Non-Offending Parent Reactions to Disclosure

Non-offending parents differ on their responses to the abuse. Note that there are various levels of knowledge about the sexual abuse. Often, parents are aware of problems within their homes and may have concerns, but they have not actually observed any specific acts of sexual abuse. Reinforce that the child's safety must remain paramount throughout the investigation and that allegations of sexual abuse represent a safety threat.

Child welfare professionals must recognize that non-offending parents may have a variety of responses to the abuse, which may change from visit to visit or even during the same visit. It is important to remember that the parent is grieving the loss of many things, including “a happy family,” “a happy marriage/relationship”, “a healthy child”, and possibly “a good parent.”

The non-offending parent may initially question the veracity of the child's disclosure, possibly needing additional information and time to absorb what has happened. In some instances, the parent may disclose that something similar happened to them as a child. It is important to take time to explore this issue with the parent, uncover how his/her disclosure was handled in the family of origin and what they wish would have happened. Discuss how this may affect the parent’s feelings about their child’s disclosure and reaffirm to the parent that abuse is not the child’s fault. Also keep in mind the individual issues and family dynamics that may affect the parent's ability to deal with the disclosure of sexual abuse is important. Encourage the parent to seek assistance regarding their own issues and provide resources to the parent.

In other instances, the parent/caregiver may refuse to believe the child, which may be related to a fear of their financial or familial situation changing. Instruct participants to take 30 seconds in silence to tune in to their first reactions. Then ask them to use 10 minutes to share their thoughts and feelings with other participants at their table. Once the small groups have finished sharing, ask at least one participant from each table to offer a comment regarding costs to the non-offending parent.

Acknowledge that not all parents are unaware of the abuse. If it is learned that the parent knew about the abuse or “should have known” and failed to protect the child, they are then considered a perpetrator by omission and are not able to assure the safety of the child themselves. Likewise, if it is revealed that the parent also participated in the abuse, they would be a perpetrator by commission. Although the parent may become supportive and protective of their child due to or during the investigation, it is vital to remember that the child’s safety comes first. Regardless of the circumstances, the child welfare professional will still need to develop a working relationship with this parent and should encourage the parent to provide as much support to their child as possible.

Remind participants that the non-offending parent’s role in keeping the family together has costs or consequences to all of the family members, including the identified child. It
is important to explore if and how the parent would be able to assure the safety of the child in such instances, such as not allowing the alleged perpetrator to be alone with the child or sending the child to a relative’s home during the investigation period.

Reaffirm that the role of the non-offending parent is key to the issue of safety and permanency. Engaging the parent’s assistance is essential to assuring the ongoing safety of the child and for future planning. It is preferable for the alleged perpetrator to leave the home during the investigative period (and after, if the abuse is substantiated) in order to minimize the trauma to the child. Names and contact information for family members, neighbors, babysitters and friends who can assist in protecting the child, carrying out functions the alleged perpetrator might normally do (such as taking the child to school or watching the child after school) and provide support to the parent and child should be elicited. The decision as to whether the child can remain in the home or, if removed, return to the home is dependent on the ability of the non-offending parent to support and protect the child.

Although being a survivor of sexual abuse can be an identified risk factor for non-offending mothers of sexual abuse, other protective factors, which promote resiliency, might serve to mitigate that risk, including the parent’s ability to identify with and want to protect the child. “There is dignity to be drawn from having prevailed over obstacles to one’s growth and maturing….It is a deep-dwelling sense of accomplishment in having met life’s challenges and walked away, not without fear, even terror, and certainly not without wounds. Often this pride is buried under embarrassment, confusion, distraction, or self-doubt. But when it exists and is lit, it can ignite the engine of change” (Saleebey, 2006, p. 17).

It is important to acknowledge that the allegations are still under investigation and a determination has not yet been made, while reinforcing those protective actions must be taken as if the allegations were true.