

## Child Disclosures of Abuse

### Ways That Children Tell

*Disclosures are a process, not an event.*

*Telling may not be in words, but by a change in behavior. Some children cannot tell directly, so it is important to be sensitive to their signs.*

**Behavior symptoms:** May include a child not wanting to go to a certain place or to be with a certain person, being overly worried about their body, or having inappropriate sexual behaviors. A child may show an unusual interest in others' genitals or physical affection.

**Physical symptoms:** May include genital pain, itching, discharge, and bleeding. They may develop stomachaches, headaches, and/or a variety of other physical symptoms.

**"Escape" Behavior:** Children may run away, use drugs or alcohol, self-harm, want to be alone, or disassociate.

**Other changes:** Problems sleeping, bed-wetting, new fears, or refusal to go certain places or be with certain people. School problems, problems with peers, more crying than usual, depression, anger, or being more clingy or secretive are also common.

**Memories are stored in the body:** Memories of abuse and trauma are often stored in the body or in other ways. Sometimes this can show up as stomachaches, headaches, trouble focusing, developmental delays, anxiety, anger, depression, or other behaviors.

**Children may not have the words** to talk about the abuse, even if they have good vocabulary skills. They may tell in vague terms. They might say things like, "I don't like our neighbor anymore," or "Uncle is really weird." Sometimes children think they've told but they haven't been understood. A child may say something like, "Mr. Johnson wears funny underwear," and that was that child's way of telling someone about abuse.

### Reasons Children Do Not Tell

**They think no one will believe them.**

*"I told my mom and she said she never wanted to hear talk like that again."*

*"I told my aunt that my uncle touched me, and she said she was sure that I had misunderstood and that my uncle was probably just playing."*

**They have been threatened.**

*"Dad said he would hurt my mom if I told."*

*"My soccer coach said she would not let me play on the team anymore if I said anything."*

**The abuser has told them that the abuse is okay, and even normal.**

*"He said that this is what all fathers do with their daughters."*

*"I was taught to obey grownups because they know what is best, so I obeyed and went along with it."*

**They feel guilt, shame, or embarrassment.**

*"I didn't tell him to stop and just let it happen, so I feel like it's my fault."*

*"It felt good and that made me feel bad and dirty."*

*"I was embarrassed to say anything because I didn't want people to think I was weird."*

**The abuser told them it was an accident.**

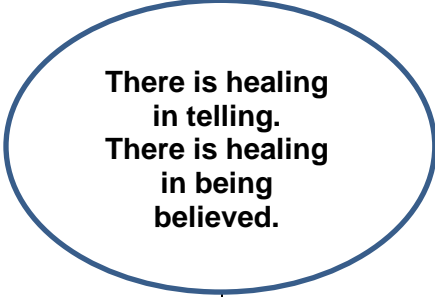
*"She accidentally walks in when I'm changing or taking a bath."*

*"We were wrestling, and they accidentally rubbed down there."*

**The abuser makes them believe its love.**

*"I like spending time with my youth pastor. He shows me how special I am and how much he loves me in different ways."*

*"I don't want to hurt his feelings or make him think I don't care about him by telling him to stop."*



**There is healing  
in telling.  
There is healing  
in being  
believed.**