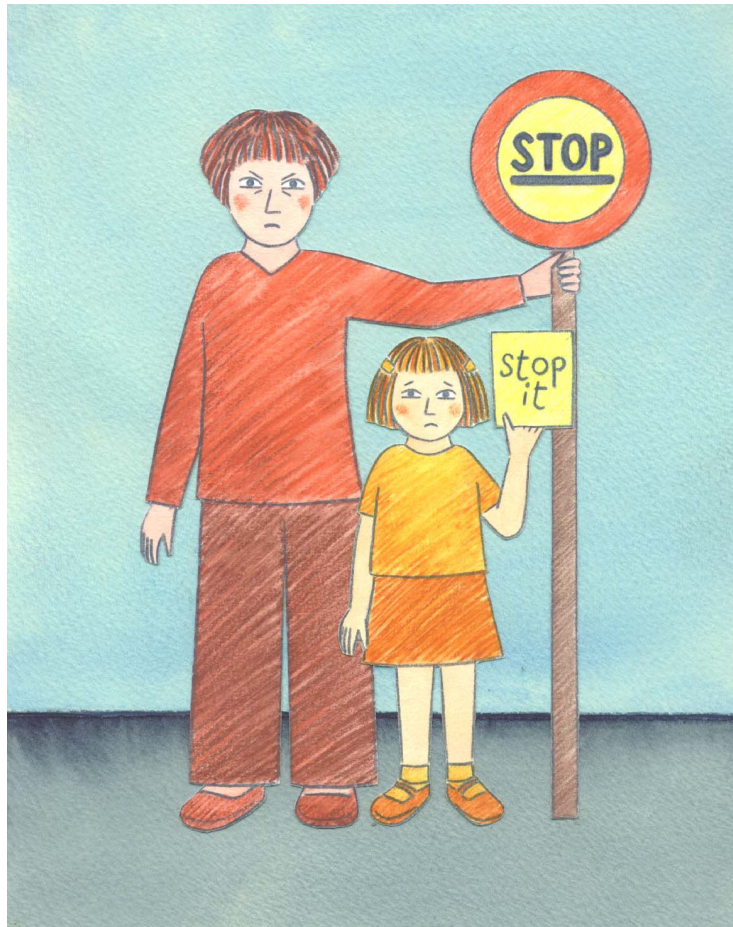


Beyond Belief

Supporting Sexually Abused Children



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The Video

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Supporting Sexually Abused Children

Using This Video

- Before watching this video, discuss what sexual abuse is.
- After the video, re-emphasize to all students that it is okay to tell someone about sexual abuse.

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Summary

Children who have suffered sexual abuse find it very difficult to share with anyone, especially as the abuser is often someone they know and have trusted. Once a child has decided to share such a negative experience, the effects can be widespread within the family.

This video aims to provide a starting point for a listener to help a child that has been sexually abused. Children suffering sexual abuse often see numerous reasons why they shouldn't tell anyone, and may have even been threatened by their abuser if they tell. Any young people viewing this video who have experienced sexual abuse will see the subject being openly discussed with their peer group and a supportive adult. This video will acknowledge their experiences, and help them to realize that they are not alone, that they are right to tell, and that abuse is never their fault. For the listener/parent, this video sheds light on what sexually abused children suffer emotionally, and the impact that telling someone will have on them and their family.

No child should ever suffer sexual abuse, but unfortunately the reality is that millions of children each year are victims. When a child has made the monumental decision to confide their abuse to someone they trust, they deserve to be listened to and protected. Above all, that child needs support, and his/her family will need support as well—by working together, a sexually abused child can recover from their abuse.

Key Points:

- Sexual abuse of children is described as forcing or coercing a child to take part in sexual activities, and is often accompanied by bribes, threats, bullying, or violence.
- There are many reasons children find it difficult to tell someone about their abuse, such as; they may feel guilty, ashamed, or that no one will believe them, that no one can protect them, or that they are responsible for the abuse.
- There are several steps that a listener should consider once an abused child has decided to tell someone, including; what to tell the child, what to do, what might help the child, and what the parent's reaction may be. All of these steps must be considered together once a child has decided to tell.
- Once a child has told someone of their sexual abuse, their reactions can be varied—from relief and happiness, to acting out or depression. No matter how a child reacts, it is important to understand that each child's reaction will be unique, and that everyone should deal with telling in their own way.
- There are many ways to support a sexually abused child, such as; reassurance, acknowledging their feelings, explaining things, and rebuilding the child's confidence.
- Parents may also feel as if they are under pressure once they've learned of their child's abuse, it's important to seek help and support as a parent as well as for the abused child.

Information About Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult or older person. It happens when a child is forced or coerced into taking part in sexual activities, and is often accompanied by bribes, threats, bullying, or violence. Sometimes it happens within the context of an affectionate relationship, in which the abuser behaves seductively, or uses emotional manipulation. It can happen to a child from any class, race, or religion.

Abusers come from all walks of life. However, research shows that:

Offenders are more likely to be relatives or acquaintances of their victim than strangers. Most reported offenders are male; the percentage of incidents of sexual abuse by female perpetrators is usually reported to be 1% - 6%.

The abuser is often someone the child lives with, a member of the child's family, or someone known to the child within the community.

Why Children Find It Hard to Tell

There are many reasons why children don't tell about sexual abuse. Abusers go to great lengths to keep their behavior secret. Silencing children is part of their strategy, and they often use threats, violence, bribes, and lies to achieve this.

Children are often afraid of what the abuser will do if they tell someone. They may fear the consequences of telling—for example, they may think that they will be removed from their family by family services, or that their family will be upset. Many children feel ashamed, guilty, and in some way responsible for the abuse. The abuser may well have encouraged the child to think this. Children may think that they will be punished if they tell; particularly if they were acting against their parent's instructions at the time the abuse happened.

Some children think that there is no point in telling either because they won't be believed, or because no one will be able to stop their abuser. They may have tried to tell someone, and received an unhelpful response. Sometimes children will put up with the abuse themselves in an attempt to protect a younger sibling. Children whose mothers are experiencing domestic violence may feel they are protecting their mothers by keeping quiet. They may know that their mother will find it difficult to protect them.

Some children may not understand what is happening to them. If the abuse has started when they are very young, they may not realize that it is unusual or wrong when they are older. They may not have the language to explain what is happening—for example; they may be too young, or they may not know the appropriate words.

Finding Out – What to Do

When a child starts to talk

- try to stay calm
- allow the child time to talk about what has happened

What to tell the child

- you believe them
- they did the right thing in telling you
- it was not their fault
- it should not have happened to them
- you will do what you can to protect them
- you will have to report the abuse, so you cannot keep it a secret

What to do

- make sure the child is safe from the possibility of further abuse
- explain to the child what you are going to do
- report your concerns to the police or social services

What might help

- try to talk with someone (a friend or relative) about what is happening so that you are not trying to deal with everything on your own
- for confidential advice, phone a helpline
- it is not usually a good idea to confront the abuser, and this could be dangerous
- it is important to report the abuse—if you do not, it is likely that the abuser will go on to abuse other children

When children tell

- children hardly ever lie about sexual abuse
- at first they may just tell a small part of their story to test the listener's reaction
- they may talk about a 'friend' to whom something has happened
- they may 'tell' by writing things down, through their behavior, or through play (especially if they are very young)
- children may tell, and then retract their story because they are scared by what is happening

When parents find out

- they may not want to believe what has happened to their child
- they may have many strong feelings (anger, sadness, fear, shame, disgust, embarrassment) or feel shocked and numb
- if the abuser is someone they know and trust (a partner or relative) they may feel conflicting loyalties to the child and the abuser

Children's Reactions

Once everything is out in the open, children may react in a variety of ways. All children react differently to the experience of being abused, and they will all go through the process of dealing with it in their own way. For some children, the worst is over once the abuse has stopped. They may feel relieved that they have told someone, and that they are now getting help.

Other children may have been coping with the experience by holding their feelings in, or blocking the experience from their minds in some way. After they tell someone, they may get angry, become distressed, or show behavioral problems. This can be a good sign, as it means that they are no longer too terrified to show their feelings—but parents may find this difficult. There may be some things that the child liked about the experience, and they may miss the person who abused them. This is often difficult for parents to understand.

Children may be upset by other people's reactions to what has happened. They may feel responsible for family arguments and disruption. Try to prevent children from being involved in adult disagreements as much as possible. Children may feel that they are to blame for other things that happen as a result of telling about the abuse—such as if the family breaks up. It is useful to reassure them that they are not to blame for anything that has happened, it has all been caused by the abuser's behavior.

Other children in the family may also be upset by what is happening and will need to have things explained to them. They may also need to be interviewed by social workers or the police. They may blame the abused child for any change in circumstances—such as if one parent has to move out. They may become jealous of the attention the abused child is receiving. It may be difficult to arrange, but they may benefit from some extra attention themselves.

There is no single 'right way' to help children deal with the experience of sexual abuse. The process will be different for each child, so parents and caregivers need to be flexible. Try not to treat the child too differently from usual—the main things children need are simply the basics; to be loved, cared for, safety, and security. Keep reminding the child that the abuse was not their fault, not matter what they said or did.

Children may have different reactions to the experience at different times in their lives. Living with the experience of sexual abuse is the same as living with any other difficult life experience—it takes time to understand what happened, and to learn how to cope with it.

Ways to Support Children

Reassure the child

- tell them you still love them and are not angry with them
- make time available for the child to talk to you on their own about anything they want
- remind them that the abuse was not their fault, no matter what they said or did
- try not to treat the child too differently—by becoming overprotective, or by trying to ‘make it up’ to the child by giving them treats
- keep clear boundaries and limits regarding the child’s behavior

Acknowledge their feelings

- children often have mixed feelings about the person who abused them
- there may be things about the experience they liked—such as; treats, attention, affection, sexual feelings
- they may be worried about how the experience will affect them in the future—such as concerns that same sex abuse will make them homosexual
- the child may be angry with you and it may take time to get close to them

Explain things

- help the child understand what has happened to them at a level they can comprehend
- be clear about the fact that the abuser is the person responsible for the abuse and all its consequences
- accept responsibility for any mistakes that you made and apologize/explain them—such as for not understanding what a child was trying to tell you if your first reaction was disbelief
- tell the child who else has been informed about the abuse—such as the fact that you have told certain teachers at school (who will keep the information confidential), but not any other children
- give the child clear information about sex, sexual development, and sexual health

Rebuild the child’s confidence

- remind them that they have rights over their own body
- help the child to think about what their strategies are for coping with difficult situations
- explain that children do not always have to obey adults, and that you will support them if they refuse to do something they think is wrong
- encourage everyone in the family to respect each other—such as by asking permission before entering each other’s room
- the child may benefit from being able to talk to other children about what happened, in a group for children who have had similar experiences
- be confident in the child’s ability to deal with this experience

Parents Under Pressure

Parents supporting a child who has been sexually abused have a very difficult job to do. They need to be able to give their child extra support at a time when they are very much in need of support themselves.

The person who has abused the child will often be an adult trusted by the parent, perhaps someone they love and care about. When this trust has been broken a parent may lose confidence in their own judgment, and find it hard to trust anyone. If the abuser is the parent's husband or partner they may have to deal with the emotional and practical consequences of the breakup of their relationship.

Parents often blame themselves for not realizing that a child was being abused. When they look back it may seem obvious. However, abusers are very clever at hiding their behavior and manipulating children to keep quiet about the abuse. Sometimes they spend years building up a friendly relationship with the child's entire family in order to gain access to the child.

Men who are violent to their partners are often abusive to their children too. Sometimes a woman in this situation may know about or suspect abuse, but feel that it is safer for her and the child not to report it immediately. Many women decide to leave violent men at the point when they discover that a child has been abused. This is a dangerous time for a woman and her children, so leaving home should be planned as carefully as possible.

Parents who have been sexually abused themselves may find it especially difficult to deal with the experience of their own child being abused. They may feel that they, of all people, should have been able to prevent the abuse from happening. They may be reminded of incidents that happened in the past. They will probably need help to deal with their feelings about their own abuse in order to be able to support the child.

If the abuser is another young person in the family, this can make the situation even more difficult for the parents. Parents may struggle to care for the child who is the victim, and also to support the child who is the perpetrator. Friends and family may be judgmental and unsupportive, and parents may feel very isolated.

Suggestions for Parents and Caregivers

Get help

- try to get support from wherever you can—family, friends, support groups for parents, social workers, victim support, parent partnerships
- it may be helpful to talk with someone outside the family, as family members may 'take sides' or have strong opinions
- when possible, take someone you know with you to meetings or interviews
- you may need to be assertive in demanding whatever help is available for yourself and your child
- if your parenting skills are being stretched to the limit by the child's behavior, then parents' organizations may be able to help
- if you have been sexually abused yourself, one-on-one counseling may be useful

Get information

- try and understand the job or role of any professional involved—don't be afraid to ask questions about what they are doing
- keep a file of letters, notes of phone calls, appointments with professionals
- take a pen and paper to meetings to take down any important information
- ask professionals to keep you informed of the outcome of any meetings, interviews, medical visits, etc.
- write down what the child tells you (in their own words)
- if possible talk to other parents who have been through the same thing

Don't blame yourself

- the abuser is the one responsible for the abuse and all its consequences, there is no excuse for abusing children
- you may have been manipulated by the abuser in order to gain access to your child—abusers 'groom' the families of their victims, sometimes over many years
- don't blame yourself for not realizing what was happening, even if you look back and it all seems obvious

Deal with it your own way

- take time to work out what's best for you and your family
- don't expect too much of yourself—don't try to be perfect
- take care of yourself; eat well, sleep or rest as much as you can, and try to take time for yourself

Questions For Discussion

1. Child abuse, including sexual abuse, occurs more often than we think. Do you know anyone who has been abused? Was that person able to seek help? Who did they go to for help?

2. Consider the portion of script below:

NARRATOR: *Some children think that no-one can protect them.*

WOMAN: *My son thought that even if he told me about it, I wouldn't be able to stop the abuse - because I couldn't stop his dad from hitting me.*

What other forms of abuse are apparent in the woman's family? Is the woman's son the only family member being abused at this time? Discuss how the earlier forms of abuse seen by the woman's son may have made him less likely to tell someone when his dad started sexually abusing him...what could his mom have done earlier on?

3. *I taught my children to be wary of strangers, not their own grandad.* This portion of the video script brings a harsh reality to light... Imagine a child has just confided in you—her grandfather has sexually abused her for the past year...do you know what to do? Discuss what should/can be done from the moment this child confided in you. Could there be any difficulties while trying to seek justice? Place everyone in the group in different roles—one person could be the disbelieving mother, another law enforcement, a school counselor, social worker, etc. Imagine how these different individuals handle such a situation as you act out your role...
4. Now imagine the child who has confided in you is mentally handicapped. You feel what she's telling you is true...but how might the scenario for seeking justice change?

Beyond Belief

Multiple Choice Worksheet

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) Sexual abuse of a child is most likely to be carried out by:
 - a) a stranger
 - b) someone the child knows
 - c) both a and b above
 - d) none of the above
- 2) Children often lie about sexual abuse.
 - a) true
 - b) false
 - c) both a and b above
- 3) Often, when children do talk about sexual abuse they've suffered, they may be afraid that:
 - a) everyone may know now that they've told someone
 - b) they are to blame for what happened
 - c) no one can protect them
 - d) all of the above
- 4) When a parent finds out their child had been abused, they may feel:
 - a) angry or guilty
 - b) relieved
 - c) as if they have been manipulated
 - d) both a and c above
- 5) Once a child has told someone of the abuse they've suffered, they may feel:
 - a) relieved
 - b) out of control
 - c) upset
 - d) all of the above
- 6) The parent of a sexually abused child may find things difficult and need support for themselves.
 - a) true
 - b) false
- 7) There are well-defined ways for parents to cope once they've discovered their child has been abused.
 - a) true
 - b) false
- 8) To help children cope with sexual abuse, it's important for them to know that:
 - a) the abuse wasn't that bad
 - b) it was not their fault
 - c) it's ok to have mixed feelings about their abuser
 - d) both b and c
- 9) Taking a child to support groups for sexually abused children is a good way to help that child recover.
 - a) true
 - b) false
- 10) Following sexual abuse, a child needs:
 - a) consistent care
 - b) affection
 - c) gifts
 - d) both a and b above

Beyond Belief

Multiple Choice Worksheet Answer Key

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) Sexual abuse of a child is most likely to be carried out by:
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For More Information

1. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry—Child Sexual Abuse
<http://aacap.org/page.wv?name=Child+Sexual+Abuse§ion=Facts+for+Families>
2. Helpguide.org—Child Abuse: Types, Signs, Symptoms, Causes and Help
http://www.helpguide.org/mental/child_abuse_physical_emotional_sexual_neglect.htm
3. National Exchange Club Foundation—Sexual Abuse
<http://www.preventchildabuse.com/sexual.htm>
4. Voices in Action—Adult and Adolescent Survivors of Sexual Trauma
<http://www.voices-action.org/>
5. ProtectKids.com—Child Sexual Abuse
<http://www.protectkids.com/abuse/>
6. all about counseling.com—Sexual Abuse/Trauma
http://www.allaboutcounseling.com/sexual_abuse.htm
7. Stop It Now—...Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children
http://www.stopitnow.com/resourceguide/rg03_vicsurv.html
8. Darkness to Light—Confronting child sexual abuse with courage
<http://www.darkness2light.org/>
9. ChildHelp USA
<http://www.childhelp.org/>
10. Medline Plus—Child Sexual Abuse
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/childsexualabuse.html>
11. American Psychological Corporation—Understanding Child Sexual Abuse
<http://www.apa.org/releases/sexabuse/>
12. counseling center—Surviving Child Sexual Abuse
<http://www.couns.uiuc.edu/brochures/sexualAbuse.htm>