn the consequences of telling about the abuse.

The setting should be a place the child considers his/her own turf. Bringing the principal to the child's classroom may be better than taking the child to the principal's office (which the child may associate with being in trouble).

Let the child know that it was brave to share something (no matter how minimal) about a difficult subject. Be openly admiring of this courage to reinforce the disclosure process.

Tell the child that you will do everything you can to see that he/she is kept safe.

Affirm your caring for the child and that your relationship has not been negatively altered. Some children feel ashamed and assume they are less lovable because of the abuse.

As soon as possible, write down the actual words used in the disclosure and in your interaction with the child. The child’s first statement has forensic significance and the exact words can be important. (please continue on reverse)
DON'T

- Do NOT try to determine for yourself if the allegation is valid or invalid. This is the role of Child Protective Services and law enforcement.

- Do NOT use shocked or disbelieving body language while the child is talking. The child may interpret this to mean that you find the CHILD unacceptable versus the ACT perpetrated on them.

- Do NOT gossip about these allegations to friends, relatives, or advocates.

- Do NOT ever try to talk a child out of what he/she is saying. If you are skeptical, do NOT express your doubts to the child. This is a task for investigators to sort through and you can express your doubts to them.

- Do NOT stand over the child while he/she is talking about the abuse. This may make the child feel crowded or dominated.

- Do NOT attempt to find out the details in the class group. Sexual abuse is not an appropriate subject for classmates to discuss.

- Do NOT suggest to a child that you think he/she may have been abused. This can be damaging and is problematic in cases in which abuse DID happen but the information was elicited through the use of leading questions.

RESOURCES


* * * * * * *

This article appears in “NRCCSA News,” Vol.5, No.4, the newsletter of the National Resource Center on Child Sexual Abuse. To obtain a copy of the newsletter, contact: National Children’s Advocacy Center, 2204 Whitesburg Drive, Suite 200, Huntsville, AL 35801. Phone 205-534-6868. Fax 205-534-6883.

* * * * * * *