



CAREGIVER'S HANDBOOK

Information and resources for non-offending parents or guardians of children who have been sexually abused.

Aroostook & Downeast CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTERS

Aroostook, Washington, & Hancock Counties



These tiles were created by children supported by the CAC. Making the tiles is a step toward healing and helping children see that they are not alone.

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PROGRAMS OF  AMHC
Sexual Assault Services



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MISSION & PURPOSE

The Children’s Advocacy Centers are committed to minimizing trauma and promoting healing for children and their families following the allegation of sexual abuse; by providing a streamlined, timely, and evidence-based community response in a safe and neutral environment.

The purpose of the centers is to provide and promote closer coordination, communication, and collaboration among child abuse response agencies to better serve children, their families, and the community in the aftermath of child sexual abuse.

COMMON QUESTIONS FROM PARENTS

This time can be confusing for parents. It is common for parents to be flooded with questions as they try to do what is best for their children. We encourage you to reach out to the Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Center’s Advocacy services to help answer questions and provide you with resources and support during this time.

Why Didn’t My Child Tell Me Sooner?

Children often do not tell anyone, and it is not a reflection on you as a parent. Often young children do not know exactly what is happening to them. They may feel something is not right but do not have the vocabulary to identify what is happening. Older children may have a whole other set of reasons and concerns about disclosing, including caring about the abuser, threats from the abuser, shame, fear, etc. It is crucial not to blame the child or yourself for their inability to tell you. Children rarely lie about such an intense and painful topic. Statistics indicate that children tell the truth 92–98% of the time. Your response to the abuse’s disclosure is critical to the child’s ability to resolve and heal.

Who Should Know About What Happened?

With younger children, parents decide who to tell based on determining what will ultimately benefit the child. If the child is school-aged, it may be beneficial for a teacher to support the child in the school environment. Also, if the sexual abuse has impacted your child so that it will influence or affect others, those who are caretakers of your child may need to be informed. The information should not be too detailed, but it should be enough to plan how they might respond to these behaviors. For older children, it is essential to consider how they may feel about certain people knowing. Engage them in conversation about this and make decisions with their feelings in mind.

Should I Treat My Child Differently Now?

Children need to be treated with sensitivity under any circumstances. A child who has been sexually abused may need more reassurance of your love and support than usual. Continuing to follow regular household routines is usually best. Children often find comfort in the predictability that a routine offers.

How Do I Know if My Child Needs Therapy?

Most children who display behavioral or emotional changes may benefit from some form of therapy. The type and length of treatment are based on every child's differing needs. However, all children benefit from immediate love, nurturing, and support from important people in their lives. You are the one who often has the most significant impact on the child.

What if My Child Discloses Something Else?

Sometimes after a forensic interview, a child may remember or decide to tell you more about what happened to them. If this happens, it is vital to contact Law Enforcement and/or DHHS right away.

Things to Keep in Mind

- ▶ Stay calm, listen to the child, and be supportive.
- ▶ Write down what the child says and your observations.
- ▶ To ensure the integrity of the investigation, it is critical that you do not question the child.
- ▶ Report the abuse and seek professional help (see page 17 for more information.)



How Should I React to a Child Who Discloses Sexual Abuse?

- ▶ Do not overreact
- ▶ Do not make assumptions
- ▶ Do not question the child. Investigators are trained to ask the right questions.
- ▶ Do not make promises you may not be able to keep (i.e., “the offender will go to jail” or “you will never have to see them again”)
- ▶ Do not confront the offender. This could both harm the child further and damage the case.

What Can I Do?

- ▶ Return to a regular routine as soon as possible.
- ▶ See that your child receives therapy as soon as possible. Trying to avoid or deny usually causes more problems because it will not go away.
- ▶ Find help for yourself. You do not have to do it all on your own. Contact the CAC for assistance.
- ▶ Teach your child the rules of personal safety. Tell them what to do if someone tries to touch them in an uncomfortable way.
- ▶ Be careful not to question your child about the abuse. If you do, you can jeopardize the case in court against your child's abuser. Specially trained professionals at the CAC will interview your child to obtain the necessary information without harming the case or causing further trauma. If your child wants to talk about it, listen supportively, but do not probe.
- ▶ Keep your child away from the person suspected of the abuse. This is to protect you, that person, and the child.
- ▶ Avoid discussing the case with other victims or their families.
- ▶ Avoid the suspect.
- ▶ Stay close and assure your child that you will keep him/her safe because your child may need an extra sense of physical security.
- ▶ Remember to give attention to your other children.



THE IMPACT OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Children who have been sexually abused may display a range of emotional and behavioral effects, many of which are characteristic of children who have experienced other types of trauma. These include:

Physical

- ▶ Unusual weight gain or weight loss
- ▶ Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- ▶ Signs of physical trauma

Emotional

- ▶ Shows signs of depression (e.g., persistent sadness, lack of energy, changes in sleep or appetite, withdrawal from normal activities, or feeling “down”)
- ▶ Changes in mood or personality (e.g., increased aggression)
- ▶ Decreased confidence or self-image
- ▶ Changes in self-care (e.g., less attention to hygiene, appearance, or fashion)
- ▶ Unwarranted worry or fearfulness
- ▶ Increased and unexplained health problems (e.g., stomach aches and headaches)

Cont. Emotional

- ▶ Nightmares or fear of being alone at night
- ▶ Self-harming behaviors, thoughts of suicide, or suicide behavior
- ▶ Drinking or drug use

Behavioral

- ▶ Keeps secrets
- ▶ Speaks very little
- ▶ Scared to be left alone with certain people
- ▶ Afraid to be away from primary caregivers, especially if this is a new behavior
- ▶ Overly compliant behavior
- ▶ Talks about or has knowledge of sexual topics
- ▶ Exhibits sexual behavior that is inappropriate for the child's age
- ▶ Regressive behavior or resuming behaviors they had grown out of (e.g., thumb sucking or bedwetting)
- ▶ Spends an unusual amount of time alone
- ▶ Tries to avoid removing clothing to change or bathe

Things to Keep in Mind

It is important to remember that the presence of these symptoms does not always mean that your child has experienced sexual abuse and that sometimes children who have experienced abuse show no emotional or behavioral changes. The reactions noted above are most easily explained as a child's response to stress and anxiety. It is more difficult for young children to verbalize what is going on for them. Therefore, they tend to show us how they are feeling.

www.RAINN.org



PROTECT CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

- ▶ Teach children accurate names of private body parts.
- ▶ Avoid focusing exclusively on “stranger danger” and keep in mind that most children are abused by someone they know and trust.
- ▶ Explain to children body safety and the difference between safe and unsafe touches.
- ▶ Let children know that they have the right to make decisions about their bodies and empower them to say no when they do not want to be touched, even in non-sexual ways (e.g., politely refusing hugs), and to say no to touching others.
- ▶ Ensure children know that adults and older children do not need help with their private body parts (e.g., bathing, wiping after bathroom use.)
- ▶ Teach children to take care of their private parts (i.e., bathing, wiping after bathroom use), so they do not have to rely on adults or older children for help.
- ▶ Educate children about the difference between good secrets, like surprise parties which are okay because they are not kept secret for long and bad secrets like those that make the child feel “yucky” or confused.
- ▶ Trust your instincts! If you feel uneasy about leaving a child with someone, do not do it. If you are concerned about possible sexual abuse, call DHHS, local law enforcement (see reporting information on page 17), or the Statewide Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Line 1-800-871-7741.

SUPPORT SERVICES

After your child has been interviewed at the Children's Advocacy Center, there are support services available to you and your family provided by AMHC Sexual Assault Services. These services can include the following:

- ▶ 24-hour confidential support line for questions, concerns, support
- ▶ Support and accompaniment to appointments (e.g., law enforcement interviews, meetings at the District Attorney's Office, court hearings, etc.)
- ▶ Assistance with filing for Protection from Abuse orders (PFA)
- ▶ Accompaniment to court hearings regarding Protection from Abuse orders (PFA)
- ▶ Support emotionally for you and your family through this process
- ▶ Ongoing support after the process
- ▶ Access to non-offending parent support groups
- ▶ Clarification and information about your case
- ▶ Help with referrals for other services for you and your child
- ▶ Informative website www.amhcsas.org

Things to Keep in Mind

All these services are free and intended to help you and your family navigate the different systems and dealing with what happens next. To contact the Statewide Sexual Assault Crisis & Support Line, day or night, call 1-800-871-7741.



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

There are many pieces to investigating child sexual abuse. Therefore, there may not be an easy answer about what happens next. It is something you can discuss with an Advocate from AMHC's Sexual Assault Support Services, who can help find out information about your case when new information is available. There are some things to keep in mind:

- ▶ You will receive follow-up calls from an advocate at one week and one month following the interview.
- ▶ The alleged perpetrator may not be arrested right away, if at all. The video of your child's interview is sent with the investigating officer as evidence in the investigation and will be kept confidential and secure.
- ▶ Generally, deciding whether to criminally charge the suspect results from coordination and collaboration between investigators and the District Attorney's office. Immediate safety issues may impact the decisions that are made at that time.

VICTIM'S RIGHTS IN MAINE

Victims of crime are entitled to the following fundamental rights:

- ▶ Treated with dignity and respect
- ▶ Assisted by criminal justice agencies
- ▶ Informed about the criminal justice system
- ▶ Notified of plea agreements and the right to comment on them whenever practicable
- ▶ Alerted of all judicial proceedings, including time and place of trial whenever practicable
- ▶ Informed of the proposed dismissal or filing of a complaint, information, or indictment before the action is taken whenever practicable
- ▶ Input at sentencing
- ▶ Request restitution
- ▶ Request compensation from the Victim Compensation Board for unreimbursed medical and medically related expenses for victims of violent crimes upon request to the Department of Corrections
- ▶ Alerted of the defendant's release from institutional confinement in all felony cases
- ▶ Afforded with a pamphlet containing specific statutes which pertain to the victim's rights

(Provided by the State of Maine Department of Corrections)



Trauma can be an event that is highly distressing to them when witnessed or experienced by a child or adolescent. These events are often in situations where the children feared for their lives or the lives of others. There are many kinds of trauma, including:

- ▶ Physical abuse
- ▶ Sexual abuse
- ▶ Exposure to violence
- ▶ Loss of a significant loved one
- ▶ Natural disaster
- ▶ House fire
- ▶ Car accident

REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

Each person can react in different ways to a traumatic event based on many things, such as age when the trauma occurred, the severity of the trauma, and the amount of time that has passed since the trauma. You may notice that some of these symptoms mirror reactions to child sexual abuse. Some possible symptoms or effects include:

- ▶ Difficulty sleeping
- ▶ Nightmares and/or not wanting to sleep alone
- ▶ Difficulty not thinking about the event
- ▶ Increased fear in both safe and risky situations
- ▶ Shame or guilt
- ▶ Difficulty concentrating
- ▶ Trouble staying still
- ▶ Thoughts of death or dying
- ▶ Low self-esteem
- ▶ Mood swings
- ▶ Drop in grades or performance at school
- ▶ Irritability and problems with anger control
- ▶ Efforts to avoid talking about the event or doing things that remind the child about the event

FEELINGS CAREGIVERS MAY EXPERIENCE

There is no “right” reaction to hearing that your child has been abused. You may experience a wide range of responses and feelings that may impact different aspects of your life. Some common feelings or reactions from caregivers include:

Anger

You may feel angry at the abuser for hurting your child or even frustrated with your child for not telling you. It is also possible to feel angry at your child for disclosing the abuse. It is not easy news to hear, but it is important to remember it is not your child’s fault. At times, you may feel angry at yourself for not protecting the child. Be honest about your feelings and share them with a trusted person or group.

Anxiety

You might be anxious about responding in the “right” way to your child or navigating the other relationships in your life, especially if you have a relationship with the abuser.

Fear

Depending on your family circumstances, you may be afraid that the abuser will find a way to harm your child again or be concerned about taking care of your family on your own.

Sadness

You may feel sad for your child, for your family, or yourself. When a child discloses sexual abuse, it will cause changes in your life. It is okay to be upset over the changes in your life that may result from this disclosure.

Helplessness

You probably do not know what to expect and may feel that there are a lot of things outside of your control. This may include how to support your child.

Shock and Denial

If you had no idea that the harm was occurring, you might be shocked to hear what has happened. Your first reaction may be not to believe or accept the possibility that abuse occurred. You may think it happened but that no actual harm was done. Caregivers often experience denial because it is too overwhelming to accept that the abuse has occurred and there will be after-effects. For some people, it takes time to overcome denial and face the realities of abuse.

Hurt and Betrayal

You may feel hurt and betrayal if the person that abused your child was someone you trusted. You may have lost a spouse or a partner if that person was the offender. You may even have lost friends or other family. It is very important to take time to grieve these losses.

Though there is no right reaction to hearing that your child has been abused, there are things you can do as a caregiver when responding. It is important that your child hears that you believe them and reassure that they did the right thing coming forward. They are not to blame for the abuse.

Your child is counting on you. It is important for you to take care of yourself so that you can take care of your child. You may find it helpful to talk to a counselor one on one about your own feelings related to what your child is going through. Know who your supports are that you can lean on and practice self-care.

You may be an adult survivor of child sexual abuse yourself. Finding out about your child's abuse may bring feelings related to your own trauma forward. It is never too late to get help. The Children's Advocacy Center is also here to support you and can make referrals for you to speak to a mental health professional.



REPORT SUSPECTED ABUSE

Call your local law enforcement agency directly or if the child is in immediate danger call 9-1-1.

**Maine Department
of Health and Human
Services Child Abuse
Hotline**

1-800-452-1999

**District
Attorney's Office**

Aroostook County:

498-2557

Hancock County:

667-4621

Washington County:

255-4425



RESOURCES

Sexual Assault Services

AMHC Sexual Assault Services:
1-800-871-7741
www.amhcsas.org

Domestic Violence Support Services (Aroostook)

Hope and Justice Project:
1-800-439-2323
www.hopeandjusticeproject.org

Maliseet Domestic & Sexual Violence
Advocacy Center:
207-532-6401
www.maliseets.net/domestic-violence-sexual-assault/

Micmac Domestic & Sexual Violence
Advocacy Center:
207-551-3639 (24-hour hotline)
207-760-0570

Domestic Violence Support Services (Hancock & Washington)

Next Step Domestic Violence:
1-800-315-5579
www.nextstepdvproject.org

**Cont.
Domestic Violence
Support Services**
(Hancock & Washington)

Indian Township Domestic and Sexual Violence
Advocacy Center:
207-214-1917

Passamaquoddy Peaceful Relations:
1-877-853-2613 (24-hour helpline)
207-853-2600 ext 266 or 291

**Mental Health and
Counseling Services**
(Aroostook)

Aroostook Mental Health Services:
1-800-244-6431
www.amhc.org

Northern Lighthouse:
207-540-1522
www.tnlh.org

**Mental Health and
Counseling Services**
(Hancock & Washington)

Aroostook Mental Health Services:
1-800-244-6431
www.amhc.org

Community and Health and Counseling:
1-800-924-0366
www.chcs-me.org

UCP of Maine:
207-941-2955
www.ucpofmaine.org

Transportation

Modivcare:
1-877-659-1302

Medical

Spurwink Child Abuse Clinic:
207-879-6160 or 1-800-260-6160
www.spurwink.org

Need More Information?

The resources above are not an exhaustive list. Please contact Maine 2-1-1, or visit www.211maine.org for more information and resources available in your area.

NOTES & CONTACTS RELATED TO YOUR CASE

Investigation Law Enforcement

Name: _____

Department: _____

Contact: _____

Department of Health and Human Services

Name: _____

Department: _____

Contact: _____

ICWA

Name: _____

Department: _____

Contact: _____

Family Advocate

Name: _____

Department: _____

Contact: _____

Sexual Assault Advocate

Name: _____

Department: _____

Contact: _____

Victim Witness Advocate

Name: _____

Department: _____

Contact: _____

Other

Name: _____

Department: _____

Contact: _____





23 High Street
Fort Fairfield, ME 04742
207-472-6134



14 Steves Lane, Suite 3
Marshfield, ME 04654
207-255-3687

70 Kingsland Crossing
Ellsworth, ME 04605
207-667-6890

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In accordance with federal regulations, AMHC Sexual Assault Services does not discriminate in the access to or provision of its services.