

For Mothers of Sexually Abused Children

When you first discover that your husband/partner/lover has sexually abused your child(ren) many thoughts run through your head...

"He wouldn't hurt anyone..."

"She/he's trying to hurt us..."

"She/he just misunderstood..."

"I don't believe it..."

"It's my fault..."

"It can't be true..."

"She/he has never liked him..."

"Boys don't get sexually assaulted..."

"Why would he go to a child for sex, he has me..."

"The child's angry at him because they had an argument..."

"Why couldn't I see it..."

No one wants to believe that the person they love can do such a thing. Yet sexual abuse is common. Most children are sexually abused by someone they know and the most likely offenders are siblings or a father/stepfather. Only 10% of children are molested by a stranger. Children of all ages get abused, even infants.

Abuse sometimes goes on for many years and at least 80% of the time it happens more than once.

There is often no physical violence as the child is "trained" to increasingly sexual behavior over a number of years. A common pattern is for the child to be fondled when quite young and for the abuse to progress from "accidental" touching to oral sex and penetration over a number of years.

Silence and cooperation can be obtained in many ways. The child may be threatened physically, the child may be told that the mother will be hurt if she/he tells the secret, the abuser may train the child to believe that somehow that he/she asked for the abuse and indeed wanted it. Some abusers use the argument that they are being a good parent and educating their child about sex. Some abusers tell the child that she/he will go to jail or the child will be forced to leave the home or similar threats. Whatever type of coercion is used, the reality is that the abuser is controlling the child's reality. Children don't disclose because they fear the consequences.

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When one child in the family is abused, statistics tell us that there is a greater than 1 in 3 chance that another child is being abused by the same abuser.

How Do Children Tell? Why Do Children Tell?

Children keep on hoping the abuse will just end, but it seldom does. Sometimes if the abuser begins abusing younger children in the family, the older child will disclose to protect his/her siblings. The child may confide in a friend who then tells an adult. Sometimes the child has tried to tell mom, by acting out or dropping hints and clues.

Mom's Reaction

- Shock, guilt, anger, betrayal, confusion and repulsion.
- She feels angry at herself for not knowing.
- She feels angry at her child for not telling sooner.
- She feels angry at the abuser.
- She feels guilty for not protecting her children.
- She feels guilty that somehow she has been an inadequate wife and failed her husband.
- She doubts her ability to make good judgments about people.
- She hates him for what he has done, for hurting her child, for hurting her relationship with her child, for traumatizing the family.
- She is repulsed by him, thinking about him touching her child sexually.
- She sometimes feels a little jealous of her child.
- She is confused. She wants to help and support her child but she has all kinds of feelings about the abuser. People can't just turn off their feelings. She feels caught between her child and the abuser.
- She feels like a failure.

The shock of disclosure is traumatic and mom may experience wide swings of mood. She will show all the symptoms of trauma - Depression, crying, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, lack of concentration, mood swings. She will be pulled every way trying to help her family, trying to deal with the legal system, trying to cope with the possible loss of the breadwinner. She may feel afraid, unable to cope. She may fear a dramatic decrease in the family's standard of living. She may feel pulled between love and hate as the abuser tells her he will change.

If the abuser denies the abuse, blames the child, or minimizes what happened, the pressures on mom increase. In order to support the child, she has to be able to stand up to the abuser and not accept rationalization or minimization. It's tempting to accept the minimizing, it sometimes seems as though if you do that, then the family can "get back to normal" quickly.

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What Every Child Wants

- Unconditional love and a place to grow up in safety. Children can recover from the effects of sexual abuse if they have a safe place to finish their growing in.
- To be believed and to know it wasn't his/her fault.
- For Mom to be there to support and to be seen refusing to accept denials, blaming or minimizing.

What the Offender Needs

- To accept that he is completely responsible for the abuse.
- To stop minimizing/denying/blaming.
- To accept that he has a pattern of abnormal sexual arousal and to get treatment for his deviant behavior.
- To be accessed by a specialist who can develop the most appropriate treatment plan.
- To accept that the sexual abuse of a child is a criminal act and that there are legal consequences.

What Mom Needs

This is the most difficult crisis a woman will ever face. She will need:

- Help and support to help her deal with her feelings and begin healing.
- Information to help her deal with her child. Child Welfare and counselors are only involved for a short time. The main job of healing will be done by Mom with her ongoing and loving care. Mom needs to know how to help, what to do, what to say.

By K.M. Nielsen, MEd

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Helping Your Child to Heal

Children who have been sexually abused are very vulnerable to other people's stress and distress. As the child heals, s/he needs experience. If your child comes to believe you are overwhelmed by the experience or are unable to listen anymore, then the child will spend time protecting and caring for you. Children healing from sexual abuse do not need the added burden of feeling responsible for the non-abusing parent; nor should they feel responsible for helping the parent feel less distressed.

To protect your child from further stress, you can:

- Let the child know s/he is not alone and other children have been abused. If possible, find a group for your child.
- When you talk about the abuse, try to do it in a matter-of-fact way using a calm tone of voice.
- Reassure the child the abuse wasn't his/her fault and you feel proud s/he was brave enough to tell.
- Accept the child's feelings about the abuse and the abuser. Children do not always feel completely negative about the abuser. Children have to be allowed to own their own feelings and not respond in a way you would like to see.
- Try to maintain as normal daily routines as possible.
- Try to be available when your child wants to talk about the abuse.
- Protect your child from friends and relatives whose distress or blaming may further disturb your child.
- Get support for yourself: a group, a friend, a relative, someone you can trust to support you and will listen to you. You will have strong feelings you need to express in a safe place with a supportive person.
- Children have really limited ways of expressing inner pain. Young children may not want to talk about the trauma very much. They often show their pain through changes in behaviour.

Things to Remember When Your World Falls Apart

- Your child has been hurt and frightened, and has a good reason for acting and feeling as s/he does.
- No child's healing is like anyone else's; healing doesn't run in a straight path or conform to timetables. Healing involves steps back and steps forward. When today is an especially bad day, try to think of ways TO HELP so tomorrow will be better.
- Your child has been hurt. Dwelling on ways you 'could' have prevented it will not help your child to heal.
- Healing TAKES TIME- maybe lots of time- but children do heal. They do recover. Give your child the gift of your patience.

K.M. Nielsen, MSW, LSW

