

I Can't Believe this is Happening

*Information for Parents Whose Children have been
Sexually Abused*

It is estimated that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 9 boys are sexually abused in childhood – from infants through to adolescents.

It can be very distressing for a parent to discover that their child has been sexually abused. A wide range of emotions may be experienced including shock, denial, confusion, anger, guilt, isolation, depression, fear and betrayal.

Offenders are usually male and known to the child. They can come from any social, cultural, racial or religious background. Women can also be abusers, but this is much less common.

Perpetrators may abuse because it gives them a sense of power that they do not have in other areas of their life. Some abusers were abused themselves when they were children. There is never an excuse for sexually abusing a child. Many people who were abused as children do not go on to sexually abuse others.

Offenders often do not believe that the abuse really hurts the child in any way or that they are responsible for it.

The abuser of your child may be your husband, partner, father, brother, son or other trusted adult such as a friend, teacher or coach.

If the abuser of your child is a family member it can be very difficult to come to terms with how you feel about the offender. You may feel conflict and confusion about loving the perpetrator, hating his actions and supporting your child.

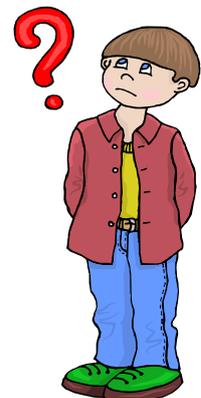
Why Didn't My Child Tell Me?

Children are taught to believe and trust what adults tell them, so they are often afraid to disclose the abuse to anyone.

They are often threatened, bribed, tricked or blackmailed into complying with the abuser. They may be told that:

- all adults do this
- they will not be believed if they tell
- it will be their fault if the perpetrator goes to prison
- they will be taken away from their family

Sometimes children try and tell an adult what is happening, but often the adults either don't understand or don't want to believe it could be true.



Myths about Abuse

There are many attitudes and myths that help to sweep child sexual abuse under the carpet. These include:

- All abusers were abused themselves
- The mother must have known it was happening
- The woman must be a bad wife or mother
- Men who abuse are sick or deviant
- Mothers should protect their children and are therefore responsible if their child is abused
- The abuse does not really hurt the child

These myths try to minimise the effect on the child, excuse the abuser and place responsibility on the child or the mother.

The only person responsible for child sexual abuse is the abuser himself.

Effects on the Child

Children can feel a range of emotions as a result of being sexually abused. These can include guilt, shame, fear, sadness, anger, isolation, worthlessness, a sense of responsibility and low self-esteem.

These feelings can be expressed in different ways. A child's school work may suffer as they find it harder to concentrate. They may become withdrawn and isolated as they feel they are "different" from their friends.

Children may become very clingy and demanding of attention, or they may withdraw from the family and not wish to be kissed or cuddled.

They may have temper tantrums or aggressive outbursts.

Younger children may regress in their behaviour and start wetting themselves or sucking their thumb. They may act out sexual behaviour with dolls or draw sexually explicit pictures.

Older children may bury themselves in their schoolwork to try and forget what is happening, use drugs or alcohol as a way of blocking out feelings or run away from home.

Just because a child is a teenager, or reaches the age of eighteen does not necessarily mean that they can stop the abuse. The perpetrator has power and control in the relationship and it can be confusing and frightening for young people to disclose.

Problems with undressing, sleeping, having nightmares, being afraid to go to bed or being in the dark are also common with children of all ages.

What do I do?

It can be very difficult for parents to know what to do when they discover their child has been sexually abused. They often have many emotions that can make it hard to think clearly, cope with normal daily routines and still give attention to other children. It is important that when your child discloses sexual abuse you:

- believe your child and ensure their safety
- reassure them that they are not to blame
- acknowledge how hard it was for them to tell someone and tell them they were very brave
- contact your local Police or the State Child Welfare Agency Child Abuse Report Line on 131 478

How you respond to your child when they disclose will have a big impact on their healing process.

Coping When Your Child Discloses Sexual Abuse

When your child discloses they have been sexually abused it can be very difficult to deal with the flood of emotions. There are some things that you can do to try and help cope with these:

- Talk to someone you can trust about what you are going through
- Try to keep up regular routines
- Eat well balanced and regular meals
- Find time to exercise – it is a great stress release
- Try to relax and rest e.g. find a peaceful place
- Monitor your drug and alcohol intake
- Understand that the abuse is entirely the responsibility of the perpetrator.

Counselling

Parents can feel overwhelmed when their child discloses sexual abuse. It may be difficult for family members or friends to know how to respond. If you were abused as a child, it may bring up memories of your own past. Some parents find that talking to a professional counsellor or joining a support group can be useful in helping them get information and deal with their emotions.

Further Information

If you would like more information, please contact Victim Support Service on (08) 8231 5626 or view our website at www.victimsa.org