



PARENTALK

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

A FAMILY SUSTAINED AND NOURISHED WITH OPENNESS

My son Jeff was 11 when a neighbor told me he had sexually abused their 5-year-old daughter. How could I have been prepared for this news? In my gut, I knew I needed to talk with Jeff directly. When I asked him, he admitted to abusing the little girl. He also told me that our childcare provider had sexually abused him for two years when he was six years old.

We tried to get help for Jeff, but he continued to act out in many ways. In desperation, I reached out to others in my family. I called his uncle in Florida: Jeff trusted him. I thought he could offer a guiding hand. How could I have known that I was inviting a person who was sexually abusing children—including Jeff—into my home? With this added abuse, Jeff's problems got worse. He finally ran away from home.

When Jeff was 14, he was placed in state custody where he began a wonderful residential treatment program for young sex offenders. I felt torn by the fact that he was so far away. But was relieved Jeff was finally getting the specialized treatment he so desperately needed. In treatment, Jeff revealed the sexual abuse by his uncle. He also admitted to abusing his sister Hannah and his brother Steve.

I was devastated. I felt tremendous guilt and responsibility for what had happened to all of my children—all while I was in my house. My anger toward his uncle alone overwhelmed me. But I knew I had to do something positive. I got my entire family into counseling.

Meanwhile, Hannah began acting out. She was staying out late, drinking, and hanging out with the wrong crowd. When she ran away, the state placed her in a foster home. After a while, she came home to live. My eight-year-old son Steve was very clear about not wanting her there. I thought maybe he liked being the only child and didn't want to share my attention with his sister. Unfortunately, it was not that simple. Steve told me that his sister Hannah had sexually abused him, too.

Hannah was placed back in foster care. While in foster care, she was raped repeatedly by the 25-year-old son of the foster parents. Hannah tried to get counseling at the local battered women's shelter, but when they discovered she had sexually abused her brother, they refused to help her. This was devastating to Hannah and to me. Hannah did not give up and found a counseling program for her victimization, the rapes, and her abusing. It made a huge difference to her. She also was finally moved into another foster home that was safer for her.

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Meanwhile, Jeff did fairly well in treatment. When he turned 18, Jeff came back home. He is now 20 and lives with a woman who has a young child. Jeff is about to become a father. He is aware of his problems and the need to be vigilant. He has told his girlfriend about his past and the need to take precautions. She is understanding and supportive. Jeff doesn't feel like he will sexually abuse again. But as a result of all the counseling, he knows he must always be careful and not put himself in risky situations.

Hannah is still struggling. She has a two-year-old daughter and is working hard at being a mother. I am happy for the open kind of communication we share. Hannah told me recently that she does not know how to deal with her daughter touching her genitals. I suggested she talk with the pediatrician about what is normal. I know that being able to talk about these issues has helped Hannah realize a little.

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*Guest Column***THE GRIEF OF DISCOVERING YOUR CHILD IS ACCUSED OF SEXUAL AGGRESSION***by William Ballantyne, Psy.D.*

Dr. Ballantyne is a clinical psychologist at West Central Services, Inc. with twenty years of experience in addressing sexual behavior problems in adults and children. He is also the facilitator of the Vermont Network of Treatment Programs for Juveniles with Sexual Behavior Problems.

Previous articles in PARENTalk have described the difficult emotional challenge for parents whose child has been accused of sexually abusive behavior. As with any source of severe emotional threat, parents facing the news that their child may have harmed another child through sexual behavior most likely will pass through the phases of grief identified by Dr. Kubler-Ross.

In 1969, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a book titled *On Death and Dying*, in which she identified five stages that a dying person goes through when they are told that they have a terminal illness. Since then, we have come to recognize that the concept of stages of grieving can be applied to almost any situation in which devastating new information threatens to disrupt our pattern of life. Everyone, including friends, family and the person affected travel through these phases of grief.

The series of emotions that typically follows devastating new information includes denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. When parents hear that their son or daughter may have sexually abused another child, they may go through the following stages:

Denial/Shock- For some, a feeling of numbness or disorientation is the hallmark. They may feel “unreal”. For others, they remain focused on their denial that such events could have occurred. “This is impossible. The accusation must be a big mistake. I know my child and my child would never do such a thing.”

Anger- Although the behavior displayed during this phase rarely appears helpful, the anger can help parents cope with information that may be difficult to take in at this point. “The accuser is a mean-spirited person who has it in for my child. Child protective services or ‘the state’ is out to get my child.”

Blaming- Attacking the accuser is often the focus in this phase. The grieving individual sometimes imagines theories of intrigue and payback in order to make sense of the situation. “The accusing child is just jealous of my child, so made this all up.”

Bargaining- While in this phase, the reality of the accusation may be accepted, but the impact or significance of the sexually aggressive behavior is often minimized. “It was just normal sex play, not sexual abuse – every kid does it.” Parents may hope that their efforts will keep the abuse report from moving into the legal system. “I’ll make sure my child never does anything like this again.”

Depression/Shame- In this phase, the parent is overwhelmed with the reality of the situation and may feel unable to cope. The challenge of dealing with the accusation of sexual abuse and what it may mean for their child, their family, and themselves bears down heavily upon them. Parents guilt and self-blame frequently arise at this time. “This is all my fault. I should have seen this before it got to such a place.” “Our family is doomed.”

Acceptance- “Yes, I think this happened.” Once the parent or parents are able to realize that the accusation has merit, they can begin to make more effective decisions about how they can respond most appropriately to this very challenging situation. There are many difficult decisions ahead and the accused child and other family members will need support.

These stages can occur in any order, and one may revisit a stage more than once. Or, one may remain in a phase of grief for a very long time until circumstances, the passage of time, or help from others assist them in moving on.

The thoughts and feelings suggested above do not always occur in isolation. The accused child, other family members, and family friends may influence the parents. For example, it is very common for the accused child to deny the accusation, at least initially. The youngster’s fears of punishment or legal sanctions

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can play a significant role in a child's response to accusations that their behavior was sexually abusive. Almost all youngsters in these situations know that the behavior was wrong, so guilt and shame are major factors in their denial.

The negative impact on parents of the discovery of their child's sexually abusive behavior increases profoundly when the victimized child is also their own. One of the greatest challenges for a parent is supporting both the victim and the accused at the same time.

In future issues of PARENTalk, there will be articles addressing the psychological evaluation of adolescents and younger children accused of sexually inappropriate and aggressive behaviors. The evaluation process can often be the time when, with the help of the mental health evaluator, the child and his or her family can begin to understand what may have happened. Building upon the strengths of the family and the accused youngster, the healing process can begin. This process can continue during the treatment phase, especially when parents participate in their child's treatment.

SUPERVISION OF YOUR CHILD

All children need help and mentors to learn to control themselves, and parents are in the best position to provide that help. But for children with sexual behavior problems, you will also need to teach others who care for your child how to supervise them appropriately.

The following steps can have a tremendous impact on your child's ability to use self-control.

Decrease Opportunities for Abuse.

- If your child is playing with another child, stay in the room or check in frequently.
- Discourage games that your child may associate with sexual behavior (e.g. doctor, Simon Says).

Teach Sexual Safety and Privacy Rules.

- Bedrooms are private.
- Children do not enter without an adult.
- One should knock and wait for permission before opening a closed door.

Encourage Open Communication.

- Listen to your child when feelings or worries are shared and help him or her figure out what to do about his or her worries.
- Encourage children to share both negative and positive feelings.
- Limit Experiences That Increase Sexual Thoughts.
- Don't expose your child to movies, TV, or music that show sexual or violent themes.

- Interrupt sexual jokes, stories, and language and talk about the impact of them on others.
- Give clear messages about when and where masturbation is ok and to have non-abusive thoughts while doing this.

Interrupt and Redirect Misuses of Power.

- Help with problem-solving difficult situations and discourage bossiness or use of force.
- Help your child understand what he or she is feeling during acting out behavior.

Correct Problem Thinking.

- Confront ideas that support your child's sexual behavior problems (e.g., I can do what I want.)
- Remind your child how others are affected by his or her behaviors.

Adapted from "From Trauma to Understanding: a Guide for Parents of Children with Sexual Behavior Problems." W. Pithers, A. Gray, C. Cunningham, and S. Lane. The Safer Society Press.

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My youngest son Steve has had a difficult time in school and suffers from very low self-esteem. I feel lucky that the school has provided counseling and extra help for Steve. We continue to talk openly. I do not believe Steve has ever sexually abused another child. We are dealing with "normal" teenage things now—which is something I feel very grateful for, and something I am not used to just yet.

I know that this is a difficult story to tell. But I feel that it is not as unusual as we would like to think.

I hope others reading this will realize that they can educate themselves about what may be happening under their own roof and what they should be looking for. I also want families to know that we all can heal from this kind of trauma. Our family is not there yet, and we are still in a very difficult place. But I feel we are on the way—through open communication and reaching for help. I am thankful for the relationship I have now with my children and for the chances they have had to turn their lives around.



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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