

Especially for Parents



King County
Sexual Assault
Resource Center

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Resource Center

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ESPECIALLY FOR PARENTS

Current statistics state that 1 out of 3 girls and 1 out of 5 boys are sexually assaulted before the age of 18. Given these facts, a child we know will very likely be victimized. However, we want to believe that our children will not be affected.

Discovering that your child has been sexually assaulted can stir up many emotions. Although reactions vary, some common themes are feelings of:

Powerlessness

"I want to make it all better, but I can't."

Shock

"I can't believe this happened to my child."

Guilt

"I should have known."

"I should have never left her alone."

Shame

"I can't believe this happened to my daughter, what will people think of my family and me?"

Denial

"It hasn't affected my child at all."

"I just can't believe he would ever do something like that."

"It's in the past, let's put it aside and move on."

Anger

"How could anyone do this?"

"I could just kill..."

Fear

"Will my daughter ever get over this?"

"My son is so young, will he ever be normal?"

These feelings are normal and need to be expressed within an environment which offers you nurturing and support. As a parent, you have the difficult task of balancing your needs with the needs of your child. Parenting under the best of circumstances is difficult. Most parents are under many daily demands such as managing finances, jobs, relationships, and children. When a crisis is added to this already full responsibility, these everyday stresses are magnified.

Dealing with the sexual abuse of your own child is a particularly difficult crisis. As parents, we are emotionally involved and often see our children as extensions of ourselves. We feel our child's pain deeply. This enables some of us to respond with love and unconditional support. For others it may remind us of our own pain or become so overwhelming that we want to deny it happened or minimize its impact and effects. Whichever your response, remember that *you* need to receive *support* as well.

Finding support people for you can be the key. Within a supportive relationship you will ideally be able to freely express the emotions that the victimization of your child has stirred up. It is appropriate within this relationship to release emotions, express fears, and work through doubts and concerns. This is your time to receive *nurturing*. The support you receive will then enable you to better support your child.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

It's okay to feel a wide range of emotions. Be aware that kids readily pick up the emotions of their parents whether expressed verbally or non-verbally. The expression of these emotions is healthy if done apart from your child and within a trusting, supportive relationship.

If you do not have a relationship which you feel is supportive, consider calling a local crisis or resource line and speaking to someone who can listen and offer support and information.

THE IMPACT OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

The impact of sexual abuse is unique to each child but there are many common elements. Some possible effects are:

Physical

- Sudden weight loss or gain
- Abdominal pain
- Vomiting
- Vaginal infections
- Changes in eating patterns

Behavioral

- Sleep disturbances
- Nightmares
- Compulsive masturbation
- Sex play inappropriate for child's age
- Behavior consistent with an earlier age
- Detachment from others
- Insecurity

Emotional

- Mood swings
- Flashbacks

Difficulties in School

- Inability to concentrate
- Drop in academic performance
- Change in peer relationships
- Change in interests

Anger/Hostility

•Expressed Outwardly

- Physically aggressive
- Verbally aggressive
- Acting out behavior

•Expressed Inwardly

- Self abuse
- Withdrawn/isolated

Depression (especially common in adolescents)

- Low energy
- Irritable
- Low or no interest in previous activities

The presence of these symptoms does not always mean that your child has been sexually assaulted. They are most easily explained as a child's response to fear and anxiety. Since children do not possess adult language skills, they tend to "tell" how they feel through action and behavior. If you know that your child has been sexually assaulted, very likely s/he has already shown many of these responses.

RECOVERY ISSUES

As a parent, you play a key role in your child's healing process. Support in words and in action can greatly enhance your child's recovery. Children need reassurance that you believe them and will do all you can to protect them. The sexual abuse and the events that occur following disclosure can be very confusing to children. Adults around them often express strong emotions. Emotions which children may believe are directed at them. It is important not to overreact. Stay calm and reassure your child that you will do all you can to help. You can be the best counselor for your child at this time if you are supportive, believing and nurturing.

QUESTIONS KIDS OFTEN ASK

Am I in trouble?

Do my parents still love me?

Do my parents still want me?

Will they arrest me too?

Most of the questions kids have are related to their feelings of insecurity. At this time their world does not offer predictability or stability. This may leave them feeling a little out of control. You can play a key role in stabilizing your child's world.

Continue to reassure your child that you are glad s/he told about the abuse and that you believe her/him. Tell your child directly that what happened was not her/his fault. Remember that the responsibility lies solely with the offender.

Listen to your child when s/he expresses feelings. Give her/him 'permission' to freely express these emotions. Allowing this freedom validates the child and gives her/him the message that it is okay to talk about these feelings.

Allow your child to ask questions. This can be a very confusing time. S/he is probably being asked many questions without knowing the reason for them. Answer questions with a calm, reassuring voice and in simple language.

Do not pressure your child to talk. Sometimes the most nurturing thing for a parent to do is to simply be available to listen when your child needs you.

SOME COMMON QUESTIONS FROM PARENTS

This time can also be confusing for parents. It is common for parents to be flooded with questions as they try to do what is best for their children.

Why didn't my child tell me sooner?

Children do not always know exactly what is happening to them when they are being sexually abused. Abusers most often gain the trust of their victim before they actually abuse them. Children may feel that something is not quite right or that they feel 'funny' about certain behaviors but they may not be at an age where they can identify the problem directly. They may not have the vocabulary to tell exactly what happened.

Children often "tell" about being sexually abused without specific words. Sometimes kids tell about abuse through changes in their behavior. Many kids cannot explain what is happening to them, but they can 'show' through their behavior that something is wrong. They may act out, become aggressive, become passive, change their eating patterns, regress to behaviors of an earlier age, etc. These are all ways that kids tell adults to pay attention.

Should I treat my child differently now?

Children need to be treated with sensitivity under any circumstances. A child who has been sexually abused may need more reassurance of your love and support than usual.

Continuing to follow regular household routines are usually best. Children often find comfort in the predictability that a routine offers.

How should I discipline my child?

Some children who have been sexually abused may act out behaviorally. Developmentally, children may not have the ability to talk about what they are feeling inside. Often children feel emotions physically. Acting out, then, is their way of releasing the physical presence of very new emotions.

Although children need to express their emotions, they also need to learn to do it in acceptable and appropriate ways. Sometimes acknowledging their primary emotions such as fear, sadness, or frustration is an appropriate response to their

behavior. If, however, acknowledging these feelings does not stop the child's acting out behavior, s/he may need more concrete teaching about appropriate responses.

Teaching alternative behaviors may include disciplining your child for the inappropriate acting out. The discipline should be fair, consistent, and planned. Parents must weigh whether this action is teaching the child what is inappropriate about the behavior or a parental reaction out of frustration with the child or the behavior. If discipline has been loose, unstructured or inconsistent in the past, it is important to build in more predictability at this point. Teach your child what s/he can expect under which circumstances. This kind of structure and predictability will allow your child to know the limits and consequences. This, in turn, gives them a sense of control.

Ideally, discipline should empower children because it teaches them proper boundaries and acceptable behaviors. Discipline which is done out of anger takes away power and teaches children to fear their environment.

Who should know about what has happened?

With younger children, parents can make the judgment about who to tell based on determining who will ultimately benefit the child. If the child is school-aged, it is often times beneficial for a teacher to know about the sexual abuse, because they can provide support to your child in the school environment. Also, if the sexual abuse has impacted your child in such a way that it will influence or affect others (for example, aggressive behavior toward peers, mood swings, etc.), those who are caretakers of your child should be informed. The information should not be too detailed but be enough for them to plan how they might respond to these behaviors.

It is also important to consider how the other party will receive this information. If you believe they do not have the skills to appropriately deal with the information, it may be wiser not to tell.

For older children, it is important to consider how they feel about certain people knowing. Engage them in conversation about this and make decisions with their feelings in mind.

What happens in therapy?

The goals of therapy for children are to provide a safe, non-threatening environment for them to sort through their thoughts and feelings about the sexual abuse and to receive relevant information and teaching. The methods used to achieve these goals are tailored to the age and developmental stage of each child.

How do I know if my child needs therapy?

Most children who display behavioral or emotional changes can benefit from therapy of some sort. The type and length of treatment is based on every child's differing needs. However, all children benefit from immediate love, nurturing, and support from significant people in their lives. Sometimes you can have the greatest impact on the child.

Most children who have been sexually assaulted will benefit from therapy at some point in their life. The effects of the abuse may impact them differently at various stages in their development. This is a normal process of healing. What is significant to a child at age eight will be different when they turn sixteen. Different developmental states bring new concerns to the surface.

Notes

Notes

Appointments

Telephone Numbers

For additional copies contact:



King County
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24-hour Sexual Assault Resource Line

888.99.voice

Toll-free in Western Washington only

King County Sexual Assault Resource Center

P.O. Box 300, Renton, WA 98057

Tel **425.226.5062**

Fax **425.235.7422**

Business Line (Voice/TTY)

www.kcsarc.org

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