

Procedures Regarding Disclosures made by Children in Classroom Settings

Occasionally a child may disclose child abuse to a teacher. Because evidence suggests that few allegations are false allegations, every disclosure should be taken seriously. If a child discloses abuse in a classroom:

Respect the Victim

- Sometimes children make *pseudo-disclosures* in which they casually mention, for example, a time when an adult or older child has behaved inappropriately toward them. Often the child does not realize that he/she is disclosing abuse. In these instances, try to prevent a full public disclosure from occurring in front of the class, if possible. Attempt to change the subject or comment that everything the child says is important but that you would like him/her to hold that thought until you can speak with the child more privately in a few minutes. Speak with the child as soon as possible!
- If a child makes a *full disclosure* of abuse in front of the class, in a calm and matter-of-fact manner let the child know that what they have said is important and that you would like to speak about what they have said in private. Make arrangements to do so as soon as possible without calling undue attention to the situation. This may require bringing the lesson to a close and having the other children turn their attention to another project.
- *Conditional disclosures* occur when a child discloses abuse but then asks the adult to promise not to tell. Children who make conditional disclosures are often very fearful of the consequences of telling, and they may have even been threatened by the offender. Acknowledge that telling must have been very scary, and that the child is very brave and did the right thing. Also let them know that *you cannot promise not to tell* because part of your job is to make sure that the child is safe and healthy. You might promise that you will do everything in your power to get the child any help that they may need. Stand by your promise.

Inquire but Do Not Investigate

- Your job is **NOT** to investigate the abuse, but to find out the minimal amount of information necessary to determine whether a report needs to be made.
- Children should be allowed to tell their story in a private, safe setting, ideally with an adult whom they know fairly well present. Remember that children cannot be forced to talk about abuse.
- Use open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions that only require yes or no answers limit the amount of information you receive.
- Be careful not to rush the child. Let the child know that everything they have to say is important. Phrases such as “uh-huh” and nodding the head also let children know you are engaged in what they are saying.

- Refrain from asking leading questions, or questions regarding specific people or places unless the child mentions the person or place on their own as part of their story. Leading questions may contaminate an investigation.
- Note about teaching lessons regarding sexuality and abuse: Children often feel uncomfortable talking about sexuality and abuse and as a result may display behaviors reflecting embarrassment or discomfort when these topics are raised in class as part of a planned lesson. These behaviors are generally mild and teachers can help students feel more comfortable by sharing that these feelings are normal and okay, without singling anyone out. *However, bizarre or unusually intense behaviors may be cause for concern.* Teachers should make a mental note of the behaviors and seek additional guidance from a school mental health professional or principal that day.

Report

- **AS SOON AS POSSIBLE**, contact the local department of child protective services (CPS) or the local police department to report the allegation. Report the allegation to the jurisdiction where the abuse allegedly occurred (if you have that information). When making a report, always write down the name of the intake worker or police officer with whom you spoke. You will need to follow up in writing within 48 hours. If you find that the CPS intake worker is not helpful, don't be afraid to ask to speak with their supervisor.
- Ask CPS and/or the police what to do if a parent/caregiver will be picking up the child soon or is waiting to take the child home.
- Remember that individuals who make reports of child abuse in good faith are immune from civil liability.
- Inform the administrator on site that you are making the report. Note, however, it is the responsibility of the individual to whom the disclosure was made to call CPS.
- If the allegation involves Church Personnel of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, also report the concern to the Office of Child and Youth Protection immediately.
- If the child discloses abuse but does not name an offender, or if the alleged offender is a family member (parent, sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin) **NEVER** call the primary caregiver before calling CPS. Be sure to inform the CPS intake worker if the situation is urgent. If you have questions as to whether or not to call the parents, discuss the situation with the CPS intake worker but do not make the decision on your own. A poor decision may interfere with an investigation and may place a child in danger.