

If You Suspect A Child Is Being Harmed

Reassure the child. Make sure that the child knows that they are not in trouble. Let them know you are simply asking questions because you are concerned about them.

Be patient. Remember that this conversation may be very frightening for the child. Many perpetrators make threats about what will happen if someone finds out about the abuse. They may tell a child that they will be put into foster care or threaten them or their loved ones with physical violence.

If you are concerned that a child is a victim of abuse, you may not be sure what to do or how to respond. Child sexual abuse is a crime that often goes undetected. No matter what your role is—parent or other family member, coach, teacher, religious leader, babysitter—you have the power to make a positive difference in this child's life.

1. Recognize the signs

The signs of abuse aren't always obvious, and learning the warning signs of child sexual abuse could be life saving. You might notice behavioral or physical changes that could signal a child is being abused. Some of these warning signs include:

- **Behavioral signs:** Shrinking away from or seeming threatened by physical contact, regressive behaviors like thumb sucking, changing hygiene routines such as refusing to bathe or bathing excessively, age-inappropriate sexual behaviors, sleep disturbances, or nightmares.
- **Verbal cues:** Using words or phrases that are "too adult" for their age, unexplained silence, or suddenly being less talkative.
- **Physical signs:** Bruising or swelling near the genital area, blood on sheets or undergarments, or broken bones.



2. Talk to the child

If you are concerned about abuse, talk to the child. Keep in mind a few guidelines to create a non-threatening environment where the child may be more likely to open up to you.

- **Pick your time and place carefully.** Choose a space where the child is comfortable or ask them where they'd like to talk. Avoid talking in front of someone who may be causing the harm.
- **Be aware of your tone.** If you start the conversation in a serious tone, you may scare the child, and they may be more likely to give you the answers they think you want to hear—rather than the truth. Try to make the conversation more casual. A non-threatening tone will help put the child at ease and ultimately provide you with more accurate information.
- **Talk to the child directly.** Ask questions that use the child's own vocabulary, but that are a little vague. For example, "Has someone been touching you?" In this context "touching" can mean different things, but it is likely a word the child is familiar with. The child can respond with questions or comments to help you better gauge the situation like, "No one touches me except my mom at bath time," or "You mean like the way my cousin touches me sometimes?" Understand that sexual abuse can feel good to the child, so asking if someone is "hurting" them may not bring out the information that you are looking for.
- **Listen and follow up.** Allow the child to talk freely. Wait for them to pause, and then follow up on points that made you feel concerned.
- **Avoid judgment and blame.** Avoid placing blame by using "I" questions and statements. Rather than beginning your conversation by saying, "You said something that made me worry..." consider starting your conversation with the word "I." For example: "I am concerned because I heard you say that you are not allowed to sleep in your bed by yourself."
- **Reassure the child.** Make sure that the child knows that they are not in trouble. Let them know you are simply asking questions because you are concerned about them.
- **Be patient.** Remember that this conversation may be very frightening for the child. Many perpetrators make threats about what will happen if someone finds out about the abuse. They may tell a child that they will be put into foster care or threaten them or their loved ones with physical violence.

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3. Report it

Reporting a crime like sexual abuse may not be easy, and it can be emotionally draining. Keep in mind that reporting abuse gives you the chance to protect someone who can't protect themselves. Depending on where you live and your role in the child's life, you may be legally obligated to report suspicions of abuse. You can learn more about the laws in your state by visiting RAINN's State Law Database <https://apps.rainn.org/policy-app/index2.cfm>

Before you report

- **Tell the child that you're going to talk to someone who can help.** Be clear that you are not asking their permission. The child may not want you to report and may be frightened, especially if the perpetrator has threatened them or their loved ones. Remember that by reporting, you are involving authorities who will be able to keep the child safe.
- **Ensure that the child is in a safe place.** If you have concerns over the child's safety, be sure to discuss them explicitly with authorities when you make the report. If you fear that the perpetrator will cause further harm to the child upon learning about the investigation, clearly communicate this to authorities.
- **If you are not concerned that the parents are causing harm,** you can consult with them prior to making a report to authorities.
- **If you are a parent and are concerned that your partner or someone in your family may be hurting your child,** this may be a very difficult time. It's important to be there for your child, and it's also important to take care of yourself.



- **Prepare your thoughts.** You will likely be asked identifying information about the child, the nature of the abuse, and your relationship with the child. While anonymous tips are always an option, identified reporting increases the likelihood of prosecuting the perpetrator.

Where to report

- **If you know or suspect that a child has been sexually assaulted or abused** you can report these crimes to the proper authorities, such as Child Protective Services. Reporting agencies vary from state to state.
- **Call the Child Help National Abuse Hotline at 800.422.4453 to be connected with a trained volunteer.** Child Help Hotline crisis counselors can't make the report for you, but they can walk you through the process and let you know what to expect.

After you report

- **You may not hear or see signs of an investigation right away.** Depending on an agency's policies and your relationship to the child, you may be able to call back to follow up after a few days.
- **If you are able to, continue to play the supportive role you always have in that child's life.** If making the report means that you can't have this relationship anymore, know that by reporting you are helping that child stay safe.
- **Take care of yourself.** Reporting sexual abuse isn't easy. It's important to practice self-care during this time.

To speak with someone who is trained to help, call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE(4673) or chat online at [online.rainn.org](https://rainn.org).

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