

# WHY MY CHILD?

A guide for parents of children who have been sexually abused

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## Introduction

You may be facing the most difficult crisis you can imagine. Your child has been sexually abused, perhaps by someone close to you or an acquaintance or a complete stranger. Yes, it is terrible, but your child is alive and there is much you can do to help both yourself and your child come through this.

You are certainly not alone, small comfort though this may be. Some studies suggest that as many as three out of ten children experience some sort of sexual abuse by the time they are sixteen. It is difficult for children to tell. Many go through life carrying the secret with them. Those are the unlucky one - the ones who don't get the support and love that you can offer to your child.

It won't be easy, but with the help of this guide and other resources, and the support of whoever you can turn to - family, professionals, self-help groups, your church or religion, you will survive. What is more, your child will survive and, with help, can go on to lead a happy, productive life. It may take time, but it is worth it. This is the message from hundreds of parents who have had to deal with the abuse of their children.

Deborah, mother of three children, felt the world had ended when she found out her eight year old son, Andrew, had been sexually abused. 'I felt I would never stop crying when they told me. All I could think of was my poor baby - would he be alright? I thought the pain would make me explode. I wished it had been me instead of him. I kept thinking, if only, if only, if only... Of course I blamed myself - I should have protected him. That was two years ago. We've had counselling and I've read every self-help book available. Andrew seems to be OK, but I keep my fingers crossed and I still worry. I know things are better because we can laugh again without feeling guilty.'

### **What is Child Sexual Abuse?**

Child Sexual Abuse is any sexual exploitation of a child under the age of sixteen for the sexual pleasure or profit of an adult or much older person.

This includes masturbating the child, or the child masturbating the adult, touching genitals, taking obscene photographs of children, oral sex, penetration or attempted penetration of the child's vagina or anus, or involving children in prostitution. It may be a single incident or events which occur over a number of years.

It is unimaginable to think that anyone could harm a child in this way, especially your child. Unfortunately it does happen.

### **Children's Reactions**

Children's reactions to abuse vary according to their age, how severe the abuse was, who the abuser was, how the child was silenced and how people reacted to

the child after the abuse was uncovered. It is important not to react with horror and shock, as the child needs to feel that the adult can cope.

Children may react by:

- Feeling betrayed, angry, guilty, shameful or frightened
- Being confused about what happened
- Being confused about their own feelings about the abuse or the abuser
- Lashing out at parents, siblings or others
- Wondering what all the fuss is about
- Feeling dirty
- Being anxious
- Feeling embarrassed, insecure
- Blaming themselves
- Having low self esteem
- Seeming to be fine
- Being worried because they secretly liked what happened

Sometimes a child's body reacts to abuse and the child likes the feeling. This only means the children's body is healthy and responding naturally to sexual stimulus. Often this is confusing for the child. (see Questions That Children Ask)

You will be reacting in your own way to the abuse (see Parents' Feelings), which may make it complicated when trying to help your child. Hopefully, you will have professional help or some other form of support. All you can ask yourself is to try your best to help your child, to keep your reactions under control and to get help for yourself (see Take Care of-Yourself). Try not to condemn the abuse or abuser in case it adds to the child's guilt and confusion. (See How Can I Help My Child?)

### **Behaviour Changes**

You may notice that your child's behaviour changes. Although many of these behaviours might have other causes, children who have been abused may:

- Start wetting their beds
- Have nightmares
- Be fearful of people/places
- Become more clinging or withdrawn
- Burst into tears, become extremely irritable
- Try to be overly 'good'
- Become bad tempered/full of rage at everyone

- Compulsively masturbate/exhibit inappropriate sexual behaviour
- Compulsively wash
- Have physical illnesses - stomach aches, headaches, pains
- Become withdrawn
- Feel suicidal
- Regress to younger behaviour such as thumb sucking or taking out and playing with long discarded comfort toys or stuffed animals.
- Have eating problems
- Re-enact abuse on objects or with other children or adults
- Panic if you try to undress them

These behaviours and others are your child's way of dealing with the abuse. With help, many of these behaviours will disappear, though some may take longer than others. There will be times when your patience is severely tried by your child. The thing to remember is that your child's reactions and behavioural changes are normal under the circumstances and that things will get better.

### **Medical Attention**

There may also be medical problems associated with the abuse, which means your child should have a full examination. Ensure that the doctor your child sees is trained to work with children and is experienced in dealing with children who have been abused. Children's doctors are trained in assessing the health and development needs of children and will also be gentle and compassionate in this sensitive situation. If you have doubts, get another doctor. Privately ask the doctor to reassure your child that his or her body is alright, despite what happened. Stay with your child during the examination, if possible and appropriate.

### **Parents' Feelings**

The trauma of what has happened can seem overwhelming. One mother said she felt absolute fury at the abuser in particular and the world in general. A father said it was like 'being in a deep pit, with no light or escape'.

You may have strong feelings such as:

- Anger, guilt, rage
- Shock/disbelief/repulsion
- Helplessness
- Grief/betrayal
- Revenge

These feelings may result in you:

- Becoming overly protective of your child and other children in your family
- Feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed about the abuse

Denying that anything happened - 'it must have been the child's imagination'

It could also result in a rift between parents - people react differently to stressful experiences. One partner may weep and talk, while the other reacts by building fences or digging holes or just keeping busy. If you resent the way your partner is dealing with his/her emotions, you may be unable to support each other. The best advice in this case is to deal with your own feelings in a way that is comfortable for you, but not to impose your way on others.

All of these feelings and reactions are normal under the circumstances. However, they can get in the way of helping your child. Children can be very protective. If they feel you are too upset by the abuse, they will stop talking about it to avoid hurting you. This doesn't mean you should not feel that way - only that you should not let it get in the way of your child's healing (see Take Care of Yourself).

No matter how you feel, it is unlikely that your child will feel exactly the same way. For example, your child may still like or even love the abuser, though you may hate that person. Take care not to impose your feelings on the child. Children need to come to terms with the abuse in their own way, whatever the rights or wrongs of the situation.

### **Incest**

The problem of child sexual abuse is more complicated when the abuser is someone you love or have loved. In addition to the feelings listed above, some parents whose children were abused by their partners feel:

- Jealousy/rejection - 'why did my partner turn to my child instead of me?'
- Worried about finances - what will happen to my family if my partner is imprisoned or loses his/her job?'
- Doubt - my partner could not have done that. I know him/her too well; it's just not possible.'
- Divided loyalties between partner and child

You may also have the added pressure of the reactions of others to the abuse. 'You MUST have known' or 'how could you let that happen?' or 'I've always thought he was strange' are unhelpful comments made to non-abusing parents trying to cope with the incestuous abuse of their children. Some parents do know about the abuse, but many do not.

When your child has been sexually abused, seek help. Find a counsellor, a friend, a family member - someone who will be non-judgmental and who will listen. (see Resources and Help Organisations).

### ***What If You Were Sexually Abused?***

If you were sexually abused as a child, the sexual abuse of your child may be a painful reminder of your experience. Dealing with your child's pain may bring up all the hurt and confusion that you might have gone through as a child. In order to help your child, you may want to get some support for yourself.

### ***Your Feelings Are Normal***

Just keep telling yourself that your feelings are normal. You are not crazy - the situation may be, but you are not. You are also not alone. Other children have suffered abuse and survived. Other parents have gone through this horror and survived. It's alright to feel the way you do.

Hold firmly onto the thought that time does heal. Perhaps some stories with positive outcomes will help to keep you going:

Tom, aged thirteen, was abused by the man who ran the paper shop. The abuse continued for two years, until the man was arrested for similar offences. Only then did Tom tearfully admit that he had been abused by the man. Tom felt suicidal and was very worried about his sexuality. With the support and help of his parents and counsellor, Tom learned how to cope with what happened. He no longer felt it was his fault.

Katie, aged eleven, was sexually abused by her gym teacher. She told her mother and the police were called. Although the teacher was never prosecuted, Katie has gone on with her life. 'I've never forgotten what happened or forgiven him for what he did, but I refused to let it ruin my life'.

Sally was sexually abused by her father from the ages of two to five. She told her mother when she was five. Sally's father denied the abuse and the medical evidence was inconclusive, so the case did not come to court. Sally's father left and was divorced by her mother. Sally ended up in the top of her class. She has contributed her story to a book and has won a contest for her writing.

Simon's babysitter, a young teenage boy and friend of the family, sexually abused him for several years. The boy was arrested for an offence against another child and also confessed to abusing Simon and others. He had been sexually abusing younger children from the age of 9, and had himself been abused. Simon and his family got help through family guidance. Simon married and has a family of his own. The boy who abused him was also counselled and has not re-offended.

When it was discovered that Joe was sexually abusing his children, the family broke up. Joe was given a jail sentence and then received therapy. During this time, his children and their mother were also counselled. His children expressed a desire to see their father again and social services worked out supervised visitations.

Amanda was sexually abused by her mother. When she told, the professionals did not believe her - they thought it must be the father. Eventually, she did get help.

She and her sister then lived with their father and received family counselling. Amanda went on to college and became a teacher.

### **What About Your Family?**

Everyone in the family will probably be affected by the abuse in some way. The child or children who have been abused may be exhibiting some of the behavioural changes mentioned earlier. Children who have not been abused may react with anxieties, as well. Clinging to parents, whinging, withdrawing, coming down with illnesses, trying to stay home from school, demanding more attention, or becoming rebellious are just some of the ways children try to cope with things they cannot really understand.

Although these reactions are natural, the general effect of this is a disrupted, stressed family in which no one feels good or safe. It is just what you don't need. There are some things you might try to make it better:

- Try not to favour the child or children who have been abused. Special treats and presents will cause resentment from other children and may make the child who has been abused feel too 'special' or different.
- If there are special treats, make sure that everyone is included and that the treats are not seen to be the result of the abuse.
- Try to carry on with the normal family routine as much as possible, even if you don't feel like it. A settled, normal routine is reassuring to children. As one little boy said, 'it can't be too bad if we're still having spaghetti on Friday night'.
- Be as honest as possible when answering questions in your family. That doesn't mean explaining things in great detail, but avoiding questions leads to children feeling worried.
- Think about how you will explain what happened. One father when asked by his other very young children what 'rape' meant, explained that 'someone touched Jenny with parts of his body which he shouldn't have'. This was all those children needed. Other children will, of course, require more information. But don't overload children. Answer until they stop asking questions.
- Work out with your children what they can say should someone comment or ask questions. (see *What Should We Say?*).
- Let your children know who they can turn to for help. Perhaps their grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, teachers, clergy or a good family friend will be available. It is good to have people to share the burden with, if at all possible.
- Seek family counselling. Ask social services, child guidance or the organisations listed at the back of this booklet for suggestions.

### Whose Fault Is It?

You may feel that it is your fault that your child was abused. You may think about all the signs you see now, but didn't connect with abuse at the time. Unless you were involved in the abuse or knew that your child was being abused, it is not your fault. **THE PERSON WHO ABUSED YOUR CHILD IS TO BLAME.**

Children are never to blame for abuse, no matter what the circumstances. Sometimes abusers say that the child 'asked for the abuse to happen'. The abuser then blames the child. Children are naturally affectionate and seek adult attention. Abusers use this as an excuse to abuse. Children cannot understand the consequences of becoming involved sexually with an adult or older person, and therefore cannot judge the situation. The abuser is always at fault.

This is true even if children, having been abused, try to get an adult to become sexual with them. The adult's responsibility is to protect, not exploit, children in these circumstances.

Tell yourself that the abuse was not his or her fault. Work on preventing it happening again (see Teaching Personal Safety Skills). If something you did put your child at greater risk, change it. Check and recheck on the people you leave your child with. If you were involved with drugs or alcohol which made you less aware of what was happening, get help.

The most important thing you can do now is to assure your child that you are not angry with him or her and that you are moving from 'Whose fault was it?' to 'How can we make it better?'

### Why Didn't My Child Tell?

Children often don't tell about abuse. It may be that they don't know it's wrong or that they were frightened. Some children are threatened. One little boy didn't tell because the abuser said his father would die if he did. Another little girl didn't tell because the abuser said her mother would not love her anymore, if she knew.

Children don't tell because:

- They're embarrassed
- The abuser is a close relative or parent
- The abuser said he/she would go to prison if the child told
- They don't want to get into trouble
- They don't think anyone would believe them
- They think you already know
- The abuser bribes or threatens them
- The abuser is someone they like and want to protect
- They don't know the words to say

- The abuser tells them he or she will hurt them if they do

Children may tell someone outside the family because they don't want to hurt you. Children can be very sensitive and protective of your feelings. That's why it's important to assure your child that you are pleased that the abuse is out in the open, no matter how you found out. Don't make your child feel guilty for not having told you or not having told sooner or having told someone outside the family. It is possible that keeping it secret may have saved them from worse harm. Praise your child for having survived the abuse.

### When a Child Tells - Ways to Respond

Since most children do not want to cause pain to someone they love, they may reveal only a little about the abuse at a time to test your reaction. The following suggestions might be helpful:

- Stay calm. Try not to transmit your anger, shock or embarrassment. It will help your child to know that you are in control of a situation he/she could not cope with alone.
- Take what your child says seriously. Children, particularly young ones, rarely lie about sexual abuse.
- Reassure your child. Children may feel responsible for or guilty about the abuse
- Emphasise that the abuse is not the child's fault and that you are glad that the abuse is out in the open
- Praise your child for having survived the abuse. Explain that he/she had no choice at the time of the abuse and that he/she is now safe. This helps children come to terms with the question 'Could I have stopped it?'
- Listen, but don't press for details. Let the child proceed at his/her own pace.
- You can say that things like this have happened to other children, but avoid saying that 'this is exactly what happened to the little girl down the road'. No one experiences abuse in the same way.
- This situation may be too difficult for you to cope with alone; do seek help from police, social services, child guidance.
- Get medical attention and ensure that the doctor is appropriately trained. Stay with your child during the examination, if possible and appropriate.
- Accept the child's experience without judgements or recriminations. Statements like 'If only you hadn't gone to the park', will make things worse.
- Face what happened - don't try to pretend everything is alright. You could say, 'I love you and wouldn't have had this happen to you for the world. I can't change what happened, but we'll work together to make it better'.

- Assure your child that the abuse was the offender's fault. Never say that what happened was dirty or naughty because children then assume they are dirty or naughty as well.
- Try not to make judgmental statements about the abuser, because the child may still like or love that person. If necessary, say that the person has a problem and needs help.

### What Should We Say?

You may not want to talk to anyone about the abuse. You have a right to privacy. However, in some cases it may be necessary to work out what to say to friends, family and teachers. You may also need to help your child decide what to say. Sometimes children who are abused tell too many friends or say too much, when their friends don't know how to handle the information. Although you will want certain people to know, you will also need to guard your child from embarrassment or even ridicule. It is a fine line, because you have told your child the abuse isn't his/her fault. You might want to explain that some people don't understand about abuse, so let's work out together what to say if someone asks a question.

Children can say

- 'I don't want to talk about it, but thanks for asking.'
- 'Someone did something they shouldn't have, but that's over'.
- 'You're a good friend, so I know you'll understand if I don't talk about it.'

Parents can say:

- 'Thanks so much for your concern, but I'd rather not talk about it.'
- 'I know you'll understand that it will help my child if he/she is just allowed to get on with things. We're getting help. Thanks for asking.'
- If people are spreading rumours or being overly curious, don't become angry - enlist their help instead. Say, 'it would really help my child to get over this if he/she wasn't worried about what people were saying. You know so many people, I wonder if you would mind getting people to understand that comments like "poor Jane" only make it worse. Thanks so much for your help.'

Remember:

- You don't owe anyone an explanation, except to the authorities that are involved.
- You and your child have a right to privacy.
- People will eventually lose interest in asking.

### How Can I Help My Child?

Hopefully you and your family will receive therapy or counselling. There are some

things you can do to help your child, but check with the counsellor to ensure that you are working together:

- Explain that you will always be willing to listen should your child wish to talk.
- Be reassuring when talking with your child; continue to say that it wasn't the child's fault. If your child continues to say it WAS his or her fault, then say you understand they feel that way and ask why they think that. It may take some time for them to accept that they are not to blame-take it slowly and listen.
- Keep plasticine around and encourage your child to use it as a possible way for expressing feelings.
- Drawing and painting are good ways to get feelings out.
- Play with water and sand, pound nails into wood, set up a punching bag, encourage physical activity-anything to allow pent up anxiety to escape.
- To help children develop a sense of their own selves, do body awareness exercises like:
  - moving to music
  - drawing life size body outlines on pieces of wallpaper (lining paper is good for this and is very cheap)
  - looking in a mirror and saying what they see
  - looking at their own baby pictures
- For older children, encourage them to write in a diary or to record their feelings on a tape recorder. But older children might still like plasticine or finger painting, as it can be comforting and non-threatening to use these younger means of expression.
- Help your child to gain confidence and to become more self-assertive:
  - praise your child for doing something well, such as getting dressed on time or setting the table
  - involve him/her in making decisions, perhaps what jumper to wear or what to eat
  - - encourage creativity
  - Show your child how to make a collage out of pictures from magazines and newspapers. Make a collage about happy or sad feelings or about any other issues, like how the child sees the world today or about being a baby or being loved - whatever comes to the child's mind.
  - Give your child a small box and let him/her decorate it inside and out. On the outside could go 'how others see me - on the inside 'how I see myself or 'my private thoughts'. Allow your child to keep this box in a private place.
  - Display your child's work prominently in your house and comment on how

much you like it.

- Continue to be cuddly with your child, but only if he/she feels comfortable. Sometimes a child who has been abused withdraws from physical contact. In this case, don't force it, but make it clear that you would like a hug or kiss when the child is ready. This might be difficult for you - parents, too, need those hugs and kisses.
- Tell your child you love him/her. Children often feel that they are not worth loving after being abused.
- If your child was sexually abused by someone of the same gender, he or she might feel 'gay'. The child may need reassurance that being abused doesn't 'make you homosexual or lesbian'.
- Teenagers who are gay and have been sexually abused, need the same help and reassurance that any victim or survivor of abuse needs.
- If your son was sexually abused by a woman, some will dismiss it by saying the boy was lucky 'to be initiated'. Again, the abuse is not his fault and he will need reassurance and counselling.

### Take Care of Yourself

It is natural that you will spend much time and energy helping your child, but don't forget to take care of yourself. The more relaxed you are, the easier it will be to give your child the care and attention she or he needs.

- Make time for yourself and find support or get counselling.
- Seek out self-help groups or start one yourself.
- See if your religious leader can offer advice or help.
- Find someone to talk to, like a friend or family member, but don't overburden them by discussing it twenty-four hours a day.
- Take one day at a time.
- Keep a diary or journal to write your feelings.

Try to do something constructive, such as volunteer to help a children's charity, get your school to put the KIDSCAPE Child Protection Programme into practice, join a pressure group to get laws changed, write letters to your MP to get more help for children, start a local self-help group for parents

- If you feel unsure of yourself, take a course in assertiveness.
- Enrol in relaxation or exercise classes.
- Take up a physical activity - running, walking, bicycling - as a way to get rid of stress.
- Insist upon time for yourself - take a long bath with no interruptions, play

music, write poems, keep a journal, draw, paint.

- Do something completely different - learn to tap dance, swim, play the piano. do pottery - anything new and absorbing.
- Go to a film or play (a cheerful one!).
- Garden, dig a hole, build a fence.

Don't feel guilty if you find yourself having a good time - a more relaxed, happy parent will be a greater help to a distressed child than one who is tied up in knots. Taking time for yourself is necessary therapy for you.

If you were abused as a child and this brings back memories and feelings, remember that your child's experiences are not necessarily the same as yours. Your child may react and feel differently. Don't impose your feelings on your child. Ask for counselling or join a survivor's group to help you.

### Teaching Personal Safety Skills

Sometimes a child or teenager can get out of an abusive situation; other times it isn't possible. When teaching children about personal safety, we must not make them feel guilty about any abuse which has taken place. They should be praised for having survived that abuse. Whatever they did was right. To help them become less at risk in the future, you may wish to teach them some strategies which they could use, depending upon the circumstances. Do this in a matter of fact way - the same way you taught them to watch for cars when crossing the road, or to swim or not to play with matches.

#### *With younger children:*

- Teach them to tell you if anyone asks them to keep a secret, hug or touch a secret. Explain that no one should ask them to do this and you will never be angry at them if they tell you. Ensure that they know they must do this even if it feels good or if someone threatens them.
- Explain that it is alright to say NO, if they feel it is safe to do so. Practice with them. Shout NO loudly together.
- Help them understand that their bodies belong to them. Explain that this means their entire body, including their genitals. It is best if children know the correct names for all their body parts. However, if this makes you uncomfortable, you can say 'that includes the parts covered by bathing suits'. Children who have been abused sometimes have bad or wrong ideas about their bodies; they need to learn to love themselves and be proud of their bodies.
- Explain that they don't always have to listen to and obey adults and that you will support them if they feel unsafe.

- Tell them they can run away from someone who frightens them.
- Help them understand that hugs and kisses are lovely, but are never ever kept secret.
- Help them make a list of people they could talk to if they were frightened or worried. With very young children, draw pictures or use photographs.
- Work out a code with your child so that he/she can ring you for help if necessary.

#### ***With young people:***

- Talk to them about trusting their intuition. If they have the feeling things are not right, they should leave or get help.
- Help them to establish their own personal limits and give suggestions about getting out of situations or telling others what their limits are. One father told his children he would collect them, NO QUESTIONS ASKED, if they rang him.
- Teach them to say NO, to yell and run - and practice it.
- Give them clues about watching out for inappropriate behaviour. If, for example, a person makes sexual comments, or rubs against them or is offensive, tell them to excuse themselves, go to another room, the loo, to telephone or to take a taxi. If they have no money, tell them you'll pay at the other end.
- Help them establish a list of people they could go to talk or for help. This may or may not include you. There are some things teenagers would rather not talk to parents about.
- Taking a course in self-defence or assertiveness may help their confidence. Check that the course is properly run by a qualified person.

#### **What If My Child Molests Another Child?**

Sometimes children who have been abused act out what happened to them by becoming sexual in an inappropriate way with another child. Although this may shock you (or another adult such as your child's teacher), do not punish your child. Your child needs help to learn that this kind of behaviour is not acceptable.

Children, depending upon their age, may not realise it's wrong or may have liked the feelings associated with the abuse and are trying to recreate those feelings.

Try to:

- React calmly
- Explain why the child should not do it
- It is something grown-ups might choose to do with each other
- it is wrong to trick or force sexual contact

- It is OK to touch your own body in private
- Bodies are nice and everyone's body is their own

You may wish to explain sex to your child outside the context of abuse

- Contact your child's counsellor or social worker to arrange counselling about ways to stop the behaviour
- If your child hasn't got a counsellor or social worker, seek professional help. Contact your local Child Guidance Clinic, your GP or social services to ask for advice
- Ensure that your child is ALWAYS supervised when with other children until the problem is sorted out

If appropriate, explain to the parents of the other child why your child has done this and what you are doing to stop it. They will obviously be upset, but an explanation and apology should help. To prevent the situation getting worse, you may wish to get professional advice and support. Likewise the parents of the other child may need help to sort things out. You may seek help from social services or the police child care team.

If your child has molested another child, it could have serious implications. It could mean he or she is in danger of becoming an abuser. Insist upon professional help for the child's sake and to prevent future victims.

#### **Commonly Asked Questions**

##### ***Why Do They Do It?***

People who sexually abuse children come from every profession, class and race. The vast majority of reported abusers are male, but women also sexually abuse children. Most were themselves abused as children (note that most abused children DO NOT grow up to abuse, but some do). Abusers are sexually excited by children and use their power to force, seduce, threaten or trick children into sexual acts. Quite often they blame the child.

Child abusers gravitate to occupations which place them in contact with children and become very skilled at ensuring a child's silence. In some cases, the parent has come to trust the abuser and will see no problem with the child spending time with that person. Abusers can be manipulative and very believable. In 75% of the cases of child abuse reported to the police, the abuser is known in some way by the child.

##### ***Will my child become an abuser?***

Although most abusers were themselves abused, most children who have been abused do not grow up to become abusers.

### ***Will my child be able to have a normal sex life?***

With help and counselling, the answer is yes - children can grow up to have a normal sex life.

### ***Will my child need counselling?***

It is generally a good idea to get counselling to help your child express his/her emotions and feelings.

### ***How long will it take to get back to normal?***

That depends upon the extent of the abuse. It could be months; it could be a couple of years or even longer. Sometimes the full extent of the abuse and its effects emerge slowly over a long period of time as the child develops emotionally and sexually. Your support for your child is often very valuable in this process of uncovering and dealing with the abuse.

One father said he thought his son was back to normal within months. 'Three years later, he suddenly brought up another incident which he hadn't talked about before. I suppose it was because he was getting a bit more aware sexually and that made him remember other things. The counsellor we went to said this could happen again, but the way we handled it was exactly right. That made me feel good, even if I was distressed for my son. We are trying to be sensitive, to listen and not to be thrown if anything else arises. Our son is getting counselling now. We're prepared to help him as long as it takes.

### ***Least said, soonest mended?***

If the abuse is not dealt with, it is possible that it will surface in later years in some way. This is called the 'time bomb' effect. It is better to try to deal with the abuse as soon as possible after it is uncovered.

### ***What next?***

If the police are investigating, your child may be asked questions, you may have to go to court and your child may be called as a witness. If this happens, you can get information on the 'Child Witness Pack' from your local social services or police.

### ***Child Witness Pack***

This information pack has been funded and devised through a collaboration of four government departments and five voluntary child care organisations. The pack aims to de-mystify the court process in criminal proceedings and make giving evidence in child abuse cases less of a traumatic experience for children and their families. A supply of free copies was sent to local police forces which are best placed to know the cases in which there is a criminal prosecution. For further

copies, contact NSPCC Publications Department, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH; telephone (020) 7825 2775.

### **Questions That Children Ask**

Hopefully the child who has suffered abuse will be receiving professional help. If that is so, you will want to check with the therapist about answering questions and show the therapist these questions and suggested answers. If you are dealing with a child who has been abused, be prepared for possible questions such as those listed here. The suggested answers are only a guide, but might help you avoid some pitfalls. Don't question the child, but do answer if the child questions you.

#### ***'Will I be an abuser when I grow up?'***

Although many of the people who abuse children were themselves abused, it is important that children are told that most children who have been abused do not grow up to become abusers themselves. But statements that abused children grow up to abuse do worry many children who have been abused. So if a child you are caring for asks about abuse, be sure to emphasise that most children do not grow up to abuse others. If they press you for more information, you could explain that sometimes children who are abused think that it is their own fault. Sometimes they think that the abuse happened because they were bad or naughty. They think that they deserved to be abused.

If someone doesn't help them to understand it wasn't their fault, they continue to have a bad opinion of themselves. They don't know how to be kind or say good things, so they just repeat what happened to them. The abuse then goes in a cycle - parent abuses child, child grows up and abuses his/her own children and so on.

It is sad that many abusers were themselves abused. They need help to sort out their problems and counselling so that they can try to stop abusing. But it is even more important that children who have been abused know that it wasn't their fault and that they can grow up to be loving, kind people to children of their own.

#### ***'What is wrong with the person who abused me?'***

The child may still love the person who abused him/her, so be very careful not to condemn the abuser. You might say that the person had some problems and perhaps was unkindly treated as a child (see above). The abuser needs to work on these problems so that he/she can be around children without harming them. Avoid using the excuse that the abuser is 'sick'. Children might then think that anyone who gets sick is a potential abuser.

#### ***'It wasn't abuse - I liked it. Why is everyone so upset?'***

Sometimes the abuse didn't seem to be abuse to the child. It may have come from

the only person whom the child felt loved him/her. It might have felt good. After the initial abuse, the child might have approached the abuser and so feels that it is unfair that the abuser is being punished. Your child may be feeling quite sad. One way to help him/her is to say that sometimes grownups do things with children that should be done with other grownups and should never be done between a child and an older person. Children need to be protected until they are old enough to understand and make decisions themselves.

### ***'I shouldn't have to tidy my room (or do other chores) because I've been abused'***

It is not surprising that we want to treat children who have suffered abuse in a special way. Although extra treats and love are fine, the child desperately needs to be 'normal'. Fitting into the structure of the home or school, being given the same chores as any child and following the family or school rules are important to the child's healing process. Try to keep everything as normal as possible. It makes the child feel more secure.

Of course, your child may need time to him/herself and may need extra attention, but that shouldn't detract from the child being given limits and structure. You could say, 'You know that I am very concerned that you were abused, but I know that it is best for you to do the things that children are expected to do, like go to school, clean your room and brush your teeth (or whatever).'

Children need someone to help them take control of their lives - to help them begin to heal. They may fight against it, but that is only to test your willingness to stick to the rules. All children will test limits.

### ***'Why Me?'***

Children want to know what it was about them that led to the abuse. They sometimes think they must have brought it on themselves. You might say, 'You just happened to be there', or 'It's not your fault you were born into (or live in or went to school in) that situation' or 'It could have been another child - the person needed any child, not you particularly'. The message to get across is that it was unfortunate that the child was the victim, but the child did not bring the abuse on and is not responsible for it.

## **Resources for children and young people**

### **BOOKS**

- **Alexander and the Dragon**, (ages 4-9), K. Holabird, Autrum Books. Wonderful book about a little boy overcoming his fear of the dark (the dragon), with lots of support from Mum and Dad.
- **Back in the First Person**, (teens). K. Page, Virago Press. Cath becomes

walled up in her own silence after being raped by Steve. She needs to tell and get help, but is afraid.

- **The Body Book**, (ages 3-11), Claire Rayner, Piccolo. Great illustrations with simple explanations - especially important for children who have been abused to make them feel comfortable about their bodies.
- **Daniel and His Therapist**, (ages 4-8), L. Morgan, Papers Inc. A New Zealand publication - Daniel gets counselling and stops acting out, after being touched on his penis by his Mum's friend.
- **Don't Tell Your Mother**, (teens), T. Hart, Quartet Books. The emotions of Shirley and her parents are explored in this novel about incest - best read first by parents. **Feeling Happy, Feeling Safe**, (ages 3-7), Michele Elliott, Hodder & Stoughton. Brightly illustrated colour picture book helping children with bullies, strangers, getting lost and advances from known adults.
- **Out in the Open, A Guide for Young People Who Have Been Sexually Abused**, (teens), Q. Bain and M. Sanders, Virago. Excellent book for young people - helping them to come to terms with having been abused.
- **Push Me, Pull Me**, (teens), S. Chick, Women's Press. A 14 year old girl's world collapses when mum's boyfriend sexually abuses her. She tells when he leaves, and healing begins.
- **The Willow Street Kids**. (ages 7-11), M. Elliott, Pan. Based on true stories, this book, chosen for the Good Book Guide, deals with dangers such as bullying, strangers and child abuse.
- **Too Close Encounters & What To Do About Them**, (teens), Rosemary Stones, Piccadilly Press. Common sense strategies for dealing with everything from flashers to rape - full of valuable advice for young people.

## **For Adults**

### **BOOKS**

- **Allies in Healing**, Laura Davies, Harper & Row. Practical advice and encouragement for those helping survivors.
- **The Courage To Heal: A Guide For Women Survivors**, Ellen Bass & Laura Davis, Mandarin. Offers hope and encouragement to women abused as children.
- **Keeping Safe, A Practical Guide To Talking With Children**, Michele Elliott. Gives practical advice about issues such as keeping safe from sexual abuse, drugs, AIDS and bullying.
- **Outgrowing the Pain**, Eliana Gil, Dell. A very good 'first' book for adults who were abused as children.
- **Protecting Children**, Training Pack for Front-line Carers, Michele Elliott,

HMSO. Training pack with video for people dealing with children who have been abused - to help prevent re-abuse.

- **Victims No Longer**, Men Recovering from Incest and Other Sexual Child Abuse, Mike Lew, Harper & Row. Gives both survivors and therapists essential advice for healing.
- **When Your Child Has Been Molested, A Parent's Guide to Healing and Recovery**, K. Hagans and J. Case, Lexington Books. Sensitive guide providing information, comfort and advice to families to help them through the trauma of child sexual abuse.
- **501 Ways to Be a Good Parent: From the Frantic Fours to the Terrible Twelves**, Michele Elliott. Gives advice in a common sense and humorous way about issues such as the 10 worst and 10 best things to say to your child; getting children to bed on time; chores without tears; dealing with lying, cheating, swearing; teaching the value of money and much more in 32 chapters.

#### Help Organisations

The following organisations may be able to offer additional help. Please visit our web site, [www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk), and go to the *Links* section for further details

You can contact your GP, Social Services or Police. You can also contact any of the following organisations (if the number is engaged, keep ringing!):

- **ChildLine**
- **Children 1st, Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children**
- **The Children's Legal Centre**
- **Family Rights**
- **NSPCC**
- **ParentLine Plus**
- **Samaritans**
- **Scottish Child Law Centre**
- **Youth Access** Provides information and advice for young people and the names of counsellors in your local area.

#### KIDSCAPE

KIDSCAPE is a registered charity which was founded in 1984 to prevent child abuse and bullying. KIDSCAPE works with parents, teachers, police, social services and other child care professionals to protect children and young people. It

provides schools programmes, leaflets, posters, books, videos and other materials which teach children and young people practical strategies for keeping safe and for coping with bullying, stranger danger, danger from known adults, getting lost, addiction, and other personal safety issues.

KIDSCAPE also provides workshops and national conferences which raise new childcare issues and it pioneers effective, practical ways of tackling the dangers which threaten children.

KIDSCAPE has free booklets to help parents and children:

**Keep Them Safe** (for parents to teach children aged 5 to 11 ways to stay safe)

**Stop Bullying!** (a general guide about bullying, including What If? Questions for children and young people.)

**Preventing Bullying! A Parent's Guide** (information for parents about what steps to take if their child is bullied or is a bully)

**Why My Child?** (a guide for parents about sexual abuse)

KIDSCAPE also has free leaflets for parents:

**Child Abuse, Signs and Symptoms**

**Parent of a Teenager? Read This!**

**Preventing Racist Bullying**

**Protect Children from Paedophiles**

For a copy of any of the booklets or leaflets or for more information about KIDSCAPE and its child safety programmes and books, send a large self-addressed envelope to:

KIDSCAPE

2 Grosvenor Gardens

London, SW1W 0DH

We are grateful to the Grosvenor Estate for sponsoring our offices (near Victoria Station)

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