

“But who should I tell?”

questions and answers
about seeking
help after
sexual abuse



My soul was crying out for me to tell . . . but the fear I had in my heart prevented me.

Anna, 15, sexual abuse survivor*

For kids like Anna, letting other people know that they have been sexually abused—a process called disclosure—can be almost as painful and scary as the abuse itself. So painful and scary, in fact, that many kids who are sexually abused never tell anyone what happened.

If you have been sexually abused, it is important that you let someone know what happened and get help. Disclosure may be scary, but it is also the first step in healing from the pain.

*Why should I tell anyone?
All I want to do is put this behind me.*

Sexual abuse lives on because of secrecy. People who commit sexual abuse (perpetrators) often blame, shame, or threaten their victims to make sure no one hears about what they have done to you. Disclosure is the first step to healing for you, and also the first step to making sure the person who hurt you doesn't get a chance to hurt anyone else.

*Not her real name.

Help on How to Tell

If you're not sure what to say—or who to say it to—check out the Just Tell-Kids Web site (<http://www.justtell.org/8-12/welcome.html>) for more info and advice.

... If anyone reading this is going through what I went through, please take my advice: No matter how bad or good the rapport is between you and your family members, do not wait until the abuse destroys you to tell someone. ... If one person doesn't believe you, tell someone else. Keep telling until someone listens. I know it's painful to tell, but what you're living with is far worse.

Anna,* 15,
sexual abuse survivor
[http://www.youthcomm.org/FCYU-Features/PartnerinCrime\(11-16-00\).htm](http://www.youthcomm.org/FCYU-Features/PartnerinCrime(11-16-00).htm)

Who should I tell?

Tell an adult that you trust and feel comfortable with. Sometimes that means a parent or other relative; sometimes it means a teacher, counselor, or even a friend's parent. The main thing is that you trust the person. If you're not sure who to tell, you can also call the **ChildHelp Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD** (1-800-422-4453). The call is free, and the ChildHelp crisis counselors can help you find help in your area.

What if the person I tell doesn't believe me?

Tell someone else! Most kids find that the adults they tell do believe them and will help them. But when the perpetrator is a relative or family friend, some adults may not want to believe that a person they trusted could do such a terrible thing. If the first person you tell doesn't believe you or does nothing to help, keep telling people—your favorite teacher, your school counselor, the school nurse—or call the ChildHelp hotline (1-800-422-4453) until you get the support and help you need.

What will happen after I tell?

After you tell, you may have concerns about yourself and your body. Having a medical exam will be helpful to make sure you are healthy. In addition, to make sure everyone is safe and getting the help they need, you may need to talk to a caseworker, counselor, and/or the police. Counseling can be very helpful to young people as they go through this experience. If the perpetrator was someone you live with, there may be changes at home to make sure that you and other family members are safe from harm. Whatever happens, keep in mind that everything is being done to make sure that you are safe and that you get the help you need to heal.

Disclosure can bring up a lot of confusing feelings. You may feel good about no longer having such a big secret and safer because someone knows, but also angry about what happened and scared about how people will react. You may even feel worried about what's going to happen to the perpetrator. All of these reactions are normal. The important thing is to remember that you did the right thing and that the abuse was not your fault.

*Not her real name.



I told, and now it just seems like everything is worse than ever. Can't I just take it all back?

The days and weeks right after a person discloses sexual abuse can be kind of rough, particularly if the perpetrator was someone you knew well. Many perpetrators try to make their victims feel responsible for the abuse, or to believe that the abuse was love. But sexual abuse is NEVER your fault, and it is NEVER okay for an adult to express love by being sexual with a child (including teenagers). By disclosing the abuse, you've protected yourself and other kids who might have been abused. You may even have made it possible for the perpetrator to get help so he (or she) won't abuse again.

My family supported me and constantly reminded me that I had done the right thing by speaking out. And after I spoke out, my stepfather's sister and niece confessed that he had molested them as well. It made me feel proud to have been the one with the courage to speak out.

Tamika,* 17, sexual abuse survivor
<http://www.youthcomm.org/NYC%20Features/April2009/NYC-2009-04-22.html>

Sometimes family and friends may take a while to understand what happened and to fully accept that the perpetrator did such a terrible thing. This can be frustrating and scary, but most kids who disclose do have family members and friends who support them and want to help. Hang in there and rely on the people who believe in you and who you trust.

Where can I go to learn more and get help?

There are many organizations and Web sites that can help you with getting help and taking the step of disclosure. Here are just a few:

- **911Rape** (<http://www.911rape.org/home>) sponsored by the Rape Treatment Center at Santa Monica-UCLA Medical Center, this site offers support for info on how to get help after a sexual assault/abuse.
- **After Silence** (<http://www.aftersilence.org/index.php>) offers a support group, message board, and chat room for survivors of sexual abuse.
- At the **National Center for Victims of Crime, Teen Action Partnership** (<http://www.ncvc.org/tvp/main.aspx?dbID=DBTeenActionPartnership788>) you'll find a toll free helpline—1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255, 8AM to 8PM EST)—where you can get counseling, practical information, and referrals to local sources of help.
- The **Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN)** (<http://www.rainn.org>) offers general information on sexual abuse and a search page for finding local rape/sexual abuse crisis centers. RAINN also sponsors the toll-free National Sexual Assault Hotline (1.800.656.HOPE).

Lots of kids have gone through sexual abuse and have gained strength and greater confidence through the disclosure and recovery process. You can read some of their stories—in their own words—in these two excellent books:

- *Kids helping kids: Break the silence of sexual abuse.* (Linda Foltz, Pittsburgh, PA: Lighthouse Point Press, 2003.)
- *Laurie tells.* (Laurie Lowery, Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, Learner Publishing Group, 1995).

*Not her real name.

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National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.