

Guidance for Parents of Abused Children & Young People

If you are a parent, (or an adult in Loco Parentis) who has discovered that your child has been sexually abused, you will be experiencing many different emotions. They are likely to include shock, disbelief, numbness and confusion. There could be feelings of anger and hatred towards the abuser together with guilt and shame that somehow this happened and you were unable to protect your child.

If your partner, or another close relative or friend was the person who mistreated your child, you will also be trying to come to terms with the fact that someone you may have lived with, loved and thought you could trust has done something so damaging.

However, if you are reading this it is likely that you are a parent who believed your child and is now focused on supporting and minimising the damage that could be caused. This also means that your child is very fortunate because many parents choose to ignore or disbelieve what has happened.

Parents who do not believe and support their child usually choose to see their child as the problem. They usually blame the child for attempting to disrupt the family and then use the child as a scapegoat. It is the easy option. It maintains economic stability and enables them to keep up appearances, leaving the child utterly alone and defenceless.

Supporting your child may have caused rifts within your family and destabilised much of the security you had enjoyed ~ But it was doing the right thing.

So what now? ~ There is a great deal you can do to help and the information in this leaflet is intended to give you a start.

Supporting your child means reporting the abuse to the Police and child protection services as soon as you can. It is a situation where there are no exceptions and you would put yourself in a precarious position if you failed to do so. It will help your child to explain what you must do and at the same time reassuring them that you will be there whatever happens. **Know from the outset that the professionals who will be involved are specially trained to deal with situations of abuse with care and respect.**

It may not have occurred to you that listening to your child and believing what you were told, has already considerably minimised the harm that could have been caused. It does depend on age and awareness; however, most children are very cautious about disclosing abuse. They sense the danger of not being believed; they instinctively know that disclosure could lead to being called a liar and in some cases having to apologise to the person who abused them. They fear the risk of being blamed, thought of as a trouble maker and a threat to the family's cohesion. Even if a child is fairly confident that they will be believed, they will often 'play safe' and say nothing.

When a child discloses abuse your overall reactions will play a very large part in how he or she eventually resolves the experience/s. This does not mean that you have to get everything right. You may not have believed your child when they first told you, or did not believe your senses if you discovered the abuse yourself; because shock can have that effect. We assume that you are now coming to terms with the truth and looking for opportunities to deal positively with what has happened.

It is not true that a child who has been sexually abused is damaged for life. The truth is that with the right help and support, such a child can recover and go on to live a fulfilling, happy, successful life and enjoy loving and trusting relationships.

You cannot be a counsellor to your child, that would blur your relationship as a parent although you do need to be well informed in order to support your child. The following advice and guidance is intended to help you listen and relate to your child in the most helpful ways.

Start by understanding that those that abuse children are cunning, devious, manipulative and very skilful at hiding their tracks. They can often appear as mature and sensible; they make a point of being helpful, generous, charming and friendly to those they meet. They cultivate trust in those around them by doing good deeds or by becoming so called 'pillars of society'. They are fully aware of the consequences of being discovered so become dedicated at deceiving anyone who might protect the child if a disclosure is made. Do not blame yourself because you were tricked; instead realise that you too are a victim in a different way.

The harmful significance of abuse falls into five broad areas which may be experienced by a child to various degrees:

- The traumatic sexualised event/s
- Betrayal
- Stigmatisation
- Powerlessness
- Dissociation

The following information describes how children might be affected by sexual abuse and some of the factors which may have a bearing on resolution and healing.

1. The age of the child when the abuse began

Very young children sometimes carry body or sensory memories of the abuse and can describe these instead of being able to state what has happened to them. Tummy ache, other pains and odd reactions to ordinary sensory input are examples. Also unusual or extremely worrying behaviours can indicate abuse. Not having the words to communicate they draw attention to themselves symbolically. These things may have been what drew your attention to the fact that something was wrong; or you may now be able to reflect and understand what may have been causing such symptoms and unusual behaviour.

Children who are abused during times when their sexuality is emerging can be affected more as abuse interferes with the natural sexualisation process. They may have more language skills than a small child but the language they need to communicate effectively is seldom available to them. The abuser may have distorted the meanings of words to confuse. For example, an abuser may describe their acts as giving love or presents.

Children who are older may be in a better position to describe and understand what is happening to them; however, they are often silenced in subtler ways. They are more susceptible to moral and emotional blackmail, a sense of having to keep the family together and of not wanting their knowledge to hurt others.

2. The closeness of the relationship between the perpetrator and the child

Many of the harmful dynamics of abuse described above are intensified according to how much the child is dependent on and attached to the abuser.

3. The duration of the abuse

If the abuse occurs over a long period, there is a danger that it becomes normalised as part of the relationship. The attachment issues can sometimes be very difficult to resolve. Some apparently consensual adult incestuous relationships started as childhood sexual abuse. More frequently the abuse is unwanted and therefore the duration of the stress and fear will have a detrimental effect. Last of all, the longer the abuse continues the more responsible and guilty the victim can feel. Victims often wonder why they did not stop the abuse and why they returned to situations where abuse was likely to reoccur.

4. If violence is involved

In most cases where abuse includes violence or the threat of violence, a child will have experienced a level of additional trauma and damage to his or her development

5. The social environment at the time/s of the abuse

A child who can safely and reliably disclose, will tend to suffer less than the child who has no one to tell.

6. The development of the child at the time of the abuse

Children who have had the benefit of a healthy environment are confident, feel good about themselves and can be assertive in their communication with others. Such an upbringing serves as good protection against abuse and the effects are generally less damaging. If the young person has a firmly established concept of his or her sexual identity and preferences this also helps.

The cumulative effect of the above factors distorts the formation of a healthy belief structure. Distortions will occur so that the world, the people in it and the sense of self are damaged. For example, some sexually abused children have learnt that to be loved and feel safe they must initiate sex with adults. The list of distortions is almost infinite and not always as stark and obvious as the example given. As a rule, professional intervention is needed to reconfigure such beliefs.

How best to relate and respond to your child

Focus on the needs of your child. Disclosure will have been a frightening experience for most children; and your child will need to re-establish their sense of safety and of being loved. To do this you may need to seek support for yourself.

It is very helpful if you can respond in a calm yet interested way to the questions and disclosures your child makes. This will demonstrate that you can cope with what they say.

Demonstrating that you believe your child validates their experiences. Even if you doubt some details, know that the spirit and meaning of what you are being told is true. Avoid asking leading questions as these can be interpreted by your child as evidence that you doubt. This may result in the child becoming silent or saying what they think you want to hear. Such questioning can also affect the evidential quality of your child's statements to the Police and to suggestions that the allegations arose from your questions. Only in very rare circumstances does a child lie about being sexually abused and even then it should set off alarm bells that something IS seriously wrong somewhere. Far more common is that a child will lie and say that the abuse did not occur because of pressure they feel from those questioning them.

You can help by restricting access to those who are not supportive or who doubt the facts. Such people are usually struggling with their own shock and disbelief and are likely to seek relief by challenging your child and causing him or her to withdraw the allegations.

It is very helpful to say and demonstrate how proud you are of your child and the courage they have to deal with such an upsetting event.

It is right to state that the abuser was wrong to do what they did but it is wise to keep such statements generalised. Most abusers will have worked hard to convince their victims that it was their fault or that they were an equal participant. Even adult victims of sexual violence frequently feel that they are to blame; this can be a complicated area to resolve and can be made worse by over emphasising that a child is not to blame while they still feel that they are.

Accept and acknowledge the feelings that your child expresses however upsetting and shocking this may be for you. Good parents naturally want to comfort. However, be aware that minimising or denying the feelings that your child has, may lead them to question your capacity to support them.

Treat the abused child the same as your other children. Treating your abused child differently will further stigmatise them. Treating them the same will in time restore a sense of safety and normality.

See Childhood Abuse: Books for Parents in the DABS Directory Book List section