



Supporting Survivors & Self—Indigenized (SSS-I)

Miye na Wicakiya Oyate Wi Okiciyapi Kta

A Lakota-Grounded Guide to Responding to Children's Disclosure of Sexual Abuse/Assault

SUPPORTING SURVIVORS OF ABUSE

What is sexual abuse of children?

- Child sexual abuse refers to the involvement of a child (person less than 18 years old) in sexual activity that violates the laws or social taboos of society and that the child:
 - » does not fully comprehend;
 - » does not consent to or is unable to give informed consent to; or
 - » is not developmentally prepared for and cannot give consent to.
- In South Dakota, the legal age to give consent for sexual activity is 16; anyone under the age of 16 is unable to give meaningful consent to sexual activities.
- Sexual abuse can happen to boys, girls and two-spirit children. It may also be called sexual assault or sexual violence.
 - » **Examples:** inappropriate touching, inappropriate language, sexual photos/videos and sex (vaginal, anal or oral).
- **Sil okihan** means sexual violence and other types of severe violations of a sexual nature in Lakota. Prior to colonization, **sil okihan** was very rare in Lakota communities.
- Native survivors of sexual violence may avoid seeking help because of:
 - » community stigma
 - » feelings of shame
 - » fear of being blamed
 - » tight-knit communities
 - » sexual violence often happening within families
 - » lack of services
 - » mistrust and fear of seeking services

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- Survivors, especially children, may not understand that what is happening to them is abuse.
- Survivors are more likely to turn to informal supports (friends or family) and often wait until a crisis point is reached before disclosing.
- Disclosure is the act of telling someone else about sexual abuse. For example, a child telling a teacher they are being made to do something sexual by another individual. It might also be called help-seeking.

Why is it important to support child survivors of sexual abuse?

- **Wakanyeja** is the Lakota word for children. It means sacred beings. A Lakota proverb says, “*The ones that matter most are the children.*”
- It is important to respond in supportive ways to disclosures of sexual abuse. Positive responses, such as believing the child or providing the child with emotional support, promote healing and recovery. Negative responses like blaming the child, not believing the child or doing nothing to support the child, can lead to depression, anxiety, suicidality and substance use. You can make a HUGE difference in the life of a child survivor of sexual abuse! What you say and do matters a lot!
- Supporting child survivors of sexual abuse aligns with Lakota virtues such as love (**thechihila**) and compassion (**waunsilapi**), as well as the concept of **wolakota** (to be a good relative).
- Children often stay silent about abuse because they feel shame, because they feel it’s wrong to talk about sexual things, or because they do not want to hurt their family or community, especially if the person abusing them is a family member or respected person in the community. It’s our job to tell them they are right to tell! In fact, in our prevention work in schools we emphasize to children “*Tell and tell and tell until someone believes you and you get the help you need.*”
- Responding in supportive and loving ways to disclosures of sexual abuse helps to break the cycle of intergenerational transmission of trauma.

What do I do if a child discloses sexual abuse to me?

- Thank the child for having the courage to tell you. Make sure the child knows that disclosing to you was the right thing to do.
 - » For example, you might say: “*Thank you for telling me; telling me took a lot of courage; we will get you some help to deal with this; what happened is not your fault; you deserve to be taken care of and protected.*”
- Show the child with your body language that you are listening and that you care.
 - » For example, you might nod your head and say “mmm-hmm” as you listen.
- Sit or kneel at the child’s level rather than stand over them.
- When using reflective listening—rephrasing and stating back to the child what you hear them saying—be sure to use the same words they are using.
 - » For example, if they use the phrase “*hurt me,*” use that phrase rather than other words (abuse or rape).
- Ask the child how you can be helpful. You might also suggest praying, smudging or hugging the child (but ask permission first to hug them).



- Be sure to get the child help. **Scan the QR code for a list of resources or visit:** go.unl.edu/community-resources

- Do **NOT** do the following:
 - » Do not use shocked or disbelieving body language when a child discloses to you.
 - » Do not try to talk the child out of what they are telling you.
 - » Do not express doubts to the child.
 - » Do not hover over or touch the child when the child is disclosing. Remember you are in a position of power and may intimidate the child.
 - » Do not suggest or guess the child might have been abused. Use the words they use as you reflect on what they have told you.

- » Do not ask questions—about time, where, how long, details, etc. It’s important to avoid leading questions that might further upset or confuse the child, and/or hinder a future investigation/prosecution.
- » Do not make promises. For example, if the child says to keep what they are telling you a secret, do not say you are going to keep it a secret. You need to tell someone who can get the child help and make sure the child is safe.
- You should report sexual abuse to the appropriate authorities. Some people (teacher, counselor, nurse) in the state of South Dakota are required by law to report.
 - » After the child has shared, let them know you need to tell people whose job it is to keep other people safe. Explain this is a rule/law, but also that you are doing this because you care about them and want them to be safe. For example, you can say *“I am proud of you for telling me. I care a lot about you. I need to tell someone whose job it is to make sure you and other children are safe. Remember that what happened to you is not your fault.”*
 - » Even if you are not a mandated reporter, you should still report it to the authorities or someone who will help—like a school official.



MANDATED REPORTING

Per South Dakota law, anyone can report child abuse and neglect, but people in specific professions are **REQUIRED** by law to report.

Scan the QR code or visit:

go.unl.edu/mandated-reporting

Reporting procedures:

- If a child is telling you at your job, follow your school, organization or agency’s mandated reporting protocols. If you are not sure what these are, please immediately ask your supervisor.
- If a child is in imminent danger (they’re about to go home to someone actively sexually abusing them or they say they might kill themselves), **CALL 911**.
- If the abuse happened a long time ago or the person who abused the child is no longer in their life, you still need to report it, but may not need to call 911. Instead, here is who you can contact:
 - » **OST Public Safety: 605-867-5111** (Open 24/7)
 - » **OST Child Protection Services (CPS): 605-867-5752** (M-F: 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.)
 - » **SD Child Protection Services (CPS): 877-244-0864** (M-F: 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.)

What steps should I take to support my self?

- When a child is disclosing, remember to take a deep breath, think before you speak, put your phone down and remind yourself that you could be saving this child’s life.
- Hearing about child abuse can be hard. You may notice a range of feelings such as sadness, shock, anger and disgust. It is important that you do self-care.
- Self-care means taking care of the whole self—physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Self-care examples include:
 - » Traditional healing (smudge, prayer, ceremonies).
 - » Exercise. Go for a walk outside.
 - » Eat healthy and get a good night’s sleep.
 - » Spend time with relatives, friends and people who lift you up.
 - » Do something creative. Listen to or make music, draw or paint, work on crafts.
- Do not seek emotional support from the child who told you about the abuse or other children. Seek support from trusted adults in your life.
- If you are a survivor, hearing about childhood abuse may bring up hard memories. Know that you are not alone. There are local and national resources that might help, visit: go.unl.edu/community-resources.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES

Remember to use HEARSS when someone discloses sexual abuse to you.

H	E	A	R	S	S
<p>Hearing: listening in a reflective way</p>	<p>Empathize: show you believe and care</p>	<p>Align: support the survivor in the way they need</p>	<p>Resources: list resources, if appropriate</p>	<p>Stick with feelings: allow survivor and you to feel what you feel</p>	<p>Support yourself: honor your own emotional, physical and spiritual needs</p>

THINGS TO SAY

- I am here for you.
- It took a lot of courage for you to tell me.
- This is not your fault.
- You are strong and you matter.
- You are worth protecting.
- You can keep talking to me. You can get ahold of me (give them your phone number).
- We are going to get you help.
- You did the right thing by telling me.
- This does not and will not define you.
- How can I support you?
- If appropriate, you can say I love you.

THINGS NOT TO SAY

- Did you say no or tell them to stop?
- Are you sure that is really what happened?
- Don't tell too many people. We do not want this getting out.
- Those words are dirty.
- That can only happen to girls.
- I am too busy to deal with this now.
- Why are you telling me this?
- Just keep it to yourself.
- Get over it already.
- You are going to ruin their life. They have their whole life ahead of them.
- Why were you dressed like that?
- Were you drinking?
- This is your fault.