

Taking Care of Your Child After Sexual Assault

Important Facts To Know About Child Sexual Abuse

- Any kind of sexual contact between an adult and a child is abuse and a crime; sexual contact by a teenager that is forced or with a younger child is also abuse and a crime.
- Most offenders know or are related to the children they abuse and typically they take advantage of the relationship to get the children to go along and to not tell.
- Even though the children are usually not violently attacked or hurt physically during a sexual assault, they often feel afraid of being hurt.
- Not all children are able to tell parents right away about the abuse; they are often worried about what will happen.
- Children react in different ways after sexual abuse – some children have serious emotional reactions and others have only minor reactions.

The love and support of family is the most important factor in children's recovery.

Getting help

Sexual abuse affects the child and the whole family and help is available. We can offer:

- Crisis intervention: meeting with a counselor to discuss immediate concerns.
- Information and referral.
- Legal advocacy: information on legal evidence and the legal system.
- Medical examinations.

Counseling for children and families.

Medical Care for Children

A medical examination is recommended when sexual abuse involved physical contact. Sometimes your child's regular doctor can do this, but often it is best to have a specialized medical exam by an expert. The specialized exam includes talking to the child and parents or caregivers, a whole body exam, and a detailed exam of the private (genital and anal) areas. This part of the exam is usually done with a *colposcope*, a special magnifying instrument that is attached to a camera. The exam is to find if there are signs of microscopic injury or infection.

The exam is not painful, and it is always done while the child is awake. The doctor and nurse will explain everything that is happening to your child and you.

Most children have normal exams after sexual abuse, and a normal exam does not mean that the child was not abused. Most children and families find the exam helpful in addressing their concerns and providing reassurance that the children are physically OK.

Reactions to Abuse Children often experience stress symptoms before or after others learn about the sexual abuse. The symptoms are reactions to the abuse and may include:

- Memories, nightmares, or fears about the abuse.
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns.
- Avoidance of activities or particular situation.
- Withdrawal or depression.
- Irritability, crankiness, or short-tempered behavior.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Acting out sexually.

Your child may experience some of these problems or none at all. Pay attention to unusual behavior in your child and discuss them with a counselor.

Your Reactions

Parents usually are emotionally upset upon learning of the sexual abuse of their child. Parents often feel angry with the offender or guilty for having failed to protect their child. If their child did not tell right away, parents may wonder why. Sometimes they may look back and realize that there were signs that something was wrong and feel sad they did not realize what was going on. These are normal reactions.

Since most offenders are known, trusted by the family, or even family members it may be difficult to believe the abuse happened or to resolve mixed feelings. Parents often feel betrayed.

When the offender is a family member such as a grandparent, uncle, even another child, many difficulties arise for the family in terms of making decisions and taking action. There may be feelings of loyalty and love towards the offending person as well as towards the victim. Family members may choose sides with some believing it happened and others refusing to believe it could have. Parents may disagree about how to handle the situation..

If the offender is the spouse or partner of the parent, what the relationship is like can strongly influence the parent's actions once he/she learns of the abuse. If feelings toward the offending spouse/partner are positive or mixed, decisions about staying together, or to divorce or separate will be more difficult to sort through. The feelings a parent has toward the offender may affect a parents' ability to believe in and support the child. When offenders deny or minimize the abuse or blame the child the situation gets very complicated.

If a parent doesn't believe a child who has been abused and supports the offender, there can be severe damage to the child. The child will feel betrayed by the parent as well as the offender. What every child victim needs is to be believed and to know that he or she is not at fault. When the parent is able to support and stand up for the child, the child has an excellent chance of recovering from the effects of sexual abuse. It is very important to get help and support for your feelings because parents' reactions make a big difference in children's recovery. Families are children's most important resource for recovery.

Counseling for the Child

Counseling is not necessary in all cases of sexual abuse, but it can be very helpful for many children. Although sometimes parents feel they would like their child to just forget about what happened and move on, this may actually increase problems. If the situation is handled in a direct and sensitive way the negative effects on the child can be reduced.

Counseling typically involves giving information about sexual assault and its effects, offering a safe place to talk about what happened, teaching coping skills to manage stress reactions, and helping make sure that children do not blame themselves, feel ashamed or develop unhelpful ideas such as that no one can be trusted or the world is a very dangerous place. The goal is for children and families to learn healthy ways to handle distress and to put the abuse in perspective as a bad experience that does not need to have life long effects. Fortunately most children will recover from abuse.

Counseling for Parents

The sexual abuse of a child can be traumatic for a parent as well as for the child. In addition to attending to the needs of the victim, parents must deal with their own feelings and reactions to the situation. Parents may be faced with making decisions about whether to continue the relationship with the offender, how to deal with contact or visitation between the offender and the child, and reestablishing trust and communication in the family.

Parents of children who have been sexually abused, and people whose partners or relatives are sex offenders, often find it helpful to talk to a counselor to sort out feelings and deal with the effects of the abuse on the child and the family. Some parents or partners of offenders find it helpful to join groups so they can discuss their feelings and experiences with others who are or have been in similar situations and can understand what they are going through.

Protecting Your Child from Further Harm

Here are some ways to help protect your child from further abuse and minimize the emotional trauma your child may experience:

- Prevent contact between your child and the offender until an investigation has taken place. Explain to your child that he/she should tell you immediately if the offender attempts to touch or bother them again in any way.
- Continue to believe your child and do not blame him/her for what happened. Give your child support and reassurance

that he/she is okay and safe.

- Respond to concerns or feelings your child expresses about sexual abuse calmly. Listen to your child but do not ask a lot of questions.
- Respect your child's privacy by not telling a lot of people, and make sure that other people who know, don't bring the subject up to your child. Listen to your child, but don't ask for information or details about the abuse. Let the professionals do the interviewing to find out the details. A legal case can be negatively affected if the child has been questioned by non-professionals.
- Try to follow the regular routine around the home; maintain the usual bedtimes, chores and rules.
- Let the child's brothers and sisters know that something has happened to the child and that he or she is safe now and will be protected. Make sure that all children in the family are given enough information to be able to protect themselves from the offender without discussing the details of the assault.
- Talk about your feelings with someone you trust – a friend, relative, clergy or counselor. It is best not to discuss your worries in front of, or with, your children.

Outside Involvement

Because sexual abuse is a crime, the social service and legal agencies always need to be involved. This is not a problem that can be solved by the family alone. These agencies may become involved:

Child Protective Services

Professionals are required by law to notify Child Protective Services (CPS) of suspected child sexual abuse. CPS is a state agency that investigates reports of child abuse and neglect in the family. CPS has the legal responsibility for making sure children are safe in their homes and that abused children get support, medical care, and counseling.

Criminal Justice System

This is the legal system responsible for the investigation and prosecution of people accused of crimes such as sexual assault. It is a crime for any adult or teenager to have sexual contact with a child. Crimes are reported to the law enforcement agency where the crime occurred. Police officers and detectives are responsible for investigating reported crimes, including interviewing victims and witnesses, gathering evidence and arresting suspects.

Victim's Advocacy Services

An advocate is someone who helps victims through the systems they need to deal with by providing information and support. Your counselor can be your advocate or an advocate can be from a community agency or through the prosecutor's office.

We can provide the help and support you need at this time. Please let us know how we can assist you, your child and your family in recovering from the sexual abuse.

We are here to help.

Our mission is to prevent and counter the harmful effects of traumatic experiences on victims, families and our community. These experiences include sexual and physical abuse and neglect of children, rape, sexual harassment, violent crime, accidents and disasters. Services reflect the values, beliefs and traditions of our community and are available to people of all ages. We strive to create a society free of interpersonal violence.

Founded in 1973, the Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress is a Washington state accredited Community Sexual Assault Program.