When a child tells you about abuse

A guide for parents, caregivers and trusted adults

Hearing that a child may have been abused can feel overwhelming. Your first response can help them feel heard and supported. Listen calmly, take what they tell you seriously and get help to keep them safe. Abuse is never the child's fault.

If a child is in immediate danger, call Police on 111.

In the first few minutes

Children may tell you a little at a time, use their own words or show that something is wrong through play or behaviour. Make space to listen without deciding for yourself what a behaviour means.

- Give them your attention. Let them speak at their own pace, including pauses. They do not need to tell you everything at once.
- Stay calm and connected. Avoid showing shock, anger or disbelief. Follow the child's lead about personal space and comfort; do not assume they want a hug.
- Take them seriously. Respond with care, without blame or criticism. The responsibility for abuse belongs to the person who caused the harm.

Words you can use

"Thank you for telling me."
"I believe you."
"You haven't done anything wrong."
"This is not your fault."
"I will get help to keep you safe."

Explain what you need to do in words they understand: "I need to talk to someone whose job is to help keep children safe. I'll explain what happens next as we go."

What to avoid

Avoid repeated or leading questions, asking why they did not tell sooner, or trying to investigate. Do not promise secrecy or an outcome you cannot guarantee. Do not confront the person they have named. Leave detailed questioning to trained professionals.

What to do next

Act promptly. Do not wait until the child has told you more, or until you feel certain about what happened. Concerns about abuse that happened in the past also need a response.

Get help with safety

Contact Oranga Tamariki on 0508 326 459, available free 24 hours a day, or contact Police. You can talk with a social worker even if you are unsure. Explain any immediate worries about the child being with the person involved, and ask for guidance about safe arrangements and who should be told. Call 111 if there is immediate danger.

If you receive the information through your work or volunteering, follow your organisation's child protection procedure and notify the designated person. This must not delay urgent action to protect a child.

Make an accurate record

As soon as you can, write down the child's exact words, when and where they spoke, who was present and how you responded. Keep what you saw or heard separate from your interpretations. Store the record securely and share it only with those who need it to protect and support the child.

Over the following days

- Keep offering calm, familiar care and routines where possible. Let the child know they can talk again without pressure to repeat their account.
- Explain next steps in a way that suits their age, communication needs and understanding. Include their wishes and cultural needs in discussions about support.
- Stay in contact with the professionals involved and follow the agreed safety plan. Share any new concerns promptly.
- Get support for yourself so you can continue to be a steady, caring adult. Discuss your feelings privately with an appropriate support person, away from the child.

Support from CAPS Hauraki

For support and help finding the next step, call 07 868 8644 or email reception@capshauraki.co.nz. For urgent safety concerns, contact Police or Oranga Tamariki directly.

Guidance and contacts

Child Matters | Responding to disclosures

Oranga Tamariki | Worried about a child

New Zealand Police | Reporting suspected child abuse

Wording and contact details checked October 2026.