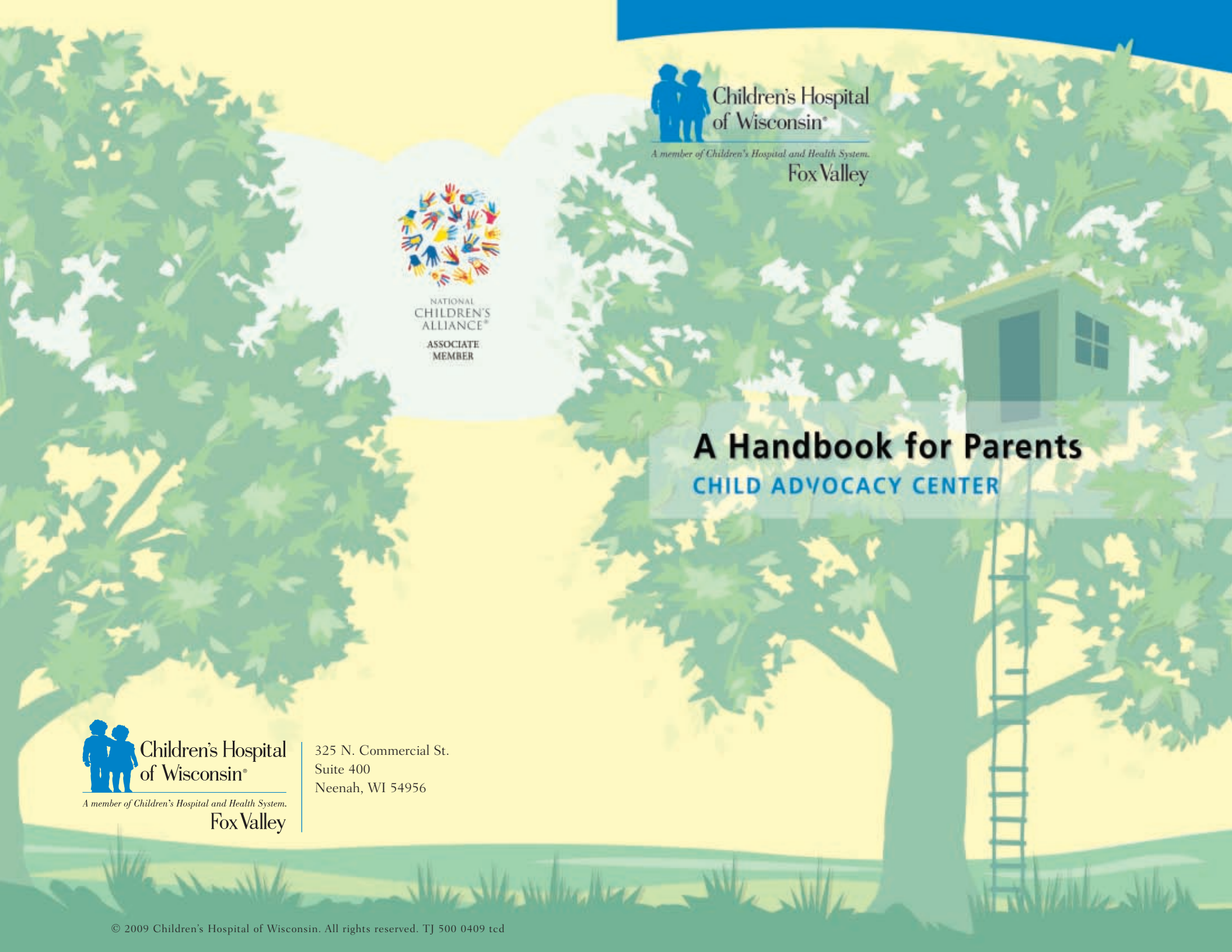

Children's Hospital of Wisconsin®

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Fox Valley

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE®

ASSOCIATE MEMBER

A Handbook for Parents

CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER

Children's Hospital of Wisconsin®

A member of Children's Hospital and Health System.

Fox Valley

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Welcome

The idea of abuse can be scary for children, parents and other family members. The Children's Hospital of Wisconsin-Fox Valley Child Advocacy Center is here to help you. This is a hard time for your child and your family. This handbook will help you know what to expect during your child's visit to the Child Advocacy Center.

Children who may have been harmed or hurt come to the Child Advocacy Center to talk about the abuse and to get medical care. It is a safe place for children to get care from staff from many different agencies and health care providers.

The team at the Child Advocacy Center:

- Interview your child in a way that limits his or her trauma.
- Will make sure you and your child feel as comfortable as possible.
- Will help your child and family heal.
- The team at the CAC will provide expert medical care for your child.

This handbook will help answer some of your questions.

You can call (920) 969-7930 if you have any concerns.

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What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse occurs when a person forces a child to have any form of sexual contact or makes a child perform sexual acts. Sexual abuse may involve touching private parts (clothed or unclothed), forced sexual acts between children or making a child view, read or participate in pornography.

Sometimes sexual abuse involves adults. Other times it involves older children abusing younger or smaller children. These acts are abusive even when the offenders say they were gentle and did not hurt the child.

Sexual abuse is overwhelming to children, especially when people they trust are involved. Children tend to believe what adults tell them is true rather than relying on their own feelings. If the abuser tells them that what is being done is OK, they may doubt their own feelings that it is not OK. This type of abuse is a violation of trust. It may make it harder for a child to trust people in the future. It is often difficult for children to report abuse because they don't want to "cause problems." More often, they fear that telling will make people mad at them. ***It is very difficult for children to report abuse.***

Reference: *When Your Child Has Been Molested,* by Kathryn B. Hagan

What is physical abuse?

Physical abuse is harm or threats of harm to a child by a parent or other adult in charge of the child's welfare. It is not an accident.

What is neglect?

Neglect is when a caregiver fails to provide necessary care to a child for reasons other than poverty.

What to expect at the Child Advocacy Center

When you arrive at the Child Advocacy Center, staff may meet with you to get some basic information about you and your child. Your child's likes, dislikes and other information will be discussed. During this time, your child will be asked to wait in the waiting room.

If appropriate, your child may have a video-recorded interview with a Child Advocacy Center team member, a police officer or a social worker. Your child may be asked questions about the alleged abuse. During the child's interview, parents and/or caregivers will be asked to wait in the waiting room.

If appropriate, your child may have a medical exam. The exam is done by a medical doctor or nurse practitioner.

At the end of the visit, the team will talk with you about the findings and next steps.

Your team of professionals

Below is a list of people you may meet before, during or after your visit to the Child Advocacy Center.

Police officers: Police officers interview children, parents who did not abuse the child and other people who saw the abuse happen. People who are suspected to have abused your child will be investigated. Police officers will gather evidence about your child's abuse.

Child Protective Services worker: The Child Protective Services worker helps protect your child. He or she provides services and information to your family to help meet your needs. Other county social workers are assigned to work with children who are charged with crimes and the families of these children. Child Protective Services may refer you and your child to counseling.

Forensic interviewer: The forensic interviewer speaks with children about abuse allegations. The forensic interviewer may be a police officer, a child protective services worker or a social worker who works for the Child Advocacy Center. The forensic interviewer has special training to talk with your child and ask questions in a child-friendly way.

The interview will be video-recorded. This limits the number of times your child has to talk about the abuse. During the interview, you will be asked to stay in the waiting room.

Doctor/nurse practitioner: A nurse practitioner will medically evaluate your child. Our professionals have years of experience and special training in examining children who may have been abused.

Family advocate: A family advocate works with a local Fox Valley agency and helps victims and their families understand the legal process. The family advocate also provides other valuable services to victims and their families.

Psychologist or therapist: Psychologists or therapists do assessment and follow-up that focuses on your child's emotional response to what has happened. They help teach families how to help their children heal.

The investigation

These are the basic steps of a child abuse investigation:

1. Someone reports suspicion of abuse to authorities.
2. If appropriate, a video-recorded interview is done with the child at the Child Advocacy Center. The interview may be done by either a social worker or police officer.
3. If appropriate, a medical exam is done.
4. A police officer and/or Child Protective Services worker will continue the assessment and investigation.
5. A team of professionals will meet to talk about the case. They decide what else needs to be done. Doctors, nurses, prosecutors, police officers and social workers may be a part of the team.
6. The case may be referred to criminal court or children's court. Other plans also may be made to manage the case.

The interview

Why does my child need a forensic interview for suspected abuse?

What happens after a report of child abuse varies. Sometimes the chance to speak up about what happened can be a good thing for the child. However, the events after the report may be scary.

A forensic interview should allow a child to have a safe, comfortable place to talk about being harmed or hurt. Specially trained interviewers will talk to your child to get the needed information without causing more harm to your child or hurting the case. Specific details about the reported abuse are gathered.

A video-recorded interview will keep your child's statement about the abuse. This is very important because the legal system often moves slowly. This allows your child to move forward and begin to heal.

What happens during a forensic interview?

Parents are asked to stay in the waiting room while their children are interviewed. Staff believes that more accurate information can be gathered if parents are not in the room. If you are there, your child may be unwilling to tell important details because they want to spare you from hearing them.

This is what happens during the forensic interview:

- Your child will be taken to the interview room with the interviewer.
- The interviewer will take the time to make sure your child is comfortable without you.
- Your child will be told that the interview is being recorded. He or she also will be told if investigators are observing from another observation room.
- Your child will be given time to become comfortable with the interviewer. Then, your child will be asked very general questions about why he or she came to the Child Advocacy Center.
- Based on your child's responses, the interviewer will ask more questions that allow your child to describe what he or she experienced.

Your child will join you in the waiting room after the interview.

How should I react to my child after the interview?

Your child may ask questions or talk about the interview after you leave the center. Here are some things you can say that will help your child:

- *"I believe you."*
- *"I know it's not your fault."*
- *"I'm glad I know about it."*
- *"I'm sorry this happened to you."*
- *"I'm not sure what will happen next."*
- *"Nothing about you made this happen."*
- *"It has happened to other children, too."*
- *"I am upset, but not with you."*
- *"I'm sad. You may see me cry. That's all right. I will be able to take care of you."*
- *"I'm not mad at you."*
- *"I don't know why he or she did it. He or she has a problem."*
- *"You still can love someone but hate what he or she did to you."*

Be careful not to question your child about the interview or abuse. If you do, you can jeopardize the case in court against your child's abuser. Here are some things to keep in mind after you leave the center:

- If your child wants to talk about it, just listen. Do not probe.
- Try to return to a normal routine as soon as possible.
- Keep your child away from the person suspected of the abuse. This is to protect you, your child and the suspect.
- Avoid talking about the case with other victims or their families.

- Provide your child with an extra sense of physical security. Stay close, and assure your child you will keep him or her safe.
- Do not tell your child that it is all done when the interview is over. It is possible that your child will be interviewed again or asked to talk in court. The professionals involved in your child's case can help you talk with your child about going to court if needed.

The social workers at the Child Advocacy Center are available to help you with any questions and/or concerns you may have.

The medical evaluation

Just as doctors talk to patients when they are sick, the doctors and nurses at the Child Advocacy Center will talk to your child about his or her medical history and any concerns or worries. A physical exam is done in a gentle manner. It is done by a nurse practitioner who has special training and experience examining children for possible abuse.

The exam for physical and sexual abuse begins as a regular head-to-toe checkup. If sexual abuse is suspected, a more thorough exam may be needed. If you have questions about what happens during this exam, ask anyone on your team.

Most children, who have been sexually abused, even with a history of penetration, have normal exams. The team does not rely on the exam alone to determine if abuse happened. The reason your child has this type of exam is it helps the child know he or she is OK.

Doctors and nurses who specialize in this field understand that many children and teens have worries about the results of abuse to their bodies, even if they can't talk about them. The medical provider will take the time to discuss this with them, which often can be the first step in healing.

Some families want their children to be examined by their family doctor. This field of medicine is a real specialty. Most pediatricians and family practitioners send their patients to a center with the expertise of the Child Advocacy Center.

Common signs sometimes shown by abused children

Children may show some of these signs as a result abuse, stress or trauma. Not all children show these signs. It does not mean that a child showing these signs has been a victim of abuse. Since abuse can be traumatic, it is important to recognize **major changes** in your child's behaviors, moods and actions.

All children experience stress, trauma and abuse uniquely. Children have many different reactions to trauma and stress. Some children may exhibit unusual behaviors, but some children will not. Please talk to your team of professionals about behaviors you are concerned about in your child.

How to respond to your child

The Child Advocacy Center and other community agencies offer services to help children who may have been abused. Children react differently depending on age, extent of abuse, support from others and how they are related to the abuser.

The single most important factor affecting a child's recovery is the level of support from the parents or caregivers.

If you do everything you can to support your child, the chances of healing are greater. You may feel torn between loyalty to your child and loyalty to the abuser. There are services to help you sort it out. Ask your Child Protective Services social worker for help.

The following are reactions your child may have and things you can do to respond to the reactions. All of them are normal and understandable reactions to abuse. These are some general responses. A therapist will help you deal with these behaviors more specifically.

Child's reaction	What you can do to help
Fear A child may not want to separate from you and may need constant support.	Reassure the child that he or she is safe now.
Embarrassment/guilt A child may be embarrassed to talk about what happened. Older children and boys often feel a sense of guilt.	Tell the child that the abuse is not his or her fault and he or she is not responsible for what happened.
Anxiety/loss of control A child may feel out of control or vulnerable. He or she may develop a low self-image of him or herself.	Create situations in which the child feels in control and empowered. Keep a schedule of normal household routines and rules.
Withdrawal A child may stop talking. Remembering things may be hard. It may be hard to talk about the abuse. He or she may start bed-wetting, thumb sucking or lose toilet training.	Help the child feel secure and in control. Explain the purpose of the legal investigation, the medical exam and treatment in an age-appropriate manner.
Difficulty sleeping or taking part in other routine daily activities A child may not want to sleep alone, may have nightmares, disrupted eating habits (hoarding food or reluctant to eat), stomach ache or headache. He or she may not want to go to school.	Allow the child to talk about his or her fears. Show understanding about physical complaints. Reassure the child that he or she is safe.

Provide safety, love and support. Let children know it is OK to cry or be mad. Make sure your child understands it is not his or her fault. Don't make your child talk about things. This could seriously damage the case.

This all may seem overwhelming right now, but your team members are here to support you. Call a Child Advocacy Center staff member with any questions or for further assistance at any time.

How parents sometimes feel when abuse has been reported

When abuse has been reported, parents sometimes feel as if they are on a roller coaster of emotions. This is normal. The report can affect your life in many ways, and it takes time to adjust. Listed below are some of the common thoughts and feelings parents have. You may feel one or more of these as you cope with your child's abuse.

- **Denial.** Your first reaction may be not to believe or accept that your child has been abused. Or, you may believe it happened, but that no real harm was done. Parents often deny abuse because it is too overwhelming. It is very hard to accept that abuse occurred. There will be after effects for both the parent and child. For some people, it takes time to face it.
- **Anger.** At times, you may feel angry with yourself for not protecting your child. You may feel angry with the perpetrator for what was done. You may feel angry with your child. Be honest about your feelings and share them with a trusted adult, counselor or support group.
- **Helplessness.** You probably do not know what to expect and you feel that things are out of your control. Some parents fear that their children will be taken away. Try to learn about how cases go through the legal system.
- **Lack of assertiveness.** You may feel small and think there is nothing you can do to help the situation get better. The Child Advocacy Center staff members will help you learn what you can do to heal and help your child.
- **Shock, numbness, repulsion.** You may have memories of being abused as a child, which may lead to feelings of shock, numbness and repulsion as it relates to your child's situation. If so, you may need to seek therapy for yourself to recover from the abuse.
- **Guilt, self-blame.** You may feel your child's abuse is your fault. Remember that the offender is responsible for the abuse – not you. The best thing you can do now is support your child. Learn all you can about how to make things better. Reading this handbook is a good first step.
- **Hurt and betrayal.** It is normal to feel hurt. You also may have lost a spouse or partner if that person was the offender. You also may have lost friends. It is very important to take the time to grieve these losses.
- **Sexual inadequacy.** Some women believe the offender abused a child because their relations with him were not adequate. This has not been shown to be a reason that abusers harm children.
- **Concern for money.** You may be worried about finances because of lost income. There are programs that may be able to help you. Don't be afraid to talk to the people who gave you this book about what help may be there for you.
- **Fear of violence.** You may fear the offender will try to harm you or your children. If so, there are resources such as domestic violence shelters with professionals who can help. If this is a concern, please talk to the people who gave you this book.
- **Fear of drug or alcohol abuse.** You may be afraid that you or the offender will abuse drugs or alcohol because of the stress, or that one of you may have a relapse to an old addiction. If you need help, find a recovery center or ask for help to find one.

It helps to talk to a good friend or counselor about your feelings rather than your child. Evidence shows that ***the single most important factor affecting a child's recovery is the level of support from the parents or caregivers.***

Working with the legal system

The legal system protects children by holding offenders accountable. The more facts and cooperation you give to the team, the better job they can do on your case.

Here are some basic tips for working with professionals in the legal system:

- **Avoid talking about the abuse in your child's presence.**
- **Be calm and reassuring to your child.** Don't tell your child what to say. It is important that the information comes out in your child's own words and in your child's own time.
- **When you are asked for information, try to give as many facts as you can.** Don't try to guess if you don't know the answer to a question – it is better to say you don't know.
- **Always be honest, even though the truth may not seem favorable to you or to others.** In the long run, you will be much better off.
- **Love, support and protect your child.** Avoid asking your child about the abuse. If the alleged offender is a significant person to you, it can be very difficult to balance your feelings for him or her with the need to protect your child. Remember that your child only has you to make healthy, protective decisions for him or her.

- **Cooperate.** You will probably feel the team at the Child Advocacy Center is prying into your personal life. It is necessary and vital to the case and to your child's welfare that we receive this information. The sooner the facts come out, the sooner the case can be resolved and you can return to a more normal life.
- **You may feel the team does not care because they avoid showing emotions.** In fact, the team does care, and part of the caring involves remaining objective and calm in the face of extremely emotional situations.
- **If you have questions, ask them.** Many things will be happening at once, and a lot of information will be presented to you. Feel free to stop any of the team members and ask them questions about anything you don't understand.

Limitations of the legal system

The well-being of your child should be your top priority. Don't lose yourself in the legal system because it is only one step in the process. It is not essential to your child's recovery. ***The best advice is to enter the legal system without expectations, because the more you expect from it, the harder the experience is likely to be.***

Celebrate when the legal process is over. No matter what the outcome, tell the child it is over. You and the child did your best, worked hard and put in a lot of time.

How to tell your child about the outcome

It is best to be honest and direct with your child. How you talk about the outcome depends on your child's age and what he or she can understand. The most important thing is to let your child know that you are proud of him or her.

When the case is complete, you may feel let down or have a period of sadness. If your child hears you express this, he or she may think you are disappointed in him or her. Instead, find a supportive friend with whom you can share your feelings and frustration.

Remember that you have done your best in trying to prevent further abuse and hold the offender responsible for what he or she did. Even if the case was dropped, this is a major accomplishment.

Sometimes, even though everyone does their job really well, there may not be enough evidence to prosecute the abuser. Here are some things to say to your child in that situation:

- "Just because they didn't find _____ guilty, that doesn't mean they didn't believe you. It's just that they have to follow the court's rules."
- "You may be wondering how someone can do something wrong or against the law and not be punished. It doesn't make sense to me either."
- "It doesn't matter what the court process did. What matters is that you did what you needed to – you told."
- "You are safe. You have been very brave."

What to say to others

One challenge your family will have to face will be what to say to others about the abuse. Your child may feel embarrassed and/or responsible for the abuse. If there is no publicity or public awareness, you can decide whom you will tell. Let your child know which relatives or friends you will talk to. Allow your child to have some choice about who is told.

Sometimes an extended family member is the first person to learn of the abuse. You may feel hurt that someone knew before you. However, understand that your child may have been trying to protect your feelings by telling someone else. Your child may have felt that the person could tell you in a less upsetting way than he or she could.

If you are especially close with your family, you may want to talk with them about your child's abuse and how it has affected them. It is important to keep in mind how these relatives usually react to stress. Their reactions may include hysteria, horror, rejection, sincere concern, embarrassment, disgust, disinterest or more questioning for intimate details. These reactions may be even stronger if the offender is a family member. If you know they will react in a negative way, you may not want to share the information with them unless it becomes necessary. It is important to keep your child's sense of privacy.

Comments you can expect from others about the abuse

- "What exactly did he or she do to your child?"
- "Are you sure your child didn't make it up?"
- "Why didn't you know it was happening?"
- "If it were my child, I'd just move away."
- "Your poor child must be feeling really guilty."

Remember that you don't owe anyone an explanation. "I'd rather not talk about it" is a good response. Or simply say, "It has been a very difficult time for all of us. I appreciate your concern." Or it may be easier to just nod as an acknowledgement of what someone says.

Keep in mind that most people don't know much about sexual abuse. For example, in response to comments about your child feeling guilty, you could say that children always feel guilt in these cases until they're assured that they are not responsible for what happened. As a parent, you also might be experiencing some guilt. You may feel defensive. In that case, a good response is, "Parents do their best, but we're only human."

Adults are the people most likely to say something to your child. You may want to tell your child that if someone says, "I'm sorry about what happened to you," they should respond with a simple, "Thank you." Let your child know that he or she doesn't have to respond to any comments or questions. He or she could say, "My parents told me not to talk about it right now." If other children comment or tease, your child might say, "It could happen to anyone, including you."

Reference: *When Your Child Has Been Molested* by Kathryn B. Hagan

Taking care of yourself

You are going through a very difficult time. You probably feel pressure from many directions. Although you are trying to take care of a lot of people, you also need to take care of yourself. Your well-being is very important. You need to find time to do something just for you – and plan to do it regularly. This may be difficult, but it is in your best interest and your child's best interest.

Scheduling your own time and space will help you gain or regain a sense of your own identity. Take time to take care of yourself.

Find help for yourself. You do not have to handle this alone. It is important that you take care of yourself so you can do the best job taking care of and supporting your child. See that your child receives therapy as soon as possible. Although this happened to your child, it also happened to your family. It is important that all members of the family are taken care of as part of the healing process.

Billing and payment for a Child Advocacy Center visit

Patients who see the nurse practitioner will be billed through their medical insurance. If the family does not have insurance, or if the insurance company does not pay for all of the bill, there are other ways to manage the bill. Team members will discuss this with you during the visit. For more information, call Children's Hospital of Wisconsin at (888) 449-4998.