

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO THE CAC



**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY
CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER**
201 W. Kenyon Road, Suite 1
(Champaign-Urbana Public Health District Building)
Champaign, Illinois 61820
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NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S
ALLIANCE®

ACCREDITED
MEMBER

IMPORTANT NAMES & NUMBERS

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 Champaign, IL 61820
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Crisis Intervention Counselor

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**Illinois Department of Children
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 508 S. Race Street
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Police Department: _____
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State's Attorney's Office (217) 384-3733
Julia R. Rietz, Champaign County State's Attorney

Mental Health Services:

**Mental Health Center
 of Champaign County** (217) 398-8080
 1801 Fox Drive
 Champaign, IL 61820

**Rape Advocacy, Counseling &
 Education Services** (217) 344-6298
 (217) 384-4444 *Hotline*
 145-A Lincoln Square
 Urbana, IL 61801

For information about other services available in our community, contact **First Call for Help** at (217) 352-6300 or visit the **Help Book** website at www.helpsource.org.

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DEAR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS,

We understand that this is a very difficult time for you. Any hint or suspicion of abuse of your child causes many strong and confusing emotions. The process of determining what happened to your child and how to proceed from there may seem quite overwhelming.

It is our job to work together to reduce the number of times your child will have to be interviewed and to ensure that your family receives swift, necessary support.

Our goals are to:

- Do the best job possible in finding out what happened.
- Work with the legal system to help your child.
- Help you understand the child protective and legal systems.
- Help make the process as comfortable as possible for you.
- Help your child and family begin to heal.

We hope this Guide will help you understand more about child sexual abuse and the system we use to respond to a report of abuse. Please call us if you have any questions.

*The Champaign County
Children's Advocacy Center
(217) 384-1266*

Note: the use of gender pronouns (i.e., she, he, him, her) throughout this Guide is intended to be neutral and no inferences should be drawn from their usage.

WHAT IS THE CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER?

The Children's Advocacy Center is a safe, welcoming place where children suspected of being abused are interviewed by specially-trained professionals and where they and their families receive services designed to promote healing and reduce the trauma of abuse. Children up to the age of 18 may be interviewed at the Children's Advocacy Center.

To ensure an appropriate, coordinated response to allegations of child sexual assault and serious physical abuse, our team of professionals includes representatives of local police departments, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, the State's Attorney's Office, medical practitioners, educators, therapists, caseworkers, and victim advocates.

Whenever a law enforcement agency or the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services receive a report of sexual or serious physical abuse of a child under age 18, they will contact the Children's Advocacy Center to schedule an interview. If your child is reported to have been the victim of sexual assault or serious physical abuse, he or she will be brought to the Children's Advocacy Center where they will be interviewed by a member of the multi-disciplinary team. Prior to the interview, the interviewer will take time to make sure your child is comfortable with them and will make sure that your child knows you are available if they need you. Your child will know where you are while they are being interviewed.

The interview will take place in a comfortable, child-focused room. One person will be designated to conduct the interview, usually a police officer or an investigator from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Interviewers have received specialized training in how to conduct interviews with child victims. While the interview is taking place, other members of the multi-disciplinary team will view the interview from a separate observation room via closed circuit television. Your child will be informed that other professionals are observing the interview. The interview will be audio and visually recorded to provide an accurate record of your child's behavior and statements as well as to document that the interview techniques used were appropriate and legally sound.

You will be asked to sign a form acknowledging that you understand that the interview with your child will be recorded. The multi-disciplinary approach utilized by the Children's Advocacy Center helps reduce the number of times a child has to tell about the abuse.

While your child is being interviewed, you will be asked to meet with our Case Manager. Our Case Manager will obtain from you information about your child's history and will talk with you about community services available to assist your child and your family with the healing process. We will also make referrals to link you and other family members with needed services.

Our services do not end when you leave the Children's Advocacy Center. Our Case Manager will stay in touch with you and will help you with any difficulties you might experience in accessing services. We will also assist you throughout any legal proceedings which may arise as a result of the investigation.

The Children's Advocacy Center will do everything possible to support you and your child throughout the healing process. We encourage you to let us know if there is anything we can do to help.

WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Since some childhood sexual activity is normal, it is important to understand how child sexual abuse is defined. In the broadest definition, child sexual abuse may refer to any forced or coerced sexual activity involving a child:

- Sexual contact between a child and another person (whether it is an adult or an older child) in which threats, treats, bribes, or other tricks are used to get the child to participate in the activity.
- **Any** sexual contact between a child and an adult.
- Touching private parts whether under or over clothing.
- Penetration using an object.
- Forced sexual acts between children.

Some abuse may not involve actual physical contact. This might include:

- “sexy talk”
- “flashing” of sexual body parts or exposure to sex acts
- voyeurism or “peeping” activities
- child pornography (whether it involves making the child view, read, or participate in pornography)
- encouraging or promoting child prostitution
- Internet (i.e., pornography, sexually explicit e-mails and chat rooms, “sexting”)

Often, the abuser will persuade the child to cooperate and to keep the abuse a secret. This “persuasion” may involve the promise of special treats or privileges, or threats of physical punishment and other consequences. Or, the abuser may not need to make any threats. Children are taught to obey and trust adults and the abuser may take advantage of this, especially if he is a person the child knows well and trusts.

Children tend to believe what adults tell them is true rather than to rely on their own feelings. This works against them in two ways. If the molester tells them what is being done is OK, they may doubt their own feelings that it is not OK. If a parent’s initial reaction when they hear of the abuse is “*This can’t be true!*” the child may wonder if his or her own feelings are mistaken. Children almost never tell about abuse in order to avoid causing problems. More often, they fear that telling will make people angry with them. ***It is extremely difficult for children to report abuse and the process of disclosing abuse sometimes occurs over a long period of time. Be patient with your child.***

THE OFFENDER & STEPS THEY TAKE TO ACCESS CHILDREN

People who abuse children come from all economic and ethnic groups and a variety of social and educational backgrounds.

According to research, approximately 90% of all sexual abuse of children is perpetrated by someone the child knows. Many abusers are people who are trusted and loved by the child such as a relative, friend, or neighbor.

You cannot recognize abusers by their appearance. They do not fit any stereotypes such as dirty old men, perverts, or loners. Abusers may be married and have children. They may have criminal records or they may be outstanding citizens.

Although it is difficult for adults to believe, children are sometimes sexually abused by other children. Sometimes, sexual contact between children is curiosity. But if one child is much older or bigger than the other, the behavior may be abusive. Pay attention to sexual behavior between children; if it seems unusual or abusive, intervene.

Some parents wonder how it is possible for their children to be abused. Offenders use many tactics to gain access to children.

They:

- Seek out an approachable child, one who is easy to get to such as a relative, neighbor, or friend.
- Establish a relationship with the child by spending time playing with them, volunteering to babysit, becoming their buddy, or buying them games or presents.
- Break down the child's resistance to touch by playing games that involve touching such as wrestling and tickling. As a result, children are often confused when the touch becomes sexual.
- Find ways to be alone with the child such as babysitting, inviting them to sleep over, or taking them camping.
- Blame the child and coerce them to keep the secret by making the child feel responsible so they won't tell. They say things like:
 - *"You know you like the way I touch you."*
 - *"If you tell, people will think you're bad."*
 - *"If you tell I will go to jail."* or
 - *"If you tell your mother, she won't love you anymore."*

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF SEXUAL ABUSE ON MY CHILD?

The behavior of your child may change for a time. Children may have some of the following symptoms:

- Heightened fear or anxiety
- Increased tearfulness or crying
- Changes in sleeping patterns such as nightmares, bedwetting, fear of going to bed, fear of sleeping alone
- Changes in appetite
- Irritability, anger, mood changes
- Withdrawal from usual activities and friends
- Isolation
- Change in school performance such as lower grades, poor concentration, short attention span, or loss of interest in school activities
- Nausea or upset stomach
- Clinging to parents
- Aggressiveness
- Rebelliousness

Children react differently to the abuse depending on their age, the extent of the abuse, the support they receive from others, and their relationship with the offender. You should be aware of any changes in your child's behavior or disposition, but some children are not visibly changed by the experience. Do not look too hard for things that are not there.

The single most important factor affecting your child's recovery is the level of support they receive from you. Your child's reaction depends very much on how you and other important people in their lives handle the situation. If your child feels especially loved and protected during this time, he or she may recover more quickly.

If you feel torn between loyalty to your child and loyalty to the offender, find a professional (such as a therapist, counselor, minister, or trusted friend) to help you sort out your feelings. Make sure your child knows that they are your number one priority!

HOW SHOULD I ACT TOWARD MY CHILD?

Be patient and kind. Provide safety, love, and support. Allow your child to express her feelings, and let her know it is OK to cry or be mad. Make sure your child knows it was not their fault and they are not to blame for what happened. Explain to your child that you may get mad or cry too, but make sure she always knows you are not mad at her.

Do not pressure your child to talk about the experience. If the subject comes up, discuss it honestly and openly. Answer your child's questions to the best of your ability. Allow your child to be involved in decision making so she can regain a sense of control over her environment.

Try to return to your family's normal routine as soon as possible. A familiar and stable routine will be very helpful for you and your child. Avoid becoming overprotective of your child. Give your child safety information, but avoid causing them to become more fearful than they already are. Help them identify safe people they can go to when they are scared or sad.

See that your child receives therapy as soon as possible. Trying to avoid the problem will usually cause more problems because it will not go away. Your child is experiencing quite a few emotions that they may not know how to deal with. They have many questions they need answered. The sooner the child gets therapy, the better they will be able to cope in the future.

This kind of experience affects the whole family. Pay attention to the needs of the other children in your home as well. Understand that it is a natural reaction for siblings to blame or resent the victimized child for disruption caused following a report of abuse. Give them the support and information they need to cope with their feelings and concerns.

Some things you can say to your child that will really help:

- *I believe you.*
- *I know it's not your fault.*
- *I'm glad I know about what happened.*
- *I'm sorry this happened to you.*
- *I will take care of you.*
- *I'm upset, but not with you. I'm upset at the person that did this.*
- *Nothing about you made this happen. It has happened to other kids too.*

HOW PARENTS SOMETIMES FEEL WHEN ABUSE HAS BEEN REPORTED

When abuse is 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. Following are some of the common thoughts and feelings parents have.

1. **Denial.** Your first reaction may be not to believe or not to accept the fact that it really happened. Or you may believe it happened, but that no real harm was done. Parents often experience denial because it is too overwhelming to accept that the abuse occurred and that there will be aftereffects.
2. **Anger.** You may feel angry with yourself for not protecting your child. You may feel angry with the perpetrator for what he did. Be honest about your feelings and share them with a trusted person or group.
3. **Helplessness.** You probably do not know what to expect and can feel that things are out of your control. Try to stay aware of how your case is proceeding and ask questions of the professionals that are involved with you.
4. **Lack of assertiveness.** You may feel invisible and think there is nothing you can do to help the situation get better. You can take care of your child and be sure she is receiving all the help she needs.
5. **Shock, numbness, repulsion.** You may have memories of being abused as a child. This can lead to shock, numbness, and repulsion. If so, you may need to seek counseling for yourself to help you recover so that you can help your child recover.
6. **Guilt, self-blame.** You may feel it is all your fault. Remember, the offender is responsible for the abuse, not you. The best thing you can do now is support your child and learn all you can about how to make things better.
7. **Hurt and betrayal.** It is normal to feel hurt from the loss of your child's innocence. You may have lost a spouse or partner if that person was the offender. You may even have lost friends. It is very important to grieve for these losses.
8. **Sexual inadequacy.** Some parents feel the offender turned to a child because their relations with the offender were inadequate. It is important to realize that sexual relations with an adult partner do not affect a person's likelihood to abuse or not abuse children. If your partner was not the offender, your relationship with them may be affected as you try to work through your feelings.
9. **Concern about money.** You may be worried about finances because of loss of income. There are many programs available to help you.
10. **Fear of violence.** You may fear the offender will try to hurt you or your child. If so, there are domestic violence programs available to help you.
11. **Fear of drug or alcohol abuse.** You may be afraid that you or your child will abuse drugs or alcohol because of the stress. If you need help, don't hesitate to contact a therapist, trusted person, or recovery center.

THE INVESTIGATION

Following are the basic steps in an investigation of child sexual abuse.

1. Someone reports suspicions of abuse to authorities, either law enforcement or the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.
2. Interviews are conducted with the child at the Children's Advocacy Center.
3. Medical exams are conducted, if necessary.
4. Law enforcement and DCFS will continue the investigation, which will include an interview with the alleged offender, if possible.
5. A team of professionals will meet to discuss the case and decide how to manage it. The team consists of State's Attorneys (prosecutors), law enforcement officers, DCFS investigators, social workers, medical practitioners, and mental health professionals.
6. The case may be referred to Criminal Court or Juvenile Court, or some other plan may be made for managing the case.

FACTS ABOUT THE INVESTIGATION

The investigation of the abuse will take place by a team of professionals, which typically includes a State's Attorney, DCFS investigator, police detective, and Advocacy Center staff. The team approach to these cases keeps the process as simple as possible. At times, you may be asked to wait while your child is being questioned. Being left out of some of the proceedings can make you feel uncomfortable and worried. Our Protocol requires that parents not be present during the interview because it is felt that more accurate information will be obtained if you are not there. In your presence, your child may be unwilling to tell important details because she wants to spare you from hearing them. Sometimes parents cannot control their emotions at what they hear, or they may place pressure on the child to tell in a way that can complicate the legal process.

The interviewer will take time to make sure your child is comfortable with them and will make sure your child knows you are available if they need you. Your child will know where you are while they are being interviewed.

The legal process moves at its own pace, which is different from your child's need to heal. Emotional wounds may be reopened by the various proceedings, which can take place over many months. The court date may be delayed over and over again. You have no control over this, so try to be patient. Remember that people are working to gain the best outcome for you and your child.

The legal system was not designed with the needs of children in mind. The system is designed primarily to protect the rights of the accused, not the victim. The rights of the child are far less defined than the rights of the accused. However, efforts are being made to improve the legal system's response to child abuse cases. For example:

- Professionals in these cases are specially trained on a variety of topics regarding child abuse.
- The number of times the child has to tell about the abuse is being reduced.
- Community agencies involved in these cases are making efforts to coordinate their services.
- Legislation is being sponsored to change the law and provide more protection for child victims, both in and out of the courtroom.

YOUR TEAM OF PROFESSIONALS

The State's Attorney: The State's Attorney has the final decision as to whether charges will be filed. Consideration is given to many factors that will affect the likelihood of success in court. Some of the factors considered are: age and maturity of the child, the child's ability to testify, whether or not the suspect has confessed, presence of medical evidence, and whether or not there are other witnesses.

The Law Enforcement Officer: All major police departments in Champaign County have investigators on the team. They interview children, non-offending parents, suspects and other witnesses, and gather evidence from the scene of the alleged event.

The DCFS Investigator: The role of the DCFS Investigator is to help protect your child. They conduct interviews and develop safety plans.

The Medical Professional: Your child may be referred to a physician or other medical professional with specialized training in child sexual and physical abuse cases. The medical professional will examine your child, fill out a report, and do certain tests that may be used as evidence in court. Most sexually abused children have not suffered any serious injuries. However, if your child has been injured in any way, the medical staff will tell you how to care for them. Don't be afraid to ask questions. If you are not sure you understand what you have been told, ask more questions. It may be necessary to schedule a second appointment for follow-up care. Please follow the instructions of your medical professional.

The Case Manager: The Children's Advocacy Center's Case Manager is a trained paraprofessional who helps the parent or other caretaker when abuse is reported. The Case Manager helps the caretaker connect with services in the community and provides support as the caretaker protects the child in the aftermath of the abuse report.

The Crisis Intervention Counselor: The Crisis Intervention Counselor provides short-term counseling designed to address the immediate effects of the crisis in the aftermath of the abuse report and to reduce the severity of the crisis, both for the child and their family. The Crisis Intervention Counselor also provides short-term emotional support and works with the Case Manager to ensure that the child and his/her family are linked with all necessary and appropriate services. Crisis intervention services are provided free of charge.

WHAT HAPPENS IN CRIMINAL COURT?

1. Using evidence discovered through the investigation and the input received from the team, the State's Attorney's Office determines if there is enough evidence to file criminal charges.
2. If criminal charges are filed, the person accused of abusing the child may be **arrested** (or he may receive a **summons**) and must go to court for an **arraignment**.
3. The arraignment is when the person accused of abusing the child (called the **defendant**) appears before the judge and pleads guilty or not guilty to the charges. If the defendant pleads guilty, sentencing will be scheduled for a later date (note: defendants almost never plead guilty at arraignment). If the defendant pleads not guilty, the case will continue through the court process. If the defendant cannot afford an attorney, the judge will appoint an attorney to represent him. Also at this stage, bond is set by a judge. If the defendant cannot post bond, he will remain in custody while the case is pending.
4. There are two types of hearings that may occur before trial: a **Preliminary Hearing** or a **Grand Jury Hearing**. The Preliminary Hearing will take place before a judge in open court and the judge will review the evidence and testimony and decide if there is enough evidence for the case to proceed to a trial. A Grand Jury Hearing is held in private before a jury. The defendant and defense attorney do not attend. The Grand Jury reviews the evidence and decides if there is enough evidence to hold the defendant over for a possible trial.
5. The defendant will have an attorney; this is the **defense attorney**. This lawyer may want to talk to your child or you before the trial date. Although you may choose to talk with this person, you and your child do not have to talk to the defendant's attorney.
6. If there is a **Trial**, the defense chooses if they want a **Bench Trial** or a **Jury Trial**. A bench trial is held before a judge. A jury trial is held before a judge and 12 jurors. During the trial, you and your child might have to testify. The defendant does not have to testify. It may take several months from the time charges are filed until you go to court for trial. When you do go to court with your child, take along a quiet toy, coloring book, or something to keep your child busy for what might be a long wait.
7. Once all the evidence and testimony is presented, there will be a **Verdict** of guilty or not guilty. If found not guilty, the defendant will be released if he has no other pending charges. If found guilty, the defendant will be sentenced at a later date (**Sentencing Hearing**).

Prior to the Sentencing Hearing, you will be contacted by a representative of the State's Attorney's Office and asked to complete a **Victim Impact Statement**. Please note, either you or your child, or both, may complete a Victim Impact Statement. The judge will read the Victim Impact Statement before he decides what sentence to impose upon the defendant. You and/or your child will also have the opportunity, if you choose, to read your Victim Impact Statement to the Court at the Sentencing

Hearing. The State's Attorney's Office will help you prepare your Victim Impact Statement.

8. The case can also be settled by agreement without a trial. This is called a ***Plea Bargain***. A plea bargain may take place between the prosecuting attorney and the defense attorney at any time and is reached when the attorneys agree on a charge and a sentence. If the judge accepts the plea bargain, there will not be a trial. Although a plea bargain insures that the defendant will be convicted, oftentimes it results in a lesser sentence. As a result of a plea bargain, a conviction will appear on the offender's record and he/she may have to register as a sex offender.

Many times, a defendant will plead guilty but there is no agreement between the attorneys about what sentence to recommend. In that event, the case may be continued for a ***Sentencing Hearing***, at which time a judge will decide the sentence to be imposed. If that happens, you will be contacted by the State's Attorney's Office and asked to complete a ***Victim Impact Statement*** (see above).

Always remember that the well being of your child should be your objective. Don't lose yourself in the legal system, because it is only one step in the process, and 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 the system, the harder the experience is likely to be. Also, remember to celebrate when it is over. No matter what the outcome, conviction or not, tell your child it is over. You and your child did your best, worked hard, and put in a lot of time and courage. Celebrate a job well done!

WHAT TO SAY TO OTHERS

One challenge your family will face will be what to say to others about the abuse. Your child may feel embarrassed and/or responsible. 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 be discussing it with and let your child have some choice about who is told.

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

If you are especially close to your family, you will probably want to talk with them about your child's abuse and how it has affected the family. It is important to keep in mind how these relatives usually react to stressful situations. If you know they will react in a negative way, you may not want to share the information with them unless it becomes necessary to do so.

It is important to maintain your child's sense of privacy. On the other hand, be careful not to make it a dirty secret, as this could cause more shame in your child.

COMMENTS YOU MAY HEAR FROM OTHERS ABOUT THE ABUSE

“What exactly did he 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 rather move away.”
“Your poor child must be feeling really guilty.”

Remember, you don’t owe anyone an explanation. *“I’d rather not talk about it”* is an acceptable response. Or simply say, *“It’s been a very difficult time for us.”* *“I appreciate your concern”* is another response you might want to use. Or it may be easier to just nod an acknowledgement of what someone says.

Keep in mind that most people have very little knowledge about sexual abuse. For example, in response to the comment about your child feeling guilty, you could say that children always feel unnecessary guilt in these cases until they are assured that they are not responsible in any way for what happened. As a parent, you might also be experiencing some guilt and, as a result, 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,”* he doesn’t have to respond to any comments or questions. Your child could say, *“My mom and/or dad told me not to talk about it now.”* If other children comment or tease, your child might say, *“It could happen to anyone, including you.”*

The Champaign County Children’s Advocacy Center has a library of print and video materials which provide more detailed information about the effects of abuse on children and their families. We would be happy to share those resources with you. Please ask our Case Manager to help you.

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