

ESPECIALLY FOR PARENTS



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Learning that your child has been sexually abused is likely one of the most difficult things you have had to hold. 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. Developmentally, children are not often able to separate out strong emotions directed at the abuser or the situation from something directed at them. In general, children are attuned to reactions adults display in response to their behaviors.

Young children, in particular, may interpret emotional parental response as something they did wrong. It is important to provide support and a caring presence for your child. Stay calm and reassure your child that you will do all you can to help. You can be the best "counselor" for your child when you are supportive, believing and nurturing.

Children become victims of sexual abuse in numbers far greater than most people are aware. They are most likely victimized by people the child or family knows, likes and trusts. Individuals who offend against children work hard to gain the trust of the child and adults in the child's life.

Discovering that your child has been sexually abused can stir up many emotions in you their parent or care giver. 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/son, 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/son ever get over this?”

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

While these feelings are normal and commonly held by parents, they are not necessarily an accurate attribution of the situation. Blame for the abuse falls directly on the person who offended against the child and no one else. So, feelings such as shame and guilt belong to the person offending. Parents need the space to express their emotions in an environment which offers the ability to process it thoroughly while simultaneously receiving 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 multiple daily demands and 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 impacts 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 is normal to feel a wide range of emotions. It is also normal to feel numb. People respond to crises and stress in a variety of ways. There is no right or wrong way. However, 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
- Withdrawn
- Insecurity
- Avoid activities/people that were once enjoyed

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 harm
 - Withdrawn/isolated

Depression (especially common in adolescents)

- Low energy
- Irritable
- Low or no interest in previous activities
- Sleep less/more than usual

The presence of these symptoms does not always mean that your child has been sexually abused. 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 abused, very likely s/he has already shown some of these responses.

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 these 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 knowing 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.

What's next?

Child sexual abuse is automatically reported to Child Protective Services or Law Enforcement when it comes to the attention of educators, social workers, medical personnel, and other helping professionals. It will be investigated and the ultimate goal is to hold the offender accountable for the offense. You and your child do not have to go through this process alone. There are agencies equipped to guide you through the legal process in which you will be involved. Ask for a Victim Advocate to assist you.

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 handle my child's misbehavior?

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.

Under healthy and ordinary conditions, children learn to identify and name their feelings in age appropriate ways. For instance, when babies are hungry, they cry and adults scramble to feed them. When children enter school and are surrounded by unfamiliar people and surroundings, teachers assist in helping kids to identify their emotions and shape their behaviors in socially accepted ways. However, when children are sexually abused, they are exposed to acts far beyond their brain's capacity to integrate and understand. These acts of abuse create a cluster of emotions and thoughts that no child has the experience necessary to cope. Abuse should not be a child's experience.

Parents, guardians and other adults can assist children to recognize and name their feelings. Sometimes acknowledging and assisting children to name their primary emotions such as fear, sadness, or frustration helps children attach a name to a feeling. If, however, acknowledging these feelings do not stop the child's acting out behavior, s/he may need more concrete teaching about appropriate responses to strong emotions.

Shaping a child's behavior is different from punishing a child. When the behavior seems to be a reaction to a trauma memory, or a strong emotion they do not know how to express properly, spend some time teaching the child what to do the next time that emotion comes up.

For instance, when a schoolmate calls your child a name that causes hurt feelings, your child's first reaction might be to hit the name-caller. Your child may need assistance in naming the feeling, and also an alternate behavior. Teach your child a phrase they could use next time this happens: "That is not nice and I am not going to play with you anymore;" "I don't like it when you call me names." Another strategy might be to teach your child to ignore the comment and go play with someone else. Give your child some useful strategies that might work under varying circumstances.

Teaching alternative behaviors may include disciplining your child for inappropriate acting out. If your child is acting defiant, and disobeys a rule, a corrective action such as a time out, or the withdrawal of a privilege might be appropriate.

The important thing to remember is that the goal is always to shape behavior into the preferred and acceptable behavior. 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. Discipline which is done out of anger takes away power and teaches children to fear their environment. Ideally, discipline should empower children because it teaches them proper boundaries and acceptable behaviors

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 play 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 talk about their abuse and sort through their thoughts and feelings. Therapy is also a time to learn new skills and to receive relevant information and teaching. Children benefit greatly from therapy. They engage in the process quickly and learn new skills related to dealing with big feelings, communication, anxiety and memories of the abuse. Therapy is specifically designed with kids in mind.

How do I know if my child needs therapy?

Most children who have been abused can benefit from therapy. Children show the impact of abuse in a variety of ways. Some children withdraw while others display obvious behavioral or emotional changes. 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 positive impact on your child.

Children who have been sexually assaulted can enter therapy at any point in their life. The effect of the abuse impacts them differently at various stages in their development. This is a normal process. Wellness is a journey, not a single event. Different developmental stages bring new concerns to the surface. What is significant to a child at age eight will be different when they turn sixteen. Entering therapy is a healthy response to dealing with the sexual abuse.

MOVING FORWARD

Parents play a vital role as a primary support person for their child who has been sexually abused. Children need to hear that the abuse was not their fault and that you will always be available with love and support. Child sexual abuse is not something that we plan. No child should be sexually abused. However, if it becomes a part of your child's experience, you, as their parent, can give them love and support as you work with community partners who are ready to assist you with the aftermath of child sexual abuse.

For additional copies contact:

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