

DISCLOSING ABUSE IN SPORT



13% of student athletes are victims/survivors of sexual assault through their participation in sport. A coach, trainer, or parent may be the first person to whom a child discloses. Disclosures may happen soon after experiencing abuse or they may happen months, years, or decades after the abuse. Regardless of the immediacy or timeframe, it's always important to be affirming and to share that you believe and support them.

WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE DISCLOSES

Stay Calm and Listen Carefully

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It's critical to stay calm and listen to the person carefully. Be sure to thank them for telling you and reassure them that you support and believe them. While it may feel awkward to say, "I trust and believe you," it's important that you speak clearly and ensure the person knows that you are not doubting them. Be sure you are trying to remain calm and choose your words carefully. Saying common phrases to express that you were not aware, or that you are in shock such as saying, "I can't believe this happened!" can be received by the person disclosing as you not believing what they are saying, even if you are not intending it to be received that way.

Be Mindful to Never Blame the Person for the Abuse They Experienced

Also be mindful that asking follow up questions immediately after the disclosure can be difficult for the person to answer and can seem investigative. Your role as a parent or support person is to ensure the child is safe and that they know that you believe them. It is not your role as a parent and support person to investigate and record all details of the abuse, approach the perpetrator, or act on the disclosure other than reporting it in accordance with state and federal laws.

IF THE ATHLETE IS A CHILD

If the athlete is a minor, please remember to call for help immediately. As a mandated reporter, you will need to immediately contact a child abuse agency such as a Children's Advocacy Center.

If you know or suspect that a child is being or has been sexually abused, please call the [Childhelp® National Child Abuse Hotline at 1.800.4.A.CHILD \(1.800.422.4453\)](https://www.childhelp.org/) or visit the federally funded [Child Welfare Information Gateway at: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding>](http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding). If you need immediate assistance, call 911. Many communities also have local Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) that offer coordinated support and services to victims of child abuse (including sexual abuse). For a state-by-state listing of accredited CACs, visit the website of the National Children's Alliance. Once authorities are notified of the abuse, the child will speak with a forensic interviewer who will work with law enforcement to build a case and respond to the abuse. Ensuring that the child has a positive first disclosure with you, by voicing that you trust and believe them, and by not asking questions or requiring them to share details about the abuse, will help the child in navigating a forensic interview. It's important to not force the child to share the story multiple times prior to the interview as the forensic interviewer is professionally trained in how to ask questions and support the child through their disclosure in a trauma-informed way.

IF THE ATHLETE IS AN ADULT

If the athlete is an adult, it is important to empower the athlete to respond and act however they feel is best for them. It's important to ensure that the athlete feels safe where they live and the places they go. If the athlete does not feel safe at home, it's important to make a [safety plan](#) with them. If the athlete does not have a counselor, it can be helpful to [connect them with a sexual assault center](#) if they are interested in obtaining a counselor. If they are interested in reporting the abuse to authorities and/or law enforcement, it can be beneficial to offer to go with them as they make a report. If the athlete experienced a sexual assault within the past 5 days, they may also need support in obtaining a forensic medical examine to acquire STI prophylaxis, emergency contraception, and check for any internal or external injuries.

If the abuse occurred as a child, but the athlete is an adult now, you legally do not have to report the abuse. Prior to an athlete disclosure, it is important for you to know and understand your athletic organization's policies and protocols around abuse or, if you are within a public school or university in the US and you are covered by Title IX as a mandated reporter within the organization. However, please note that regardless of your agency's policies, you are not legally required to report the abuse to authorities if the athlete is an adult.

WHY DON'T CHILDREN IMMEDIATELY DISCLOSE SEXUAL ABUSE?

There are many reasons children do not immediately disclose abuse, including:

Threats of bodily harm (to the child and/or the child's family) from the perpetrator

Fear of being removed from the home and family

Fear of removal of support systems, such as an athletic team

Fear of not being believed

Shame or guilt

Not realizing what happened was abuse

Believing myths of abuse

(i.e.: boys cannot be victims; women cannot be perpetrators; the victim must have allowed it)

Fear of getting the perpetrator in trouble

Fear of getting in trouble themselves, especially if the child blames themselves

Not having the language to communicate what happened

(for example, not knowing anatomical names for body parts)

When an athlete trusts you with their story and disclosure, it's crucial you support and validate them. Be mindful that the response following someone's first disclosure can impact their response and possibility of sharing moving forward. Survivors never owe anyone their story, but it's a privilege when someone trusts you with theirs.

RESOURCES

https://files.cargocollective.com/c520687/World-Players_CARE-Report-2021-.pdf

https://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunctionsaction=rols:main.dspList&rolType=c%20ustom&rs_id=5

<https://www.nationalcac.org/forensic-interview-services/>

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//child_sexual_abuse_fact_sheet_parents_tea%20chers_caregivers.pdf