

**COPING WITH SEXUAL ABUSE  
OF  
YOUR PRESCHOOL CHILD**

**A GUIDE FOR PARENTS**

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## YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN MOLESTED

There is nothing you can do to change the fact that your child has been sexually abused. There probably was little you could have done to prevent it. But there is much you can do to lessen the effects of sexual abuse on your child and to help yourself cope with its aftermath. You and your child are not alone. As many as 4 out of 10 children, become victims of some form of sexual abuse by the time they reach grade school. The majority of cases go undetected because the children are afraid to tell anyone. So, as hard as it is to hear what your child has to tell you about the abuse, be glad that he or she is willing to talk about it – it is an important step toward emotional recovery. And it gives us all a chance to help. This guide has been written to help you help your child to integrate this experience in ways that will not have lasting negative consequences.

## WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE?

Child sexual abuse or sexual molestation can include any kind of sexual act between a child and an adult or significantly older person. Sexual acts may include the following: touching of the other's genitals by either the adult or the child; exposure of the adult's or child's genitals, including photographing the child's genitals; adult masturbation in front of or by rubbing against a child; oral sex performed on a child or by a child on an adult; and any type of penetration of a child's vagina or anus, however slight, by a penis, finger, or other object. Such descriptions conjure up frightening images in a parent's mind – images that are almost too painful to contemplate. But we must be able to consider the possibility of their existence if we are to be able to help a child who has been subjected to such acts.

Sexual activity between children who are peers may be upsetting to parents and others, but it is not usually considered to be abuse unless there is some element of force, coercion, or intimidation involved. However, real force is rarely necessary because, in the vast majority of cases, the abuser is someone whom the child knows and trusts. A child's compliance (and silence) is usually acquired through trickery, bribes, or threats of consequences. This aspect is particularly confusing to children and must be dealt with very carefully by parents and other adults.

## EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO ABUSE

The reactions of children vary greatly, depending on the child, the experience, and what is done about it. They range from withdrawal to aggression to seeming lack of interest. Try not to expect a particular reaction – be supportive of your child's feelings, even if they are very different from your own.

Confusion is one of the most common reactions of very young children. It is we adults who often pass on the sense of seriousness and crisis that can cause children to panic and withdraw. Children must be allowed to work through whatever feelings they have.

Your child's emotional reactions to sexual abuse may include the following:

- Fear, insecurity
- Guilt, shame, embarrassment
- Uncertainty about how to feel
- Feelings of being dirty, spoiled, disgraced
- Fear of consequences from abuser, parents, system
- Guilt because some things may have been pleasurable
- Anger, hostility, blame
- Acute anxiety
- Self-blame, self-doubt
- Fear of internal damage
- Betrayal-by abuser or by parent protector
- Confusion about what happened that was wrong

## MEDICAL INDICATORS

Often there are no obvious medical indications that a child has been sexually abused. This is because there is usually a delay between the time of the abuse and its discovery, and because many sexual acts leave no clear signs. A lack of medical evidence does not mean the absence of abuse, however, and a child's statements should never be discounted simply because a doctor cannot prove them medically. Most doctors (even your own pediatrician) have not been trained in this type of examination and may not recognize many of the subtle signs of child sexual abuse. For this reason, children should be examined by physicians who are trained and experienced in diagnosing sexual abuse. As confident as you may be in your family doctor, you may get better answers if you discuss your fears with a specialist.

There may have been medical indications of sexual abuse in the recent or distant past, which, at the time, you did not associate with this problem. That is quite natural; few people ever assume that this could happen to their children. However, if someone is being investigated or prosecuted for abusing your child, your memories of any unusual symptoms exhibited by your child could help provide a link between the abuse and a particular person's access to your child.

## HELPING PARENTS COPE

After reading this guide, it might be very helpful to the police or prosecutor handling your case to write down any medical, behavioral, or emotional indicators that you remember noticing, as well as the approximate dates when they occurred. Following are some of the possible medical problems that your child might have experienced as a result of sexual abuse.

- Pain in the genital or anal areas, including pain while going to the bathroom or when held or picked up
- Redness, rash, swelling, or tears in genital or anal area
- Blood, discharge, or unusual odor from vagina or anus
- Unusual anxiety, embarrassment, or distress from any medication applied to treat the above conditions
- Other medical problems that could be associated with anxiety or possible sexual abuse, such as stomach pains, headaches, leg pains, throat infections, asthma

Many parents are reluctant to take their children to a doctor for an examination of this kind. They are afraid that the examination will only add to the children's trauma. This is a natural reaction and an important factor to consider. However, a gentle, sensitive diagnostic examination for sexual abuse need not be any more upsetting to a child than any other visit to the doctor. Children often worry about whether or not they have been damaged or might have something wrong with their bodies. Aside from determining whether your child has sustained any physical injury that may require treatment, a doctor's magical authority to a child can provide the needed reassurance that the child's body is still in perfect condition and that he or she will be just fine. Again, it takes a doctor with special training and experiences with these cases – don't be afraid to ask.

## POSSIBLE BEHAVIORAL CHANGES

There are many kinds of behaviors that children may display following molestation. Young children tend to act out some of their reactions because the abuse is so hard to express verbally. Be observant of behavior changes, but try not to look too hard for what may not be there. Some common behavioral reactions during and after molestation are these:

- Sleep disturbances, nightmares, fear of “monsters,” bedwetting.
- Loss of appetite, problems with eating or swallowing
- Fear of certain people or places
- School phobia: Sudden dislike, refusal to attend, fear of a teacher, upset upon return
- Social withdrawal, stranger anxiety
- Wetting pants, thumb sucking, rocking
- Unprovoked crying
- Unexplained anger, irritability, or crankiness
- Clinginess, fear of separation, fear of other caretakers
- Sexualized behavior: Excessive masturbation, new terms for genitals, pseudomaturity
- Secretive behavior: Having a secret, questions about them, answering “I can’t tell you”
- Re-enactment of abuse using dolls, drawings, or friends
- Regression: Behaving younger
- Sudden talk of an adult, imaginary, or secret friend
- Threatened behavior: Fear of violence, games with threats
- Anxiety-related illness

All of these are signs of anxiety and common reactions by pre-schoolers to molestation. Your child may develop some of these problems or none at all. They usually last from several weeks to many months following disclosure of the abuse. Try not to react strongly to them, especially any sexual behavior. Be comforting and supportive of your child’s nonverbal messages, and encourage him or her to put those feelings into words. The duration of your child’s reactions depends, in part, on how you and others respond.

## RESPONDING TO YOUR CHILD

It is natural for you to feel shock, outrage, and disbelief over what has happened, but the most important thing you can do for your child is to get control of your feelings. You may be screaming inside, but you must make every effort to be calm with your child. It may be the hardest role you've ever had to play – and the most important. It is best that your child not see you express your anger or pain. It may increase your child's guilt about the abuse and about telling. Moreover, your child may feel that he or she has somehow harmed you, and may not confide in you again.

## HELPING PARENTS COPE

Most children don't tell about sexual abuse because they are afraid they will be blamed, disbelieved, or rejected. When preschoolers do disclose abuse, many do so in stages – saving the 'worst parts' until they see how you react to what they tell you first. Rarely do young children ever fabricate an accusation of sexual abuse; they do not have extensive sexual fantasies involving adults. It is more common for them to deny victimization when it has occurred or to minimize its severity. They do this to protect themselves and others, including, sometimes, the abuser. Some children repress an incident to the extent that they are emotionally incapable of remembering it. In cases involving multiple victims, it is not uncommon for them to describe each other's abuse while denying their own. Since children already come to us bearing this kind of anxiety, we must do all we can to lessen it.

The following are some suggestions on how to respond:

- Under-react: The more matter-of-fact you can be, the more your child will be willing to share with you.
- Assure your child that you believe what he or she has told you, and that you are glad that he or she is able to talk to you. Give permission to clarify any misunderstanding or false information.
- Be careful never to give the impression that you are blaming the child for what has happened. Even without meaning to, some questions sound blaming (e.g.: "Why did you let him?"; "What were you doing in the closet anyway?"; "Why didn't you tell me this before now?").
- Emphasize that, no matter what your child said, did, or felt, it was not his or her fault, and that he or she did not cause it or deserve to have this happen. Children need to know that when there is sexual behavior between an adult and a child, the adult is always responsible.

- Consult with professionals who are trained, sensitive, and experienced with child sexual abuse cases, regarding the need for diagnostic examination and treatment. Reassure your child that he or she is physically fine and that there is no lasting harm to worry about.
- Stay close to the child immediately following disclosure and provide an extra sense of physical security. If the child or your family was threatened with harm by the abuser, reassure your child that he or she is safe with you. Explain that the threats were only a trick to keep the child from telling, and that there is no real danger.
- Do not make efforts to bury the incident, “forget all about it,” or put it behind you immediately. Even children with a strong desire to block out the abuse are unlikely to forget that it happened. Children need to be given the opportunity and the permission to express their feelings as they come up. They need to be helped to put the abuse in its proper perspective so that it won’t smolder in them as a forbidden secret for life. When we consciously or unconsciously silence child victims by our actions or our attitudes, it is usually out of our own need not to hear or think about the abuse, not theirs.
- At the same time, try not to “talk the abuse into going away”. Be a good listener, but try not to pry beyond what is necessary to understand what happened. Enough other professionals probably will have to ask your child for the details of the abuse. Continual probing questions from you may only add to your child’s embarrassment or sense of shame, and may even become a means of getting attention. It is also important to respect your child’s privacy by not telling a lot of people about it or repeating the story to others in the presence of the child.
- Permit your child to have positive as well as negative feelings if that’s what he or she expresses. People who sexually abuse young children often are very good at working with children and at winning their confidence and friendship. As a result, your child might have some good feelings about the abuser, who may be regarded as his or her friend, even though he or she did some confusing and uncomfortable things or even hurt the child. It is usually very hard for a parent to hear this from a child victim without reacting very negatively. However, if you can allow your child to express whatever he or she is feeling without getting an adverse reaction from you, the child won’t have to feel additionally guilty about these thoughts.
- Try not to become overprotective or restrictive of your child’s usual activities following the disclosure. Make every effort to follow normal routines and to help your family return to its normal lifestyle. If your child concludes that the abuse has caused disruption of his or her entire family pattern, it may take on even larger traumatic proportions.

- Maintain your normal expressions of affection and physical interactions with your child. Some parents, particularly fathers, tend to withdraw from physical contact with molested children because of their own emotional reactions or because they assume that it will be upsetting to the children. Instead, it may make your child feel that there is something wrong with him or her, that he or she is being punished, or that molestation and family expressions of affection are similar and related behaviors. Your child may not want to be held or kissed at first, but that will usually pass quickly. Try to interact with your child as you have always done, and take your clues from him or her as to what feels comfortable.
- Use this opportunity to educate all your children about what sexual abuse is and what they can do to help protect themselves. Teach them that there is good touch and bad touch, and that parts of their bodies are private and belong only to them. Give them permission to say “no” to some adults, to run away from people who scare them, and to ask for help. Emphasize that most adults are not like the abuser and will help them if they are in danger.
- Don’t ignore your other children during the crisis or try to pretend that nothing has occurred. They need reassurance and attention during this time, too. Tell the brothers and sisters in a general way what has happened to the child victim, but that he or she is okay now and they are all safe. It is best not to go into any real details of the abuse. If the victim tells them later, that is his or her choice, but you might caution against scaring the others. If they know the abuser, they may have ambivalent feelings toward him or her, or they may feel guilty for not being able to protect their sibling. Stress that the victim is telling the truth and that no one in the family is to blame, especially the victim. Point out that this can happen to any child and has happened to lots of other children.

## HOW TO EXPLAIN WHAT HAS HAPPENED

It is very difficult to find the words to help your child understand what has happened. Some children know it was bad because it hurt, they were uncomfortable, or they were threatened not to tell. Others sense that it was wrong, but they aren't sure why. Some who aren't hurt or scared and who may have experienced physical stimulation may want to know what was bad about their "game" or their "friend". It is difficult to know what to say to a child who has had little prior knowledge about sex. Saying that a person is "sick" or "sick in the head" can be confusing to young children, who generally equate those words with physical illness. They may worry that they or you may catch this sickness or that someone is going to die from it. On the other hand, we don't want children to grow up thinking that all sex is dirty and wrong.

One way to approach it is to say that there are some things that grownups can do that children don't do (e.g.: Children don't drive cars, they don't have jobs, they don't drink alcohol, they don't stay up late, etc.). The things that the abuser did to them are like those things – they're not okay because they were between an adult and a child and because they are against the law. They're against the law because the child didn't really have a choice and because those things aren't good for you until you're grown up.

You might explain that the abuser has a problem – he or she does sexual things with children instead of grownups. Your emphasis should be on the behavior, not the abuser, since the child may have some positive feelings about him or her. If you can communicate the idea that a person's behavior can be bad or wrong without the person necessarily being bad, it also will help children to understand that they aren't bad just because they participated in or were exposed to it.

## LONG-TERM EFFECTS

It is difficult to make a blanket statement about the future consequences of sexual abuse, except to say that they vary from child to child and depend upon a number of factors. Some of the most significant of these factors are these:

- The nature of the abusive acts
- The relationship between the victim and the abuser
- The duration of the abusive behavior
- The presence of violence, threats, and physical harm
- The child's age and development level
- The child's individual personality and strengths
- The process of intervention and reactions of others

Space does not permit a discussion of all these variables or how they interrelate with one another. It is a complex issue, and the reasons why children react differently are not fully known. However, this problem has been referred to as a "psychological time bomb" because, for some children, its effects may not show up until years after the abuse. This is why it is so important to help your child express and master his or her feelings at the time they occur. Many former victims who suffer from long-term effects in adulthood never had the opportunity to work through the trauma when they were young.

It might help to know that recent studies indicate that as much as one-third to one-half of the population has experienced some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18. Considering how widespread this problem is, it would appear that most children do recover from the effects of molestation and grow up to function adequately. What is clear is that a child's ultimate reactions are strongly affected by the way the situation is handled by the significant adults in the child's life. If your child is dealt with directly and sensitively during disclosure and afterward, he or she need not suffer permanently from the abuse.

## **WHAT ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY OR POSSIBLE SEXUAL PROBLEMS**

There are absolutely no data to suggest the children become more prone to homosexuality as a result of child sexual abuse. Rape victims do not become attracted to rapists following an assault, yet many parents of boys molested by men worry about this unnecessarily. Similarly, promiscuity, frigidity, or sexual abusiveness by themselves have not been causatively linked to childhood sexual abuse. However, even preschool-age children often are aware of anti-homosexual attitudes in our society, and are afraid that they will be labeled as such when they are molested by someone of the same sex. It is believed to be a primary reason why boys rarely ever report sexual abuse. Consequently, it is important to let your son know that he did not cause the abuse to happen by anything he did or said – he was just there. It is just as important not to transmit any anxieties about homosexuality to your son through such actions as grabbing his sister's dolls away from him, overreacting to masturbation or sex play with other children, or curtailing activities that he engaged in before the abuse occurred. The same applies to abuse of girls by women.

Again, it appears to be insensitive reactions, mismanagement of cases, and lack of disclosure that lead to many later difficulties. Helping your child to relearn what constitutes appropriate behavior sometimes takes patience, but need not be an upsetting process for either of you.

### **DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT FOLLOWING ABUSE**

Many parents assume that, because they have a close relationship with their children, the children will tell them if abuse occurred and describe what happened. What they often don't realize is that children usually are warned or threatened by the abuser not to tell their parents. The threats can be very frightening: "I will come back and hurt you or hurt your parents," or, even worse, "Your parents won't love you any more if they find out." As a consequence, children may be more resistant to telling parents than anyone else.

A diagnostic evaluation by a trained, experienced child therapist or interviewer can help your child unburden his or her secret and help you to learn what happened to your child. Similarly, it is important to provide therapy for your child to help him or her work through the many confusing feelings brought on by sexual abuse. You may feel that your child is too young for therapy, but a good child therapist can create a safe environment for dealing with hidden fears and anger.

Therapy need not necessarily be long-term, but it can be more helpful now than later in life.

## TAKING CARE OF YOU

When preschoolers are molested, the anguish of their parents often is more visible and more deeply felt than that of their children. You need help and support at least as much as your child does, so that you will be able to provide support to your child. Some of the things you may be experiencing at this time are as follows:

- **RAGE, THE URGE FOR RETALIATION.** These are common reactions – but don't let yourself react on impulse to settle the score. You will only hurt your child more. Do constructive things with your anger: Ventilate it, cooperate with authorities, file a suit on behalf of your child, develop prevention programs, or work to improve the response system.
- **GUILT OR SELF-BLAME.** Also common, but totally useless to your child and unproductive for you. Lamenting on why you didn't prepare your child better or adequately investigate who your child was with will only divert your energy and attention from your child's needs. Leave your anger and blame where they belong – on the abuser – and move on.
- **FEAR FOR YOUR CHILD.** Reactions resulting in over-protectiveness are very natural but not very useful. Children need to regain their self-confidence and the feeling that they can still be trusted. Treating a child as you did when he or she was younger also may reinforce regression behavior. Your fears may undermine the child's need to re-establish self-sufficiency and could actually increase his or her vulnerability to others.
- **EMBARRASSEMENT, SECRECY.** Some parents need to suppress the abuse because it causes them to feel embarrassed or personally responsible, or it brings back memories of their own childhood traumas. Dealing with the sexual abuse of your child will be particularly difficult and painful if you were molested as a child, because it usually triggers many unresolved feelings of your own. You may need help in handling those feelings, and there are increasing numbers of therapists and self-help groups available to help you do that. Try not to project your own old fears or denial onto your child. Your need for secrecy will not help your child.

- **EXACERBATION OF RECENT MARITAL PROBLEMS.** Child sexual abuse puts a strain on any marriage, but it is particularly difficult on one that already is shaky. Some parents secretly or openly blame each other for failure to protect their child. Sometimes one partner will have difficulty having sexual relations during this crisis. Sometimes one parent will deny that this could have happened, leaving the other feeling unsupported or forced to choose between a child and a partner. Some degree of family crisis is to be expected when parents discover that their child has been molested by someone outside the home. But if that crisis does not subside over time, if it precipitates other crisis, or begins to affect the foundation of your marriage, seek help for both of you.

Whatever your feelings, find someone to talk to whom you can trust and with whom you can talk about your feelings. That may be a friend, a relative, or a therapist. If your problems around those issues escalate, or your child's behavioral and emotional reactions to the abuse do not subside, get professional help. It works and you deserve it.