

Tips for talking to a child when you are concerned about abuse¹

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.

¹ Source: https://rainn.org/articles/if-you-suspect-child-being-harmed?_ga=2.146646836.1260189736.1632316554-432989522.1631104032