

A Parent's Guide to Understanding Sexual Abuse of Children and Teens

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After your visit to the STAR Center

- Assure your child/teen they are not to blame.
- Do not question your child after the interview. If your child wants to talk about the abuse, CALMLY LISTEN and do not put words into your child's mouth. Let your child know that you will let their therapist know about what they said to you about the abuse.
- Avoid expressing extreme reactions—your child needs a calm protector. Do not threaten to harm the abuser.
- Do not place a lot of attention on the abuse. Your child may begin to believe the abuse is impossible to recover from or that it somehow makes them different.
- Return to your normal daily routine.
- Provide your child with a physically, mentally, and emotionally safe environment for recovery.
- Be careful with whom you discuss your child's abuse. This can be upsetting to your child and possibly hurt the investigation.
- Follow through with all treatment recommendations. Individual counseling is often recommended for your child to help them cope. Since the whole family might have strong feelings about what happened, it may be helpful for everyone to seek counseling.
- Be aware of your feelings as a parent. You may experience a wide range of feelings. Don't hide or ignore your feelings, but express them with other adults who can be of support to you. Be careful to discuss your feelings about the abuse when your child cannot hear the conversation. Don't allow your feelings to affect your child. Remember that you are in a different stage than your child who may have known about the abuse for some time, whereas you have learned about it only recently.
- If you have questions regarding services, such as counseling resources, contact the STAR Center for assistance at (515) 241-4311.
- If you have questions regarding the investigation, contact law enforcement, Department of Human Services, and/or victim services.

Possible Feelings of Abused Children/Teens

Each child has a unique reaction to abuse and can have any combination of feelings, which can change from day to day.

Confusion

A child may feel that everything is out of control. People are saying things the child is unable to understand.

Fear

What will happen now? A child may fear harm by the abuser for telling. The child may fear going to court and facing the abuser. The child may fear abandonment by parents. The child may fear that their friends will not like them. All the different people wanting information may frighten the child.

Anger

A child may become angry at the person who reported the abuse or at their parents for not protecting them. Their anger may be turned inward and shown in a self-destructive manner.

Revenge

A child may want to get back at the person who abused them.

Relief

A child may feel relief from the burden of keeping a secret.

Worry

A child may think telling was a bad decision and may try to back out by saying the abuse never happened. A child may be worried about how the family will get along without the abuser (especially if the abuser is a family member). A child may worry about how going to jail would affect the abuser.

Doubt

A child may begin to doubt their memory about the abuse and may tell themselves that the abuse wasn't that bad.

Guilt

A child may feel that by telling they betrayed the abuser. The child may focus only on good things about their relationship with the abuser.

Regret

A child may wish they would have told sooner OR the child may wish they never would have told at all.

Embarrassed/Ashamed

A child may feel embarrassed about the abuse. They may feel different from everyone else. A child may be afraid others think bad things about them.

Responsible

A child may feel responsible for everyone else's pain (including the abuser). A child may feel that they are at fault for the abuse. This is especially true if their body responded to the abuser's touch.

Abandoned

A child may feel they do not have the support of their family. Sometimes the family of a victim rejects the child when the abuse is reported.

Alone

A child may worry about being left alone and may cling to adults.

Common Parent Feelings When Their Child/Teen Has Been Abused

Denial

A common first reaction is to deny that the abuse occurred OR to simply think that no damage was done, hoping that their child does not even remember it. In many cases it takes time for parents to overcome their denial and accept that their child was abused.

Anger

Many parents feel angry — either at themselves for not being able to protect their child — or at the abuser for what they did. Be honest with yourself about your feelings and talk to someone you trust.

Guilt, self blame

Some parents feel that the abuse is entirely their fault. It is important to remember that it is the abuser who is to blame. The best thing to do is focus on how to help your child.

Hurt, betrayal

When a child is hurt or betrayed so is their parent. As a parent you have a right to talk to someone about your pain, which may include the loss of people who were once close to you but now keep their distance.

Helplessness

It is a normal reaction to feel like things are out of control and that you do not know what to expect. Some parents describe feeling helpless or invisible.

Difficult memories

For some parents, abuse of their child may bring back feelings of their own abuse and especially how much they did not want it to happen to their child. If this is the case, working with a therapist can help you recover and learn how to separate your feelings from your child's feelings.

Sexual inadequacy

Some parents think that the abuser turned to their child because of problems in the adult sexual relationship. It is important to understand that problems with adult sexual relations do not cause a person to abuse children.

Desire to forget

It is natural to wish that you and your child could just forget the abuse and pretend it did not happen. However, this is not a healthy way to handle it. Your child will feel safe by knowing they can talk about what happened. Even though it may be tough now, you can learn how to talk with your child so they always know you are there for them.

Disbelief

One of the hardest things for some parents is learning that their child was abused without them even knowing about it. You may be confused about why your child didn't tell you (even when you said they could come to you about anything). The thing to remember is that sexual abuse almost always happens in secrecy. Whether the abuser threatened the child not to tell or tricked the child into thinking they should not tell, abusers use control over the child to hide their actions. Tricks that abusers use on children include:

- Threatening to physically harm the child or a loved one (including pets)
- Scaring them into thinking their parent would be mad at them, would not believe them, would choose the abuser over them, or would not be able to cope with the truth
- Telling them they would be taken away from their family or their family would fall apart
- Using the child's love for the abuser as a reason to keep the abuse a secret

What to Say to Others

You should have a family plan about how to handle questions. You can let others know that your family is going through a stressful time without telling the details about what happened.

Things to consider for the child:

- May feel embarrassed and/or responsible;
- May feel shame if the situation is treated like a terrible secret;
- Needs a sense of privacy and control over what has happened;
- Should know which friends and relatives will be told;
- If school age, should have some choice about who is told (when possible).

Who and what to tell?

- **Siblings:** Reassure them that everyone is safe and the adults can handle the situation and consider therapy if needed.
- **Relatives:** Choose carefully, taking into consideration how your relatives react to stressful situations; intense anger/threats, distress, disgust, disbelief, or unnecessary questioning are all harmful.
- **Friends:** Decide who can give you support so you have someone to talk to about your feelings.

- **School staff:** Pick one person (perhaps the school counselor) to talk to about what your child should do if they need support at school (and let your child know the plan).
- **Caregivers:** Give specific directions about supervision to anyone watching your child; some children need to be in direct sight of an adult at all times.

Recovery

Child abuse affects each child/teen differently. Even a one-time incident can cause confusion and guilt if not handled properly.

Things to consider for your child's recovery:

- A child does not just forget about the abuse if their parents don't talk about what happened.
- Things the abuser did or said can make a child feel responsible for the abuse or what happened when they told.
- It is important that a child gets a clear understanding that the abuse was not their fault.
- If children blame themselves for the abuse, they could have problems later with self-esteem, depression, relationships with other people, or sexually acting out with other children.
- A child may have good feelings toward the abuser and needs to separate what was good about the relationship from what was abusive.
- A child needs a healthy parent (so take care of yourself).

Therapy can help:

- Children (and parents) can feel relief when they talk about what happened with someone who is not directly involved.
- Children may not want to tell their parents things that will make them sad or upset.
- A therapy session provides a safe place for children (or parents) to deal with their feelings.
- Parents who were abused when they were children need to separate their feelings about what happened to them from their child's feelings.

Finding the Right Therapist

Some people think that a child/teen who was sexually abused can just forget about what happened, but it is not realistic to think that they will forget. Therapy helps a child learn how what happened to them affects them so they can deal with their feelings and live a healthy life. Dealing with their feelings NOW may prevent problems in the future such as inappropriate contact with other kids, anger issues, guilt/self-blame, school problems, social isolation, anxiety, promiscuity, perfectionism, etc. Recantation (see page 8) may also occur but can be avoided or handled appropriately through therapy.

When searching for a therapist for your child, you must remember that you are a consumer. Just as you would take your car to a good mechanic you want to give careful thought to who works with your child. It is important that you find someone who is qualified to work with your child's age range, which is especially important for very young children (up to six years old). If your child has been sexually abused, then you will want someone who has training in the specialized field of child sexual abuse. It is important that both parents and the child feel comfortable with the therapist. Don't get discouraged if the first therapist is not the right fit.

Children who are sexually abused are affected differently. A good therapist will help you, as a parent, understand how your child is doing AND how you can best support your child and help the family heal. While some children may benefit from occasional follow-up sessions as they reach new developmental stages, most do not need years of therapy. Remember that it is best to talk with the therapist about when to stop therapy for your child so they may have a final good-bye session.

Some questions to ask when selecting a therapist:

1. Do you work with children? If so, what ages?
2. What training/experience do you have in the treatment of child sexual abuse?
3. How will I pay for my child's therapy (insurance, out-of-pocket, sliding fee, crime victims' assistance)?
4. How often will you want to meet with my child?
5. Where will you meet with my child to ensure their privacy and comfort?
6. How often will you want to meet with me? Will you meet with me and my child together or separately? Will other family members be involved?
7. How will I know if my child is benefiting from therapy?
8. How will I know when my child no longer needs to come for therapy?

Recantation

Recantation means that after a child/teen has disclosed sexual abuse, they try to “take it back.” When a child recants, it does not mean they were lying about what happened. Rather, out of fear or embarrassment a child may decide it is too difficult to deal with and try to make it all go away. Often times in an effort to keep the child from telling, an abuser will tell the child that they will be taken away or -worse- not be believed at all. If the child is removed from their family or if they are not believed, then they may wish they had never said anything in the first place. This is particularly true if the child is not believed by their parent. Also, if an abuser is charged and prosecuted, a child may recant the abuse prior to trial out of fear of the legal system or simply not wanting to get someone in trouble. If your child recants, stay calm and let their therapist know.

Dispelling Myths About Sexual Abuse

Myth: Sexual abuse only happens to ‘pretty little girls.’

Truth: Both boys and girls are targets of sexual abuse. Abusers often pick children with whom they spend alone time. The child’s appearance is rarely a factor.

Myth: Sexual abusers are ‘dirty old men.’

Truth: Abusers are men and women, young and old, married and single. The old saying, ‘You cannot judge a book by its cover,’ is especially true when it comes to trying to identify an abuser.

Myth: Sexual abuse only happens by strangers.

Truth: This is quite the opposite. Most cases of child sexual abuse occur by someone the child knows and trusts, often times a family member (including siblings) or someone they trust like a coach or youth leader.

Myth: I was sexually abused as a child so I would know if something was happening to my child.

Truth: An abuser may try to convince you that things you are noticing are related to your own abuse instead of what is happening between the abuser and your child.

Myth: A child can willingly participate in the abuse.

Truth: Boys’ and girls’ bodies can respond to the abuser’s touch, but that does not mean they wanted the abuse to happen. An abuser may use a child’s body response as a reason to keep the secret by telling the child they liked it. An abuser may convince the child that their relationship is normal.

Myths Specific to Male Survivors

Myth: Boys are harmed less by abuse than girls.

Truth: All children and teens (boys and girls) can be both physically and emotionally harmed by abuse.

Myth: If a teenage boy is abused by a woman, it is not really abuse.

Truth: A sexual act with a child/teen by a more powerful person (male or female) is always abuse. Whether by a mother, aunt, babysitter, or teacher, sex abuse can cause teenage boy confusion, possible depression, or other problems.

Myth: Only homosexual men abuse boys.

Truth: Abusers are attracted to a child's developing body (lack of hair or adult features) and often select a victim based on access to the child. People who abuse children may also have sex with adult men and/or women.

Myth: Boys abused by males are or will become homosexual.

Truth: Many boys who have been abused by males wrongly believe that something about them sexually attracts males and that this may mean they are homosexual. Experts do not believe that early sexual experience, even if the touch felt good, makes a person gay.

Why Knowledge About Sexual Abuse is Important

- Because one in four girls and one in six boys will be exposed to some form of sexual abuse by age 18.
- Because one in five of children are approached sexually on the Internet by age 18.
- Because sexual abuse occurs in every race, class, neighborhood, religion, and cultural group in the country.
- Because it happens to the children of GOOD PARENTS.
- Because much of the reported sexual abuse of children is not by strangers, but by someone known to the child.

The Role of Grooming in Sexual Abuse

Grooming

- Is a technique used by perpetrators that can allow them to go undetected for decades
- Is a seduction process in which the perpetrator gains the trust of the community, the family, and the child target

The Purpose of grooming:

- Is to reduce the likelihood that a child will disclose abuse and
- Reduce the likelihood that a child will be believed if they were to disclose abuse

Grooming May Involve:

- Becoming a pillar of the community in which the child(ren) lives
- Building a trusting relationship with the child's family/caregivers
- Building a close relationship with the child
- Providing the family with emotional/financial support
- Providing the child with emotional and/or physical attention
- Providing the child with special outings, gifts, and/or money
- Treating the child as if they are older – more mature than their age (providing access to alcohol, drugs, and pornography)
- Slowly sexualizing the relationship with the child through sexualized conversation and touch that increasingly becomes sexualized (i.e. wrestling, back rubs, “accidental” genital touch)