



PARENTALK

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

STRONGER AND WISER

The story of a mother and a child with sexual abuse behavior problems

My experience as “the mother of a sex offender” began about five and a half years ago. I discovered that both of my sons had sexually abused several children, including cousins and friends. Words cannot express what I felt when I learned that my 14-year-old son, who is developmentally disabled, had initiated the sexual abuse and my 11 _ -year-old son, had joined in. My world came crashing down. The events to follow would test me to my very core.

I believe that one of the best things I did for my sons was to insist that they tell the police the truth. As a result, they were officially charged in juvenile court and sent to separate residential treatment facilities for sex offenders. Suddenly I was involved in the world of the judicial system: juvenile court, DHS, case workers, counselors, attorneys.

My oldest son stayed in a facility for three years. This turned out to be very good for him. Not only did they address his sexual abuse problem, but they were also able to accurately diagnose him with a developmental disorder. He was already being treated for a neuropsychiatric disorder, but this second diagnosis explained many things about my son’s behavior that had, until then, mystified me.

Due to these newly found disabilities, my son was sent to a group home, where he remains today. Staff members help him with daily living skills such as cooking and cleaning. He also has a job coach who accompanies him to his part time job.

My youngest son spent one year in a residential facility and then came home for a short time. He was very angry, belligerent, and verbally abusive. He had developed the habit of punching holes in the walls whenever he was angry, which was most of the time. He went back and forth between home and facilities until he

was well enough to remain at home—but even then there would be clashes between us. My youngest son has now been home for 2 _ years. His behavior has improved dramatically, and he has completed his outpatient counseling.

Upon release, I took my sons to an excellent therapist for outpatient follow-up. I had dealt with many therapists and had learned that a really good one, with specialized training in treating sexual behavior problems, can make the difference. He followed the progress of both my sons, always held them accountable for their actions and attitudes, and provided me with much needed moral support.

**ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT
LESSONS I HAVE LEARNED IS THAT
ALTHOUGH I AM FAR FROM PERFECT,
I DID THE VERY BEST JOB I COULD
AS A PARENT**

I was dealing with feelings of total isolation, personal failure, and shame. This was not a matter that I felt could be shared with other parents or friends. I felt like no one else had ever walked this road, no one else would ever understand. I realized this was false when I saw how many other teenagers with sexual behavior problems were in my sons’ residential facilities.

I am now able to reflect upon the last few years with a better perspective. Although there are still unanswered questions, I am now a much wiser person. One of the most important lessons I have learned is that although

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*Guest Column***ISOLATION AND RECOVERY FROM ABUSE***by David S. Prescott, LICSW*

If there is one element common to all families who experience sexual abuse, it is the sense of isolation. This can occur as separation from friends, family, and community. Parents can even feel cut off from themselves, their emotions, and sense of identity.

The anguish of coming to terms with sexual abuse is equally isolating. It is remarkably common for parents to ask themselves what else might be going on that they don't know about. The immediate surprise and doubt can quickly become a sense of fear and revulsion. Many believe that they have no one to go to with their pain and no longer expect to receive sympathy from others. Parents ask the very same questions as many victims of sexual abuse: "Can I ever be myself with anybody?" and "Is there a safe place for me?"

**BY WORKING WITH OTHERS TO
UNDERSTAND AND PREVENT ABUSE,
IT IS POSSIBLE FOR FAMILIES TO
GROW STRONGER.**

It is commonly acknowledged that ours is not a culture eager to talk about sex and sexuality. Even a casual observer of the American media comes away with the impression that the term "sex offender" is the worst possible label. This same-based portrayal of an individual never suggests the possibility of personal improvement. There is an underlying assumption that sex offenders are sleazy individuals who will never change. In fact, there is a wealth of research indicating that this needn't be the case, particularly when the person abusing a child is another child or adolescent.

What do parents expect when sexual abuse has occurred in their family? Many feel that they are alone with these problems, which is far from true. They expect to lose significant relationships, which does not have to be the case. While it is likely that many important relationships will change in the life of the family in which abuse has occurred, it can often be for the better in the long run.

America's dedication to taking sexual abuse seriously is certainly well founded. Sexual abuse is recognized to be so widespread that it takes a public health perspective to fully comprehend its effects and potential for prevention. However, there are many unwarranted myths that contribute to the sense of isolation of families. Among these is the notion that sex offenders are unable to change and, inevitably, re-offend. Current research shows that when someone who sexually abuses a child successfully completes specialized treatment, the likelihood of reoffending is low. This is especially true of children and adolescents with sexual behavior problems. In recent years, there has been significant progress in developing treatments that can help reduce the risk of re-offense.

In an era when sexual abuse is made all the more traumatic for families through the public focus on the crime without much mention of rehabilitation, what are families to do?

First, families should be aware that they are not alone. This is obvious in the recent exponential growth of treatment programs and strategies for adolescents and adults who have sexually abused. There are support networks where families can go. Often families find out that they have much in common.

Second, non-abusive family members have a vital and honorable role to play in moving families forward. This is NOT a myth. Research has shown that the sooner a family believes and responds appropriately to the victim of abuse, the better he or she is able to recover. Additionally, the sooner the family responds appropriately to an adolescent or child who abuses, the more quickly a professional can address the sexual behavior problems. Much of the successful treatment is related to factors outside the therapy itself: family support for the victim and for the abuser. By taking the abuse seriously, it opens up the possibility for families to reunite in a safe and meaningful way.

Third, parents quickly discover that it is vital to get professional help in order to recover from sexual

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abuse. This can come in the form of education as well as supportive counseling. Parents typically feel pulled in several directions at once, especially if the children abused and abusing are in the same family. It can be easy to compromise safety through the desire to reunite as quickly as possible. Having a neutral professional to advise you on balancing these difficult elements can be enormously helpful. There are numerous resources available.

Fourth, in my experience working with families that have experienced abuse, those that have moved forward most effectively have been those who make safety of its members an explicit value. Cliché as it may sound, an ounce of prevention really is a pound of cure. This ranges from open discussion around safety to changing living arrangements to promote the well being of all family members.

Finally, take good care of yourself and rest assured that you are far from alone. By working with others to understand and prevent abuse, it is possible for families to grow stronger.

David Prescott is a Licensed Social Worker who oversees the treatment of sexually abusive youth at a residential treatment center in Bennington, Vermont.

PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SEXUAL BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS SHARE WITH STOP IT NOW!

"When my 14-year-old son was accused of sexually abusing his 2-year-old cousin, the family was greatly concerned about who would find out. Although we wanted to keep quiet about the sexual abuse, we had to look past our worries and do what was best for the children. Both children were put into specialized treatment and we have learned to be honest about what has happened."

"After my 8-year-old stepdaughter disclosed that my 15-year-old son had been sexually abusing her, my first instinct was to ensure that my family did not change in any way. I finally realized that it was best to make some changes in the way we lived. My son is now in an inpatient treatment program, which has taught both children that there are consequences to sexually abusing and has allowed them to heal without feeling anxious or uncomfortable around one another."

"It was discouraging to hear that I needed to make a report to the authorities if I wanted to get help for my child's sexual behavior problems. When I notified child protective services that my 12-year-old son had abused a 7-year-old neighbor, I was skeptical about the benefits of reporting. But, it was through this report that my son and the child he had abused were able to get much needed treatment and support."

"Being the father of a sexually reactive 9-year-old girl, I am taking steps to seek professional counseling for her. By working with an expert, I hope to understand why my daughter is acting out and learn how to emotionally support and work with her in the home."

I am far from perfect, I did the very best job I could as a parent. Unfortunately, my best efforts did not keep my sons from making some very bad decisions. However, we still need more emotional support and treatment for families of abusers. There are support groups for practically everyone in our society—alcoholics and drug addicts, for instance—but there is little

support for families of sex offenders. I believe that those of us who have been through this particular ordeal need to come together and draw on the strength and courage of one another.

—Written by “Mary” whose name has been changed to protect her identity.



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