



# You can help a Sexually Abused Child

Straightforward advice on what to do when a child confides in you

Janet Rosenzweig

The sexual exploitation of children is a statistically startling fact of life. The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect predicts that 20 out of every 100 children, both girls and boys, will be victimized in some manner before they reach their eighteenth birthday.

Statistics on sexual abuse are inexact, due in part to variations in the definition. Sexual abuse can include a wide range of behaviors, from fondling to rape, including juvenile prostitution and pornography. For practical purposes, and for explaining the issue to children, *sexual abuse can be described as being touched, looked at, or*

*spoken to in ways that children feel is an invasion of their privacy.*

## Profile of an abused child

How do you know that a child has been sexually abused? There is a myriad of signs and symptoms. While the appearance of any one symptom does not signify sexual abuse, the presence of several signs may indicate a possible victim.

The behavioral symptoms are similar to those associated with depression. Withdrawal or aggressive behavior may be noted. Self-destructive acts are often common among older children.

These include substance abuse, self-mutilation, promiscuity, attempts to run away, and suicide threats or attempts. Younger children may exhibit a preoccupation with their own genitalia or those of other children. Many sexual abuse victims will refuse to dress for physical education classes, often fearing that there is something different or dirty about their bodies that others will notice.

Some sexual abuse victims may impose sex play on other children; however, the key word is *impose*. A mutual decision to engage in "you show me yours and I'll show you mine" is not

necessarily problematic. However, should a child use force of any nature to secure the cooperation of another child, the act cannot be considered mutual and the instigator should be suspected of being a victim.

Children's art may also provide a clue. Drawings of adults displaying prominent genitalia and self-portraits indicating great isolation are two common signs.

Low self-esteem is typical in victims. They are implicitly taught that their value is for *what they do* (in this case, be a sex partner for an adult) as opposed to *who they are*. When they demonstrate such poor self-esteem, they may become the target for scapegoating by peers.

Sexual abuse victims have often been robbed of the chance to learn to make smart decisions concerning their own safety. For this reason, they may be revictimized in other circumstances.

#### **When a victim confides in you**

A child will often try to communicate that something is wrong. This is extremely difficult for younger and older children alike; our culture gives young people the message that sex is not something they talk about with adults. In addition, they most likely have been told by the abuser not to tell. And, if incest is the problem, they are often dreadfully afraid of what will happen to their family when people find out. But many children will test the water with a trusted adult, possibly seeking an opinion on hypothetical problems. If you are the one a child confides in, there are several do's and don'ts to keep in mind.

**Do believe the victim.** A child rarely lies about sexual abuse, and even if he or she does, a need for professional help is still indicated. Not believing someone adds to the problem—most likely other people the child may have tried to talk to have not believed the child either. A child may seriously begin to doubt his or her own sanity when repeatedly told that what he or she knows to be true is not.

**Do emphasize that the victim is not at fault.** Often a child has been led to believe that he or she provoked the attack. Under no circumstances is a child victim ever considered at fault. Regardless of the child's appearance,

manner of dress, or behavior, the adult must be responsible for his or her own behavior. Moreover, if a child is behaving in a precociously seductive fashion, someone must have encouraged and rewarded such behavior.

**Do acknowledge the child's conflicts,** which arise from several places. Primarily, the child is confused about the repercussions of the report, which will certainly cause a crisis for both victim and family, as the social and legal systems begin their intervention. A child may also have a conflict regarding feelings for the offender; in spite of the attack, there may be true affection for the offender. It is possible, and with male victims of female offenders often probable, that the victim experienced sexual arousal. Given that the sexual response system is a function of the autonomic nervous system and a reflect response to stimulus, the child may be terribly confused about something that in some way felt good, even though he or she is sure it was wrong. An analogy to laughing when tickled, or getting goose bumps when cold, can be understood by a child.

**Do not ever make a promise to a child that you cannot keep.** Victims have most likely been lied to by adults in the past. They need to learn to trust adults again. A common temptation is to let a child talk you into promising not to tell anyone. This explicitly removes your ability to take control of the situation. Relinquishing control to responsible adults is a vital step in the healing process of the victim. Of course, it is also illegal to fail to report child abuse of any type to local child protective services authorities. Explain to the child that you want to find a special person to help him or her, someone with the child's best interests at heart, someone who understands sexual abuse problems.

**Do know the resources in your community.** Every state has a Child Protective Service Unit, located within a larger state agency. Many Child Protective Service Units even have specially trained sexual abuse case workers. Local police and sheriff departments and some hospitals have either specialized child abuse or sex crime teams. Many family service agencies provide treatment for victims and their families, as may your local mental

health agency. It would be good to call these agencies and learn who the specialists are before you need to contact them. An agency might also provide speakers at faculty meetings on identifying and helping victims.

**Do not ever ask an incest victim why he or she let it go on so long.** Data from different treatment programs indicate that the incest may have been going on from several months to several years before a report is made. By asking why a victim let it go on so long, you are implying that the child had the ability to stop it.

**Do cooperate with Child Protective Service workers.** They will often want to interview the child at school. Unless the first contact with the child is away from parents, he or she may defer and retract the allegations in their presence. Protect the child's confidentiality; have him or her called to the school nurse or counselor's office as if nothing is particularly out of the ordinary. If a child's protection will be best served by removal from home, make lessons and homework available. A child often loses ground in schoolwork while in protective custody.

**Do be as supportive as you can be to a victim seeking help.** It is truly difficult to take that first step. It is our job as caring adults to make that first step as rewarding as possible.

#### **Programs and resources**

Programs designed to help prevent sexual abuse generally incorporate many of the basic health education principles. The goals of prevention programs are to teach children that their bodies belong to them, that they need to learn to make good decisions about them, and that there are people who can help them do this. The American Cancer Society's "Early Start to Good Health" curriculum may be used to introduce these points to young children.

The Illusion Theater in Minneapolis has pioneered the idea of the touch continuum; there is good touch and bad touch and children can sense the difference. Learning that they do not have to accept the bad touching is important. Parents should let children make their own decisions about whom to touch, and should be discouraged from forcing a child to hug or kiss people if the child does not want to.



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### SEXUAL ABUSE *continued*

Staff from local sexual abuse programs will often be available to present special programs in the classroom or in special assemblies. Often after a sensitively done program on sexual abuse, victims will identify themselves to the speaker or their teacher. Be prepared for this. It is important to know in advance exactly how you need to proceed in your community.

Child sexual abuse is a serious and complex problem, requiring input from all community systems concerned with the welfare of children and their families. Schools can play a vital role by directing child victims to help, and by implementing prevention programs.

The following groups and centers will provide information or materials to help you develop your own prevention program.

*Babylonian Encounter* (film); National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse—Kansas Chapter, Suite 301, 214 W. 6th St., Topeka, KS 66603. See INSTRUCTOR, January 1984, p.26.

*Child Abuse and Neglect: A Teacher's Handbook for Detection, Reporting, and Classroom Management* (\$7.95 in paperback, \$14.95 hardbound); NEA Professional Library, PO Box 509, West Haven, CT 06516. A companion leaflet, "What Parents Should Know about Child Sexual Abuse," is available in packages of 25 for \$4.95 from the same address.

*Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Project*, a guidebook for developing a curriculum for children, created by Illusion Theater. For complete information, write Sexual Assault Services, Hennepin County Attorney's Office, C-2000 Government Center, Minneapolis, MN 55487. Cost is \$8 including postage. Other resources such as posters and study cards are also available.

*Come Tell Me Right Away* (booklet); Edupress, Inc., PO Box 383, Fayetteville, NY 13066. Cost: \$2.50.

*Dangerous Stranger*, 11-minute videotape for elementary children. Available free except for small cost of dubbing the video on the videotape you provide. For information write: Charles F. Ash, Jr., Pennsylvania State Police, U.S. 322, Limerick, PA 19468.

*Some Secrets Should Be Told*, conversation with puppets on sexual abuse, geared to grades K-6. Developed by Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Can be purchased as a 10-minute film or as a filmstrip; a video version can be rented. For prices and further information, contact: Family Information Systems, 69 Clinton Rd., Brookline, MA 02146.

*What Everyone Should Know about Sexual Abuse of Children* (100 pamphlets for \$39); Channing L. Bete Co., Inc., 200 State Rd., South Deerfield, MA 01373. □

Jaant Rosenzweig is executive director of the Child Club of Dallas, Texas, and a consultant to the Texas Department of Human Resources for sex abuse programs.