



PARENTALK

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

THEY'VE MOVED FORWARD, FOREVER CHANGED

Over 10 years ago "Sue" spoke at a press conference for STOP IT NOW! VERMONT about what it was like to discover abuse in her family. We printed Sue's story in our PARENTalk Newsletter (V.1, N.2) where she described her initial reactions and family responses to finding out her son had sexually abused her daughters. Although her discovery 12 years ago was "the most devastating news of my life," today both Sue and her family have moved forward, forever changed, and lead a very normal life.

My son is now 19 years old and has graduated from high school. He has a full time job, owns his own car and, most importantly, has successfully completed his treatment for adolescents with sexual behavior problems. He is really doing very well. Both of my daughters are doing great as well. The oldest will be a senior in high school, is getting good grades, and looking forward to her future. My youngest girl is doing what she loves most, enjoying her summer riding horses. I never thought that I would be able to say it, but we are really leading a very normal life—as normal as it can be with three teenagers!

It took a lot of work to get to this point, but if there is one thing I would like families dealing with the complex issues of sexual abuse to know, it is that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. It may seem dim right now, but it brightens with every day and eventually you emerge a stronger and more educated family.

But the steps to get here were not all easy. As I wrote in my previous statement, it took a long time to find the right help for my children. But once we were on the road to healing we struggled for a long time with the isolation we felt from our community. Reflecting back, this continues to be the most difficult part of facing sexual abuse. Talking about my son's abuse of our daughters and the victimization of all three children has helped our family heal, but we are still very guarded in sharing our experiences with others.

Our first step out of isolation was to tell my extended family about the sexual abuse. With the help of a counselor, we shared our experiences because it helped to hold my son accountable for his actions. We also shared the details of our story so that they can understand that sexual abuse can and does happen right in our own homes. Even more importantly, we learned to talk together about how to prevent this from happening to their children. Although most of our family continued to embrace us, my relationship with my brother and sister-in law is still strained. It was my brother's son who had sexually abused my son when he was 6 years old, yet they have not yet even begun to deal with this abuse even after 12 years. However, with time, I believe that that, too, shall pass..

TALKING ABOUT MY SON'S ABUSE OF OUR DAUGHTERS AND THE VICTIMIZATION OF ALL THREE CHILDREN HAS HELPED OUR FAMILY HEAL, BUT WE ARE STILL VERY GUARDED IN SHARING OUR EXPERIENCES WITH OTHERS

I live in a very small rural community, and we have chosen not to share my son's abusive history or my daughters' abuse with others outside our family. Living in such a small community I was very aware that if you tell one person then everyone will know. Because I am simply not sure how those around us will react, we, as a family, have chosen to discuss the abuse only within our family. I just do not want to subject my son and daughters to the potential negative reactions of their peers and the community.

But this, too, is challenging. My son is 19 and at a point in his life now where he can make decisions
CONTINUED ON PAGE FOUR

*Guest Column***TRUSTING AND SUPPORTING OUR CHILDREN***by Patti Cutler, M.Ed., LMHC*

Children with sexual behavior problems are most successful in treatment and in their lives if they have the strong support of parents and guardians. But the strong support of parents does not mean fully trusting everything the child says or does in his or her life. Support means understanding the treatment process they need to gain the skills to stay safe.

I have been a therapist working with adolescents for 24 years. In this time I have seen many parents struggle with this issue of trust. And I have seen many of them reach a place that balances watchfulness and trust.

To truly support your children, parents need to educate themselves about child sexual abuse and about the treatment their children are undergoing. They need to become familiar with the terms and tools used to help young people who abuse to change their behaviors. Parent support is especially helpful in the stages when young people begin to actively incorporate these new tools into their daily living. I believe that parents can best supervise their children and begin to make the difficult decisions of when and where to trust their children when parents: understand the basics of treatment tools and principles, see how their child is using and internalizing these tools and have built a solid relationship with the child's therapist

Some basic terms may be helpful in moving this process forward. Here are some of the key terms and dynamics you will need to face as you begin to re-build healthy and trusting relationships within the family:

Thinking Errors Thinking errors, also known as cognitive distortions and "stinkin' thinkin'" are patterns of thoughts and attitudes your child may use to continue their abusive or sexually inappropriate behaviors. Thinking errors are used to pass off any responsibility for bad behavior. You may recognize them by statements that: Shift the blame onto someone else: "Well he came and talked to me, so he was the one who wanted to..." Deny any involvement: "I didn't go to the park."-when you know that he or she was there. Minimize what happened: "I know I wasn't supposed

to be near her, but I only talked to her, I didn't touch her or do anything really wrong." Pretend ignorance: "I didn't know there were going to be children there!"

Compromising Positions This, simply put, is being involved in ANY situation where your child is alone without any supervision or witnesses to an activity. Situations can easily become compromising and, without knowing what to watch for, children (and adults) often "walk right into them." An example of this is using a multi-stalled public bathroom in the community. It is the responsibility of the child, parents, and therapist to work together to identify these situations ahead of time and to plan exactly what to do when faced with unexpected situations alone.

High-Risk Situations There are particular situations for those who abuse that bring them closer to an offending situation. These high-risk situations will vary from person to person, depending upon the risk factors of the abuser. For example, locker rooms may be a high-risk situation for one person and video arcades may be high risk for another. During the treatment process, young people are taught how to recognize and define the factors that make a situation especially risky for them. Without this knowledge, a young person does not have the tools to determine whether they are in a dangerous position for them and their community.

Adaptive Coping Skills During treatment, young people are taught a variety of positive coping skills to deal with stressful and high-risk situations. These are concrete strategies to avoid or remove themselves from a situation. Again, these strategies are personalized to the individual. As you can imagine, young people must develop many, many skills and need encouragement in practicing them to fully make them available when they need them the most.

Secrecy Finally, there is no place for secrecy in a child's life. Whenever the child is seeking some form of secrecy this indicates the child's need for vigilant supervision. Knowledge of these and other treatment issues is

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essential to re-developing trust with a child who has sexually abused others. I hope this short review may be helpful to you.

Ms. Culter has worked with adolescents for 24 years. She is director of the Springdale Education Center in Springfield, Massachusetts, which is a private day school for youth dealing with significant emotional issues as well as sexual behavior issues. Ms. Culter also is recognized as a national trainer in the field of adolescent sexual behavior issues.

“Before we learned of the sexual abuse in our family, I really believed everything my kids told me about what they were doing, where they were going, and who they were with at any given time. With the therapy process I have learned to be watchful, to talk about what is going on, and to trust my gut if something strikes me as odd. Today, my instincts tell me when to probe deeper and when to let things go and maybe most importantly, when to talk with our treatment provider about what may be happening. It took us all a long time to adjust to this change, but I feel as though I am a much better parent for it.” –Sue.

“We do not ignore what happened and talking about it has helped my family to heal. We also know better now what to look for which helps us prevent this from ever happening again. My son now knows and can feel the impact of what he has done.” –Joan.

“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.”-Kay.

“The most important advice we can give as a parent 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.”-Laura.

about how and who to tell about the sexual abuse in his past. He is very committed to never abusing another child again. The tools he learned in his therapy program have become a way of life for him. For example, he avoids being around children and is always aware that when there are children present he is not left alone with them. My daughters are younger and I still feel the need to actively protect, support, and advocate for them. They are emerging from this experience stronger, more articulate and mature.

My hope is that in time things will be different and that disclosing our experiences will garner support for my son, for our daughters, and for our family. Society is not there yet, but that does not mean we should not be trying every day to get to that point. I am a perfect example that families can, and do, move forward. Together we can make even a bigger difference. That is why I shared my experiences with you two years ago and that is why I am writing again today.



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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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