

# SEXUAL ABUSE – WHAT EVERY PARENT NEEDS TO KNOW

## **Parents must be watchful**

The most important factor in preventing child sexual abuse is for parents and other caregivers to be alert and cautious; supervise children well. Most parents work hard to create a safe environment for their children. But they don't realize the highest risk factor for sexual abuse is actually a child's age and/or developmental stage. The younger or less capable the child, the more vulnerable they are – even in a seemingly safe environment. This is because most abuse happens at the hands of someone the children know.

## **Sexual offenders are usually someone you know**

Geraldine Crisci, a sexual abuse consultant at PCC's Peel Collaborative Child and Adolescent Sexual Abuse Treatment Program, knows this idea is terribly disturbing, "but statistics clearly show that abusers know their targets - I see the victims of this betrayal all the time," she states sadly.

Sexual abuse is always manipulative and frequently pre-meditated. "One reason we find it difficult to talk about sexual abuse is that it's hard to believe someone we trust could carefully plan to abuse. Since offenders are so manipulative, many experts believe there is too much emphasis on children protecting themselves; they are not capable of this responsibility.

## **Children cannot protect themselves – protection is an adult responsibility**

"We certainly believe in child safety programs," says Anne-Marie Duguay, an intake supervisor at Peel Children's Aid, "but we are more concerned about adults taking the responsibility for protection against sexual abuse. Parents need to understand how abuse happens and know what they need to do to prevent it. Unfortunately, teaching kids about 'stranger danger', while helpful, has distracted both adults and children from recognizing that people they know and trust could hurt them. That's why many of these offenders are never exposed."

Crisci agrees, "of course children need to know that if anyone upsets them or does something they don't like, they have the right to - and should - tell. But that also means adults must listen, take it seriously and follow up - even if it involves someone close to you; a person you trust and would never suspect."

## **Be willing and available to talk and listen to your children**

Parents should ask themselves, 'How convinced is my son or daughter that I would come to their aid if they were to tell me of a sexual abuse incident?' Crisci, a founding member of the international, U.S.-based Association of Sexual Abuse Prevention, encourages parents to say to their children, 'no matter what the circumstances or who is involved, (even mommy's best friend), YOU are more important to me than anyone else in the world! You can talk to me about absolutely anything.'

## **A child's safety is more important than their obedience**

"We expect compliant behaviour in our children. While good and right, this can also be dangerous," explains Crisci, "because children generally want to obey and please adults."

Think of the number of news stories where adults in a position of trust, such as coaches, teachers, members of the clergy and relatives, have violated the young people in their charge. Crisci advises parents to say, 'yes, I want you to obey me and your teacher, but if ANYONE ever does something wrong I want you to tell me. I will listen to you and believe you.'

## **Respect your child's concerns or discomfort**

Choose to support your child and their right to control their own body rather than insisting they do what we want. For example, as tough as this might be, respect your child's wishes not to hug or kiss a relative or friend, even if that person is disappointed. "That's your opportunity to demonstrate support", counsel Crisci, "if we don't respect our kids' discomfort or concerns, they'll think they can't tell you if someone does something that makes them feel uncomfortable. Say, that's OK, honey, just smile and wave today!"

## **Children do not always tell when they have been sexually abused**

As all of these lessons describe, open and honest communication is parents' first line of defense, "If children get the sense that sexuality is a 'taboo' topic, they could fear a parent's reaction and not tell because of misunderstanding or shame," explains Duguay.

Molesters will frequently use intimidation or threats to ensure a child will not tell anyone. But an offender may also prey upon on a child's sympathies, saying things like, 'you wouldn't want to get me in trouble, now would you?' Another manipulative tactic is to accuse the child of active participation in the abuse or liking it, laying the blame on the child.

### **Children who blame themselves don't report abuse . . . and don't heal**

Sexual abuse often goes unreported because the child blames himself/herself or is made to feel at fault by the manipulative offender. "It is a myth that if your child follows all your rules he/she will be safe," states Duguay, who suggests we reassure our children they can always talk to us. "Tell them, 'even if you think you might have done something wrong, I still want you to tell me if anyone ever touches you in your private place or others you in any way. You and your safety come first.'"

### **Applying the knowledge learned in these lessons**

Crisci and Duguay hope people will recognize the benefit of having a clearer picture of child sexual abuse. A useful exercise is to examine your perceptions about sexual offenders and abuse.

"In order to protect children from harm, parents must understand how sexual abuse can happen," agree both Crisci and Duguay. Think about it. How does sexual abuse happen? Talk about it. What do others believe? Have you always imagined it happens to 'other' families? By strangers? Is it only weird or sinister people who would do such a thing? Would your boy or girl tell you if they were abused?

If you have questions about sexual abuse, or are concerned for the safety of a child, please contact Bruce Grey Child & Family Services 519-371-4453.

## SEXUAL SAFETY - TIPS FOR PARENTS

### **How to encourage your child's healthy sexual development and sexual safety**

1. Do not 'neglect' the topic of sexuality and communicate openly with your children. Make sure they understand that you are willing to answer their questions. There are many resources available to assist you. The Public Health department and libraries can help.
2. When teaching your children to list body parts include genitalia. Use proper medical names, i.e. vagina and penis.
3. Help your children understand that the areas covered by their bathing suits are private.
4. Educate children about safe touches, e.g. check ups by a nurse or doctor
5. Encourage children to talk to you about touches that make them feel uncomfortable.
6. Create a sexual safety plan with your children that includes what to do if anyone approaches them sexually or if they are asked to touch someone else (say no and run to a safe place, tell a parent or teacher, call Kid's Help Phone, 911 or Bruce Grey Child & Family Services
7. Monitor your children's television and Internet use to avoid their exposure to sexual material.
8. Do not over react if your child tells you that they have engaged in sexualized behaviour. Children may express themselves sexually and occasionally cross boundaries, e.g. playing doctor. Your response will determine whether your child shares with you again.
9. If your child's sexual behaviour is problematic, describe the positive actions you want them to take. Try initiating consequences. If their inappropriate sexual behaviour continues, consult your family doctor or Bruce Grey Child & Family Services

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