

Talking to your kids about

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Sexual Abuse of Children



By Eve Glicksman, Staff Writer

Your child has a frightening dream. Someone made her pull down her pants, she says. Is it just a bad dream - or is she trying to tell you something?

A comment like this may be the only hint you'll get that a child has been molested. Sexually abused children are frightened and confused. They may feel trapped between loyalty to the abuser - often someone they know - and their feeling that something is wrong. In many cases, the child doesn't tell because he has been threatened by the abuser. Other children believe they are to blame and are too ashamed or guilty to tell anyone.

Sexual abuse may involve kissing, fondling or sexual intercourse, but it doesn't always include touching. Sometimes a child is forced to look at pornography or watch someone masturbating. She might be lured into a sexual chat on the Internet, or an abuser might watch her undress or shower.

By age 18, as many as 10 percent of boys and 25 percent of girls have been sexually abused. For most, the molester is someone the child knows - a babysitter, neighbor, older sibling, step-parent, teacher or clergy member, for instance. Usually, the abuser is someone in authority whom the child trusts.

What to suspect sexual abuse

Sexual abuse can be hard to identify if there is no bruising, redness, bleeding or pain. Instead, crying or poor behavior often signal a problem. Parents should be alert for any of these sudden changes in behavior:

- Sleep problems, nightmares or bedwetting
- Mood swings
- Fears of places, people or activities
- Regressive behavior like thumb-sucking or clinging
- Unexplained stomach pain
- Sudden interest in genitals or sexual subjects
- Using new words for sexual organs or acts
- Seductiveness
- Acting out abuse during play
- Being secretive

If you suspect sexual abuse, have your child examined by a doctor and a mental health professional. Untreated, sexual trauma in childhood can lead to eating disorders, alcoholism, personality disorders, teen pregnancy or post-traumatic stress later in life. A child's shame can also cause anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, chronic pain and harmful behaviors.

How to respond

Experts say it's unusual for a child to make up a story about sexual abuse. Parents should take such stories seriously and encourage discussion. Ask the child whether he has been touched.

Above all, remain calm.

- Be matter-of-fact and don't make judgments.
- Don't be defensive if a relative or friend is involved.
- Tell your child that she did the right thing by telling you. Don't blame her for not telling you sooner.
- Tell the child that the abuse was not his fault.
- Remind your child that you love her, no matter what happened.
- Promise your child that you will take action to stop the abuser.

Remember that a child's ability to heal from sexual abuse largely depends on how the parents respond.

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External Sources

- [University of Michigan Health System. Parenting a sexually abused child. Accessed March 9, 2007.](#)
- [Stop It Now! Commonly asked questions. Accessed March 9, 2007.](#)
- [University of Michigan Health System. Responding to child sexual abuse. Accessed March 9, 2007](#)
- [National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Child sexual abuse. Accessed March 9, 2007.](#)
- [Stop It Now! Warning signs about child sexual abuse. Accessed March 9, 2007.](#)
- [University of Michigan Health System. Child sexual abuse. Accessed March 9, 2007.](#)

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