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A Child Safety Information Series † Diocese of Colorado Springs

### Active Listening

Studies reveal that it takes an average of seven years for children to disclose sexual abuse, and those who work with children – whether in schools, churches, or other venues – find themselves in unique and privileged positions to receive these disclosures.

For the children who are victims of abuse, trusting and telling an adult can be one of the hardest things they'll ever do. Over the years, it has been assumed that children who experience abuse don't talk about it, but recent studies show that children do disclose. The question we must ask ourselves is, "Are we listening?"

"Active listening" is a phrase that describes intentionally listening to what is said as well as to what is not said. It includes listening, observing, and "hearing" the verbal as well as nonverbal messages that are being sent.

Not every child will feel comfortable or capable of speaking directly or openly about the abuse they're experiencing, so it's important to be able to discern the meaning of communications in the different channels through which the true meaning is being expressed.

If we're alert and observant, we might notice:

- Behavioral indicators: shrinking away from or seeming threatened by normal physical contact, sudden unexplained personality changes, or mood swings.
- Physical indicators: cuts or bruises (especially those appearing as defensive wounds), unrealistic explanations of injuries, a child complaining that it hurts to walk or sit, or they're experiencing pain or itching in the genital area.
- Verbal indicators: reporting nightmares or bedwetting, using words or phrases that are "too adult" for their age, withdrawal, or suddenly being less talkative than before.

We should seek to engage the child in conversation to see if they're ready to disclose what is happening in their life. If they began to share what has been happening, we should strive to:

- Be an empathetic listener. We should thank the child for sharing the information, assure them that they're doing the right thing, and let them know that what happened is not their fault.
- Honor their boundaries. If we feel they might need to be consoled by touch (like a side hug), we should ask permission before any touch occurs. It's important that they feel in control of their body at all times.
- Be open and honest with the child at all times. If what is shared needs to be reported, we should tell the child that so the child doesn't feel betrayed.

It's important to remember that if a child knows that we will truly listen, that child will feel confident to share with us.



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