

What to do when a teacher is accused of abuse

1) Remain open-minded.

The natural human instinct is to recoil from alleged horror, and to immediately assume that the allegations are false. But the overwhelming majority of abuse disclosures prove to be true. In every case, the proper response is to remain open-minded.

2) Let yourself feel whatever emotions arise.

You may feel angry, betrayed, confused, hurt, worried and sad. These are all natural, "typical" responses to an allegation of sexual abuse. None of these feelings are inappropriate or "bad." Don't "kick yourself" for feeling any of these emotions.

3) Remember that abuse, sadly, is quite common.

It's far more widespread than any of us would like to believe. Experts estimate that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 9 boys will be molested in their lifetimes.

4) Don't try to figure out who the accuser is.

Abuse victims, like rape victims, need their privacy to recover from their trauma. Openly speculating about who is alleging abuse is essentially gossiping, and helps to create a hostile climate that will keep other victims (even those abused by other perpetrators) from coming forward.

5) If you do know the victim(s), protect their confidentiality.

There are many good reasons why abuse victims are unable to publicly come forward. Often, the person wants to keep their parents or young children from suffering too. Don't compound their pain by disclosing their identity to others.

6) Understand that abuse victims often have "troubled" backgrounds (i.e. drug or alcohol problems, criminal backgrounds, etc.)

Instead of undermining the credibility of accusers, these difficulties actually enhance their credibility. (When someone is physically hurt, there are almost always clear signs of harm; so too with sexual abuse. The harm is reflected largely in self-destructive behaviors. One might be skeptical of a person who claimed to have been run over by a truck but showed no bodily injury. Similarly, one might be skeptical of an alleged molestation victim who always acted like a "model citizen.")

7) Don't allow the mere passage of time to discredit the accusers.

Stress to your community members that there are many good reasons why abuse victims disclose their victimization years after the crime. In most instances, victims come forward when they are emotionally able to do so, and feel capable of risking disbelief and rejection from precious loved ones, including family members. Sometimes, they are psychologically able to do so only after their perpetrator has died, moved or been accused by someone else. Sometimes, they have been assured that their perpetrator would never be around kids again, but have learned that this isn't the case. (In other cases, it takes years before victims are able to understand and/or acknowledge to themselves that they have been sexually violated. This is a common defense mechanism.)

8) Ask your family members and friends if they were victimized.

Many times, abuse victims will continue to "keep the secret" unless specifically invited to disclose their victimization by someone they love and trust. Even raising this topic can be very uncomfortable. But it must be done. It may be very awkward and your family members may even act resentful at first. But soon they will remember that you really care about them, and will see your question as a sign of that care.

9) Mention the accusation to former community members now living elsewhere. They may have information that could prove the guilt or innocence of the person facing allegations. This is especially important because sometimes abuse victims or their families move away after experiencing abuse.

11) Contact the police or prosecutors.

It's your duty as a citizen to call the proper civil authorities if you have any information (even if it's "second hand" or vague) that might help prove the guilt or innocence of the accused. It's your duty to help seek justice and protect others from harm. Remember: abuse thrives in secrecy. Exposing a physical wound to fresh air, clean water and sunlight can be healing. Exposing sexual crimes is also ultimately healing. And remember that police and prosecutors are unbiased professionals with the skills and experience needed to ascertain whether an allegation is true or false.

11) Don't allow other community members to make disparaging comments about those making the allegation.

Remember, the sexual abuse of children has terribly damaging, long lasting effects. You want to help prevent such victimization. And you want anyone who is in pain to get help as soon as possible. Critical comments about those who make allegations only discourage others who may have been hurt. Such remarks prevent those who need help from reaching out and getting it. Show your compassion for abuse victims. Remind your fellow community members that hurtful comments are inappropriate. Remind them that they can defend their teacher without attacking the accuser.

12) Educate yourself and your family about sexual abuse.

There are many excellent books and resources on the subject.

13) Support the accused teacher PRIVATELY.

Calls, visits, letters, gifts, and prayers - all of these are appropriate ways to express your love and concern for the accused teacher. Public displays of support, however, are not. They only intimidate others into keeping silent. In fact, it is terribly hurtful to victims to see community members openly rallying behind an accused teacher. You may want to publicly defend a teacher, collect funds for the teacher's defense, and take similar steps. Please don't. Express your appreciation of the teacher in a direct, quiet ways. Even if the teacher is innocent, somewhere in the community is a young girl being molested by a relative or a boy being abused by his coach or youth leader. If these children see adults they love and respect publicly rallying around accused perpetrators, they will be less likely to report their own victimization to their parents, the police, or other authorities. They will be scared into remaining silent, and their horrific pain will continue.

14) Don't be blinded by the pain you can see.

The trauma of the accused teacher, and those who care about them, is obvious. You can usually see it in their face, posture, and actions. But please keep in mind the trauma of the accuser as well. Because you rarely see their pain directly, it's important to try and imagine it. This helps you keep a balanced perspective.

15) Try to put yourself in the shoes of the alleged victim.

It's easy to identify with the teacher. Most people have met dozens of teachers and know them as warm and wonderful individuals. On the other hand, few people know when they meet abuse survivors. Try, as best you can, to imagine the shame, self-blame, confusion and fear that afflict men and women and children who have been victimized by trusted authority figures.

16) Use this painful time as an opportunity to protect your own family.

Talk with your children about "safe touch," the private parts of their bodies, who is allowed to touch those parts, what to do if someone else tries, and who to tell.

18) Turn your pain into helpful action.

In times of stress and trauma, doing something constructive can be very beneficial. Volunteer your time or donate your funds to organizations that help abused kids or work to stop molestation.

19) Keep in mind the fundamental choice you face.

On the one hand, at stake are the FEELINGS of a grown up. On the other hand, at stake is the PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, SPIRITUAL AND SEXUAL SAFETY of potentially, many children. If one has to err in either direction, the prudent and moral choice is to always err on the side of protecting those who can't protect themselves: children. Remember that it's easier for an adult to repair his reputation than for a child (or many children) to repair their psyche and life. Another way to look at this: Being falsely accused of abuse is horrific. Actually being abused, then being attacked or disbelieved is far worse.

19) Ask your Principal to bring in an outside expert or a therapist who can lead a balanced discussion about sexual abuse.

Therapists understand and can answer the questions you and your community members are facing, and help your community deal with the emotional impact of this trauma.