



# PARENT*talk*

**PARENT*talk* is a Stop It Now! publication by and for parents of children and teens with sexual behavior problems.**

## Loving Them Both

When you are a parent with a child who has sexual behavior problems, there are times when things seem calm, and then the winds kick in and the storm starts again. Sometimes I ask myself, how is my family able to face this struggle? How can we get to a more hopeful place? So much energy has been poured into this long, intense, healing journey.

**“*Sometimes I ask myself, how is my family able to face this struggle? How can we get to a more hopeful place?*”**

I am a divorced mother of two boys, Troy (15) and Ted (12). I became involved with a very supportive, loving man, Alex who has helped my sons and me through this healing process.

On an ordinary day several years ago, I took my older son, Troy, to visit his father. Back at home, Ted disclosed to Alex that Troy had been touching his private parts.

When I returned home, Ted told me as well. I felt like I had heard the worst thing a mother can hear. I felt confused and shocked. As I listened to Ted, I began feeling everything through him and seeing it through his eyes. I felt so deeply sad for what he had been through, and I battled with feelings of responsibility. What could I have done to prevent this? Why didn't I see the signs?

Then I started to think about Troy and realized I was feeling both anger and sympathy toward him. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, how could he do this to his brother? Where did he learn this behavior? I was very scared and worried about what would happen to Troy.

I wish I could explain what it is like to be the parent of BOTH a child who has been abusing and a child who has been victimized. The feelings are so mixed and confusing. I love both my sons, but at times I felt guilty and ashamed that I cared for Troy even though he had hurt Ted.

We later found out that the boys' father had sexually abused them both. The investigation was eventually dropped, and the boys' father still has not taken responsibility for his

actions, nor been held accountable legally. He denies it ever happened and still tries for visitation.

We immediately began getting help for both my sons and making sure they were both safe from repeating these behaviors. It was clear the boys could not be left alone together. Even with Alex there to help, I cannot tell you how difficult it was to live in our house during this time. It actually felt like things were getting worse not better. Ted was locking his bedroom door at night, fearing a visit from his brother.

I struggled so much with whether or not Troy should stay in our home. The thought of sending him away nearly broke me, but at the same time I began to realize that neither Troy nor Ted could get healthy while living together. Eventually, we made the decision to place Troy in a residential treatment center. I constantly have to reassure myself that this was the right decision.

Since then, Ted is doing better. He is much more outgoing and is making new friends. I can tell he feels safer and free to be himself. Still, Ted has many fears about possible contact with his father and brother through reunification therapy.

For me, it is still extremely difficult not having Troy at home. I visit him often and send him lots of letters and cards, but still it is not the same. His treatment providers say Troy is making strides toward understanding his offending patterns and learning how to interrupt and stop them. Still, Troy has many issues that need to be addressed.

I hope and pray that in the end both of my sons will choose to live healthy and happy lives and that the cycle of sexual abuse in our family will stop.

One thing I have learned from this experience is that child sexual abuse, in our society, is a big secret. And it is the secrecy and silence that allows it to happen way more than any of us wants to admit.

To other parents with a child who has sexual behavior problems I will say this: your child is still young and resilient; it is never too late for change. Seize the chance now - get your child help so that the behaviors do not progress into adolescence and adulthood. And most of all, educate yourself, your family members, and your children on sexual abuse and prevention.

Even though my family and I still have a long way to go, I will never give up.



## Guest Column

# Just Say KNOW: Promoting Healthy Sexuality in Young People with Sexual Behavior Problems

By Steven Brown, Psy.D. Traumatic Stress Institute, Northampton, MA and South Windsor, CT.

Though probably unpleasant, take a moment and remember back to the time you first discovered that your child had a sexual behavior problem. You likely had many feelings -- shock, horror, embarrassment, shame. Suddenly, all kinds of new people were involved in your life telling you that your child needs to change. More than anything, you also wanted your child's behavior to STOP.

Your reaction is understandable. And, to be sure, helping your child control his or her inappropriate sexual behaviors is an important goal. But, it is only part of putting your child back on a healthy developmental path. To fully heal, children also need to learn about healthy sexuality. They need to know how to express their sexuality in positive ways -- -- what they can look forward to, not just what to avoid. When treatment and parenting focus solely on avoidance, young people can easily feel that what adults REALLY want is for them to get rid of their sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors altogether.

But, humans are sexual from birth. Our sexuality evolves and changes over our lifespan. It is not possible

(or desirable) to eliminate our sexuality. Instead, the goal -- for all of us - is to understand our sexuality and use it positively for connection and pleasure. Unlike alcohol abuse, where drinking has few inherent benefits and eliminating the behavior has few negative effects, sexuality is a fundamental part of who we are. Trying to eliminate it carries other, important costs.

So, how can parents foster healthy sexuality in their children with sexual behavior problems? The most critical goal is to open lines of communication between you and your child about sexual matters. Here are some suggestions:

**Work on becoming more comfortable talking about sexuality.** This is NOT easy. Most parents never learned from their parents about how to talk openly yet appropriately about sexuality. As a result, you may feel wholly unprepared to discuss sexual issues with your children. Some ideas to make it easier are: talk to other parents who may have similar struggles, read books on healthy sexual development, talk to a therapist experienced in helping families, and practice saying sexual words in the mirror.

*Continued on next page*

## **If You'd Like to Read More About This Subject, Here Are Some Suggested Books from Steve Brown:**

### **For Parents**

*From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children*, by Debra Haffner

*From Dating to Diplomas: A Parent's Guide for Raising Sexually Healthy Adolescents*, by Debra Haffner

### **For Children and Teens**

*It's so Amazing: A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies And Families*, by Robie Harris

*It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Sex and Sexual Health*, by Robie Harris

*What's Happening to My Body? Book For Boys: A Growing Up Guide for Parents and Sons*, by Lynda Madaras

*What's Happening to My Body? Book for Girls: A Growing Up Guide for Parents and Daughters*, by Lynda Madaras

*Changing Bodies, Changing Lives: A Book for Teens on Sex and Relationships*, by Ruth Bell Alexander

For more suggestions, go to the website for the Sexuality Education and Information Counsel of the United States (SIECUS), [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org).



**Remember that it's okay to feel uncomfortable.** You can even tell your child that you feel strange having the conversation. But don't let discomfort get in the way of talking.

**Remember that information about sexuality does not equal permission.** You may have the fear that talking about sex will give your child permission to have sex, but many studies show the opposite. Children whose parents talk to them about sexuality are more likely to delay sexual behavior and use protection when they decide to engage in sexual intercourse.

**Your actions speak as loud as your words.** One of the best ways to teach healthy sexuality is to work on yourself and your relationships. Young people learn about healthy, intimate relationships from observing people around them. If they see abusive relationships, they are more likely to be involved in abusive relationships themselves. If they see their parents in loving and caring relationships, they will search for the same in their own lives.

**Don't wait until your children ask questions.** They may never ask. Find teachable moments to talk about sexuality. Read a book to a younger child about bodies, birth or babies. With a puberty-age child, say "When I was your age, I started getting \_\_\_\_\_ (a lot of sexual feelings, pubic hair, my period) and was worried about

\_\_\_\_\_. Do you ever worry about that?" For a teenager, use TV shows to discuss sexuality. "Those two people just met and they are already sleeping together. What do you think about that?" Then share your beliefs on the subject.

Remember to talk about the joys of sexuality, not only the dangers. As parents, it's very easy to talk only about all the bad things that can come from sex. Also, tell your children that loving relationships can be the best part of life.

### ***Would you like to share your story for the next issue of PARENTtalk?***

*Future editions depend on parents and family members like you. You may remain anonymous and choose to write your story, or be interviewed by Stop It Now!.*

*For more information, please contact Amanda Horowitz at (413) 587-3500, ext. 13 or [info@stopitnow.org](mailto:info@stopitnow.org).*

*Thank you.*

## **A Letter from the Editor**

*Many of us know that child sexual abuse is largely perpetrated by someone the child knows and trusts, but did you know that 30-50% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by a child under the age of 18\*?*

*Last year, 20% of calls to the Stop It Now! national helpline came from adults concerned about sexual behavior between two children within the same family. My heart goes out to the parents who call in to our helpline in these situations. When talking with them, I hear their overwhelming and confusing feelings. Many express their desire to "hold" both their children through the difficult process of healing and treatment. Mostly, I want these parents to know that having a complex and emotional reaction is understandable and that it is okay to feel love for both children.*

*I have spoken with many parents faced with difficult situations like the one described in this issue, and I am amazed at the strength, integrity, and connectedness they bring to dealing with issues of recovery day after day.*

*I would especially like to thank the parent who shared this issue's story for her openness and courage. And to the parents out there who haven't called, please know you are not alone, and you have support.*

*Thank you. Amanda Horowitz, Helpline Coordinator  
Stop It Now!*

\*For more information on these and other child sexual abuse facts and statistics, please visit: <http://www.stopitnow.org>



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## PARENTtalk

## Loving Them Both

PARENTtalk is by and for parents. What questions or topics would you like the newsletter to address?

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Stop It Now! is grateful for your feedback and will respect your confidentiality.

**YES!** I want to support Stop It Now!'s work to keep all our children safe from sexual abuse. Please accept the enclosed contribution.

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*Thank you for your support!*

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All PARENTtalk back issues are available on-line at [www.stopitnow.org/parenttalk](http://www.stopitnow.org/parenttalk)

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