



## **FOR CLERGY OR CARE GIVERS: HOW TO RESPOND WHEN A CHILD IS SEXUALLY ABUSED**

### **1. Prayerfully gather your thoughts.**

Sexual abuse is a most disturbing disclosure that creates fear, anger, and/or panic, causing leaders to react in unwise, even ungodly ways. Specifically seek to discern the truth and ask God to give you wisdom and courage (1 Cor 16:13; Js 1:5).

### **2. Contact law enforcement and report the abuse immediately.**

If the suspected perpetrator is a family member or if the family was negligent in protecting the child from a non family member, Child Protective Services should also be contacted. In many states clergy and even Sunday School teachers are mandated reporters. That is, they are required by law to report any suspected child abuse and/or any abuse disclosure. Scripture is quite clear that we are to obey our governing authorities because they are ordained of God to impede and punish evil (Rom 13:1-7).

### **3. Do not interrogate the child.**

Abused children feel great shame so we must be very gentle and careful in talking to them about the abuse. Furthermore, it is the job of trained law enforcement, mental health, and social workers, not church workers, to conduct forensic interviews and gather the details of the abuse, which will hold up in court.

### **4. Do not confront the perpetrator.**

For the sake of the legal investigation, it is important for law enforcement to be the first ones to interview the perpetrator. In time, God might give you the opportunity to talk to the perpetrator, but that should not happen at the outset of the abuse disclosure.

### **5. Assure the child that the abuse is not their fault.**

Shame causes children to innately feel they are responsible for the abuse. Additionally, perpetrators often tell the child it is their fault. It may take a very long time for the child to truly believe the abuse wasn't their fault, so repeated verbal assurances from respected leaders can be very helpful.

**6. Assure the child that you take their story very seriously and that you are sorry for their abuse.**

Let them know that you and the church take abuse very seriously because God takes it seriously (Ps 5:6; Matt 18:5-7). Reassure the child that you love them and will be praying for them.

**7. Assure the child that you and the church will work to get them help.**

The kinds of help needed by an abused child and their family are quite varied, but some of the most common needs include: referrals for Christians counselors experienced in treating abuse; financial assistance with professional counseling; education and coaching of church workers on how to respond to the abused child; Christian books, ministries, and web resources to educate the child and the family on abuse. Ask the child and the family what the church could do (or not do) that would be most helpful.

**8. Recognize the complexity of abuse and gather various professional and community resources.**

One of the most common mistakes pastors make when confronted with abuse is to try to “take care of everything in house.” Abuse is an astoundingly complex problem which defies quick, simple solutions. The dynamics of abusers are complex and well hidden, making it very difficult for outsiders to know the truth, let alone offer a wise response. Hence, ministering to abuse survivors, their families, and abusers calls for a partnership with various agencies, wise Christian leaders, and professionals.

**9. Protect the child from the perpetrator and from others who seek to blame the victim and minimize the abuse.**

God unequivocally calls spiritual leaders to confront abuse and to protect and aid those who are abused, especially children (Is 1:17; Jer 22:3, 15-17; cp. Js 1:27). Denial and victim blame are some of the most common responses to sexual abuse, however, these responses are most strongly condemned by God (Prov 17:15) and must be boldly resisted by church leaders.