



PARENTALK

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

A FAMILY'S ROAD TO HEALING

As parents with six children to raise, we understood that we would endure untold trials and tribulations. Nothing, however, could have prepared us for the day we heard the words: "Your son has molested your daughters." In that moment, and the torturous years that followed it, every idea we'd held about ourselves as parents was turned on its ear. "How could this awful thing happen in our family?" we asked. We viewed our son's actions almost as a separate entity, a beast that we had to eradicate. We knew our lives would never be the same after that day...

Sam, our oldest child, had always been a bright, sensitive boy who excelled at everything he tried. We were deeply proud of the young man we believed he was becoming. However, as Sam matured, his courteous behavior masked a rising tide of anger. Whenever confronted, Sam was a master at denying and minimizing his behavior. We misread the cues and gave him more attention in the hopes his anger would be alleviated. It would prove to be a mistake that would haunt us for years to come.

At age eleven, Sam's abusive behavior crossed over into a new arena. His ten-year-old sister, Jamie, came to us one evening and hesitantly revealed that Sam had engaged in inappropriate sexual contact with her and her younger sister, Lacy. A wave of shock and disbelief washed over us, but we trusted our children implicitly and we knew it must be true. We had an initial meeting with a therapist our family physician had recommended and he assured us that we had nothing to worry about. He stated emphatically that Sam's behavior was 'normal' for a boy his age. Jamie, depressed, would soon enter therapy herself.

Four years later, our world came to a screeching halt with a single phone call from Jamie's therapist. He gave us the devastating news that Jamie had confessed that she and Lacy had been sexually abused by Sam the entire time. The therapist explained that he was

compelled by law to report Sam to the authorities, but that he wanted us to know first. Thankfully, Sam was out of the state at the time visiting his father. My concern could be fully focused, for the moment, on my two oldest daughters.

Three months later, Sam had been through the court system. It had been an agonizing and isolating experience. The hardest thing we ever had to do was take the trip to the police station with our son and turn him over to the police. To make matters worse, we knew that every step we took to help our son would feel like a betrayal to our daughters.

**"THE MOST IMPORTANT
ADVICE WE CAN GIVE
IS TO TRUST
YOUR INSTINCTS."**

We researched frantically to find a good specialized treatment program for juvenile sex offenders, and found one close to home. The court allowed Sam to spend the next three years in private boarding school while attending this treatment program. He learned not to define himself by his offenses, but to understand them as a behavior, a choice, he could learn not to make.

While our life would never be the same, we have come leaps and bounds since that time. The courage our daughters exhibited allowed us to face the truth together. Sam faced his own demons and made peace with all of us, but more importantly, with himself. We are now building a bridge of healing within our family.

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The most important advice we can give is to *trust your instincts*. If your child's behavior concerns you, don't dismiss it. If a professional doesn't listen to your concerns, find another. Reach out; don't try to go it alone. I only wish we'd known about an organization like

Stop It Now! to turn to. Our fervent wish is that we will help our children by promoting early intervention and treatment of youngsters with sexual behavior problems. It's important to remember that it can happen in *anyone's* family.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR IN PLAY BETWEEN CHILDREN

Children and teenagers sexually abuse children, though sometimes it is hard to tell whether it's abuse or innocent play. Some sexual activities are normal for children at certain ages. But there are warning signs that should send up red flags if you see them between children in sexual play.

Sexual activity is most likely to be abusive where there are significant differences between children in age, size, social status, or ability, or where one child puts pressure on another.*

Here are some questions to ask. Is one of the children:

- Much larger than the other?
- More than 3 years older than the other?
- More powerful in the relationship—for example, a baby sitter, a club leader, the “bully on the block”?
- More able than the other mentally, emotionally, or physically? Is the possible victim disabled or developmentally slow?
- Using threats, bribes, or physical force?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, the sexual activity may be abuse. If you have questions or need support, please call the Stop It Now! helpline at 1-888-PREVENT.

Joan Tabachnick, Editor

*Gil and Johnson, 1993.

7 THINGS TO DO

When you discover that your child has sexual behavior problems:

1. Love your child: Tell your child you love him/her.
2. Build the idea of accountability: Let your child know what he or she did was wrong.
3. Learn about your child: Gain a better understanding of the limitations and capabilities of your child.
4. Look at the whole child: Remember that abuse is only part of your child, and that your child is more than an “abuser”.
5. Consider therapy for the entire family: Nobody should tackle the issue alone.
6. Talk to your child: Let your child know that he/she can always talk about his/her feelings.
7. Believe in your child: Recovery does happen.

*Guest Column***“DOING THE RIGHT THING”: THE DO’S & DON’TS OF LOVING YOUR CHILD WITH SEXUAL BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS***by Tiff Waskowicz*

This is the second in a series of guest columns. This article is by Tiff Waskowicz, a college student working with Stop It Now! as part of her field study for a class on domestic violence. During her exploration, Tiff listened to tapes from parent speak-outs and interviewed both parents and clinicians. Tiff discovered that parents could offer some dos and don'ts to other parents as guidelines to encourage change in their families and in their child with a sexual behavior problem (see sidebar). She offers the following findings from her research as a work in progress and welcomes your comments, feedback and additions.

At a recent parent speak-out, one mother told Stop It Now! that her son's treatment provider said “they were doing everything right.” But the mother reflected to us that she had no idea what “doing everything right” meant.

Clinicians and parents agreed: there is no correct way of “supporting” a child with sexual behavior problems. So much depends upon the child, the family relationships, and circumstances of the sexually abusive behavior, and the social/cultural environment. But parents had a lot to say to other parents about how to deal with their initial reactions and the long term awareness that their child has sexual behavior problems.

Most of the parents I interviewed concurred: the initial reaction by parents when they uncover a sexual behavior problem is crucial. More than one parent stressed, “It is important for me to remember that abuse is only part of my child, and that my child is more than just an ‘abuser’.” To cope with this frightening realization and to begin recovery, parents emphasized the need to remember that their child is a good person who made a bad decision. Parents repeatedly stated the importance of telling their children that they love them. One parent said, “Love your child. More than ever before, they need to know that you still love them.”

The clinicians I spoke with stressed that parents need to set a clear boundary and tell their children that what they did was wrong. This is part of the child's work toward healing—accepting responsibility for what they did

wrong. However, both parents and clinicians agreed that parents need to do this boundary setting in a loving way. One parent said that this is most easily done by “encouraging her son to do the right things while reminding him of what he believes in.”

Parents repeatedly told me they often felt angry at what had happened, wanting to scream “How could you do this?” or “Why didn't you tell me?” to their child. Again, in hindsight, everyone agreed that it was not helpful to anyone to express these words because they only isolated the child further. Clinicians agreed that breaking this isolation is a critical part of the healing and recovery process.

“Sexual abuse does not just happen” was a key phrase used by many clinicians in therapy. To prevent future abuse, parents, children and clinicians worked together to understand what caused the behavior. In doing this, parents gained a better understanding of the limitations and capabilities of their child. The most common insight that both parents and clinicians highlighted was that parents should always remember the importance of balancing support with accountability. One parent gave this example: “My son now believes that the truth is right and falsehood is wrong. So when he gets to a place where he talks about wanting to deceive someone or lie, I can remind him of his belief and ask him how they go together.”

Families agreed wholeheartedly that once a sexual behavior problem was acknowledged, everything in the lives of these children and their families changed. One clinician explained, “Everything in the parents' lives will change once they discover abuse. But many parts of their family life will get better once the family starts dealing with it.” In the discovery and recovery stages, clinicians stressed the need for parents to ensure the physical and psychological safety of all children in the family. Clinicians recommend therapy or support groups for each family member because no one should have to tackle the problem alone.

From talking with parents and clinicians, I realize that the child is not the only one who needs support. Because

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of the isolation surrounding the issue of child sexual abuse, parents often have no one to talk to about their own hurt and their need for support. My conclusion: **PARENTS, DON'T FORGET ABOUT YOURSELVES!**

Parents who had the courage to share their stories and feelings with others found that they did not have to feel so alone. Many took advantage of the group therapy session available to parents as a time and space to share their stories. Listening to them, I recognized for the first time how difficult this process is and how brave and strong these parents have been. I am now 20 years old and I now see courage in a very different way after hear-

ing these heartfelt stories. Most importantly, these stories clearly showed me—and I hope they show you, the reader—that recovery can and does happen.

This article does not do justice to the range of possibilities for supporting a child with a sexual behavior problem. Perhaps the most important thing is to recognize that there is no one right way to support a child. I hope this article initiates discussion between parents that can be shared through this newsletter and within support groups around the country. If you would like to share your thoughts or reactions, please feel free to email me directly at info@stopitnow.com, call the toll-free helpline at 1-888-PREVENT.



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PARENTalk...A FAMILY'S ROAD TO HEALING

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

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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