

A Guide for

# friends and family

of Survivors of Sexual Abuse,  
Harassment, and Assault



## Help is always available, 24/7.

If you or a loved one has experienced sexual harassment, abuse, or assault and would like help, visit [www.pcar.org/help-in-pa](http://www.pcar.org/help-in-pa) or call **1-888-772-7227** to be connected to a Pennsylvania sexual assault center near you.

For help outside of PA, call the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) at **1-800-656-4673** from anywhere in the United States.

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# Understanding sexual harassment, abuse, and assault

**Sexual violence includes all forms of unwanted sexual contact including sexual harassment, abuse, and assault, and can be perpetrated through words or actions.**

Sexual violence can be committed without the knowledge of the person who was harmed. Several factors can impact a person's knowledge that sexual violence has been committed against them, such as age, intellectual disability, mental illness, or incapacitation due to drugs or alcohol. People who cause harm may specifically target a person because of these factors or may be so charismatic or manipulative that the survivor doesn't recognize the behavior as abuse.

Some forms of sexual violence, though deeply harmful, may not be illegal. For example, a sexist or sexually-violent joke might be deeply offensive or cause a person to feel afraid, but it may not meet the legal definition of a crime.

People who commit sexual abuse may use force or violence, but most often, they use manipulation, threats, or "charm" to coerce or trick the victim. A lack of physical injuries does not mean the victim consented, nor does it mean the sexual harassment, abuse, or assault didn't happen.

Oppression is a root cause of sexual violence. Sexual harassment, abuse, and assault are tied to inequality. People who commit sexual violence may target people with less perceived power in society due to factors such as:

- Race or ethnicity
- Age
- Physical, developmental, or intellectual disability
- Gender identity

- Sexual orientation
- Immigration status
- Income
- Political identity
- Religious or spiritual beliefs

Sexual harassment, abuse, and assault can take many forms, including, but not limited to:

- Child sexual abuse
- Commercial sexual exploitation or sex trafficking
- Exposure and voyeurism
- Forced participation in the creation or viewing of pornography
- Incest
- Rape and sexual assault
- Sexual touching without consent
- Ritual abuse
- Sexual harassment
- Sexual or gender-based bullying, including cyber-bullying

The majority of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault is committed by someone known to the survivor, including, but not limited to:

- Parents
- Partners
- Family members
- Caregivers
- Classmates
- Co-workers
- Friends
- Acquaintances
- Faith leaders
- Coaches
- Teachers

**Oppression is a root cause of sexual violence. Sexual harassment, abuse, and assault are tied to inequality.**



Sexual violence can occur in any setting, including places where people should feel safe, such as:

- Homes
- Faith-based institutions
- Healthcare facilities
- Schools, colleges, and universities
- Childcare and preschool programs
- Work
- Correctional facilities
- Residential care or treatment facilities
- Sports teams and recreational facilities

Sexual harassment, abuse, and assault are sometimes covered up by institutions or people in positions of authority. The sexual violence may be ignored or allowed to continue even after it is discovered. Institutions or organizations may wrongly prioritize their reputation over the safety of the individual and others. It is important to note that failing to act on or report abuse can be a criminal offense.

Sexual violence impacts everyone: individuals, families, communities, and the larger society. But together, we can make a difference because prevention is possible and it is happening. People can work to establish and build healthy and positive relationships that are based on respect, safety, and equality. As individuals, all of us have a role to play in creating safe environments. We can all intervene to stop concerning behavior; promote and model healthy attitudes and relationships; and begin by believing survivors and assisting them in finding resources. We are all part of the solution.

## How you can help when someone discloses

Your response when a loved one discloses sexual harassment, abuse, or assault can have a lasting impact on the survivor. To help the survivor on their path to healing, it is essential to respond with compassion and empathy. Let them know that they are not alone and that healing is possible.

### **Remain calm.**

You may feel shocked or outraged, and while these are very common responses, it is important to temper your emotions so that you do not add to the survivor's distress. If you need to vent or process your emotions, contact your local sexual assault center for support.

### **Believe the survivor.**

Make it clear to them that you believe what they are telling you and that the sexual harassment, abuse, or assault was not their fault.

### **Give the survivor control.**

During the sexual violence, choice was taken away from the survivor. Empower the survivor to make decisions about next steps, and try to avoid telling them what to do.

### **Be available to the survivor to express a wide range of feelings.**

Some survivors may feel numb or may not want to talk about their experience. Remember that these feelings are about what happened and the person who committed the abuse, and try not

to take their feelings or expressions of emotion personally. Simply listening and being there with them can be very helpful.

### **Be patient and realize that healing can involve advances and setbacks.**

Avoid making threats against the person who committed the abuse. This may cause a survivor to worry about your safety or risk of arrest. Also, it is not unusual for a survivor to still care about the person who harassed, abused, or assaulted them. Threatening that person may add to the survivor's conflicted feelings.

### **Do not attempt to investigate or question others about what happened.**

Not only might these actions put you at risk of harm, you may negatively impact criminal or civil investigations if the survivor makes a report.

### **Maintain confidentiality.**

Except in cases of mandated reporting, it is important to allow the survivor to decide who to tell about what happened to them.

### **Ask before offering physical comfort.**

Asking for consent to touch the survivor (For example, "May I give you a hug?") can help to re-establish the survivor's sense of safety and control.

### **Don't make promises you cannot keep.**

For example, saying that you will never let anyone harm them again or that the person who abused them will be put in jail. If the promises do not pan out, trust can be eroded, and survivors can feel additional layers of betrayal.

### **Educate yourself about the impact of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault.**

Learn about resources in your community that provide services for survivors, such as your local sexual assault center. This guide is a good place to start.

### **Take care of yourself.**

You cannot help others to the best of your ability if you are also struggling. Sexual assault centers also provide support for family members, friends, and significant others of survivors. Their services are free and confidential, and they are there to help.

If you are unable to provide the help or support the survivor needs, assist them in identifying other resources. For example, you can help them identify other friends or family that may be able to help them, or put them in touch with community resources that can assist, such as the local sexual assault center.

### **Mandated reporters of child abuse**

Mandated reporters are teachers, child care workers, medical professionals, police officers, coaches and anyone else who works with children. Every mandated reporter should be equipped to know the proper steps to take when they suspect child abuse. To learn more about what it means to be a mandated reporter and the steps one should know, visit <https://pcar.org/laws-policy/mandated-reporting> for more information.

**The time following sexual harassment, abuse, or assault can be confusing or frightening. Let survivors know that help is available.**



## Concerns and options

The time following sexual harassment, abuse, or assault can be confusing or frightening. If you know someone who has experienced sexual violence, without overwhelming them, you may want to help them consider the following issues. Most importantly, let them know that help is available.

**Pennsylvania Sexual Assault Hotline:** 1-888-727-2877

**Find Help in Pennsylvania:** [www.pcar.org/help-in-pa](http://www.pcar.org/help-in-pa)

**National Sexual Assault Hotline (Phone):** 1-800-656-4673

**National Sexual Assault Hotline (24/7 chat):** [online.rainn.org](http://online.rainn.org)

**Childline:** 1-800-932-0313

### Safety

To the best of your ability, make sure the person is in a safe place. Be there for them emotionally, and encourage them to reach out for additional support. You or they may contact your local sexual assault center for free and confidential counseling and advocacy by calling 1-888-727-2877 (in PA) or 1-800-656-4673 (anywhere in the U.S.). In PA, to report the abuse of a child to Childline, call 1-800-932-0313. While some people are required to make these reports (including, but not limited to rape crisis advocates, law enforcement, medical professionals, and teachers), anyone can make a report if they suspect child abuse.

### Support and counseling

Survivors and other people in their lives may need help dealing with their feelings about the sexual harassment, abuse, or assault. Sexual violence is serious, and may have short- and long-term effects on the survivor and those who love and care for them. Sexual

assault centers provide free and confidential counseling, support and accompaniment through medical and legal proceedings, 24-7 hotlines, advocacy services, prevention programming, and more.

## Medical attention

Medical care after a sexual assault can be an important part of the healing process. Healthcare providers can perform a forensic exam (often known as a rape kit) to collect evidence and find any injuries not readily visible, and provide treatment for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and medication to prevent pregnancy (emergency contraception). Evidence generally can be collected within five days, depending on the circumstances around the assault. Cost for forensic exam and related medications are not to be charged to a victim. Victims can choose to have the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency's Victims Compensation Assistance Program (VCAP) billed for the forensic exam and medications. See VCAP section below for more information.

A victim does not have to speak with police in order to get a forensic exam. Adult victims also have the option of getting evidence collected anonymously and can choose to have the evidence held or tested anonymously if certain information is provided to police. Evidence collected anonymously is held for the duration of the statute of limitations. The victim can choose to report to police at any point during this time and have the case converted to a known case and work with police in a possible investigation.

If a victim does not wish to go to a hospital or get a forensic exam, they can seek treatment at a clinic or their healthcare provider for STD treatment and pregnancy testing. Emergency contraception is also available over the counter in a number of brands, including Plan B and Next Step. See [https://rhntc.org/sites/default/files/resources/rhntc\\_ec\\_fast\\_facts\\_job\\_aid\\_8-31-2023.pdf](https://rhntc.org/sites/default/files/resources/rhntc_ec_fast_facts_job_aid_8-31-2023.pdf) for more information.

## Victims Compensation Assistance Program (VCAP)

Pennsylvania law allows for victims to opt for the costs of the forensic rape examination and medications provided as a direct

result of a sexual assault or rape to be charged to the state and not to the victim. Therefore, a victim should never be billed for a forensic exam. The victim of a sexual offense does not need to report the sexual offense or talk to law enforcement in order for the costs to be paid by VCAP.

Other costs associated with the crime may be eligible for reimbursement through VCAP under specific eligibility requirements. Information can be found here: [https://www.pccd.pa.gov/Victim-Services/Pages/Victims-Compensation-Assistance-Program-\(VCAP\).aspx](https://www.pccd.pa.gov/Victim-Services/Pages/Victims-Compensation-Assistance-Program-(VCAP).aspx) and an advocate from the local sexual assault center can also be a helpful resource and assist with filing a compensation claim.

## Reporting the assault to law enforcement

Survivors can choose whether or not to report the assault to the police, and can make a report any time. Once a report is made, the police will work to gather evidence. An investigation can take weeks or months. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, through the county prosecutor or district attorney's office, will decide whether or not to move forward with the case. During the decision-making process, the prosecutor is evaluating: what crime has occurred, statute of limitations for the crimes, the amount of evidence that they have, which charges can be filed, and whether or not they believe the crime can be proven in court. If charges are filed and an arrest is made, the process will continue through court proceedings.

## Reporting the assault to authorities at school or work

If the sexual harassment, abuse, or assault happened in a school or work setting, the survivor may have additional options. For example, Title IX of the Civil Rights Act protects students from sexual violence that impacts a survivor's ability to receive an education. Similarly, Title VII prohibits discrimination within the workplace that may include instances of sexual harassment, abuse, or assault. These types of reports are separate from reports that are made to police, and may offer different forms of relief for survivors. While schools and workplaces are legally

obligated to investigate incidences of sexual harassment, abuse, or assault within their settings, survivors can choose whether or not to participate in these processes. You can learn more about the latest Title IX Guidance at [www.pcar.org/what-know-about-title-ix](http://www.pcar.org/what-know-about-title-ix).

## Filing for civil protection orders

Civil protection orders can offer survivors additional options for safety and support. In Pennsylvania, there are three different types of orders: Protection from Abuse Orders, which are for use in cases where the sexual violence involves a family member or intimate relationship partner; Sexual Violence Protection Orders are intended to be used in situations of sexual violence where there is no family-member or intimate relationship between the parties involved; and lastly, Protection from Intimidation Orders are for cases of harassment or stalking involving a victim who is 17 or younger and an offender who is 18 or older. Filing for a civil protection order is a separate option from reporting to police and the criminal justice process. For more information about these orders or how to file, you can contact your local sexual assault center or visit <https://pcar.org/sexual-violence-protection-orders>.

## Legal services

Many survivors of sexual harassment, abuse, or assault wonder about what their legal options might be. The options that might be available to survivors can vary depending upon the specific circumstances, timeframe, or location where the sexual violence occurred. Attorneys can help survivors and their loved ones sort through their options and provide guidance. To speak with an attorney or to help find legal services in your community, contact PCAR's Legal Assistance Project at 1-717-901-6784. PCAR's legal services are free and confidential.

## Responding to child sexual abuse

The disclosure of child sexual abuse can affect an entire family, social group, or community. If you are a caregiver or loved one of a child who has experienced sexual abuse, you may want to seek support from family, friends, or a counselor or support group at a local sexual assault center. You will be better able to support the child if you are able to work through your own feelings.

It is common for caregivers to have a range of feelings, such as anger, sadness, or guilt about what has happened. These feelings may be particularly complicated or confusing if the person who harmed the child is also someone that you love and trust. It is important to remember that no one is to blame except the person or people who committed the abuse. Your feelings about the abuse may be different than the feelings of the child who experienced the abuse. That is okay. Reassure yourself and the child that it is typical for people to react differently, and that there are many safe ways to express those emotions and be supportive.

Effects of child sexual abuse can be similar to the reactions experienced by adults which are explained later in this guide. In children, it is common to notice changes or regression in behaviors. For example, you may notice sleep disturbances, trouble concentrating, outbursts, changes in school attendance or performance, or social withdrawal. Children may display behaviors that they had outgrown, such as bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, or attachment to a security object.

The disclosure of child sexual abuse can create a crisis in many families. Caregivers and loved ones may assume that once a child has disclosed their abuse that they will feel safe and return to their normal functioning. While children are very resilient and can heal from abuse, healing takes time and patience.

## Here are a few ways you can help:

- 1 Maintain consistent rules and structure to increase feelings of safety.
- 2 Offering choices whenever possible allows the child to feel a greater sense of control.
- 3 Allow the child to express the full range of emotions they are experiencing. Help them find safe and healthy ways to express themselves.
- 4 Recognize the child's strengths, and help them recognize their own resilience and strength.
- 5 Most importantly: **listen, believe, and support them.** Let them know the abuse is not their fault. Your support is more important than anything else right now.

## Effects of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault

Each survivor of sexual violence responds in their own way. It is important to respect each person's way of coping. Whether the violence was completed or attempted, recent or in the past, a survivor's daily functioning can be impacted in a variety of ways.

### Emotional responses

Some survivors will openly express their emotions, while others present as if nothing is wrong. These responses may be consistent with how the survivor typically copes with stress, or may be completely out of character. It may take some survivors days, weeks, or even months or years to talk about what happened to them. It is important to be patient and to remember to respect the survivor's process and timeline for coping and healing.

### Physical responses

It is common for survivors to experience physical responses as a result of the trauma they have endured. Responses can include headaches, body aches, digestive issues, impact on appetite, changes in sleep patterns, or exacerbation of existing medical conditions.

### Psychological responses

It is common for survivors to experience feelings of anxiety and depression as they process what has happened. They may develop or rely on coping strategies that help them deal with the stress. These coping mechanisms may be healthy or unhealthy. Examples of healthy coping can include exercise, journaling, art, music, or therapy. It is important to remember that coping skills that are typically considered to be positive may be used in

harmful ways when done in the extreme. For example, exercise is a great way to relieve stress, but when it becomes excessive, it can cause physical harm to the survivor, and social harm if the time they spend exercising is at the expense of maintaining their relationships. Additional examples of unhealthy coping can include using drugs or alcohol to numb pain, sleeping excessively, over- or under-eating, or self-harming behaviors. Existing mental illness can be exacerbated, and survivors may struggle with suicidality. It is important to assist them in seeking professional help if they are feeling overwhelmed.

### Social responses

In the majority of cases, sexual violence is committed by someone known and trusted by the survivor. This can cause them to question their relationships with others. While many survivors will find comfort in connecting with loved ones, some survivors will withdraw from their relationships. While it may seem counter-intuitive, many survivors use sexual intimacy to find comfort and to gain a sense of control over their bodies.

### Spiritual responses

Experiencing a trauma or life-changing event, such as sexual harassment, abuse, or assault, can cause survivors to question their understanding of the world. Some survivors may find comfort in faith (whether religiously-based or not), while others may feel abandoned. Experiences of sexual violence can cause people to question their sense of self, their meaning and place in the world, and the reasons for suffering and pain.

Below is a list of common responses, but is certainly not exhaustive. Survivors with existing physical or mental health concerns may experience flare-ups in their condition. Often, these feelings, symptoms, or behaviors will present soon after the trauma happened, but it is also possible for them to surface weeks, months, or even years after the sexual harassment, abuse, or assault.

## emotional

- Guilt, shame
- Self-blame
- Embarrassment
- Fear
- Distrust
- Sadness
- Anger
- Numbness
- Confusion
- Shock, disbelief
- Denial

## physical

- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Injuries from assault
- Body aches
- STIs
- Pregnancy
- Insomnia
- Fatigue
- Changes in appetite

## psychological

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Feeling out of control
- Dissociation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Trauma
- Substance use, misuse, abuse
- Phobias
- Thoughts of self-harm, suicidality

## social

- Withdrawal from relationships
- Withdrawal from activities
- Avoiding certain people or places
- Changes in behavior
- Over-immersion in activities as an escape

People are very resilient, and healing is possible. While the healing journey is unique to each survivor, many people find relief in talking through the trauma in counseling, therapy, or a support group. It is important to note that sexual assault centers are a great point of contact, and can help identify resources within their programs or in the community that can help meet the survivor's needs.

## How common is sexual harassment, abuse, and assault?

### The majority of sexual victimization starts early in life (Black et al., 2011)

According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), sexual violence is common in youth. Most female victims of rape (79.6 percent) experienced their first rape before age 25 and almost half (42.2 percent) experienced their first rape before age 18.

### Teens' experience with sexual harassment, abuse, and assault (Smith et al., 2018)

Both female and male youth are exposed to early sexual victimization. The 2015 NISVS data found:

- 11 million or 43.2% of female victims reported their first completed or attempted rape occurred prior to age 18.
- 1.5 million or 51.3% of male victims first experienced completed or attempted rape prior to age 18.

### Male survivors

According to the 2015 NISVS, almost a quarter of men who were surveyed (24.8%) experienced sexual violence involving physical contact, including:

- Rape (completed or attempted): 2.6%
- Made to penetrate (completed or attempted): 7.1% (1 in 14 men). The majority of this group (almost 80%) reported the person who committed the abuse as being female
- Sexual coercion (being worn down by someone who repeatedly asked for sex; sexual pressure due to someone using their influence or authority): 9.6% or almost 1 in 10 men

- Unwanted sexual contact (for example, groping): 17.9%

*NOTE: Since some respondents reported experiencing more than one form of victimization, these sum of these percentages is greater than 24.8%*

Almost half (48.7%) of male victims were sexually assaulted for the first time as adults, but 51.3% of male victims of completed or attempted rape reported experiencing their first victimization prior to age 18; 25.3% reported their first victimization occurred between 11-17, and 26% reported their first victimization at age 10 or younger.

### LGBTQ survivors

- Adolescents in LGBTQ communities are more likely to experience sexual harassment than their straight peers (Farris et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2014).
- Almost half of transgender adults are sexually abused or assaulted during their lives (James et al., 2016).
- Over 29% of lesbian or bisexual girls and over 25% of gay or bisexual boys experienced rape (Lindley & Walsemann, 2015).

### Survivors of color

- Black women have experienced an “institutional pattern of rape” rooted in slavery (West & Johnson, 2013).
- Between 40 and 60 percent of Asian women in the United States report forms of sexual violence (Black et al., 2011).
- Black girls and women 12 years and older experienced higher rates of rape and sexual assault than white, Asian, and Latina girls and women from 2005-2010 (Planty et al., 2013).

### Survivors with disabilities

- Women with a disability were significantly more likely to report experiencing rape, sexual violence other than rape, physical violence, stalking, psychological aggression, and control of reproductive or sexual health. (Black et al., 2011)

## Questions and answers

q

**My friend was raped a few months ago, and since then, has been having a lot of sex with different people - more than before. Is this a common reaction?**

- a** Each person who experiences sexual violence will respond differently, and these responses may include changes in how they express themselves sexually. Some survivors will not want to engage in intimate behaviors after experiencing sexual harassment, abuse, or assault, while others find sexual activity to be a way to regain a sense of control over their bodies and sexuality. For many people, sex can be a coping strategy; however, as with anything, if the sex is impacting your friend in negative ways (such as creating or compounding feelings of guilt or shame) or if they are engaging in unsafe sex (not using protection, for example), encourage your friend to reach out to a counselor and/or their healthcare provider to learn more about engaging sexual activity that is safe and healthy for mind, body, and soul. Also, encourage your friend to seek reproductive healthcare. Your local sexual assault center can provide information about clinics and options.

q

**My brother was sexually abused as a child. Now, as an adult, he abuses drugs and alcohol. Is there a connection?**

- a** Many people who misuse or abuse alcohol or drugs have experienced trauma in their past, including child sexual abuse, and use substances to numb their feelings or as a form of self-medication. Research shows overwhelming evidence that victims

of sexual violence are much more likely to use alcohol and other drugs to cope with the trauma of their victimization. The short-term relief offered by alcohol or drugs can become problematic for many survivors. If your brother is thinking about or in treatment for addiction, it may be helpful to encourage him to talk to someone about the abuse he experienced so that he can have help healing from his trauma and can learn healthy coping skills.

q

**My child was sexually abused by a friend of the family about a year ago. My child refuses to talk about it and is acting as if nothing happened, but I have so much anger and can't seem to move past it. Is this common?**

**a** While there are many common responses that people share, there are other responses that may be unique to that person or their situation. For example, you expressed that your child is refusing to talk about the abuse and is acting like nothing happened. While not every child would respond in this way, this is a common reaction. It is possible that the avoidance may be a form of self-protection. It might feel easier to them to not think or talk about it. Avoidance like this can happen consciously or unconsciously. It is also entirely possible that your child is not at a stage where they understand what happened or why everyone is so upset about it. It is also common for children to not want to talk to their parents about what happened for fear of upsetting them.

Parents often experience a full range of emotions when they learn that their child has been harmed, including guilt, fear, sadness, and anger. These feelings can be compounded when the person who caused the harm is someone they care about and trust. These feelings can be hard to process, especially when you are working hard to support your child.

Rape crisis counselors are specially trained to support children who have been sexually abused and their families who are also

impacted by the abuse. You and your child might find it helpful to have a person to share your feelings and experiences with. A counselor can help you and your child explore different ways of processing and expressing feelings and help you learn healthy coping skills.

q

**I was sexually assaulted in college, and around that same time, I began to question my sexuality. Are the two related?**

**a** Social stigma of LGBTQ sexuality can compound the impact of sexual abuse, whether survivors identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or straight, or another sexual orientation. Sexual abuse can and often does affect and complicate the way people feel about sex, sexuality, and gender identity, but sexual abuse does not “turn” someone gay or change someone’s gender identity. No matter the gender of the person doing harm or being harmed, sexual violence is about access and vulnerability. Unfortunately, because of biases and discrimination against LGBTQ people, they are targeted for sexual harassment, abuse, and assault more frequently.

For example, adolescents in LGBTQ communities are more likely to experience sexual harassment than their straight peers (Farris et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2014), and research finds that almost half of transgender adults are sexually abused or assaulted during their lives (James et al., 2016). Research also shows that more than 29% of lesbian or bisexual girls and more than 25% of gay or bisexual boys experienced rape (Lindley & Walsemann, 2015).

# What can you do to prevent sexual harassment, abuse, and assault?

## Create safe communities for children

It is important for adults to feel confident in their ability to protect children from violence. Children are not responsible for protecting themselves or avoiding sexual harassment, assault, or abuse. Parents, guardians, educators, and other adults can create safe communities for all children. Adults can:

- Become comfortable talking with the children in their lives about their bodies, healthy relationships and sexuality, and physical development. Use correct terms for body parts, and talk to kids at different stages of their lives in developmentally-appropriate ways. There are many great books and resources available that can offer guidance on how to have these important conversations. Contact your local rape crisis program for more information about the Parents in the Know or Healthy Relationship projects or for other suggestions.
- Respect when a child does not want to give or receive physical affection such as a hug, kiss, or high-five, even when it's from a family member. Support them in their choice of whether or not to consent to physical affection with other adults. To learn more, visit [www.safesecurekids.org](http://www.safesecurekids.org), a website created by PCAR and d'Vinci Interactive to help caregivers prevent sexual abuse and harassment by communicating with children about respect and consent.
- Practice action steps when another adult acts inappropriately with a child or children (such as insisting on spending time alone with them or not respecting a child's boundaries).
- If you are a mandated reporter and a child discloses that they have been abused or if you suspect child abuse,

make the report by phone (1-800-932-0313) or report electronically through Pennsylvania's [Child Welfare Portal](#). Remember that it is not your role to investigate what happened; suspicion of abuse is enough to require you to make a report. If you are not a mandated reporter, you may still choose to report child abuse or suspicion of abuse.

- Know that support is available if you think abuse is happening, for you and the child. Your sexual assault center can answer questions and provide resources.

## Create safe communities for everyone

Every person has the ability to promote and share respectful behaviors. This can be as simple as privately asking a friend not to make inappropriate comments or publicly intervening in an argument or conflict. Taking action begins to change the thoughts, beliefs, and norms of individuals and communities.

Sometimes it can be intimidating to disrupt disrespectful behavior or hard to think of what to do or say in the moment. You may find it helpful to plan ahead and think about options before you're in the situation. Here's a common example:

A friend makes disrespectful comments about a highly-publicized case of sexual assault, and is expressing victim-blaming opinions. In this situation, you could:

- Share information you know about sexual harassment, abuse, and assault, and tell them that sexual violence is always a choice made by the person who committed the abuse, and that victims are not to blame for someone else's actions. Let them know that these kinds of attitudes prevent people who abuse others from being held accountable.
- Ask compassionate and thoughtful questions about the person's attitude. Why do they feel that way? Maybe having a thoughtful discussion could change their attitudes or beliefs.

- You could explain that sexual harassment, abuse, and assault are serious and widespread problems that affect many people and families, and that comments like those make it harder for people to come forward to make reports or to seek help.
- Tell them that you do not appreciate their comments and ask them to stop.

Remember, it's okay if you don't feel comfortable speaking up in the moment. You can follow up with the friend later, or check in with others who may have overheard and are also feeling confused, hurt, or offended by the comments to be sure they're alright.

Sometimes these kinds of actions seem small, but they can have long-reaching impacts that create changes in people and communities. People who commit sexual violence often rationalize their actions with beliefs based in inequality and oppression. When we interrupt or bring attention these kinds of attitudes and behaviors, we begin a process of change that can end sexual violence.

## Encourage healthy relationships and interactions

Many of the messages we receive from media are violent, manipulative, and harmful. It is important to think carefully about these images and stories so that you can challenge them, and create healthy relationships and sexual experiences.

Respectful, equitable relationships are based on consent. Consent means that both people are able to freely choose and agree to what they are going to do together, making decisions without any force or coercion. Consent should be clear, specific, voluntary, ongoing, and coherent. Silence or a lack of response is not consent. For additional information on consent or for prevention programming, contact your local rape crisis program.

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