

Protecting God's Children for Adults

The Facts about Mandated and Ethical Reporting

By [The VIRTUS® Programs](#)

Introduction

Every person involved in the life of a child has the opportunity to make a significant difference in that child's life—regardless of their role or level of interaction. One of the most important tools safe adults have to combat child sexual abuse includes recognizing and reporting abuse. *We must* become more aware of the facts, best practices—and the law, to respond appropriately when abuse does happen.

When do we need to report abuse?

Report any disclosures about child sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect to your state's child protective services or local law enforcement as soon as possible. A disclosure of abuse occurs when a child or youth shares that they have experienced abuse. There is no gray area for disclosures—these *must* be reported.

In addition, report anything that gives you a belief or a **suspicion** that a child or youth has been abused in any way—this includes suspicions of abuse based on observed behavior or information that was communicated to you. A **reasonable suspicion of abuse** means that based on a scenario or situation, a thought or concern has entered your mind that the child could be in a current abusive situation, or may have experienced abuse in the past.

Mandated and Ethical Reporters

Anyone can report suspected or known child abuse, *anytime*, day or night. *Mandated Reporters* are persons who are legally required to report suspected or disclosed cases of abuse or maltreatment to child protective service agencies or law enforcement. In some states, every adult is a mandated reporter, by law. In other states, you are more likely to be a mandated reporter based on your profession or interaction with children.

However, regardless of the law, **everyone has an ethical and moral obligation to report known or suspected child abuse**—this includes whether the adult is “on” or “off-duty,” which means that the mandated reporter is always required to report abuse. Additionally, even if the law in your state does not specifically designate you as a mandated reporter, it is possible that your *organization* might have a policy that obligates you to make reports of child abuse or maltreatment. For many who are involved in child-serving organizations, the organization's policy elevates them to be mandated reporters from an ethical perspective.

Many states have laws that require reporting within a certain timeframe, typically from 24-48 hours. However, the best practice is just to report as soon as possible. *After* you communicate with child protective services, you may also need to follow up with your supervisor or your organization's child protection office if it involves a child or employee/volunteer of the organization.



Report even if you aren't sure if abuse is actually happening, and even when you feel that you don't have all of the facts. Keep in mind that disclosures must always be taken seriously—a child doesn't need to have any of the common indicators of sexual abuse for you to believe them and take action. It's unlikely that we will ever be positive that abuse is occurring, and we will rarely have all the facts. We need to report anyway.

When in doubt of whether or not you should make a report, always err on the side of protecting the child, and make the report. Your action of reporting could be the determining factor as to whether an investigation will occur, even if others have already reported. And, you never know if your report will be what ultimately saves that child's life, or gets them the help they need.

There are also other scenarios that would require communicating your concerns. For example,

- If you believe or suspect that a child is in imminent or immediate danger of abuse, call 911.
- Sometimes, you won't have a suspicion of abuse, and a child hasn't disclosed abuse to you, but, the child does disclose inappropriate or boundary-violating behavior from an adult. This should be immediately communicated to the program supervisor or to the organization. Some states also require this type of situation to be communicated to child protective services.

Conclusion

Ultimately, being a safe adult means more than observation—it's about courage and action—to have greater awareness, to hear children and youth, to *believe* them, and *act* when a child or youth discloses or when you suspect abuse. If you have any questions about the reporting policies within your organization or state, please refer to your organization's office of safe environment or child protection. You can also review the requirements for reporting in each state here:

https://www.virtusonline.org/virtus/Abuse_Reporting.cfm

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