

WHAT TO DO IN CASES OF ABUSE (ADAPTED FROM 'SPIDERS AND FLIES')

Talking to your child

Although many mothers recognize the need for 'prevention talks' with their child/ren, it is a difficult job evoking many questions, "When's the right time". "At what age". "How do I begin". There are also a number of mothers who feel that to explain the dangers somehow takes away a child's innocence. Our experience says that sexual abuse continues because the abuser feels that it is not going to be detected.

A child who is uninformed may not know that what is happening is wrong, they may have been told by their abuser that this is normal. If the only information they are receiving is from the abuser, often a trusted adult, why shouldn't they believe what they are told? Abusers are very clever at manipulation both of the child and mother.

So although it may be difficult and maybe embarrassing it's worthwhile to your child to develop a discussion about sexual abuse. Keeping things as simple as possible, as early as possible, begin by talking about their body, maybe at bathtime. Encourage them to use the proper words for their private parts; breasts, vagina, penis, bottom. If this is difficult make sure you know what their "nicknames" are for these areas. Encourage them to keep these parts of their bodies private. It is important to stress that if anyone touches them in a way they do not like that they must tell you. Even if that is someone that they love. Encourage your child to tell even if the abuser has told them that they mustn't.

Abusers use many ways to get a child to keep the secret, if a child hears "Whatever you tell mummy she won't believe you" from an abuser, and they have never heard you say "I will believe you" they are more likely to keep quiet. The mother in this situation has to be just as clever in informing her child of the ways someone may use to get them "To keep the secret" and to encourage the child that she will believe them, that the abuser is doing wrong not them, and that they were right to tell.

It is important for everyone to recognize that sometimes it will not matter how well informed a child is sexual abuse will still occur, and once again the only blame lies with the abuser. In these cases mothers are sometimes at a loss to know what to say to help their child, especially if the abuser is their husband/partner. Their own feelings may be overwhelming and they feel unable to face or support their child. It is important to recognize that that is normal. They are not a bad mother. Many mothers struggle on feeling they have to "Be strong" for everyone else, you will need help too. It is true that your response to a child's disclosure is important, the message that you send to your child may play a part in your relationship from now on. If you can offer a few comforting sentences straight away or as soon as you can it will go along way towards reassuring them of the following;

- You believe them
- They did the right thing by telling you; they should not feel guilty or ashamed for telling.
- You are glad that they were able to talk to you.
- It was not their fault.
- You are sorry that it happened.
- You will try your best to protect them from any future abuse; you will try and stay especially close to them during this time.
- The abuser did a very bad thing, something an adult is not supposed to do to a child and something which is against the law.

Disclaimer

MOSaC is unable to screen all these resources for professional soundness, effectiveness or suitability for individual cases. Therefore this information is provided as an aid to you, rather than a recommendation by us. We hope it is useful. We welcome any positive or negative feedback you may have. If you know of any other resources that may be of help please do let us know. Some resources may require a fee.

- Do not suggest that the abuser is 'sick' or 'bad' as the child may have strong feelings for the abuser.
- Focus on the behavior and that this must stop.
- You may need to take them to a doctor to make sure everything is all right.
- Other adults may need to know.
- You want them to see a person (like a doctor/ counsellor) with whom they can talk about the abusive event, the entire situation, and their feelings in a safe and private environment.
- Encourage them to ask questions if you can't answer them say you will find someone who can.
- They are not dirty, bad, weird or stupid for having been involved in the abuse

THESE ARE TECHNIQUES WHICH ARE STAGE RELATED TO A CHILDS AGE

Infancy (birth to 1year)

Protect the child from further abuse by preventing contact with the abuser.

Spend more time holding and cuddling the child. Tell the child that you are sorry for what happened whether or not you think they can understand.

Toddler and Early Childhood (2-5 Years)

Offer the child physical affection, answer the child's questions about the incident calmly and honestly. Reassure the child in words and actions that they are safe and loved. Talk with the child and discuss the incident. Most children welcome this, but some might be resistant. If so, do not push the child to talk about it.

Allow the child to draw or play with dolls or toys regarding the incident. This allows the child to resolve their anger instead of expressing it in aggressive or sexual play with friends. Explain to the child that your talks about what happened are shared only with people that can help and are not made public knowledge.

Establish clear methods with your child about protection, monitoring and communication.

Latency (6-9 Years)

Give the child love, affection and support. Create an open atmosphere in which you can talk with your child regarding the incident. Give children the opportunity to express themselves regarding the incident. This may alleviate anxiety. Provide clear boundaries and protection mechanisms. You may not always be able to hear what they have to say, but let them know you will come back to it again, maybe after a cuppa and a deep breath.

Preadolescence (10-12 Years)

Encourage your child to discuss the incident. Avoid overprotection. Keep the lines of communications open; your child may not want to talk with you about the incident at a given time. Allow your child to decide when they wish to discuss it. Consider group educational and therapy approaches. Give your child the opportunity to talk with another trusted person if they cannot talk with you about the incident.

Adolescence (13-20 Years)

Offer the child support and the willingness to talk about the incident. Encourage your child to seek outside professional help. Avoid being overprotective. Encourage group and family therapy approaches as well as individual therapy

Encourage your child to find out more about sexual abuse and it's dynamics by reading /talking to other survivors. Give your child the opportunity to express their anger in appropriate ways that are not abusive to your child or others. These might include talking, drawing or pursuing a hobby or physical activity

If your child wishes, encourage them with the aid of a therapist to confront the abuser in an assertive and mutually helpful way.

MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS

Doctors are commonly involved in all abuse cases, either by uncovering the abuse themselves through a routine examination or investigation of a specific (symptomatic) problem. Or examining the child after abuse has been uncovered through some other means. During an examination the doctor will interview the child, gently gaining the child's trust, moving on to more sensitive topics. The doctor will conduct a physical examination of all major body systems, focusing on oral, anal and genital areas, particularly if sexual abuse has previously been uncovered. The Doctor may perform specific tests the nature of which will depend on the age, sex, condition and symptoms of the child. In addition to providing immediate relief from pain, injury, or infection the doctor can be very helpful in diagnosing the specific type of abuse that occurred. This may be invaluable in court proceedings; as such forensic medical testimony constitutes powerful evidence.

Many sexual abuse cases do not involve forced penetration or significant physical harm, and thus are not evident in a general examination. Trained doctors and nurses however can detect diagnostic physical signs (such as slight reddening, soreness or tenderness) and even more revealing emotional or behavioral signs (such as excessive embarrassment, flinching, fear, shyness or hesitation) Even if the doctor discovers nothing he or she can offer advice about appropriate care of his or her body and the importance of telling a trusted adult if anyone touches (or has touched) the child in private areas.

ACTION -ORIENTATED ACTIVITIES

Enhances your child's self-esteem. Sexual abuse is an abuse of power; therefore whether your child is a victim or offender, they may feel powerless, worthless or scared. You can do specific things at home or at school to promote your child's self-esteem and help your child feel that they are in control.

Discuss with your child the difference of behavior that they choose and behavior that they are forced into, explaining that they are not responsible for the latter.

Spend time focusing on positive qualities they possess. Ask your child what they like about you and then tell your child what you like about them. Encourage your child to try new things. If they makes mistakes try not to criticize. Instead say "Try again, you can do it". Encourage your child to adopt a stress reduction programme through exercise, music, art, recreation, relaxation and discussion.

Try to talk with your child not at them. Stimulate independence and allow your child to do things themselves. Have fun together, let your child plan an adventure and carry it out. Try not to treat your child as a victim this will only enhance feelings of low self-esteem. Help your child experience success, affection and acceptance even if you have to relax your standards. These suggestions might take time to implement, hopefully they will be rewarding for both you and your child as they build self-confidence and a strong bond that may help your child overcome their fears and establish positive relationships with others.

IF YOUR CHILD HAS NIGHTMARES

Your child may have recurring nightmares about the trauma they have experienced. They may wake up screaming, crying, and so scared that they may be unable to sleep. You can help your child by doing some or all of the following;

Make sure your child realises the nightmare is not real. Encourage them to draw a picture of the nightmare or tell the whole story of it. Ask your child to think of a way they can change the drawing to make the nightmare not scary, preferably by devising an ending in which your child feels happy and powerful. Encourage your child to make the drawing into an interesting but non-frightening event. Explain that they have control over dreams and that this power can be used to change nightmares so that they are not scary. Have your child draw the nightmare, then shred the paper.

USE ART WHENEVER POSSIBLE

Children love to draw, besides being a way for them to express themselves it's an excellent way to reduce anxiety.

Ask your child to draw separate pictures about fear, anxiety, anger, sadness and happiness. Ask what the drawing is about, if your child resists do not insist. Ask your child to draw whatever they want, children often draw about the abusive incident. If your child wishes to discuss the picture with you, listen try not to make judgments or offer any explanation. Just thank them for sharing it with you. Encourage writing stories or keeping a diary. Some children respond well to writing stories or poems. If your child enjoys doing this, here are some things you can do to encourage them. Ask them to write a story about what it's like to be scared, angry, abused or emotionally aroused. Ask them to write a story or poem about how they could help someone who has been a victim. Ask them to write a letter to the abuser including all that your child wants to say, but do not necessarily post it.

Encourage them in drama. Most children enjoy make believe games, they like dressing up and using props to act out a fantasy or some aspect of reality.

Acting, role-playing can be helpful in working through stress. Here are some suggestions:

- Ask your child to listen while you tell a story e.g. A child is asked to go into a neighbors house to see some puppies, Role play this situation with your child ask them what they would do. Teach your child to say no by active practice and role-playing, this might be difficult as children are often reprimanded for responding negatively to an adult. Explain that saying NO in a firm voice may help in protecting them, practice different situations by asking your child questions to which the answer is always no.
- Ask your child to say no in different ways until they can say it firmly and with authority.
- Read imaginative stories aloud to your child; ask them to pantomime the actions of one of the characters.
- Involve your child in one to one role-playing as well as in peer groups
- Use scripts as well as improvised play
- Provide dolls to play with
- Ask your child to put on a puppet display, if your child request help give it, if not be an observer.
- Allow your child to talk for the puppet

HELP IMPROVE YOUR CHILD'S BODY IMAGE

Draw two outlines of your child on separate pieces of paper. Ask your child to fill it in with both an inside and outside view. If anything is missing ask them to fill it in. Talk about the drawing pointing out the positive aspects of your child. Tell your child what you see on the outside as well as the inside, stressing the fact that your child is clean, nice, good-looking and so on. Have your child look in a full length mirror, ask your child to tell you about the child in the mirror, if they cannot respond tell them what you see, emphasizing the positive. If your child responds negatively reassure your child that even though that is how they might feel, that is not what you see.

ENCOURAGE PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES

Most children enjoy physical outdoor games with their friends, some children will benefit from learning karate or judo which promote self control and a sense of being prepared, protected and powerful. Allow your child access to outdoor play of various kinds especially with organized groups.

YOUR REACTIONS

Many parents become so caught up in their own emotions during and after disclosure that they are unable to support their child. If you are trying to help your child accept that you may need help too. Children are very sensitive to the emotions of adults, it is very important that their parents are as open and stress free as possible to be able to nurture them. Be aware of the effects of disclosure on others in the family system, decide who is to know about the abuse and when and how you will inform them. Also try and help your child deal with the effects caused by making the abuse public.