TALKING TO A CHILD

Would your child feel comfortable coming to you about something that happened to them? Would you feel comfortable talking to one of your child’s friends if they opened up to you about being exploited?

Here are a few Do’s and Don’ts when talking to a child you suspect has been/is being sexually exploited.

DO

lBe non-judgmental when listening to the child, and make sure to avoid shaming the child in the way you ask questions.

l“I” questions can be very helpful. Rather than beginning your conversation by saying, “You (the child) did something/said something that made me worry...” consider starting your inquiry with the word “I.” For example, “I am concerned because....”

lPay attention to your body language. Face the child and make eye contact. Show interest, empathy, and understanding through words, nods, and facial expressions. Speak calmly.

lPay attention to your child’s body language during and after their response to your question. Their body language should be congruent with what they are verbalizing.

lLabel the behavior, not them. For example, “you’re involved in prostitution” rather than “you’re a prostitute.”

lAsk if anyone has been touching them in ways that don’t feel OK or that make them feel uncomfortable.

lKnow that sexual abuse can produce a physical response that feels good to the victim, so asking your child if someone is hurting them may not get the information that you are looking for.

lEmphasize the child’s own choices and wishes in the recovery process.

DON’T

lDispute facts or comment on the child’s motivations. This is likely to stop the flow of information.

lExpect the child to recognize their situation as exploitative or to present themselves as a victim in need of immediate intervention or rescuing.

lReact verbally or physically in a way that communicates disgust or disdain. Refrain from displaying a “shocked” face or talking about how “awful” the child’s experience was—this may shut the child down.

lExpect the child to disclose all of the details of their abuse. Sometimes difficult information will need to be gathered in stages.