



GUIDE

Receiving Disclosures

In this document you'll learn to recognize and respond to a child or teen's disclosure of maltreatment. If you're a visual learner, you may wish to begin by watching the following 2-minute videos, which will help lay the groundwork for specific tips we'll provide.

- 4 ways to support youth in the moment of a disclosure. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children: Responding to a Child's Disclosure of Abuse | NSPCC Learning: www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvJ5uBlGYgE
- 10 things to keep in mind when receiving a disclosure. Magenu Educational Video Series: Handling a disclosure www.youtube.com/watch?v=YevXT5pC_C8&feature=emb_logo

Best Practice 7

Support Victim-Survivors

OBJECTIVE

Learn to recognize and respond to a child or teen's disclosure of maltreatment.

AUDIENCE

Youth-serving professionals and administrators in youth-serving organizations; parents and caregivers; community members

TIME

2 hours

RECOGNIZING A CHILD'S DISCLOSURE OF MALTREATMENT

1. Disclosing maltreatment may be one of the most difficult conversations a child or teen will ever have. They may lack the knowledge to identify what has happened as abusive or the language to describe it. They may experience deep shame, self-blame, or fear of what will happen if they do disclose. For all of these reasons, children and teens are reluctant to disclose maltreatment. Most wait years, often decades, before telling anyone.

2. When children or teens do disclose, they may do so accidentally or tentatively, testing the adult's reaction before continuing. The following are examples — based on real cases — of initial disclosures made by children or teens:

- "I don't like it when Aunt Leah comes over."
- "I want to quit my bar mitzvah lessons."



- "A kid in my class was making up stories today. He told us that the teacher takes him out for ice cream and licks his penis on the car ride home."
- "Rachel doesn't have to study. The teacher has a crush on her and will let her do extra credit even if she does poorly."
- "The boys in the older grade are always bothering us before class starts – I hate them."
- "Rabbi Schwartz is smelly and gross."
- "I had a bad dream about a monster who made all the kids in our class take off our pants and then laughed at us."
- "Is it weird that my friends are afraid of Ariel? I think they just don't understand Ariel like I do."

Sometimes, children and teens who disclose maltreatment may later recant the disclosure even though the maltreatment occurred.ⁱⁱ They may do so for numerous reasons, including wanting to protect those who have harmed them or fear of not being believed, of getting into trouble, of being harmed, or of losing someone — often the perpetrator — whom they love.

WHAT IF I BELIEVE A YOUTH HAS SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO TELL ME, BUT THEY SHARE ONLY MINIMAL INFORMATION OR DO NOT SHARE AT ALL?

Like adults, children and teens will disclose on their own timeline, when they feel ready. It is important not to pressure them to say something they don't want to say. At the same time, you'll want to clearly communicate that you are available as a resource should they want to speak again. Depending on the situation, you might try words to the effect of:

"You can always come to me with anything, and I will help you. If you get tricked, confused, or scared, it's OK. It is never your fault if someone convinces you to break your safety rules or if an adult gets you to do something wrong. You will not be in trouble. You have the right to get help."

Remember, even if a child or teen hasn't disclosed maltreatment, if you have other information that leads you to be concerned for their welfare, you may need to make a report (see more on reporting in *Best Practice 8: Develop Protocols for Responding*) or alert others in your organization so that together you can create a plan to best support the youth. In all instances you'll want to stay connected to the youth as a safe and supportive presence, and you may find that they'll approach you to talk again in the future.



WHAT SHOULD I DO IF CHILDREN OR TEENS DISCLOSE

MALTREATMENT TO ME?

Disclosing maltreatment takes courage. If an adult responds emotionally, negatively, or dismissively, the child or teen may stop talking. It is okay for you to have a big reaction to a disclosure of maltreatment — receiving such a disclosure is difficult too, and you'll need your own time to process. But all that happens later, when you are not with the child or teen. This is the moment to be completely present, calm, and supportive. Doing so can have a lifelong impact, as resiliency-building begins in the moment of disclosure, based on the response the child or teen receives.

- Stay calm in the child or teen's presence.
- Show love and respect for them.
- Begin by building resiliency. Thank them for telling you and praise their courage.
- If they express guilt or concerns about getting in trouble, reassure them that no matter what happened, they are not to blame.
- If they express concern about not being believed, reassure them that you believe.
- Allow the child or teen to talk freely; do not interrupt, ask them to repeat words, or probe for details.
- Use open-ended questions like, "What else would you like to share with me?"
- Do not offer false assurances, such as promising to keep the disclosure a secret.
- Let the child or teen know what to expect next.

The conversation you just had may have been quite difficult. End it where you began, by building resiliency, using supportive, loving and empowering words, and communicating that you are available to continue speaking about the issue they've raised.

Endnotes

- i. As a reminder, "maltreatment" is used throughout Aleinu as an overarching term that encompasses multiple forms of child harm, including but not limited to child maltreatment (i.e., sexual maltreatment, physical maltreatment, emotional maltreatment, spiritual maltreatment), neglect, harassment, bullying, and hazing. For a refresher on all terms, see the Aleinu Glossary in your [dashboard](#).
- ii. In one study of children with a sexually transmitted disease – proof of their having been sexually abused – more than half denied that they were abused and instead protected their abuser. Lawson, L., & Chaffin, M. (1992). False negatives in sexual abuse interviews. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 7, 532-542. In another study of 116 cases of confirmed sexual abuse, almost 80% of the children initially denied the abuse or tentatively disclosed, 75% of those who disclosed did so by accident, and over 20% of the children ultimately recanted their disclosure even though the abuse had occurred. See: Sorensen, T. & Snow, B. (1991). How children tell: The process of disclosure in child sexual abuse. *Child Welfare League of America*, 70, 3-15.

