

# Recognizing and Reporting Sexual Abuse and Assault

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At least one in five girls and one in ten boys will be sexually abused at some point in their childhood.<sup>1</sup> People ages 15 to 24 report rape and sexual assault at far higher rates than any other age group.<sup>2</sup> If you suspect a student in your classroom has been or is being sexually abused, sexually exploited or injured (by anyone, not just a caregiver) you are required to report it. It is important to also remember that you likely always have students who are currently experiencing sexual abuse or assault, or who have in the past. Strive to create a classroom that is safe and inclusive, and in which good boundaries are modeled. You do not have to know for certain that a student has been abused to make a report and to offer the student support.

## How to tell that a student may have been sexually abused

1. The student tells you (possibly following a lesson on sexual exploitation or sexual assault).
2. The student acts differently from usual, in troubled ways . . .
  - Regressing to younger behaviors
  - Clinging to you or another staff person
  - Cranky, hostile or depressed
  - Sleeping in class, or lacking energy
  - Development of minor ailments (headaches, stomach aches, no appetite)
  - Reluctant to leave school at end of day
  - Dressing provocatively or wearing many layers of clothing even during hot weather

These behaviors can signal other stresses, but it never hurts to ask if you can help with a problem.

3. One student confides that another student was exploited.

## What to do if a student confides in you or if you have reasonable cause to believe a student has been assaulted

1. Believe that student and say, "I believe you."
2. Tell the student that it's not their fault and say, "I care about you and I'm glad you told me."
3. Speak privately with the student and maintain the student's confidentiality within the school, except if you feel the need to enlist the help of one other adult support person (your principal, school nurse, or whomever you trust the most).
4. Report the abuse. In all 50 states, the law requires professional school personnel to report the suspected abuse to either the police or to a child protection agency.<sup>3</sup> It is not sufficient to turn the case over to your principal or anyone else, even if this is what your school protocol advises. You are required by law to report it yourself or make certain it has been reported by another person (for example, by being in the room at the time). You do not need to know for

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certain that abuse has occurred to be obligated to report. All you need is *reasonable cause to believe* it has occurred; it is the job of the child protection agency to investigate, not yours.

5. Offer the student as much control as possible over the timing and manner of reporting. If he wishes, for example, he could make the report himself while you sat at his side for support.
6. If you need or want support or advice for yourself or the child in reporting the abuse, seek professional help.<sup>4</sup>

### What to do if you get an anonymous question from a student that indicates possible abuse

1. If you recognize the handwriting, ask that student if you can talk privately. Do not pressure the student, but explain that you care and that if there is anything the student wants help with, you can help. If the student denies writing the question, say that you care and want to help if the student ever does need help in the future. Explain that, in the meantime, you do have to notify Child Protective Services that you received the question, even if you aren't sure who wrote it.
2. If you don't recognize the handwriting, call Child Protective Services for advice about whether to make a formal report.

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<sup>1</sup> Finkelhor, D., & Dziuba-Leatherman, J. (1994). Children as Victims of Violence: A National Survey. *Pediatrics*, 94, 413-420.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. (1997, July). *Age Patterns of Victims of Serious Violent Crime*. Retrieved from <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/apvsvc.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Find state laws here: [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/mandaall.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/mandaall.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> To find your local sexual assault center, visit: [www.nsvrc.org/organizations](http://www.nsvrc.org/organizations).