

## Talking with Students and Gathering Information

Educators are trustworthy and safe sources of help for many students. Students may disclose information about abuse or neglect to educators to confide in them or if they are seeking help. This information sheet will help guide you through conversations that involve disclosure.

When a student discloses abuse or neglect- you are there for them as a trusted adult, as their educator, and as a mandated reporter. Remember that any disclosure of abuse or neglect by a child should be treated as a fact when determining whether you need to file a 51A report.

### **The Three Core Responsibilities:**

#### **1.) Support the emotional needs of the student**

- The student has come to you as a trustworthy adult. The student may be disclosing information about themselves or information about others. Your first responsibility is to acknowledge what they say and express your support for their disclosure. Tell them that they are in a safe place to disclose.
- React calmly- it is likely that the student is already scared or worried, your tone of voice and body language should reassure them that you are a safe and supportive resource.

#### **2.) Create a safe space for the student to express themselves in their own words**

- Allow the child to tell you about what happened in a free and open manner. Let them set the pace and use language that is comfortable to them.
- Tell the student that you are glad they informed you. Tell them you are sorry about what happened. Try to avoid any other commentary about the situation.
- Ask only open-ended questions: "Tell me about what happened" and "Are you okay?"
- Do not conduct multiple interviews, one disclosure is enough to file a 51A. Do not conduct group interviews.

#### **3.) Be honest and explain next steps**

- As well as you can, predict for the student what will happen next. Be as clear as you can be and honest about the things you do not know. As best as you can, alleviate anxiety and fears.
- Be honest about your obligation to report alleged abuse and neglect.
- Explain that if the student can come back later to discuss the issue further if they want.

### Some helpful things to communicate to students:

- Let the student know that they are not responsible or at fault for what happened.
- If the student doesn't want to open-up or stops short of providing the whole story, acknowledge and respect their boundary and let them know you want to offer them support.
- Reassure the student that they've done the right thing by disclosing information to you.
- Reassure the student that you are there to help and to keep them safe.

### Things not to do:

- Do not ask leading questions or request details.
- Do not ask the student the same question over and over or conduct multiple interviews. These can cause confusion, can cause the student to recant, or can elicit purposeful misstatements.
- Do not express shock, disapproval, or disgust at what the student says. Instead, be neutral as possible.
- Do not label the student's experience "abuse" or "neglect."
- Don't share their story more broadly than is necessary. You can consult with other professionals when assessing your concerns and when determining whether a 51A report is warranted. At the same time, you should do your best to keep the student's confidentiality as much as you can while still performing your professional obligations.

### DO NOT INVESTIGATE

Your job as an educator and as a mandated reporter is to be present for students who disclose information about abuse or neglect to you. Students may do so unprompted, or students may do so when asked whether there is something wrong or whether they need help. You can provide students and their families with support. If the information that a student tells you causes you to reasonably believe that the student is experiencing, or at substantial risk of experiencing, abuse or neglect, or sexual exploitation or trafficking, you must execute your mandated reporter responsibilities.

Providing support and making a 51A report do not require you to investigate a situation. It is not the job of an educator to investigate whether a student is telling the truth or the details of what occurred beyond what is needed solely to provide support and/or report.

DCF staff are trained in investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect. They are the investigators. **If you push beyond listening to the student's disclosure, to directing or evaluating the disclosure, you have gone too far into the role of investigator.** Student disclosures should be treated as facts for purposes of mandated reporting.

If you go beyond the role of educator and mandated reporter to the role of investigator, you risk tainting the DCF investigation. Children who are interviewed multiple times, asked leading questions, or whose truthfulness is directly or indirectly challenged may change or recant their story. This makes DCF's job much harder and puts the child at risk.

## Practical Tips: How to Communicate

Open-ended questions are questions that do not suggest what the response should be. Leading questions are questions that suggest the response. For example:

Open-ended: What color is it?

Leading question: It was red, wasn't it?

It is tempting to ask leading questions because it shows the person you are talking to that you are following along in their story. However, leading questions can cause jumping-to-conclusions and a desire to agree on a storyline. It is critical that when talking with children you use open-ended questions. Think of this as creating the space for the child to talk, not agreeing with what the child is saying.

### Helpful open-ended questions:

- What happened?
- Are you okay?
- How do you feel?
- Do you know what happened next?
- Why do you feel this way?
- Who was there?
- Where were you?
- What are you worried about?
- What are you not worried about?

### You can show the student you support them by saying:

- I believe you.
- Your story is important.
- I care about you.
- I care about this situation.
- I trust you.
- Thank you for talking to me/sharing with me.
- I'm going to be as honest and helpful as I can be.

It is also important that you respect a student's boundaries. If they are disclosing abuse or neglect, or their fears about potential abuse or neglect, it is likely that their boundaries have already been somehow violated. You should be an active listener to the information the student provides, but you should not lead the child down a path of disclosing more than they are comfortable with. Remember- you can connect students and families to services. Think about making referrals to counseling or other [supportive services](#).

Behavior is a form of communication. For very young students and students with disabilities, behavior may be one of their primary modes of communication. Pay attention to how a student shares their story, what their body language is and whether that body language is normative for them. Notice the student's tone and any clues to how the student is feeling.

Use age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate words. Mimic a student's word choice back to them. For example, if a child says: "I felt sick" you can say "ohhhh, what kind of sick did you feel?" Mimicking word choice validates the student's feelings and prevents you from jumping-to-conclusions. Students with disabilities may use non-traditional words and concrete ideas to express

themselves which may be confusing or unclear. Focus on how you think the student may be affected by the situation they are describing.

When you need help or guidance on any topic addressed in this document, reach out to your administration or school clinical staff.

**Your first responsibility is to your students. Be there for them, be present, they trust you.**

**Thank you for all you do for your students and their families.**