



PARENTtalk

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

Support Groups for Parents

This issue focuses on support groups for parents of children with sexual behavior problems. The following four stories are written by parents who are in the same support group, led by the treatment provider who works with their children. They each have a different perspective, have different stories to tell, and have joined the group at different stages in their own families' situation. But despite their differences, they have all found that attending the support group has helped immensely in their families' recovery and healing. They share their stories below.

Grandmother

Alex is our first grandchild and very dear to my husband's and my heart. He is a good student in school and has always had an active social life with many friends.

When we were first told of Alex's arrest, my husband and I were quite distressed. Our immediate reaction was to do whatever we could to give support, strength, and guidance to our loved ones. Prayer was constant, and we had many sleepless nights. Finally we made plans for my early retirement so I could take care of Alex. Since his mother had a full time job, an extra person was needed to meet all the appointments and court-ordered care of Alex. I don't regret making this sacrifice for my family: in many ways it brought us closer.

It was sad and devastating when we learned of Alex's wrongful choices, and the court system stepped in and took charge. As a family, we found ourselves feeling uneducated in the "system," and we were frightened, not knowing what to expect and what could happen. We felt so alone and insecure.

For the whole family, every day has been a learning process. Now, after months of specialized treatment, Alex is learning ways to control his behaviors, as well as important life skills. We know his group therapy is helping him to express his thoughts and release his feelings of shame, depression, and hopelessness.

Taking an active role in our parents' support group,

for us, has been a calming, learning experience. We talk intimately and offer each other support by sharing in the hurt, disappointment, fears, successes and joys we all experience daily.

We're so thankful to the counselors leading our group for providing a place for us to bond together, give each other support, and offer words of understanding when working through difficult times in our particular situations. Having this "safe" place truly helps us to restore a sense of family normalcy.

Mother

When our son was convicted of child molestation and rape of a child, our world seemed to crash to pieces around us. It has made such a difference in our lives that all our friends stayed by us then, as they still do.

When our son began counseling, though, I didn't want to face any of the other parents from his treatment program. I was too ashamed. It took me several months to decide to join the parent support group, but I have never regretted it. In fact, I think it saved my sanity.

In group, I heard the stories of other parents, some even more heart-rending than ours. As I shared our family's story, I began to feel that here, in the parent support group, I could be safe and could find understanding, because we were all feeling the same agony.

Through tears and laughter, participating in my support group has helped me become a stronger, better person. And maybe I've been able to help other parents, too.

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Father

The most significant event in my mind is the instant in time when I found out that my child was accused of sexually molesting my niece. If you have had a similar experience, you know the feeling of an icy fist gripping your heart and your mind going black with horror, imagining what has happened and what will occur in the days and weeks ahead. Questions rip through your mind so much faster than logic can provide answers.

When our child was found guilty of a sex crime, it was traumatic for the whole family. The trauma was made worse by a feeling of loneliness and isolation, a feeling that there was no one to share our pain with and to draw strength from. This certainly was not a subject we felt we could bring up casually at the office, or with close friends.

The first time my wife and I attended a parent support group, we were very apprehensive about sharing our experiences. However, as we listened to the stories of other parents, we realized that they experienced the same pain, stress and despair. It was a great relief to finally say everything we had on our minds, knowing that others empathized with us and would not be judgmental. Even if you don't feel like sharing your situation, we urge you to attend a parent support group. At the very least, you will know that we are all in this together.

We have learned that every year, thousands of parents in America are hit with the realization that a child of theirs has engaged in sexually deviant behavior. To any parents going through the roller coaster ride of treatment, courtroom proceedings, and in some cases, the incarceration of your child, please know: you are not alone.

Father and Mother

When our son first started treatment, his treatment provider didn't yet offer a support group for parents. Although we were told about a different group not too far away, the thought of another night out was overwhelming. In hindsight, we should have taken advantage of a group as soon as possible, even if it meant driving farther or taking time that we didn't feel we could spare. It would have been nice to have someone further along to give us insight about what we might expect.

We were thrilled when our son's provider started a group. Participation in this parent group has been helpful for several reasons. It has brought us in contact with our child's therapist more frequently, opening up communication between us all. We also learned that many parents are struggling to make sense of this process along with us. We have met other families going through the same struggles and have been able to share ideas on how to cope with the difficulties of running a family while attending to the special needs of one child. On many occasions, we discuss specific strategies to help our children from re-offending. We have also learned that many families lacked the support that we had through our church and friends, so by attending group, we have helped to provide a safe and non-judgmental ear. There are many benefits to participation in parents' groups, and for us, there is no question that the time and effort to attend these meetings has been completely worth it.

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Guest Column

Parent Support Groups

By Dan Knoepfler, MC and Martha Davis, MSW

When we started our treatment program for sexually acting out youth, offering a support group for parents and caregivers was not a priority. Several years later, we came back to the idea because we felt that having parents and family members in session once or twice a month was just not enough. Furthermore, there was not enough time in family sessions to address some of the parents' individual needs.

Many parents feel they must put on a strong front to help their child get through the treatment process. Though this may be true, parents also need to express their own anger, frustration and sadness. They need to discuss how their child's and family's lives have been changed. A common thread that runs through most parents' stories is their anger toward their child for putting the family in its current situation. Many parents feel a loss of control over their family and their ability to make decisions on their own. They struggle with feelings of resentment because they must consult or get permission from their child's therapist and probation officer to do things that used to be normal day-to-day activities. These difficulties seem less overwhelming to the parents when they share strategies with others in the same situation.

The parents feel that the most valuable part of group is the wealth of information that each parent con-

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tributes. As professionals, we can be sympathetic and compassionate about their struggles, but the real strength of a support group is the expressions of empathy the parents show for each other; they all know what it is like to have a child with sexual behavior problems. Parents share valuable first hand knowledge regarding the courts, law enforcement, child protection, and treatment. Parents who have had a child in treatment for awhile share their experiences with parents who are just beginning. Some group members exchange phone numbers and support each other outside the group as well. Now that we have been running the group for more than a year, we can no longer imagine our program without it.

If there is no support group in your area, try talking to a treatment provider about starting one. We encourage other providers to think about starting a group for parents and care-givers. As hard as it is to care for a child with sexual behavior problems, it is even harder to feel alone when dealing with it.

A Letter from the Editor

It has been a dream of mine to publish a special edition on support groups for parents and caregivers of youth with sexual behavior problems. Over the years I have seen again and again that when parents and family members of a youth in treatment are supported and made a part of the healing process, treatment for the child or adolescent is proven to be even more effective. The more I talk to parents, the more I share in their frustration that support services available to them in these situations are scarce.

It is my hope that reading the stories in this edition will serve as one more source for comfort and help to inspire new ways of supporting each other. In the words of another parent, "Being able to function every day without guilt and regrets because of the help given to me by the parent support group is priceless."

If you have a story to tell, we welcome your calls or email. You may remain anonymous and choose to write your story, or be interviewed by Stop It Now!. If you are a parent with a story to share or if you are a clinician who would like to involve your parent support group in a project, please contact me at (413) 268-3096, ext.13 or info@stopitnow.org.

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



Stop It Now!

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

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