



PARENTALK

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

THE MOST DIFFICULT DECISION OF MY LIFE

Thank you for this opportunity to write about my experiences these last four years. This is the first time I have spoken publicly about what happened in my family, and I appreciate your willingness to maintain our anonymity. It is important not only to my family, but to the victim's family and the victim to not relive this pain after years of healing.

Although my son was never an easy child, I have always had a close relationship with him. He was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder at age two and a half. I did what any responsible parent would do and worked very hard both with my son at home and with his teachers at school to help him be successful and happy. Until fourth grade, all of his grades were A's and B's and it looked like we were on the right track.

At fourth grade, he suddenly did not want to go to school. He became more and more isolated so we decided to try therapy. As a parent, I knew he was not coping with something. Over time, it felt like my son was slowly slipping away.

By the time he offended, he had two psychological evaluations by two different medical centers and neither gave an indication that he had a sexual problem. What finally told us about the abuse was a call from our neighbor that "something had happened" between my son and her child.

My immediate response was not helpful. I was in shock, angry, and not educated about how to talk about sexual abuse. I dragged my son out of bed badgering him with my questions. In hindsight, I don't think he could have talked with me in that state even if he wanted to. My world was turned upside down.

But then I did educate myself. I found out that there is specialized treatment for adolescent sex offenders, but

that no one would see him unless he was reported. And no one had reported this crime.

I knew that if I didn't do something now it would continue until he was caught as an adult and sent to prison. So I made the most difficult decision of my life—I decided to report the crime myself. I first sat my son down and told him that I loved him very much. Although I didn't know what would happen, I did know that we couldn't solve this problem ourselves. And I believed that this was the best way to get the help we so desperately needed. I then asked his therapist if he would help report the crime and he did.

In hindsight, talking to my son was the best thing I could have done. I set a clear limit, I let him know it was wrong, and I told him that I would not help him keep his secrets. I also let him know that I loved him, that he was not alone, and that together we would find him help.

We were lucky to find an organization that works with adolescent sex offenders. This wonderful therapist worked with my son for three years and had just the right combination of toughness and caring—telling my son that child sexual abuse was a crime, but offering to work together to make sure it never happened again.

Today I look back and feel lucky to have found such a wonderful therapist and having had such strong support in these hard years. In these four years we have also learned how to get on with our lives and to be watchful with our son. We don't talk about it every day, but when things come up, we know how to ask questions like, "Is this a place that is safe for you?" I also know that adolescent boys don't always talk to their mother about these things. So I have learned to ask him if he wants to talk to his therapist or someone else about what is going on.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Five years ago Stop It Now! started talking with parents of children with sexual behavior problems. We approached these courageous parents because we wanted to know more about their experiences. With their permission, we asked them many, many questions about their own journey through this difficult issue.

Parents told us that they wished they had more information about healthy sexual development in children. They wanted encouragement to continue to work towards a healthier home environment and a sense of hope that other families like them had worked through many of these difficult issues. Most of all, they talked about the isolation they felt. One parent told us, "It would be easier to tell someone my son is a drug addict, drug pusher, or even a murderer than a sex offender." While this may be true for right now, we believe that we can change society's response to children and teens with sexual behavior problems—these are our children who need our help. I am a parent of two children, and I know how difficult it is to raise children in today's world. I have tremendous respect for every parent I have met who is directly confronting the sexual behavior problems of their children and supporting their children in living a healthier life. In my Vermont work, I have been privileged to meet so many parents who are willing to tell their stories to others in a public forum so that other families will not feel so isolated in their own struggle with this taboo subject.

It is reaching out to others that gives me so much hope. This newsletter is a new resource for parents and for all of us who care about keeping our children safe. This is new, so please let us know what you think, what you want in future issues, and what we can do to make this a more valuable resource.

*Sincerely,
Joan Tabachnick
Stop It Now!*

Q & A: TIPS FROM THREE COURAGEOUS PARENTS

Q: What is different about your life now that your family is aware of the sexual behavior problems?

A: Perhaps the biggest thing we do differently is to respect the law on all levels. I gave a clear message to my son when I entered him into treatment. I reported his crime myself when no one else did. In my family, this issue of obeying the law has remained one of regular discussion as day-to-day events arise. We live in a society of individuals who often obey the law only if they feel it is an appropriate law. In our lives, things like speeding, driving before getting a learners permit and pirating software are taken very seriously. Recently one of my son's friends bought a CB radio which he enhanced beyond the legal broadcasting limits. As he began to explain to me the numerous justifications for this, my son quickly replied, "Don't even try that with her!" As both of us chuckled, I realized that my son and I have an understanding of right and wrong that is special. Our limits of acceptance when it comes to legal issues are tighter than most and I believe both of us like it that way. (Kay)

Q: What would you like to share with other parents and professionals from your direct experience with this issue?

A: While we feel like we've weathered this storm, we wouldn't wish this experience on anyone. Our advice to parents: trust your instincts. You know your child best and if something doesn't seem right, don't accept a professional's opinion that negates that instinct. Search until you find the answers. Remember that there is help out there. And to therapists: listen to your clients. When you are treating a child, please take into consideration the concerns of his or her parents. Don't assume you have all of the answers without exploring all of the possibilities. Be educated about issues like child sexual abuse. Be informed that children can abuse other children, whether that abuse be verbal, sexual, or physical. Be clear about the line drawn between normal sibling interactions and abuse. (Michael and Laura)

WHAT IS AGE APPROPRIATE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR?

Sexuality is a part of every human regardless of age. Listed below are some of the healthy developments for preschoolers to adolescents. These are only some of the developments and behaviors to be aware of, and it is always important to remember that each person develops at his or her own pace. If you have any questions about your children, call a doctor, nurse, or any of the many agencies and programs that work with children and adolescents.

PRESCHOOL (0-5 years)

Sexual language is used frequently, primarily related to differences in private body parts, bathroom talk, pregnancy, and birth; masturbation at home and in public is common; showing and looking at private body parts are common; discussion of sexual acts is uncommon; contact experiences with other children are rare; adult-like sexual behaviors are rare.

SCHOOL AGE (6-12 years)

Questions center around menstruation, pregnancy, and sexual behavior; experimenting with other children is very common and typically occurs during games with same-age peers including kissing, fondling, exhibitionism, and role-playing; masturbation is common in the home or other private places, but rare in public; use of sexual words and discussing sexual acts is more frequent than during preschool years although still uncommon (10-20%); adult-like sexual behaviors are rare.

ADOLESCENCE (13-16 years)

Questions focus on concerns about decision-making, social relationships, and sexual customs; masturbation is common and restricted to private places; experimenting between adolescents of the same age is common and includes open-mouth kissing, fondling, and body rubbing; voyeuristic behaviors are common; sexual intercourse occurs in approximately one-third of this age group.

(Adapted from Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: Sharing the Responsibility by Sandy K. Wuertele and Cindy L. Miller-Perrin)

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I want to take this opportunity to tell other parents to EDUCATE YOURSELVES about child sexual abuse. The one place I am still angry is that many of the professionals I spoke with did not know how to recognize what was going on. So as parents, we need to learn about what to look for and how to talk about child sexual abuse to our children. It is not something any of us want to find. But if you see or sense something is wrong, know that the most loving thing you can do for your children is to take action before they become adults. There is wonderful help out there when you do reach out for it.

In closing, my hope for the future is that parents will be able to talk about stopping child sexual abuse with each other. At times I have been very alone with this. Breaking the silence around child sexual abuse will help our children talk about their concerns and will give all of us the support we need to deal with this growing epidemic.

Thank you for listening to my story.



Stop It Now!

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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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