

## A QUICK GUIDE FOR SCHOOL STAFF

### ONE TO ONE RESPONSE TO A KNOWN OR SUSPECTED CHILD VICTIM

A teacher is often the adult outside the family that a child is most likely to speak to about abuse. The teacher can be a lifeline for the abused child. In order to be a safe trusted adult for the student to come to, a teacher can:

- React calmly to information given by the child. Children test adult reaction to less significant information before risking revealing their secret. Don't act disinterested/angry/shocked/grossed out.
- Use "active listening" skills.
- Convey a sense of caring and interest to the suspected victim:
  - “I care about you.”
  - “If you feel bad, I'd like to help.”
- Give the child a sense that his/her feelings matter:
  - “If you're scared, tell me.”
  - “Your feelings are important and it's good to talk about them.”
  - “Is there someone you are afraid of?”
  - “Is someone hurting you?”
  - “Sometimes people do things we don't like. Is anyone making you do something you don't like?”
- Believe and take seriously information given by a child.
- If a child is not comfortable opening up to you, ask who she/he would like to talk to. Make suggestions of people she/he might talk with.

When a student is disclosing information that may be considered abuse, **listen carefully**. Find a quiet, private place to listen to the child. Let the student tell you the information in whatever manner she/he is most comfortable with. Empathy can be developed through intense listening to the child:

“I hear you, I understand.”	“I understand you fears.”
“Can you tell me more.”	“I believe you.”
“I see how you feel.”	“I want to help you.”
“You see unhappy.”	“I want to know.”
“You seem afraid.”	“I'm so glad you're talking to me.”

Word your questions so that they are non-judgmental. Recognize your limitations in dealing with this complex, emotionally charged situation. If you are uncomfortable discussing this subject with the child, get help from the counselor to speak to the child or someone else trusted by the child.

#### **Do Not:**

Examine or search for physical evidence (only medical staff is allowed to examine a child in case of emergency).

- Act as a therapist, a detective or child protective investigator. Your role is to listen, accept and support the child. The only questions that you should ask are those questions necessary to make the report to SCR and to complete the written report (Form DLSS 2221A).
- Interview the child to confirm suspicions or proof of the allegations.
- Ask leading questions or press for answers that the student is not comfortable providing.
- Allow the student to feel “in trouble” or “at fault” for the abuse.
- Criticize or change the student's choice of words or language.
- Display shock, anger, disgust or disapproval of the parents, the student, or the situation. You may feel these things, but it is unlikely to be helpful to the student to share these feelings.

## HOW TO HANDLE DISCLOSURES OF ABUSE OR NEGLECT

Students sometimes disclose abuse in a school setting. Some students are unaware that their disclosures are remarkable. They may believe, for example, that all parents use beatings or cigarette burns as a method of discipline, or use violence when they fight with each other. For others, telling represents a giant step across a gulf of silence. It may be an expression of hope (“Please help me”) or despair (“I can’t keep this secret any more”).

### Disclosures occur in several ways:

- **Direct Disclosures:** A student announces the abuse privately or in class, perhaps during a discussion, perhaps feeling safe in doing so because of the nurturing atmosphere you have created. If the student discloses in front of the class, acknowledge the disclosure, then tell the student know that you want to talk further privately. Find a private time and place to do so.
- **Indirect Disclosure:** A student alludes to abuse rather than describing it directly. For example: “My neighbor told me to go into his bathroom.” “My dad can’t sleep at night.” “I don’t like going to my uncle’s house any more.” A student may not know how to speak more directly, may be embarrassed or afraid to tell, or may be trying to get around a promise to stay silent. Encourage a student to be more specific, but do not supply the words. Ask open-ended questions such as “Can you talk about that a bit more, so I understand?” or “How do you feel about that?”
- **Disguised Disclosure:** A student depicts the abuse as a friend’s problem: “My friend is having problems with his stepfather.” “There’s this girl who told her mother of an older person who was hitting on her, but the mother thought she was making it up.” “I know someone who was abused.” Do not challenge the student’s account. Encourage the student to talk to you further, and reassure the student that the problem is not his or her friend’s fault. In time, the student may tell you that the problem is not a friend’s, but his or her own.
- **Disclosure With a Catch:** A student may reveal a problem, but asks you not to tell: “Something is happening to me, but this has to stay just between us.” The student may want the relief of discussing it, without risking that something negative will happen to the abuser. Don’t make promises you can’t keep. As a mandated reporter, you are legally required to report abuse as described in the Chancellor’s Regulation A-750. Offer your help, but inform the student immediately that you may need to consult with other appropriate persons. Students usually will proceed with a disclosure if you explain the process and offer your support.

Students who disclose abuse will watch your reaction carefully. They may worry that you won’t believe them, or will recoil, as if their secret were an explosive device. Remember that showing shock or disgust (or worse – disbelief) could cause the student to stop the disclosure or recant the allegation. If you appear calm and under control, the child will feel more comfortable talking to you.

When a student discusses an abusive situation, it is important to:

- Understand that a school staff member’s role is to listen and accept, not to act as a therapist or investigator.
- Convey a sense of caring and interest. Use “active listening” skills.
- Allow the student to relate the information in whatever way he or she finds most comfortable. Don’t change the student’s choice of words.
- State that a student has the right to tell, and that it is courageous to do so.
- Emphasize that abuse is not the student’s fault.

*For additional information on child abuse reporting, consult Chancellor’s Regulation A-750*