



PARENTALK

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

LOVE & COMMUNICATION GUIDE FAMILY TO RECOVERY

I'm a parent of four young adults. When they were very young and I was at home, my husband and I decided to also help other children who might be in need of a home. We became foster parents for several years and through these children had many positive experiences.

But not all of them were positive. One morning, I found two of my sons, ages three and five, in the top bunk with our 14 year old foster boy. I did have the wherewithal to talk with them about what was going on. A few questions confirmed that he had sexually molested my sons. I was stunned. I had not been aware that boys would do this to boys. I reported this incident immediately to child protective services. As a family, my husband and I were encouraged to educate ourselves on how to talk with our children about sex. The foster boy promised never to molest again, so we allowed him to remain in our home.

Years went by. One of my sons was stubborn and moody, but this didn't seem out of the ordinary. I attributed his behavior to growing pains. One day, as I was leaving the elementary school, I heard a first grade girl say to her little friend, "There's Mike's mom. The boy who teaches Tom to do bad things to girls." When my heart returned from wherever it had dropped to, I was determined to get to the bottom of that statement.

This began a process that brought confusion and turmoil into my life and into the lives of my family. I found out that my son had inappropriate sexual contact with his five year old cousin. I was devastated. Again, I had to report an incident, but this time it was my 11 year old son. From that time on, no place felt safe. We became so vigilant my son felt he was on a very, very short leash.

Faced with new decisions and uncertainties, our family became very selective and limited in where we went

and who we brought into our confidences. For me, these were difficult times. I lost trust in my own intuition and ability to emotionally support my family. I felt frustrated and hopeless in the situation. I could not erase the experiences my children had nor could I fix it for them. With few people to talk with, I felt so isolated watching my son struggle. It was hard to describe this time—it was excruciating.

I could not fully take in what this was like for my son. By age 11, my child had both lost his innocence that could not be restored, and he had taken that innocence from another. He had his own difficult work to do.

OUR FAMILY HAS LEARNED TO COMMUNICATE WELL ABOUT THINGS MOST FAMILIES WON'T EVEN MENTION.

My son's treatment included group, family, and individual therapy as well as numerous school meetings. Communication was essential. We talked with people who needed to be aware of his acting out. The hardest thing for me to accept was my son's fantasies about young children. I wanted him to have a chance for normal social development. I tried to understand what was going on for him and through that, gradually understood the need for "relapse prevention plans." But the treatment plan for him did work. He began to be aware of his patterns and what he needed to do to stay safe. An important turning point for all of us was his class trip at the end of sixth grade that included all of his classmates. He wanted to go on the class trip, and I really had to advocate for him to be given the chance for a normal school experience. We talked with all of the administrators and talked about his risk

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factors and the support he would need. In the end, he was given the chance to go, he was safe, and he had a wonderful time being a part of the class and being with his classmates.

Much time has passed since these initial discoveries. My son has grown from a struggling adolescent to a gentle young man who is living a healthy productive

life. After many years, I can say now that my son and the cousins he offended against have healed much of their relationship. Our family has learned to communicate well about things most families won't even mention. My son is happy and now seeks out the support and help of those around him to stay healthy. And I must say that I'm very proud and grateful to be part of his life.

HOW DO I TALK ABOUT THIS?

Everyone, including your child, wants to be asked questions about what is going on in his or her life. When child sexual abuse has occurred, whether your child has abused or been abused, he or she needs your reassurance that you care and that a responsible adult will help them.

Some simple rules when talking to your child:

- Make sure you are comfortable before you bring up the topic. It's OK to practice with a trusted adult who is not in the situation.
- Set aside time when you can focus on your child without interruption.
- Talk to your child at eye level so that it is easier for them to ask you questions.
- Ask one question at a time and listen carefully to the answers.
- Use your child's own words whenever possible, and ask your child to explain words that are unclear.
- Talk about what is appropriate touch rather than good touch or bad touch.
- Let your child know that an abuser could be someone they know, someone older or close to their age, someone who makes them feel special or grown-up.
- Say clearly that you love them, whatever they have done.
- Most important, acknowledge that the situation must have been difficult for them and support them if they have the courage to bring up abuse of any kind.
- Keep trying: you may need to bring this up more than once.

Try NOT to:

- Suggest answers to your child.
- Criticize your child or his or her choice of words.
- Show shock or horror at what your child may have to say.

Letter From the Editor

SHARING SECRETS: PARENTS TALKING TOGETHER IN A SAFE FORUM

by Joan Tabachnick, Editor

Ask you to take a moment and imagine the first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. Imagine strangers, and some friends, gathered together to talk about a secret that few ever mentioned out loud. Imagine the courage it took to walk into that room for the first time. Imagine the courage it took each participant to say out loud, "I am an alcoholic", that they had experienced this shameful secret.

Last fall, I had the chance to be a part of a very similar and very special meeting. This meeting was a gathering of parents who had children with sexual behavior problems. Over 30 parents, foster parents, and clinicians met for the first time to talk about their experiences and break some of the isolation each feel in their family's healing.

I heard parents tell stories of how they discovered the abusing behaviors of a son or daughter over 10 years ago. The hope they held out as they described grown children today, leading loving and productive lives, inspired me. I also heard the story of a woman who was struggling with how to love her 12 year old son and confront the situation that he had abused another child. *"I was called in to child protective services just last Friday, and was told that my son had sexually abused a neighbor's child. I left their office at 4:00 PM with only a list of therapists in my hand and a directive to keep an eye on my son. I was devastated. I had no idea what to do. As I sat in my car, I wondered if I should simply drive around all weekend until I could call the list of therapists and make an appointment. As I looked at 'Noah' in the rear*

view mirror, I realized how much we needed each other in this. I turned and told him to sit in the front with me because we are in this together—together we would make sure this did not happen again."

These powerful stories tell us a lot about what we need to confront these situations, how we hold our children responsible for abusive actions, and why our system needs to offer more compassion for the children and parents in these abusive situations.

The evening of sharing moved into a brainstorm of what policy changes parents would want. These parents, "consumers" in the system, have a lot to offer for positive change. They had tons of ideas:

For the legal and social services systems:

Parents said they often felt pulled between social service agencies and the court system. Their suggestion: leaders should form a partnership between the judicial and mental health systems.

For those who investigate cases of abuse:

Develop a checklist for parents about what they should do when they find out that their child has sexually abused another child. Give out information, even before the investigation is over.

For clinicians who work with children:

Parents repeatedly asked that clinicians develop a new model to treat children and not simply transfer what has been learned from working with adult sex offenders.

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For all systems, EDUCATE, EDUCATE, EDUCATE: Education came up again and again. Professionals need specialized training. Foster parents need training in healthy sexual development and how to identify sexual problem behaviors.

As parents brainstormed their list of ideas, they began to recognize how much they had to offer those who work to keep children safe. I know I too felt how much I learned in such a short amount of time.

As the evening came to a close, I felt moved by every parent's journey to this one room. But one parent gave it the most moving closing of all when she shared with us: *"This was the first time I ever felt normal talking about my son and his sexually abusing behaviors. Thank you for the chance to talk out loud to others who can understand this experience and have some hope of healing."*



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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