

## **Responding to Child Statements and Concerns Regarding Abuse: The Role of the First Responder**

### **A Resource for Educators and School Staff**

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The following scenarios represent common situations that teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school staff, volunteers, and contractors may encounter. The ‘Possible Responses’ are merely suggestions and reflect a trauma-informed approach. Real-life scenarios experienced by school staff will differ, and what may be appropriate in one situation may not be suitable in another. Please take these examples as possible responses, rather than as mandatory ones. Use your judgment in each case, always keeping in mind the best interests of the child.

- I. 9-year-old child approaches school staff and says, “I need to talk to you.”**
  - a. Possible Response (First Responder):**
    - i. “Ok, Hector. That sounds good. It’s not very private here; where would you like to go to talk? We can go to my office, or maybe take a walk...”  
{Hector is likely planning to disclose something sensitive, so be sure to begin the discussion with information on the limits of confidentiality.}
    - ii. “Hector, I’d like to hear whatever you want to tell me, but before we start, I want to make sure you are aware of something, so you aren’t surprised or upset later. If you tell me something that makes me worried about your safety or the safety of someone else, I’ll need to share that information with a few other school staff members who are part of a team that works to ensure the safety of all our students. They can help me to help you. If I do need to share this information, I will tell you first, and together we can talk about how I’m going to do that.”
    - iii. Hector agrees. You say, “I’m glad Hector. So, please tell me what’s on your mind.”
  
- II. A 14-year-old student has disclosed abuse, and in response to your indication that their parents will need to be notified, the child says, “No! Please don’t tell them!”**
  - a. Possible Response**
    - i. “You seem very upset at the idea of your parents learning about this, and I’d like to help. Can you help me to understand more about your feelings and your worries?”

- ii. Ask open-ended questions to assess the child's feelings, fears, concerns, and safety, like, "Tell me more about what you think your father would do...?"
- iii. Validate the child's feelings and concerns: "Yes, I understand that would be very scary.... I see...."
- iv. Summarize what they've said: "So, you're worried your father will be angry and blame you for what happened. Is that correct?"
- v. Unless there are safety issues (e.g., parent is the suspected offender), the parents will need to be notified about child protection concerns. You can explain this yet still keep the child involved in the process. "I understand why you're so concerned. Thank you for explaining that to me. But your parents will find out at some point since they are your guardians and have a right to know about things affecting your safety and well-being. So, assuming they will need to be told, let's talk about how that might happen. Would you like to be there when the school talks to your parents? Would you like staff to talk to your parents first and then maybe have a family meeting with you and your parents and one of the school staff members? What do you think is best? How can I and other school staff best support you?"
- vi. Once the child gives their opinion, you can take this to the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and Child Protection (CP) team; they should do their best to accommodate the child's request. The important thing is to keep the child involved as much as possible so they feel a sense of control over the process.

**III. A 7-year-old child has disclosed sexual abuse by a school staff member. They say, "You believe me, don't you?"**

**a. Possible Response**

- i. "Yes, I believe you, and I want to help you in any way I can. I'd like to tell you about what needs to happen next. Is that ok?" Then go on and explain who needs to become involved and why (e.g., explain what the CP team is, who is a DSL, what is their role). Answer questions, explore the child's concerns about the process, and continue to offer support.

**IV. An 11-year-old child approaches school staff during recess and chats a little bit before becoming quiet and then saying abruptly, "I don't like it when Mr. X looks at me."**

**a. Possible Response**

- i. This is a vague statement. You can respond with an open-ended invitation such as, "Hmm. You don't like it when Mr. X looks at you. Can you tell me more about that?"
- ii. If the child's answer is still vague, follow up with additional open-ended questions, such as, "Tell me more about that." or "Can you tell me about

a time when Mr. X looked at you and you really didn't like it?" or "You said you don't like it when Mr. X looks at you. Tell me more about how you feel when he looks at you."

- iii. "Will you be seeing Mr. X today? When?" (You are assessing imminent danger.)
- iv. If the child's responses lead you to believe that abuse, or grooming for abuse, is a possibility, then proceed with support and explanation about the need to speak with the DSL (e.g., "I am worried about what you've told me and want to help you as best I can. I'll need to talk to Mr./Ms. \_\_\_ about this so that they can help me to help you. Mr./Ms. \_\_\_ is the leader of a very small group of school staff who are the school's Child Protection Team. This team provides support to any student who is in distress and will take steps to help protect children. They have helped many students and are very good at what they do. I need their help to guide us now.")
- v. "I'm very glad you came to me, {child's name}. How are you feeling about all of this now that we've talked?" (Listen, validate emotions, and consider immediate practical strategies to ease the child's distress, such as going to a quiet place, offering something to eat/drink, etc.).

**V. A 10-year-old child is playing during recess, and you notice they have a cluster of bruises on their upper arm; you are worried about physical abuse.**

**a. Possible Approach:**

- i. You wait until the students are returning to class, and casually call the child over. As you walk, you chat a bit and then say, "It looks like you have some bruises on your arm. Do they hurt at all?" The child might respond, "No."
- ii. "That's good. Do you recall how you got them?" The child blushes and says, "No."
- iii. You say, "Ah. I see. The reason I ask, {child's name}, is that sometimes bruises like that can be from someone grabbing a person's arm when they're angry. When I see these bruises on you, I get concerned and worry about your safety. All of us here at the school take safety very seriously and want to help support you and other students if they need help." Child does not reply; looks away.
- iv. You say, "{Child's name}, is there anything you'd like to talk about?" "No." "Okay. I understand. But please know I'm here if you ever want to talk. In the meantime, I'm worried about those bruises and concerned that somebody may have harmed you. I may be completely wrong, but because it's possible that someone hurt you, I'm going to need to speak with Mr./Ms. \_\_\_, who leads our child protection team..." {Proceed with explanation of the team, DSL, why you need to report, etc.}

**VI. You see a group of adolescent boys looking at a phone and laughing. “Wow! She’s really drunk! She deserves this...Go for it, Brad!”**

**a. Possible Response:**

- i. You walk over to them and say, “You look like you’re having a great time here! What’s the joke?” They look stunned, and one mumbles, “Oh nothing. Just some friends acting crazy.”
- ii. You repeat, ““She’s really drunk! She deserves this...Go for it! What does that mean?” One boy says, “It was just a party. Celeste was acting funny, just acting weird.”
- iii. You say, “If I were to look at what you were watching on your phone just now, what would I see?” “Oh, nothing! Just Celeste kissing a guy.”
- iv. “Why don’t you give me the phone now and tell me all about what I’m going to see.”
- v. {If the boys disclose information concerning abuse/assault, you take the phone (you should not look at the abuse content), explain your concerns, and tell the boys they should NOT forward the video to anyone, talk to others about the incident, or erase the video from their phones if they have it. You explain that you will be reporting this to the CP team immediately and describe what that entails; you take the phone and give it to the DSL and IT staff for evidence. You ask the boys to come to the office with you, take their phones from them, and ensure they are supervised while the team decides on next steps.}

**VII. A student approaches a staff member and says, “My friend is in trouble.”**

**a. Possible Response:**

- i. “I’m here to listen. Why don’t we go somewhere that is a bit quieter, and we can talk?” You sit down at an empty table where there is privacy (but observability).
- ii. “I appreciate you coming to talk with me. It’s important to keep our friends safe. I’d like to help if I can. Before we start, I just want to remind you of something so there are no surprises for you later. If you tell me something that makes me worried about your safety, or the safety of your friend or someone else, I’ll need to share that information with a few other school staff members who are part of a team that works to ensure the safety of all our students. They can help me to help you and your friend. If I do need to share this information, I will tell you first, and together we can talk about how I’m going to do that. Do you have any questions about this?” “No.”
- iii. The student says, “My friend Sarah told me that her older brother sometimes hurts her when they’re alone at home. She told me not to tell anyone because he said he’d hurt her more if she did.”

- iv. “Thank you for telling me this; you did the right thing by sharing it with me. Do you know if Sarah is at school today?” (You are checking on Sarah’s immediate safety.) “Yes, I saw her in math class.”
- v. “Is there anything else you want to tell me about this situation?” “Just that I’m worried about her.”
- vi. “I’m concerned about Sarah’s safety too, so I’ll need to speak with Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_, who leads our school’s child protection team. Let me tell you a bit about what that means...” (Then you explain the team’s function, its commitment to providing support to students in distress, etc.)
- vii. “I’m glad you came to me, {child’s name}. You are a good friend to Sarah.”
- viii. “How are you feeling about all of this?” (You are checking on the student’s wellbeing; they may be distressed and need extra support.) The student says, “Okay, I guess. Glad I told someone.”
- ix. “I’m glad you did, too. Please let me know if you want to talk more about how you’re doing. I’m here to support you and Sarah.”

**VIII. A high school boy comes to his favorite teacher and shares in a hushed tone, “Miss \_\_\_\_, I am in trouble.”**

**a. Possible Response**

- i. “I’m here to listen. Why don’t we go somewhere that is a bit quieter and we can talk?” You go to an empty group room in the library where there is privacy (but observability).
- ii. “I appreciate you coming to talk with me, and I’d like to help if I can. Before we start, I just want to remind you of something so there are no surprises for you later. If you tell me something that makes me worried about your safety, or the safety of someone else, I’ll need to share that information with a few other school staff members who are part of a team that works to ensure the safety of all our students. They can help me to help you and your friend. If I do need to share this information, I will tell you first, and together we can talk about how I’m going to do that. Do you have any questions about this?” “No.” {If child objects and wants you to keep it a secret, please see scenario II. You need to explore and validate the child’s concerns and feelings about keeping a secret, and likely explain again the reasons for involving the CP team. Then, as in scenario II, you can empower the child by working with them to determine the preferred way that you notify the CP team (e.g., child goes with you; you go by yourself to the DSL).
- iii. The child decides to tell you what is on his mind: “It’s about something really embarrassing, and I don’t know what to do. Someone has a compromising picture of me and is threatening to post it on the internet if I don’t give them \$500.”
- iv. You say, “I’m really sorry to hear that, {child’s name}. I appreciate your trust in coming to me and I’d like to help if I can. Do you want to tell me

anything more about what is going on?” (Technically, you as a first responder have enough information to suspect exploitation and need to take this to the DSL. But the child may want to talk more about it and you want to allow him to do this so you can provide support. An open-ended question allows him to take the conversation in any direction he wishes, and you can follow his lead, providing support.)

- v. “It all began a few days ago when I received a text from an unknown person. They had a picture of me that I sent to a girlfriend a while back. Now, they’re saying that if I don’t pay them \$500, they’ll make sure the picture gets shared everywhere online.”
- vi. You say, “I can see why you’re very upset. It’s essential that we address this situation promptly. Your safety and well-being are our top priorities.” You go on to talk about involving the CP team. You also say, “It sounds like we will likely need to contact the police so they can help protect you and any other young people who may have been exploited. The CP team will support you and your family throughout this process.”
- vii. You say, “You know, {child’s name}, you’re not alone in this. Many young people have been put in this situation, and they have gotten through it. You will, too. You’ve been brave to come and tell me about it; that’s a great first step. And here at the school, we’re here to help you through the next steps.”
- viii. “Do you know if anyone besides your girlfriend has seen the photo?” (You are assessing how widely the image may have been spread.) “No one but my girlfriend, as far as I know.”
- ix. “{Child’s name} you’ve been through a great deal, and we’ve talked about a lot of things that will happen next. How are you feeling right now?” (You listen, validate, and support, as discussed above. If you are concerned about imminent harm (e.g., suicidality), take steps to notify others without leaving the child alone; an emergent psychiatric assessment may be needed.)
- x. “I need to speak with Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_ (DSL). Also, I need you to do a few things. The first is: Do not respond to any more emails or threats if you receive them; block the sender. The second is: Please take screenshots of all the communication that you’ve had with this person. Do not delete the photo he/she is using to threaten you. I will not view this photo, but it may be important for the police investigation.” (Do not leave the child alone—bring them to the office, or the counselor’s office, or somewhere else safe where they can sit with a trusted adult while you work with the team to determine next steps).

- IX. A 4-year-old child is seen mimicking sexual intercourse with a girl doll and pretending to insert a pencil in the genitals of the doll.**
- a. Possible Response:**

- i. “[Child’s name], I see you’re playing with your doll. Tell me about what is happening with her.” The child responds, “She’s playing the ‘dancing game’ with her daddy.”
- ii. Follow up with a ‘cued invitation’ question: “Tell me all about the dancing game.” The child says, “She’s in bed trying to sleep. Her daddy won’t let her sleep. He wants to dance, but she doesn’t like it.”
- iii. “Does anyone else play the dancing game?” (This is a yes/no question, so if the child says, ‘Yes’, you’ll need to corroborate it with a follow-up: “Tell me about other people playing the dancing game.”) The child says, “No, just my daddy and the doll.”
- iv. You are concerned about abuse and need to report it to the DSL. But you need to maintain transparency, so you say, “I’d like to know a bit more about the dancing game, but it is important that Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_ also hear about it so that if your doll or someone else needs help, we can offer it. In the meantime, why don’t you play another game with your doll—something both you and the doll really enjoy? What kind of game might that be?”

**X. A 7-year-old boy becomes visibly upset when he learns that he received a low grade on his test. The test results are due to be sent home to parents today. The child says, ‘I can’t go home with this,’ and begins to cry. You recall that the last time he had a poor grade, he missed school for two days. You are concerned about possible physical abuse.**

**a. Possible Response:**

- i. You ask another staff member to watch your students while you take the boy to a quiet place where you can talk.
- ii. You say, “[Child’s name], I can see you’re really upset, and I want to help. Can you tell me about what’s making you cry?” (Note: Given the child’s clear distress, it is hard to begin with a warning about confidentiality—he may be too upset to understand this message. So, in this case, you may want to proceed with open-ended questions to obtain basic (you only need basic) information about possible abuse, and to validate his feelings and provide support.)
- iii. The child says, “Mommy gets so mad at me when I get a bad grade. It hurts, and she makes me feel bad.”
- iv. To clarify this statement, you say, “Tell me about what Mommy does when you get a bad grade.” The child says, “She hits me with a stick, and then I can’t sit down because it hurts. She yells at me and says mean things. I feel bad.”
- v. You have enough information to determine that a report to the DSL is warranted. It is early in the school day, so the child is not in danger of harm for at least several hours. Your job now is to describe the next steps (what the CP team is and why they need to be involved; see above) and

provide support, allowing the child to talk about his fears if he wants, but not pushing him to disclose additional details. The CP team will need to find out more specific information (types of injuries, if child ever needed medical attention, if any siblings are beaten, if one parent is supportive or not, etc.).

- vi. To provide support, you can say, "I'm very glad you told me about this, {child's name}. Thank you for sharing it with me. What is happening at home is not your fault. We all have times when we don't do as well on a test as we'd like. You said you feel stupid, and your mother says you're stupid. I understand how you feel, but I see things in a different way. Can I tell you how I see it?" "Yes."
- vii. "I think you are very smart, and you try very hard. You are a good student, {child's name}. You and I can work together from now on, to help make your lessons easier. But right now, I'm very concerned about your safety." Then go on with your explanation about the CP team and next steps. Continue monitoring the child's emotions and stress level, providing support.