

Responding to Sibling Sexual Behavior and Abuse



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1. Listen to and believe the sibling:

Children and youth are often afraid to tell anyone about their experiences, as they may feel responsible, confused about what they experienced, or worried about getting in trouble. Children rarely lie about abuse. It is important to listen with care and compassion.

3. Do not react from a place of panic:

Learning that sexual activity has occurred between siblings is distressing. It can be hard to remain calm, but reacting harshly, shaming, or punishing the children or adolescents involved can cause more trauma.

2. Take the situation seriously:

It can be tempting to dismiss sexual behavior between siblings as “normal curiosity” and “harmless,” or assume it’s a phase they will grow out of. But when adults ignore or minimize sibling sexual behavior, it can damage trust, and the harmful behavior may continue.

4. Have compassion for the sibling who caused harm:

Though it can be difficult, it is important to let the child who initiated the sexual behavior know that, while what they did was wrong, they are still loved and deserving of help.



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5. Understand the difference between experimentation and abuse:

Normal sexual curiosity should not leave a sibling feeling victimized or distressed.

Individual discussions with each sibling are helpful to find out if they felt pressured, tricked, or uncomfortable. If these feelings are present or you recognize that one sibling has more power over the other due to age or ability level, seeking help is the next step.

6. Seek professional help:

When sibling sexual behavior is harmful or abusive, families need outside help. Ideally, all family members should receive therapy aimed at healing and preventing further harm. A good first resource is the Stop It Now! helpline. Families can also seek help from a pediatrician or therapist. These professionals can help determine the best path forward.

7. Make and follow a safety plan:

With the help of professionals, create a plan that all household members are committed to following, and that makes everyone feel safe. The plan should address issues such as bedroom and bathroom arrangements, shared activities, and supervision.

8. Educate children and youth on body safety:

Teaching young people about consent, privacy, body boundaries, and age-appropriate knowledge of body parts is highly beneficial. This can help the siblings understand their experience and lower their feelings of shame and self-blame. It can also help resolve misunderstandings that may have led to the harmful sexual behavior.

9. Continue checking in:

Make sure the involved siblings feel safe and supported by continuing to check in to see if they have any new concerns or questions. It is important to create a feeling of trust and open communication.

