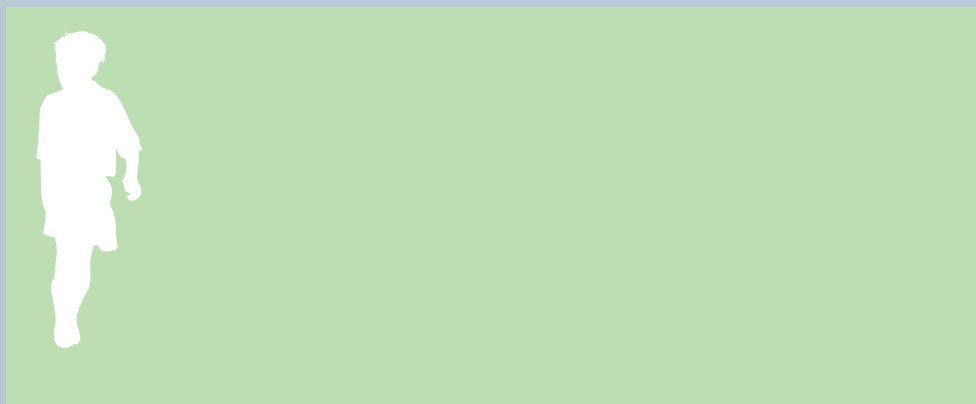


Why my child?

A guide for parents of children who have been sexually abused





CONTENTS

Introduction	4
What is Child Sexual Abuse?	4
Children's Reactions	5
Behaviour Changes	6
Dealing With The Police	6
Parents' Feelings	7
Incest	8
What If You Were Sexually Abused?	9
Your Feelings Are Natural	9
What About Your Family?	9
Whose Fault Is It?	10
Why Didn't My Child Tell?	11
When a Child Tells - Ways to Respond	12
What Should We Say to Everyone?	13
How Can I Help My Child?	14
Take Care of Yourself	16
Teaching Personal Safety Skills	17
What if my Child is Sexually Provocative with another Child?	18
Commonly Asked Questions	20-21
Questions That Children Ask	21-22
Helpful Organisations	23

INTRODUCTION

The sexual abuse of your child can unleash one of the most difficult crises you and your family will ever encounter. Besides the stress of negotiating the criminal justice system, helping your child, and supporting your family, can create nearly unbearable pressure, and you may feel you don't know where to turn. Your child could be displaying a bundle of contradictory behaviours, and be full of confused emotions - angry one moment, withdrawn the next. You may feel overwhelmed, unprepared for how to proceed over the next weeks and months. But there is much you can do to help your child and family come through the extreme emotions and events you are facing, including taking good care of yourself. To begin with, stay calm, believe your child, and provide the reassurance that is needed.

You are not alone, small comfort though this may be. Some studies suggest 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 someone what has happened, and these figures may only suggest how many children are affected. Those who keep secrets are the unlucky ones - the ones who don't get the support and love parents can offer their child. You and your family are facing great

challenges, but with the help of this guide, other resources, and the support of those you turn to - family, professionals, self-help groups - you will survive. What is more, your child can go on to lead a happy, productive life. It will take time and effort, but the work is worth it.

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 almost 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 adults can cope.

Children may:

- feel betrayed, angry, guilty, shameful or frightened
- be confused about what happened
- be confused about their own feelings towards the abuse or the abuser
- lash out at parents, siblings or others
- wonder what all the fuss is about
- feel dirty
- be anxious
- feel embarrassed, insecure
- blame themselves
- have low self esteem
- seem to be fine
- be worried because the abuse may have felt good.

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



BEHAVIOUR CHANGES

You may notice that your child's behaviour changes - sometimes day by day. Changes in behaviour may have been the first signal that abuse was happening. However, you may see more unusual behaviour even after the abuse is discovered. 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 unexplained physical illnesses - stomach aches, headaches, pains
- feel suicidal
- regress to younger behaviour, such as thumb sucking or playing with long discarded comfort toys

- 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. Remember your child's reactions and behavioural changes are normal under the circumstances and that things will get better.

DEALING WITH THE POLICE

The discovery and prosecution of the abusive offender may involve medical examinations of the child, which will be confusing and upsetting to most children. Investigation will certainly include interviews, where you may or may not be present. The website askthe.police.uk explains:

Any child or young person (i.e. under 18 years of age), is entitled to be video interviewed in respect of sexual offences that they have been subjected to or witnessed. The interview will take place in a purpose built suite that may be at a police station or another place. The interviewer will be a specially trained police officer.



When interviewed in such circumstances, the child is required to be alone in the interview room with the interviewer but there is an adjacent 'Monitor Room' where a relative may be allowed to sit and observe what happens.

If a relative is also a witness in the case (e.g. a parent who the child first told) their evidence could be damaged by hearing the child's full disclosure. In those circumstances it may be necessary for another relative to be in the Monitor Room.

In all these circumstances, you will find that gentle encouragement will help your child, who may appreciate the opportunity to talk about what happened, in the presence of a well-trained expert.

Victim Support (www.victimsupport.org.uk) has a well developed programme all over Great Britain that supports victims and their families as they navigate the legal system. The charity also maintains a well-thought-out website for young people themselves (www.are-you-okay.org.uk).

PARENTS' FEELINGS

You will be reacting in your own way to the abuse, which may make it complicated when trying to help your child, especially if you also have experienced sexual abuse. You may need to seek professional help

or some other form of support, especially if, as is typical of most sexual abuse, the perpetrator was a family member, or known to your child.

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
- revengeful thoughts
- these feelings may result in your:
 - 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'
 - a rift between parents may develop - people react differently to stressful experiences. One partner may weep and talk, while the other stays silent, and withdraws. If you resent the way your



partner is dealing with his/her emotions, you may become unable to support each other. The best advice is to deal with your own feelings in a way that is comfortable for you, but not to impose your way on others or to accuse them of having no feelings because their mode of expression is not yours.

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 hinder your child's healing (see *Take Care of Yourself*).

No matter how you feel, it is unlikely that your child will share these feelings. 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.

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 or members of their family 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-father-brother-other family member could not have done that. I know him/her too well; it's just not possible.'
- divided loyalties between family member 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. 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 *Helpful Organisations*).



WHAT IF YOU WERE SEXUALLY ABUSED?

If you were sexually abused as a young person, 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. In order to help your child, you need some support for yourself. The National Organisation for People Abused in Childhood is a good place to start; their helpline and other resources can be useful. (www.napac.org.uk; 0800 085 3330)

YOUR FEELINGS ARE NATURAL

Just keep telling yourself that your feelings are a natural reaction. 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 all right 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.'

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. Siblings 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 result is a disrupted, stressed family in which no one feels good or safe.



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.
- 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 them. 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 whom 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, if at all possible.
- Seek family counselling. Ask social services, children's services or the organisations listed

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, but the abuser is always the one 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 ever happening again (see Teaching Personal Safety Skills). If your actions put your child at risk, change. 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.

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 will 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 tell.

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 and children's services.
- 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 judgments 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 all right. 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, as 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 TO EVERYONE?

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, and 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 and stop asking.

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD?

You and your family may seek 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.
- Encourage your child to express feelings.
- Play with water and sand, pound nails into wood, set up a punching bag, encourage physical activity-anything to allow pent up anxiety and anger to escape.
- To help children develop a healthy sense of themselves physically, 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.
- Older children may be encouraged to write in a diary or write stories or make a recording. Older and young children may find using plasticine or finger paint satisfying. It can be comforting and non-threatening to use these 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 completing homework.
- Involve him/her in making decisions, perhaps what jumper to wear or what to eat.
- Encourage creativity.
- Let your child make a collage out of pictures from magazines and newspapers. You can create themes 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 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, but only if your child 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.
- Children who have been sexually abused by someone of the same gender often ask if that means they are 'gay.' Depending upon their age, explain that sexual orientation is not determined by abuse and that the abuser did not choose the child because of his/her sexual orientation. The abuse occurred because the abuser has problems.
- If your son was sexually abused by a woman, some will dismiss it by saying the boy was lucky 'to be initiated'. This response is inappropriate, and as the abuse is not his fault, 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 and to keep your reactions under control.

- Make time for yourself and find support or get counselling.
- Seek out self-help groups or start one yourself.
- Find someone to talk to, like a friend or family member, but don't overburden them by discussing the abuse twenty-four hours a day.
- Take one day at a time.
- Keep a diary or journal to give you an outlet for your feelings.
- Try to do something constructive, such as volunteer to help a children's charity, 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. You might encourage your school to offer Kidscape's "Safeguarding Children" training.
- Enrol in relaxation or exercise classes.

- Take up a physical activity - running, walking, cycling - 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, make 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 disturbing memories and feelings, remember that your child's experiences are not necessarily the same as yours. Your child may react differently and have different feelings. Don't impose your own experiences on your child. Ask for counselling or join a survivors' group to help yourself.



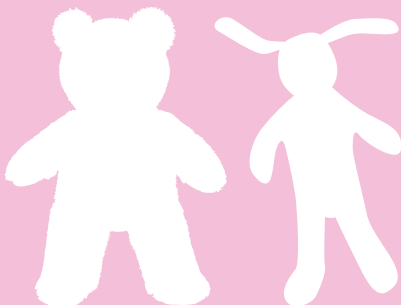
TEACHING PERSONAL SAFETY SKILLS

Sometimes a child or young person 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. To help them become less vulnerable 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.

Kidscape offers some excellent information about personal safety, both in print and on the website.

With younger children:

- Teach them to tell you if anyone asks them to keep a kiss, hug or touch a secret. Explain that no one should ask them to do this and you will never be cross with 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 all right to say NO, if they feel it is safe to do so. Practise 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 swimming costumes'. 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 word 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 practise 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, like the toilet, to telephone for help or a taxi. If they have no money, tell them you'll pay the taxi when it arrives.
- Help them establish a list of people they could talk to or ask for help. This may or may not include you. There are some things young people 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 IS SEXUALLY PROVOCATIVE WITH 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.

Do your best to react calmly. Try to explain:

- why the child should not do it
- that it is something grown-ups might choose to do with each other
- that it is wrong to trick or force sexual contact
- that it is OK to touch your own body in private
- that other people's bodies belong to them, and are private.

You may wish to explain sexual behaviour to your child outside the context of abuse.



You may consider contacting your child's counsellor or social worker to arrange counselling about ways to stop the behaviour. If your child does not have a counsellor or social worker, seek professional help.

- Contact your GP or social services to ask for advice or a referral.
- 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 such behaviour. They will obviously be upset, but an explanation and apology should help. To prevent the situation getting worse, you and/or the other parents will also need professional advice and support. 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. Many 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 for tempting them.

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 to the child and family.

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 understand his/her emotions and feelings and to grow up with a feeling of resolution.

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.

QUESTIONS THAT CHILDREN ASK

Hopefully the child who has suffered abuse will be receiving professional help. If that is so, you will want to discuss the answering of questions with the professional. It would be useful to show them the questions and suggested answers given below.

If you are dealing with a child who has been abused, be prepared for possible questions such as those listed below. 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 young people who have been abused do not grow up to become abusers themselves. If a young person presses 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, so they just repeat what happened to them.

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 has problems and perhaps was unkindly treated as a child. You could add that 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 'ill'. Children might then think that anyone who gets ill 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, especially if the child is quite close to the abuser. 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 as well as confused. One way to help him/her is to say that sometimes grown-ups do things with children that should be done with other grown-ups 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 to 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.'

In a confusing time, 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 provoke the abuse and is not responsible for it.



HELPFUL ORGANISATIONS

Please visit our website, 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 for further help:

ChildLine www.childline.org.uk

Children 1st, Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
www.children1st.org.uk

Coram Children's Legal Centre
www.childrenslegalcentre.com

Family Rights www.frg.org.uk

Family Lives www.familylives.org.uk

Kidscape www.kidscape.org.uk

MOSAC www.mosac.org.uk
National Free Helpline: 0800 980 1958
020 8293 9990 enquiries@mosac.org.uk

NSPCC www.nspcc.org.uk

Samaritans www.samaritans.org

Scottish Child Law Centre
www.sclc.org.uk

Victim Support www.victimsupport.org

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 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. Workshops for professionals and for severely bullied children are also offered.

For other information or booklets, contact
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Booklet generously supported by the Light Fund

fieldesign.com

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