



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. 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 if they tell.
 - Children react in different ways after sexual abuse. Some children have serious emotional reactions and others have only minor reactions. It may be difficult for caregivers to see the impact on the child. The child may not show symptoms.
 - The love and support of family is the most important factor in children's recovery.
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GETTING HELP

Sexual abuse affects the child and the whole family. Help is available. Our services include:

- 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.
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MEDICAL CARE FOR CHILDREN

A medical exam is recommended when sexual abuse involved physical contact. Sometimes the child's 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 full body exam, and a detailed exam of the 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. It does not touch the body. 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 or nurse will explain the entire process to child and their caregiver.

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. The exam can address their concerns and provide reassurance that the children are physically okay.

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 are usually very upset when they learn their child was sexually abused. Parents often feel angry with the offender. They may think they failed to protect their child. If their child did not tell right away, parents may wonder why. They may look back and realize that there were signs that something was wrong and feel upset they did not realize what was going on. These are all normal reactions.

Since most offenders are known and trusted by the family, 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, it can be difficult to make decisions and take action. There may be feelings of loyalty and love for the offending person and for the victim. Family members may choose sides with some believing it happened and others refusing to believe. 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 influence the parent's actions. The feelings a parent has of the offender may affect a parent's ability to believe and support the child.

It is not unusual for offenders to deny or minimize the abuse or to blame the child or the situation. If a parent doesn't believe a child who has been abused and supports the offender, it can increase the harm to the child.

What every child victim needs is to be believed and to know that they are not at fault. When parents support and stand up for the child, the child can heal from the effects of abuse. It is very important to get help 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 always necessary, 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. It is always best to have a supportive family member participate in the child's counseling. This not only strengthens the relationship with the child but also helps the child recover more quickly.

Counseling provides a safe place for both children and caregivers to talk about what happened, learn coping skills to manage stress, and regain a sense of safety and security.

The main goals for counseling are:

1. For children and families to learn healthy ways to handle trauma reminders.
2. To put the abuse in perspective as a bad experience that does not need to have lifelong effects.

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. Many times, caregivers can get this help by actively engaging in the child's therapy. At other times, a parent may need to see their own counselor who has expertise in sexual assault treatment. We can talk with you about best options.

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 they should tell you immediately if the offender attempts to contact or touch them again in any way.
- Continue to **believe your child** and do not blame them for what happened. Give your child support and reassurance that they are 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.
- Try to follow the **regular routine** around the home; maintain the usual bedtimes, chores and rules.
- Respect your **child's privacy** by not telling a lot of people. 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 non-professionals have questioned the child.
- Let the child's sibling(s) know that something has happened to the child and that they are safe now and will be protected. **Make sure that all children in the family are given enough information so they are aware of safety risks** from the offender without discussing the details of the assault.
- **Talk about your feelings with someone you trust** – a friend, relative, spiritual leader 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 need to be involved. This is often 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 child victims 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. 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 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. 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.**
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