

How can I talk to my child when...

... it has been uncovered that there has been sexual abuse of students through a teacher at the school?

Your child needs you now.

For children who have been afflicted by sexual abuse, it is very important how their caregivers (parents, teachers, other important figures in the life of the child) react. If the affected children are surrounded by people who believe them, if they are comforted and receive support, if their actions are not questioned, and if the blame is placed solely on the perpetrator, then children are usually able to process the difficult experiences well. However, there is a need to recognise that the children may feel ambivalent and may experience many conflicting and confusing emotions. Abusers confuse children. It is very normal that affected children feel confused and angry towards the perpetrator, while at the same time defending him, or still liking and maybe even missing him.

Comfort your child if it is affected by abuse or other forms of sexual violence through the teacher. Comfort your child even if it has not experienced abuse, but if their own teacher or at least a teacher at their school has turned out to be a criminal and a mean person. No one wants such a teacher at their school. Some kids also need comforting for their feelings of loss and sadness, if they really liked the teacher and/or received a lot of attention from him.

Do not interrogate your child.

Offer to be there if your child wants to talk, even about difficult and burdensome things. But also encourage your child to talk to other people, if your child doesn't want to talk to you.

Your child decides, if they want to discuss any of this with you. It does not matter if your child was involved or not.

Explain that you were informed by the school (or that you were at a parent teacher conference and learned there) about what the teacher did. That could sound something like this:

The teacher (name of the teacher) involved children and teenagers in sexual things, strange games and inappropriate touches. No adult is allowed to do that with kids and teens. Another word for that is sexual violence. A lot of the time people do this in a way that confuses children and teens so that they do not understand what is going on, often they are talked into believing that they wanted this, or that they like it, or that it is somehow their fault. It is often the case that people like that have many positive sides and are good with children and are very popular. Sometimes kids even like sexual touches from the teacher. None of that changes anything about the fact that adults are not allowed to do such things. And every adult knows this, that's why perpetrators do these things secretly and always demand that the kids tell no one about them. Sometimes they even threaten kids and say that something bad will happen, if they tell anyone. People who do things like that want to feel powerful. Like a king who can do whatever he wants. He also lied to the other teachers and tricked them and that's why it is a great shock to many, and they are saddened that this could ever happen.

If you feel great rage and anger towards the teacher do NOT discuss this rage with your child. Maybe your child liked the teacher and even admired him. You would prevent your child from speaking to you.

It takes a long time for those affected and also for witnesses to unlearn positive feelings for a perpetrator, and for them to see what he did.

If you struggle to believe that the teacher did criminal things, discuss your doubts with other adults, but never with your child.

What matters right now is great clarity. Correct information matters. Diminishing what happened does not help your child.

Silence exclusively helps the perpetrator. Every attempt, be it clumsy or awkward, to give the right answers to your child's questions is better than silence.

Offer statements that help your child to sort through what happened and what is still going on. Say that you are thinking about how such a seemingly nice teacher could do such criminal things. If your child wants to talk, discuss together how the teacher managed to trick everyone, so no one realised what was going on. Thinking through this will unburden the children. It was not them who did something wrong, but the teacher who planned exactly what he was going to do and manipulated everyone and went through with his plan to sexually assault children. He tricked everyone. Knowing that will help the children not to blame themselves.

Children who were affected usually do not want others to know about this. Honour this wish without promising to keep secrets. You might need help, or your child could need help, so you cannot promise secrecy. However, you can promise not to say the child's name and especially not to make it public, should your child have been affected by the sexual violence.

Get help if you, for whatever reason are unable to empower your child. Getting help is not admitting defeat, it is very courageous and helpful.

Kids are never to blame for sexual assault through adults.

There are different schools and pedagogical institutions in different times where sexual violence was enacted through different people. It is not the school's fault. The blame is exclusively on the person who did the sexual assault.

But there is a lot a school can do to protect itself in the future. This terrible occasion can lead to measures being taken that something like this will never happen again. After a time of crisis intervention, it takes time to process everything in the school and through the staff, and finally there needs to be some kind of fresh start. None of that can happen from one day to the next. There needs to be a lot of time, patience and dedication from the staff, the heads of the school, the team helping to deal with the crisis, and also from the parents and students. But it is possible for a school to develop a safety and prevention plan and to implement it, so that your child will learn to trust the school again and that you as parents feel well informed and know that your child is safe at school (once more).