

# Handbook for Caregivers Concerned about Abuse



Working toward healing and justice

## Welcome

We care for children when there is a concern about abuse. Our goal is to support you and your child through the process of assessment, treatment, investigation, healing and justice.

This handbook will help you along the way.

## When should a child be seen?

Children should be seen at First Step when there are concerns of:

- Sexual abuse
- Physical abuse
- Neglect
- Drug endangerment
- Witnessing violence or other criminal acts

If you suspect child abuse, you should:

- Call 911 for emergencies.
- Call Child and Family Services Centralized Intake at 866-820-5437 to report a concern.
- Call First Step at 406-329-5776 for more information or to make a referral.

## Difficult to report

It may be difficult for children to report abuse. Children are most often abused by someone they know and trust. They can be torn between sharing their experience and protecting those they love and upon whom they depend. Often, children assume they will get in trouble, that they will not be believed or that they will be responsible for “destroying” their family.

## Who can call First Step?

Concerned caregivers may call First Step to discuss our services. A professional from law enforcement, child protective services or a mental health provider may ask you to call us.

If you have questions about behavior related to healthy sexual development versus potential abuse, please call.





## Support and Recovery

The single most important factor affecting your child's recovery is the level of support from you, the parent or caregiver. With your support, your child can move toward recovery and healing.

## What happens at First Step?

When you and your child arrive at First Step for an evaluation, you will meet with a care coordinator and a nurse.

The nurse will ask you questions about your child's medical history and answer your questions before your child's interview and examination.

You may choose to bring a supportive person to wait with you during the evaluation. The care coordinator may be available to offer support or answer questions during the evaluation.

Before and after the evaluation, you will have an opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns with members of the multidisciplinary team.

## The forensic interview

First Step is a safe place where your child can talk about what has happened. Your child will talk to a nurse who is specially trained to talk with children about difficult subjects. While your child is speaking with the nurse, you may have the opportunity to meet with the care coordinator.

The goal of the interview is to seek the truth. Questions are asked in a non-threatening and non-leading manner.

Evaluations at First Step may involve professionals from multiple agencies. Only professionals who are involved in the investigation observe the forensic interview.

## The medical exam

Every child receives a medical exam. The exam is similar to a well-child check-up. The medical exam setting is familiar and child-friendly, like being at the doctor's office. Some children may disclose abuse during a medical exam, even if they did not during the forensic interview. Families find the exam to be helpful in answering questions and reassuring children that their bodies are okay.

## How to act with your child

*Some things YOU can say that will help your child:*

- "I believe you."
- "I know it's not your fault."
- "You are not in any trouble."
- "I'm glad you told me."
- "I'm sorry this happened to you."
- "I will take care of you."
- "Nothing about YOU made this happen. This has happened to other children, too."

*Some things YOU can do:*

- Return to a normal routine as soon as possible.
- Allow your child to talk, but do not ask detailed questions.
- Consider therapy or counseling for your child.
- Find help for yourself and your family – you are not alone (First Step can help you find counseling services in your area).
- Protect your child from the person suspected of abusing the child.
- Never tell your child how to act or what to say to professionals or any investigators.
- Teach your child about personal safety at home, at school and on the internet.
- Remember to give attention to your other children.

## The investigation

The basic steps to an investigation of child abuse include:

- Someone reports suspicion of abuse to authorities.
- An interview and medical exam with the child is conducted.
- Law enforcement and/or Child and Family Services will continue the investigation, which may include an interview with the alleged offender.
- The multidisciplinary team discusses the case and provide input into what the next steps should be.
- The case may be referred to civil or criminal court, or some other plan may be made for the case.

## Your multidisciplinary team

First Step has a highly trained team of professionals who respond to child abuse reports. The team members include:

- Law enforcement officer: Local law enforcement detectives interview non-offending caregivers, suspects and other witnesses and gather evidence from the scene of a reported incident.
- Child Protective Services social worker: The Child and Family Services social worker's role is to help protect your child. The CPS worker will work with you and your child to develop a safety plan and make referrals.
- County attorney/prosecutor: The prosecutor makes the final decision on whether to file criminal charges. This decision is based on many factors. Some of these factors are age and maturity of the child, the child's ability to testify, whether the suspect has confessed, physical evidence and if there are other witnesses. Not all cases are prosecuted.
- Health care provider/forensic interviewer: The health care provider's role is to interview your child and to conduct a medical exam. The interview is conducted in a child-friendly manner and is followed by an exam that is similar to a well-child check-up. This exam should not be traumatic or painful for your child. Most children who have been abused have normal exams.

- Care coordinator: The First Step care coordinator tries to meet with families during their child's appointment. If this is not possible, they provide follow-up for families over the phone. The social work staff works with the family to identify any needs and offers referrals as appropriate.
- Mental health counselor: The role of the mental health counselor is to provide counseling services for your child, your family and for you. First Step staff will provide you with referrals for mental health care at First Step or within the community.
- Advocate: Advocacy services may be provided by crime victim advocates or community-based advocates. Advocates provide services such as crisis counseling, emotional support, assistance applying for an order of protection, help in filling out and explaining forms, providing a secure place to wait during court proceedings or assistance accessing safe housing. Crime victim advocates act as a liaison between the victim and the justice system.



## Legal system response

There are two parts of the legal system: The criminal court system and the civil court system.

The criminal court system is concerned with the guilt or innocence of the accused and can include a trial. The trial will focus on issues such as:

- Is there evidence to prove that the child was abused?
- What illegal acts occurred?
- If proven guilty, what punishment should the offender receive?

The criminal investigation and court process can take a very long time. In cases that go forward for prosecution, it may be a year or more before a trial begins.

The civil court system is concerned with the safety of your child and focuses on issues such as custody, supervised visitation and counseling. Different court hearings can be held to decide these issues. The decisions in the civil system do not depend on whether the criminal system finds guilt.

## Court

Most reports of child abuse do not end up in the courtroom. Early in the process, there is no way to predict which cases will end up in court.

If there is a trial, an advocate and an attorney will answer your questions and prepare you and your child for court.

## What to say to others:

One challenge your family may face will be how to talk about the abuse. Although many adults and children have experience with abuse, it is a difficult subject.

You may want to talk with family members about your child's abuse. Your relatives may react in a variety of ways. It is important to maintain your child's privacy, but at the same time, be careful to not hold secrets.

Comments you may hear from others about the abuse:

- "What exactly happened to your child?"
- "Are you sure your child isn't making it up?"
- "Why didn't you know it was happening?"
- "If it were my child, I'd just move away."
- "Your poor child must be feeling guilty."

*You don't owe an explanation.*

Focus on you and your child above all else. You may want to say:

- "I'd rather not talk about it."
- "It's been a very difficult time for all of us."
- "I appreciate your concern."



## Resources

First Step Resource Center . . . . .	406-329-5776
MT Centralized Reporting for Child Abuse & Neglect . . .	1-866-820-KIDS
Missoula County Child & Family Services . . . . .	406-523-4100
Missoula County Sheriff's Office . . . . .	406-258-4810
Missoula Police Department . . . . .	406-552-6300
Missoula County Attorney's Office . . . . .	406-258-4737
Missoula Crime Victim Advocate Program . . . . .	406-258-3830
Missoula Youth Court . . . . .	406-258-4735
The U of M Student Advocacy Resource Center (SARC) . . .	406-243-6559
YWCA Crisis Line . . . . .	406-542-1944

## About us

First Step Resource Center is dedicated to providing a coordinated, compassionate response to concerns about child abuse. We foster that "first step" of your child's healing.

First Step coordinates with medical providers, mental health professionals, social workers, advocates, law enforcement officials and prosecutors. These professionals form a multidisciplinary team that responds to concerns about abuse. The team provides assessment, treatment, education, investigation and prosecution. Our founding principles are to seek truth, reduce trauma, promote healing for children who may have experienced abuse, neglect, drug endangerment or who may have witnessed violence.

First Step also serves adults reporting sexual assault. The focus of this handbook is the services for children and families.

## Reading list for children, parents and caregivers

*Understanding Children's Sexual Behaviors: What's Natural and Healthy*  
By Toni Cavanagh Johnson (2015)

*I Said No! A Kid-to-Kid Guide to Keeping Private Parts Private* (2010)  
By Zack and Kimberly King

*A Very Touching Book ... for little people and big people* (2009)  
By Jan Hindman

*Invisible Girls: The Truth about Sexual Abuse -- A Book for Teen Girls, Young Women, and Everyone Who Cares About Them.* (2009)  
By Dr. Patti Feuereisen

*Strong At The Heart: How it Feels to Heal From Sexual Abuse* (2005)  
By Carolyn Lehman

*How Long Does it Hurt?: A Guide to Recovering from Incest & Sexual Abuse for Teenagers, Their Friends, and Their Families* (2004)  
By Cynthia L. Mather

*When Something Feels Wrong: A Survival Guide About Abuse for Young People* (2003)  
By Deanna S. Pledge

*Kids Helping Kids Break the Silence of Abuse* (2003)  
By Linda Lee Foltz

*It Happened to Me: A Teen's Guide to Overcoming Sexual Abuse* (2002)  
By William Lee Carter

*Back on Track: Boys Dealing with Sexual Abuse (ages 10+)* (1999)  
By Leslie Wright and Mindy Loiselle

*The Me Nobody Knows: A Guide for Teen Survivors* (1993)  
By Barbara Bean and Shari Bennett

*Helping Your Child Recover from Sexual Abuse* (1992)  
By C. Adams & J. Fay

*The Missing Voice: Writings by Mothers of Incest Victims* (1992)  
By Sandi Ashley

*Shining Through: Pulling it Together After Sexual Abuse* (1997)  
By Mindy Loiselle and Leslie Wright

Please contact First Step for additional website resources and material, including information on puberty and how to talk about sexuality with children.



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ապա ձեզ կարող են տրամադրվել լեզվական  
աջակցության անվճար ծառայություններ:  
Զանգահարեք 888-311-9127 (հեռախոս  
(TTY) 711).

โปรดทราบ: หากคุณพูดภาษาไทย คุณสามารถใช้บริการความช่วยเหลือทางภาษาได้โดยไม่มีค่าใช้จ่าย โทร 888-311-9127 (TTY: 711)

#### OUR MISSION

As people of Providence,  
we reveal God's love for all,  
especially the poor and vulnerable,  
through our compassionate service.

#### OUR CORE VALUES

Respect, Compassion, Justice,  
Excellence, Stewardship

First Step Resource Center  
(406) 329-5776

[montana.providence.org/firststep](http://montana.providence.org/firststep)



Providence Health & Services, a not-for-profit health system, is an equal opportunity organization in the provision of health care services and employment opportunities.