

# ESPECIALLY FOR PARENTS OF ADOLESCENTS



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**Please note:** Throughout this book offenders are most often referred to as males and victims as females. This was done for readability. In reality, offenders or victims can be male or female.

## INTRODUCTION

Parenting through adolescence is both rewarding and challenging. From the time your child reaches the age of ten years old, your role as a parent starts to change because adolescents begin to require more independence. This time of transition can be especially challenging for the parent of an adolescent who has been sexually assaulted. The typical physical and emotional changes of adolescence layered with the trauma of abuse leave many parents feeling isolated and without support or information on what to do. Although statistics show that one in three girls and one in five boys will be sexually assaulted before the age of eighteen, it is difficult to believe that one of those girls or boys will be your own. The pain of that realization can be great. And the task of parenting an adolescent while experiencing pain will at times feel overwhelming.

## IMPACT ON PARENTS

Upon discovery that their adolescent has been sexually assaulted, parents often feel and express a seeming whirlwind of emotions.

There is no right or wrong way to feel; however, it is important to allow yourself time to feel and understand all that there is to know about the emotions within you. Your adolescent will be affected by the flood of emotions you are experiencing and how you deal with them. As a parent of a child who has been sexually assaulted, you have the difficult task of balancing your needs with the needs of your adolescent. If you were sexually abused as a child, the assault of your adolescent may trigger emotions from the past. For others, it may bring them in touch with emotions they never knew existed. These are very natural responses given the strength of the emotional bond between parents and their children of all ages.

It is vitally important to address your personal needs within supportive relationships. Choose support people who can listen to you wholly and support you without judging you. It is appropriate within these relationships to release emotions, express fears, and work through doubts and concerns. With this kind of support for yourself, you will be better able to support your adolescent. This will also enable your adolescent to focus on processing her own feelings without feelings responsible for you.

## VICTIMIZATION

### Perpetrators

Perpetrators of sexual assault can be anyone, male or female, young, middle-aged, or old. At some point in time, the perpetrator makes the decision that his desires are all that matter and that harming another individual in order to fulfill those desires is justifiable.

Some victims who disclose abuse as adolescents may have been abused since childhood. For them the abusers are often family members or close family friends.

For those assaulted during their adolescence, the perpetrator is still most often known to the victim. An offender can be almost anyone with whom the adolescent has contact. At this age it is likely to be someone who has authority or

influence over the adolescent... someone who has gained trust through the building of a relationship based on a common interest or goal. The perpetrator could be a young adult or an age-mate, though less frequently, some are victimized by strangers or those not well known to them.

Adolescence is a period of growing independence, and offenders often take advantage of their ability to isolate a victim in order to assault. Offenders typically attempt to manipulate their victims to gain trust prior to the abuse. This deception, subtle and planned, sets up an unequal relationship which gives the offender greater power.

Power does not necessarily mean physical force. The offender typically has power over an individual simply because he knows the plan he has in mind and the victim does not. Power can also be present due to an age, size or status difference. When this type of domination is in place, the use of physical force is not necessary to commit the crime of sexual assault.

## VICTIMS

Adolescence is the age in which individuals begin to explore outside of their immediate family and attach more to their peer group. It is during this developmental stage that they seek out their identity distinct from their parents. Seeking independence is a very natural and health part of adolescence. Their need for independence and peer attachment, combined with their need for nurturing and acceptance, can open up avenues for positive new relationship, but can also leave them vulnerable to victimization.

Talking about being sexual assaulted is difficult for most individuals. This is even more true for adolescents than for victims in other age groups. Adolescents may have a difficult time identifying with someone whom they could disclose the sexual assault. It is very likely that the abuser is a family member or a trusted family friend, which in turn makes telling a parent difficult. Or the offender may be a classmate or someone else known by friends which would make telling peers a challenge. This, coupled with the fact that offenders often isolate their victim from any close attachments, can leave the adolescent feeling alone and without support.

Adolescents also have a strong need to view themselves and to be seen by others as self-sufficient and capable of making independent decisions. This need for independence and autonomy makes it even more difficult for individuals of this age group to seek help.

Sometimes adolescents are assaulted while participating in an activity that they believe would be disapproved of by parents or significant others. Perhaps the abuse took place at a party where alcohol or drugs were present, or at an event that they were forbidden to attend, or perhaps they went with an individual whom their parents found objectionable. In these cases the adolescent fears talking about the sexual assault because it would necessarily bring up these questionable circumstances or situations. However, even though an adolescent may have difficulty talking directly about the abuse, there may be other ways he or she tries to communicate that something is not right. As a parent, you may notice a difference in behavior or emotions which may be a signal to inquire further.

## COMMON SIGNS

The cluster of signs, symptoms and effects of sexual abuse are as varied as are individuals. Some symptoms present themselves after trauma as a way to enable the victim to cope with and survive the assault. Although it is impossible to provide a complete list, the following are symptoms typical of adolescents dealing with the pain of sexual abuse.

### Physical

- Sudden change in weight
- Sexually transmitted disease
- Targeted pain
- Vomiting or gagging
- Eating disorders
- Drug/alcohol abuse

## **Emotional**

- Mood swings
- Depression
- Suicidal thinking/attempts
- Flashbacks
- Difficulty concentrating

## **Behavioral**

- Sleep pattern changes
- Nightmares or night terrors
- Promiscuity
- Withdrawal or isolation
- Dependency
- Self-abuse
- Truancy
- Angry outbursts
- Running away
- Sudden drop in academic performance
- Change in peer relationships

Note: It is important to realize that these symptoms are not related solely to sexual abuse. The presence of these symptoms can be related to other conditions or trauma as well.

## **THE IMPACT OF ABUSE**

Adolescents as a group tend to be very egocentric... that is to say, they believe the whole world is watching them, and that they are the cause of all good or bad that comes to them. Within this frame of reference, adolescents who have been sexually assaulted tend to struggle intensely with issues of self-blame and shame. These two core issues can in turn cause problems with poor self-image, depression, eating disorders, alcohol abuse, substance abuse, and other symptoms listed previously.

When the offender was someone the adolescent once had a trust relationship with, an array of issues arise. Feelings of powerlessness and betrayal may be present; a lack of trust and security can be devastating; and questions inevitably arise as to how others view the victim, especially her peers and family members. These issues become even more compounded if the offender and the victim have continued contact; for example, if they attend the same school. Sexual assault also brings up questions for adolescents regarding their sexuality. This is an age in which young people are beginning to sort through their beliefs and identify their values relating to relationships, intimacy and sexuality. When this process is interrupted by unwelcome and hurtful sexual contact, it results in emotional confusion and chaos.

## **SUPPORT**

When small children are victimized, it seems clear to parents as well as friends and relatives that the child needs a great deal of love and nurturing during the recovery process. Hugging a small child as she cries or holding her when she is scared is a natural and instinctive response. The needs of a small child seem simple, and comfort is readily received.

However, with an adolescent who is approaching the size of most adults and who may seem independent or somewhat distant, it is not always clear to adults how to offer nurturing support. A hug may seem too simplistic or juvenile but is often the first step in showing clearly your love and sustaining support.

Further extensions of support that you choose to offer may vary from person to person, but do not assume that your adolescent will get these essential needs met elsewhere. A parent's love is vital in the recovery process. Talk with your son or daughter about these needs and the role your adolescent desires for you to play in the recovery process. Be willing and ready to talk if your adolescent desires to do so. Consistently offer opportunities, without being pushy or demanding, for your adolescent to talk openly. Create an atmosphere of loving concern by showing your adolescent that you care through words and gestures.

## COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **The sexual assault occurred while my daughter was disobeying a rule... should I just let her get away with that?**

It is not uncommon for adolescents to challenge a rule or disobey a command given by a parent.

This kind of behavior is related to their need and desire to establish themselves as separate from their parents in order to create their own identity.

Whatever you decide, keep in mind that it is not appropriate to blame the victim for causing the sexual assault. Sexual assault is never fair punishment for breaking a rule. The action of breaking a rule may have made the individual more vulnerable to harm, but it does not justify the sexual assault.

When sexual assault occurs under these circumstances, remember to clarify that any punishment is related only to the disobedient act and not the sexual assault. It is easy for the adolescent to assume that a parent views the two as one and the same. Because of the potential for confusion, it is important for parents to use wisdom and not emotions in deciding the appropriateness of discipline.

One of the best ways to distinguish the broken rule from the sexual assault is to clearly state and show support and empathy regarding the assault immediately following the incident. The consequences for the broken rule can certainly wait or be dismissed outright.

### **My relationship with my son was rocky before the sexual assault and now it is even worse. What should I do?**

If you felt that the relationship was rocky before the assault, no doubt your son did as well. Dealing with this honestly and openly is the best approach. Acknowledge this fact freely to your adolescent. Allow your heart to be softened knowing that your warmth, love, and support are needed by him in this time of crisis.

Do not expect to be welcomed with open arms, however. Adolescents often feel the need to appear separate and strong. Respect this need and find ways of showing support without expecting outward acknowledgment.

Writing supportive notes that can be read privately or making quiet statements of love without an expectation of anything in return are some ways that you can meet this need in a way that is honoring of this age.

### **Why doesn't my daughter ever talk to me about it? I still don't know everything that happened.**

Always remember that adolescents desire to be more attached to peers at this stage in their lives. Their need for independence is great. In times of crisis they will often seek out a friend rather than a parent. It is also true that their peers will rarely be able to give them all that they need in times of crisis. Make yourself available to your daughter on the timetable that she chooses.

Give support from a distance and in subtle ways. You may have to put aside your desire to know the details of the assault until your daughter is ready to talk. Some choose never to disclose the details to parents or even to peers. You do not need to know the details to know that your daughter has been affected. Give support out of love without an expectation for anything in return.

This is easier said than done. As a parent of an adolescent, you walk a fine line between giving too little or too much. Too much space and non-interaction may imply that she doesn't matter to you, yet too little allowance for freedom may be interpreted as being intrusive.

Always balance your adolescent's need to be separate from you while remaining in a relationship of love and assurance. This will also be a test of your own sense of identity apart from your daughter. Do not confuse your need to be loved and accepted by her with your responsibility to demonstrate parental nurturing and support during a time of crisis and confusion.

### **Should I restrict my daughter's activities to keep her safe?**

Restricting an adolescent's environment has not proven to be the most effective method of keeping her safe. Not only is it impractical with an adolescent, but it will likely make her feel punished for having been assaulted. Limits and boundary setting are still important at this age, but allowing her to make decisions within reasonable limits is also an important skill for her to learn.

Set limits based on her age, developmental level and your internal set of values, rather than on the fact that she was recently assaulted. Give your daughter an appropriate amount of freedom with an appropriate amount of limits. Therefore, the most effective method of keeping her safe is to assist her in learning decision-making skills. Teach her to think about the choices she is making from all possible sides. This will in turn allow her to make wise choices throughout her lifetime.

### **Who should know about what has happened?**

One of the greatest negative impacts sexual assault has on an individual is the sense of loss of control. When at all possible, make steps to restore this for an adolescent. Giving her the power to decide who should know about the assault is a good place to start. Doing so not only gives her a sense of control, but also communicates to her that you respect her privacy.

Unfortunately, adolescents do not have full control over this since they are minors. Children's Protective Services (CPS) or law enforcement must be involved until it is decided whether criminal charges will be filed. Outside of legal obligations, allow your adolescent to say as much or as little as she desires to family, friends and relatives. Adolescents are usually able and desiring to make this decision with little assistance.

There will be people who will ask questions of you about your adolescent and information they have heard about the assault. Use wisdom in determining how much to discuss with each individual. The best way to deal with this is to let them know that you do not feel comfortable talking about it without your daughter's permission.

### **Should my adolescent receive therapy?**

Most individuals can benefit from therapy if the counselor is skilled in addressing the needs of adolescent sexual assault victims. Counseling provides a safe, non-threatening environment for them to sort through their thoughts and feelings about the sexual abuse. Provide the opportunity for your adolescent to receive counseling. If there is resistance to the idea initially, let your adolescent know that it is available if at any point he or she has a change of mind.

Often, victims want to push the memories of the assault aside because of the emotional pain associated with it. Most survivors want to avoid pain and wish for a quick fix and instantaneous relief. In time they will realize that this is not possible, and they will explore other avenues.

As a parent of an adolescent who has been sexually assaulted, you may decide to enter counseling yourself to gain support and information. It is important to realize that the trauma experienced by your adolescent is also felt by you. Often parents experience trauma related symptoms as well. Counseling can help you better understand the healing process so that you can in turn share this with your adolescent.

## **RECOVERY**

Knowing that your adolescent has been sexually abused has probably been one of the most difficult pieces of information you have ever had to face as a parent. Even though adolescence is a time of separation from parents and attachments to peers, you continue to play a vital role in providing your son or daughter with necessary love, acceptance and support. It is important to view your adolescent as a complete person with diverse experiences and a full range of thoughts and feelings. Though sexual assault greatly impacts an individual, it is not one's core identity.

Right now, the effects of sexual victimization may feel totally overwhelming. With time, this will diminish. Healing is a process that takes place over time. It is not instantaneous, and it is rarely quick. It takes place in subtle ways as the adolescent is able to process and come to terms with the assault. Allow this process to take place and assist your adolescent in moving through it by providing the kind of support that nurtures growth and personal integrity.

## A FINAL WORD

The trauma of sexual assault impacts the victim as well as close family members and friends. As a parent you are the primary giver of support to your adolescent son or daughter. Being the front line provider of support and strength can be very demanding. Allow yourself time to rejuvenate. Think of things that feel nurturing to you, and try to fulfill that need. To be the best possible support to your adolescent will require you to maintain good physical and emotional health for yourself.

One of the most difficult things for parents to see is their own child experiencing pain. The desire of most parents is to take it away as quickly as possible. Know that healing is a process with many avenues for growth. Instant healing, if it were possible, would take away from the opportunity for your adolescent to grow in strength and in courage.

Each step toward growth is one step closer toward the final celebration of healing.

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