



# Common Reactions of Parents/Caregivers

(Following a child's disclosure of sexual abuse)

Some common thoughts and feelings are discussed here. A parent may feel one or more of these or may move from one to another. The most important thing is to talk about your feelings with a trusted adult or therapist.

1. **Denial** – Your first reaction may be not to believe or accept the possibility that your child has been abused; or you may believe that the abuse did not occur but that no real or lasting harm was done to your child. Parents often experience denial because it is too overwhelming to accept that the abuse occurred and that there will be after-effects.
2. **Anger** - At times you may feel angry with yourself for not protecting your child and angry with the perpetrator for what he or she did. You may even feel angry with your child. Try not to act out anger on your child. Be honest about your feelings and share them with a trusted friend or relative.
3. **Helplessness** - You may not know what to expect and may feel that things are out of your control. You may even fear that your child may be taken away from you. A law enforcement officer or Child Protective Services personnel will be able to address your concerns and answer your questions as well as provide you with information about what will happen in the future.
4. **Guilt, Self-Blame** - You may feel that what happened to your child is your fault, that there was something you could have done to prevent the abuse from occurring, or that you should have somehow “sensed” that the abuse was happening. It is important to remember that the perpetrator is responsible for the abuse, not you or your child.
5. **Hurt and Betrayal** - It is normal to feel hurt by the loss of your child's innocence. You may also have lost a spouse, partner, relative or friend if that person was the perpetrator. It is natural to feel betrayed by a person that was close to you and your family when they have caused injury to your child.
6. **Sexual Inadequacy** - Some parents believe that the offender turned to the child because their relations with him or her were not adequate. However, research shows us that sexual relations with an adult partner do not affect a person's likelihood to abuse or not to abuse children.
7. **Fear of Violence** - You may fear that the offender will try to harm you, your child, or your family. If you have these concerns, please talk to the police and/or you are a victim advocate regarding steps that you may take.
8. **Loss of Privacy** - You may be concerned that others in the community will hear about what has happened to your child. Child abuse investigations are performed in a confidential manner; information will be shared only among team members. Your child's name will not appear in the newspaper. You should use care in what you tell others to prevent complicating or confusing matters in any way.
9. **Confusion: Why Didn't My Child Tell Me?** – It is common for the child not to tell his or her parents about the abuse. The abuser may have threatened the child with harm, saying that the abuser will get in trouble if the child tells; that a parent will be mad at them if he or she tells; that the child will be “taken away” from his or her parents; that a parent will be killed; or that the child's pet will be harmed or killed if they tell. Even young children feel protective toward their parents and refrain from doing or saying anything that will upset or anger the parent. *Reassure your child that the fact that they told someone was very brave and an important thing for them to do.*

