



## **Leading...What is it? And how do I avoid it?**

When a child discloses abuse, it can be one of the hardest and most important conversations of your life; how you respond matters, not only for your child's healing, but also for protecting the integrity of any future investigation.

This guide will help you listen in a way that supports your child without unintentionally "leading" them.

---

### **What Is Leading?**

Leading happens when we ask questions or make statements that suggest an answer. For example:

- "Did he touch you in your room?"
- "I know it was your Uncle, wasn't it?"

**Even if unintentional, leading can:**

- Complicate or weaken a legal case.
  - Create doubt later about whether their words were truly their own.
  - Make a child feel pressured to agree.
- 

### **What to Say If You're Concerned**

If you sense something isn't right, your words should open space, not fill it. Think gentle curiosity, not investigation.

## **1. Start with Safety and Connection**

You might begin with:

- “You can always tell me anything, even if it feels hard.”
- “You’re never in trouble for being honest.”
- “Sometimes kids keep secrets because they’re scared, but I’ll always keep you safe.”

These phrases communicate permission and safety without suggesting anything happened.

## **2. Use Neutral, Open Invitations**

If you need to check in more directly:

- “I noticed you’ve seemed quiet after visiting \_\_\_\_ can you tell me about that?”
- “Has anyone ever made you feel uncomfortable or unsafe?”
- “Is there anything happening that’s been bothering you?”

They allow disclosure but don’t name people, places, or actions.

## **3. Reflect, Don’t Probe**

If the child shares something vague, mirror back their words instead of guessing:

Child: “He was weird.”

Adult: “Weird how?” rather than “Did he touch you?”

## **4. Stay Steady, Whatever You Hear**

Children watch your face to decide how much to trust. If you feel shocked or angry, take a breath before responding. A calm, steady tone communicates safety more than any script.

## **What Not to Say**

### **1. Questions That Suggest a Person, Place, or Act**

Examples:

- “Did your Uncle do something to you?”
- “Was it when you were in the bathroom?”  
These imply the answer and can contaminate memory. Children want to please adults, so they may nod or agree even if uncertain.

### **2. Questions That Force a Choice**

Examples:

- “Did he touch you on purpose or by accident?”
- “Was it under your clothes or over?”  
Forced choices make kids pick from your options instead of describing their experience.

### **3. Questions That Introduce New Ideas**

Examples:

- “Did he use his phone to take pictures?”
- “Did anyone else see?”  
Unless the child has already mentioned those details, these add information that may never have occurred to them.

### **4. Repeated or “Checking” Questions**

Examples:

- “Are you sure?”

- “Can you tell me again?”

Repetition can make a child doubt their memory or change their story to satisfy you.

## 5. Emotional or Loaded Questions

Examples:

- “How could he do that to you?”

- “Why didn’t you run away?”

These shift blame or overwhelm a child with your feelings.

---

### Your Next Step

If your child shares something concerning, it’s not your job to investigate. That's the responsibility of trained professionals. Your role is to **protect, support, and report**. Contact your local child advocacy center or call the **Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-422-4453)** for guidance on what to do next.

**Remember:** You don’t have to get it perfect. Your presence, belief, and care are what matter most.