



## How To React to Reports of Sexual Abuse

By Beth Dotson Brown

It's not a situation anyone wants to be in. Hearing someone say he or she has been sexually abuse can make the listener feel inadequate, overwhelmed and that someone more experienced needs to deal with the revelation. But according to Mary Beth Hanus, Victim Assistance Coordinator for the Archdiocese of Omaha, every person can and should do what the situation requires.



**Mary Beth Hanus**, Victim Assistance Coordinator, Archdiocese of Omaha

"I think it's a moral and ethical responsibility," says Hanus, a trained mental health and social worker who has been assisting abuse victims for 25 years. Beyond government and church laws and regulations, people of faith have a responsibility to safeguard every life and to treat it as sacred.

Carrying through with that responsibility isn't easy even for someone as experienced as Hanus. Sometimes people don't want to report suspected abuse because it's uncomfortable and they think it should be someone else's job. "I've been doing it for 25 years and it's never comfortable," she says. "I always bring those situations to prayer because it's never good if a family is disrupted."

Since the U.S. Bishops developed the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, dioceses throughout the country have developed policies for creating safe environments and responding promptly to allegations of abuse. The Omaha Archdiocese has put together a list of steps to remind people what to do if they suspect abuse. The steps include: being attentive to the child, contacting key people immediately, using a team approach to gather all information, reporting to the authorities, drawing on other



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church and community resource and documenting all observations, statements and actions taken.

Hanus says a key in being attentive to the child is trying to see the situation through that child's eyes. For example, she says, an adult should not put his or her own assumptions into a situation but should ask open-ended questions.

"If a child says, 'My Daddy hurt me' the adult shouldn't say, 'Did he touch you down there?'" Hanus says. Children interpret and express things differently than adults so it's important not to put words into a child's mouth. A child might say a parent is "mean" simply because of being banned from a favorite toy.

The more appropriate questions, Hanus says, are: "How did that make you feel?" or, "If your tears had words, what would they say?" In that way, the adult can develop a stronger perspective of how the child is truly seeing the situation.

If the child does reveal sexual abuse, Hanus says it's important to "stay calm and not show that you are appalled because that will make the child feel something they did was wrong."

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists says it's helpful to children if the person they reveal the problem listens, assures the child he is telling is the right thing, says the child is not to blame and offers protection.

Once the adult has worked through those steps, it's time to report the abuse to the appropriate authorities. State laws vary but typically point people to reporting to local law enforcement or the child advocacy office. Reporting can also be done on a hotline, such as the National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-4-A-CHILD. In addition, a person reporting abuse needs to check on the regulations the church has set in their diocese.

Hanus emphasizes that every report is important. Because both law enforcement offices and hotlines keep records, the frequency of reporting can help identify a problem that needs to be addressed. How long it will take to begin investigating the situation depends on the immediate danger to the child.

