ICMEC envisions a world where children can grow up safe from exploitation, abuse, or the risk of going missing. We believe every child deserves a safe childhood.
General tips for speaking with children of all ages about abuse and exploitation include:

1. **Minimize asking questions about traumatic events.** Confine questions to those that are necessary AND those that target information that cannot be obtained from another reliable person.

2. **Be open, supportive, empathic, and nonjudgmental.**

3. **Take time to build rapport before asking sensitive questions.** By engaging the child in a discussion of non-threatening topics, it is possible to build trust, assess their ability to provide a narrative, and evaluate their vocabulary and conversational skills. In addition, rapport-building allows children to ‘practice’ answering open-ended questions.

4. **Provide an explanation** for why these questions are necessary and make it clear that participation by the individual is voluntary.

5. Discuss with the child the importance of:
   - **Talking only about events that the child knows actually happened,** not about those that may have happened
   - Telling the professional if they:
     - do not understand a question
     - do not know the answer to a question
     - feel uncomfortable with a question or want to stop or take a break

6. **Use open-ended questions** (broad questions and cued invitations that encourage free narrative) as much as possible (e.g., “Tell me all about what you did at the park” (assuming the child mentioned they visited the park). “And then what happened?”). Even very young children and children with an intellectual disability are able to answer questions in this format.

7. **Give the child your undivided attention** while they speak; use sounds and phrases to demonstrate interest in what they are saying (e.g., ‘mm’s’ and ‘I see’).

8. **Sit at eye level.** Avoid towering over the child, which can be intimidating.

9. **Minimize use of yes/no and multiple-choice questions** (if these are necessary, offer at least 3 choices (e.g., ‘yes, no, I don’t know’; ‘bedroom, bathroom, or somewhere else’, and follow the question with open-ended questions to encourage corroborative detail).
10 Avoid use of leading and suggestive questions (questions that introduce information the child has not disclosed (leading) or questions that imply an expected answer (suggestive)).

11 Frame questions so that the child is aware of the topic to be discussed; announce topic changes with a new frame (“We’ve been talking about your day in the park. Now I’d like to talk about what you did this morning.”)

12 Clarify terms (e.g., ‘had sex’; or terms used to describe genitals) and then use the child’s terms.

13 Make questions short, simple, and inclusive of only one idea.

14 Avoid phrasing questions in the negative, especially using double negatives.

15 Avoid frequent use of pronouns; instead, repeat the name of the person in question.

16 Remain objective and neutral; avoid focusing only on questions you believe will affirm your assumptions.

17 Be aware of nonverbal communication, including your own. Avoid showing surprise, anger, disgust, or other reactions that may be construed by the individual as shaming or blaming.

18 Avoid correcting or interrupting the individual during a narrative. Return to the issue later when the child has finished their answer.

19 Young children may begin to use words before they truly understand their meaning, particularly prepositions (e.g., before, after; inside, between).

20 End the session on a neutral or positive note. Ask the child if they have any questions or concerns.

Bibliography: