

PROTECTING AND LISTENING TO CHILDREN

Teaching children about sexual abuse can increase their awareness and coping skills. Children who are well-prepared are more likely to tell you if abuse has occurred. In order to protect children, teach them:

- ❖ To feel good about themselves and know they are loved and deserve to be safe
- ❖ The difference between safe and unsafe touches
- ❖ The proper names for all body parts, so they can communicate clearly
- ❖ That safety rules apply to all adults - not just strangers
- ❖ That their bodies belong to them, and no one has the right to touch or hurt them
- ❖ That they can say "no" to requests that make them uncomfortable- even from a friend or relative
- ❖ To tell you if any adult asks them to keep a secret
- ❖ That they are not bad or to blame for sexual abuse
- ❖ To tell someone they trust about abuse even if they are afraid of what might happen

If a child trusts you enough to tell you about an incident of sexual abuse, you are in a position to help that child recover. These are suggestions to help you provide positive support.

- ❖ **Keep calm.** Children can mistakenly interpret anger as directed toward them.
- ❖ **Believe the child.** In most instances, children do not lie about sexual abuse.
- ❖ **Give positive messages.** Tell them it is not their fault and that you are proud of them for telling.
- ❖ **Listen to and answer their questions honestly.**
- ❖ **Respect the child's privacy.**
- ❖ **Be responsible.** Report the incident to authorities.
- ❖ **Get help.** Get counseling for your child - help is available.

Impact of Sexual Victimization

When children are sexually abused, they often experience some typical responses. By being aware of them, parents can help their children, and themselves, cope with these painful feelings. Some common feelings and behavioral changes are:

1. **Damaged goods:** A child may feel that something about them is forever changed and that they aren't okay anymore. It is important for parents to let their child know that they will heal emotionally and that other people won't know about the abuse just by looking at them.

A physical exam, while essential for evaluating potential injuries, can also be very effective in reassuring your child. In most situations, no treatment will be required. But, the child can be assured they are healthy.
2. **Guilt:** Nearly all children who have been sexually abused feel some degree of guilt. They may feel responsible for the consequences of the disclosure and the disruption in the family after everyone found out. These feelings sometimes make children wish they had never told anyone what happened to them. Parents and others can help children resolve feelings of guilt.
3. **Fear:** Child victims can be expected to be afraid of the consequences of the sexual assault, as well as having to tell about it. Even if they seem to accept the fact that they "did nothing wrong", they may still be fearful of what is happening to their world. They may show fear of people or events, have nightmares, and not want to be left alone. It is important that the adults accept these fears, talk about them without probing, and make the child feel safe.
4. **Depression:** Some children will show signs of depression after the sexual abuse is known. They seem sad, withdrawn, complain of vague aches and pains or being tired, have poor appetites or go on food binges and change personal hygiene habits. Some children may act out aggressively, refuse to continue friendships or make new ones. School performance may drop, as well as noted changes of behavior in class.
5. **Low Self Esteem and Poor Social Skills:** When children are coping with the feelings noted above, they often stop playing with other children in carefree ways. They may become shy and awkward, or aggressive and competitive.

(The remaining impact issues apply particularly if children have been sexually abused over a long period of time.)

6. Repressed Anger and Hostility: Many child victims appear calm outwardly, but they may carry intense anger towards the offender. These feelings often get directed at other, "safer" persons. Some children continue to feel affection or love for the person who abused them, depending on the relationship.
7. Inability to Trust: Especially when a child has been abused by someone they trusted, new relationships may be viewed with confusion and suspicion. Parents and professionals can help children develop new ways to build safety into their relationships.
8. Blurred Role Boundaries and Role Confusion: Children who have carried the secret of abuse often experience a very distorted understanding of relationships. They become confused about their relationships with parents, siblings, and friends. This could potentially create the environment for repeated victimization.
9. Pseudo Maturity and Failure to Complete Developmental Tasks: Some children see far older than their years as a consequence of long term victimization. This is misleading however, because they have not experienced and learned the things that most children do while growing up. Such children may have difficulties with peer relationships, managing sexuality, taking on age-appropriate responsibilities, etc. Typically, such children need professional help to overcome these significant losses.
10. Self Mastery and Control: When a child's power and ability to keep safe is lost, the impact can be devastating. Children will need help to establish areas where they can be in control and make age-appropriate decisions for their lives.

Adapted from: Suzanne M. Sgroi, M.D., Handbook of Clinical Intervention in Child Sexual Abuse, Lexington Books, 1982.

Adapted By: Karin Brown, BSW
Child Advocate Specialist
E.C.D.A. Office
25 Delaware Ave.
Buffalo, N.Y. 14202

Jen Henry, CSW, ACSW
Sexual Abuse Specialist
Child & Adolescent Treatment Center
3350 Main St.
Buffalo, N.Y. 14214