

## Article 4: My Child Has Been Abused, What Can I Do?

By Max Swafford, M.Ed.  
Forensic Interviewer  
Crisis Counselor  
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When incidents of child abuse, family violence, sexual assault, or other traumatic events occur in a family, there are certainly counseling considerations for the children involved. But people too often forget – due to the focus on the children – that there are issues related to the parents, as well. This is particularly true when the parent was also abused or traumatized as a child, especially so if they received no support at that time.

When a parent discovers their child has been abused, some basic responses are highly suggested:

- 1. Allow that what your child is saying is believable, LISTEN to what they're telling you, and remain calm.** A common parental reaction to news of child abuse is denial (*this just couldn't happen to my child*), or outright rage (*I'll kill that no good so-and-so...*). Neither response is helpful to a child who has been abused or assaulted and sought your help. However, if you display denial to a child (or disbelief), or show shock or disgust at what the child is saying, the youngster may be afraid to continue and may shut down. In fact, some children will share a sliver of the full story, just to check the parent's reaction. If the parent goes berserk, you can bet the child will be less willing in sharing the rest of the story. The child may also recant immediately, not because the report isn't true, but because they don't want the parent to be upset with them.
- 2. Don't interrogate the child with fast-paced, intense questioning.** Let the child explain to you in his/her own words what happened. Avoid jumping to conclusions without hearing the entire story – for this often moves one to ask leading questions (as in “Did uncle Bob hurt you?” when the child hasn't mentioned uncle Bob, or simply said it happened at uncle Bob's when you don't know who the actual perpetrator is yet.) This type of questioning may confuse and fluster the child and make it harder for them to continue their story. Ask simple who, what, when, and where questions if you must, but don't make suggestions and don't assume anything. Once you have the basic report that something happened, stop right there with the questioning.
- 3. Reassure the child that they did nothing wrong.** It takes a lot for a child to come forward with a report about abuse. Reassure him or her that you take what they've said seriously, and that no matter what has happened, it is not the child's fault and you'll do everything you can to make sure it doesn't happen again.
- 4. Call your local Law Enforcement or Child Protective Services immediately.** They will take the case from there, and if applicable, will schedule a formal forensic interview with a professional interviewer in a Children's Advocacy Center such as Kids' Advocacy Place in Kerrville.

A generational history of child abuse can leave serious impairments in the family because, unfortunately, the patterns we learn in childhood often influence us as parents. Without professional support and the added insights it can provide for someone recovering from abuse, the cycle of child abuse too often continues into the next generation. I've seen multi-year follow up documentaries where young abuse victims swore they would never abuse their children, only to admit to doing so 15 years later. The roots of abuse run deep, even with the best of intentions.

Parenting is usually a very time-intensive, difficult job under the best circumstances. Then you add massive doses of stress. Stress greatly increases when parents care for abused children without support from their extended family, friends or community resources. And there are, of course, a number of other situations that can create added pressure to the family.

Teen parents often struggle to master the maturity and patience needed to be a good parent. Caring for a disabled child adds challenges of special needs or difficult behaviors. If one adds financial or relationship stressors to any of these scenarios, the conditions worsen exponentially – and increase the import of, and need for professional counseling.

Alcohol and drug abuse, if they're included in the family dynamic, can lead to serious lapses in judgment and compound all other existing problems. Drugs often interfere with impulse control, which makes emotional and physical abuse more likely, and has frequently been shown to increase the chances for child neglect.

Here at Kids' Advocacy Place (KAP), we frequently see non-offending parents who are very concerned about their child's emotional and psychological health in the aftermath of abuse. There are two elements frequently seen.

First, and perhaps most obvious, there is the concern for the child's well being and possible needs for counseling. This can help with issues that may arise at school, in the neighborhood, or within the family. Imagine if the perpetrator was a stranger, and the impact that would have on the child's perception of every stranger they see from that point. Or, what if the abuser was a beloved uncle? What does that do to the child's trust in the remainder of aunts and uncles – or for that matter, all other trusted adults? Those remaining aunts and uncles are much loved, but so was the abuser. Those family members profess to love the child, but so did the abuser. For the abused child, every quality they've learned to trust in others comes into question.

There are also layers of shame that accompany sexual abuse. While news stories of sexual predators are scary, an even more frightening situation involves the trusted, well-known adult who sexually abuses a child: a close relative, childcare provider, family friend, neighbor, teacher, coach,

or clergy member. Because these individuals are usually respected in the community, children may worry that others won't believe them, or will be angry with them if they tell. They may believe (or were possibly told) that the abuse is their fault, and if so, the shame can be devastating and can have lifelong effects. In some cases, the offenders threaten bodily harm or damage to the child's family if they tell anybody. Should you pursue counseling, knowing how the perpetrator imposed secrecy can be a critical factor for the counselor to determine treatment strategies.

Hopefully, parents can see how these issues would cause problems, and would support the counseling option. Even when the child is reluctant to seek counseling, parents can encourage the child to complete a short evaluation (not a psychological evaluation) by a trained professional in the field. This might give them some peace of mind knowing they have done everything they could to help their child recover from such an ordeal.

The second element that often arises at KAP occurs during the parent interview for basic family history and contact information. During those meetings, some parents disclose that they were sexually assaulted or abused as a child. That very fact seems to drive their concerns about their child beyond what they would normally be. Every perception they have about what is happening to their child is quite naturally influenced by their personal experience of abuse or assault in the past. If they were traumatized, they may assume their child is traumatized, when in fact, the child may not be. All abuse scenarios do not necessarily cause trauma, but a previously traumatized parent may not be able to understand that fact. On the other hand, a mother who was not traumatized by her childhood abuse might assume there is no reason for her child to be traumatized – when in fact, the child may be. In either case, the parent's experience impacts the child's experience.

When the time comes for the parent or parents to consider counseling for their child, they may well want to look into counseling support for themselves. Even if neither parent was abused in the past, a good counselor could help them focus support for the child at home in the most helpful ways. It's been my experience as a crisis counselor that most good counselors or therapists want contact with the non-offending parents.

Having made that point, I will endeavor to make another equally important observation. I have known parents of abused children who told their child to simply "get over it" and move on with their life. The notion is not without some wisdom, in that one should never dwell incessantly on the horrors of the past. But to suggest that one could simply move on and "forget about it" is not only unrealistic, but can be damaging advice with long-lasting repercussions.

Traumatized victims, if left to their own devices, will at times adapt to their internal stresses in unhealthy ways. Sometimes the victims don't even realize their "little quirks" or "their strange little behaviors" have any connection with the traumatic incident from their past.

I once worked with a 17-year-old girl who had been raped when she was 14. She never got counseling help and lived in a home that was supportive, but not necessarily understanding of her emotional and psychological plight. She had continued on with school, was passing most of her work (albeit with lower grades than in the past), and it appeared to her that she had overcome the worst of her assault. She thought she had "gotten over it" and moved on with her life.

However, she was steered to see me because she was having recurring nightmares, was worried about some of her odd behaviors, and frustrated because she and her father were arguing a lot. When I began to talk with her, she mentioned her parent's divorce, described the custody battles, her fights with parents, problems with boyfriends, and her attempts at dealing with the stress from all of the above.

Ironically, she never mentioned the rape. In her mind, it was in the past and simply old business. But as we discussed an argument she had with her father, she mentioned something that happened on school mornings which always made her father angry.

Her father would get her up for school and while she was getting ready, he would usually finish his breakfast. He typically left the house for work before she would leave for school. "Every day it was the same," she said. Her father would go to the door and call out that he was leaving. She'd come running to say goodbye, but in reality, she was running for a much different reason. He'd step through the door to the porch outside and she would immediately, and forcefully, slam and lock the door behind him.

Something sounded odd to me about her description. I wasn't thrown by the fact that she locked the door behind him. What caught my attention was that she did so immediately after he left, and with such a sense of urgency. The latches were slapping shut as he stood on the porch, and that was what made him angry. He got irritated with her obsession about locked doors.

"That's not all," she said. "I do some other stuff, too." The girl went on to describe her morning ritual after her father left the house. She'd go through every room on the inside and check every window and door, to make sure they were all locked. She also said that she would get very uneasy during thunder storms, too, and that it was even worse if she was alone. "A stupid kid thing," she said. "But it's funny. I don't remember being afraid of storms when I was little." Also, she described having difficulty being "intimate" with her boyfriend.

Red flags went off in my head and as I began to pursue a new line of thought, which led to the crux of her situation. Following a question about possible traumatic incidents in her life, she told me about being raped by a former friend of her father's who had lived in that neighborhood. Needless to say, all of her behavioral "quirks" began to make a lot more sense, and for that matter, so did her paranoia about doors and windows being locked. In her case, it wasn't paranoia. Paranoia is fear without a foundation based in reason. This girl had very understandable reasons for her fears, given the rape, which occurred at her home, by a friend of her father's, while she was alone, during a particularly violent thunder storm.

All the pieces were falling together for me, but amazingly, not so much for her. She still didn't quite make the connections. I administered a simple test I devised to survey any symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This disorder is very common among people who have been traumatized. My screening device had 28 possible symptoms, and each one could be measured for intensity, duration, and whether or not they improved or worsened over time. Even healthy people who have not been traumatized might identify one or two items, but the real value in the screening was derived by looking at the overall collection of symptoms present.

This girl identified experiencing 17 of the 28 symptoms. She said 12 of the 17 had been severe in nature, and many of those 12 had worsened over time. None of the symptoms had simply gone away in the three years since the rape. It was at that moment the girl realized the rape was still haunting her in ways that she hadn't even considered. It was affecting her behavior in general, her relationship with her father, and as we found out later, her relationships with boyfriends, too.

I reference this girl's story to emphasize the subtleties involved in assault and abuse cases. One might think that subtlety is not part of such a dynamic equation, but it definitely can be, and certainly was in this girl's case.

It's not impossible for a person to recover from, or even thrive after sexual abuse when there is no counseling support. It's just more difficult. As awful as embedded abuse can be to one's psyche, there is another aspect mentioned earlier as generational.

One form of that *embedding* is called "the cycle of child abuse." **There is research that indicates that one of every three abused or neglected children will grow up to become an abusive parent.** Even if the figures were one in ten, it would still make my point. You may be reluctant to seek professional help, but you can make a huge difference in your child's life if you do, and perhaps even your grandchildren. The earlier an abused child gets help, the greater the chance that child has to heal from abuse and not perpetuate the cycle into the next generation.

Given the significant downside to child abuse without professional support, it is hoped here that parents will not only seek counseling support for their abused child, but for themselves as well.

And having made that point about counseling, there are a few other things a parent can do to be on guard for signs of abuse that frequently surface in children.

### **Signs of sexual child abuse**

- **Behavioral signs.**
- The child may display knowledge or interest in sexual acts inappropriate to his or her age, or even seductive behavior?
- A child might appear to avoid another person, when they've never done so in the past.
- A child may display unusual behavior - either being very aggressive or very passive.
- One might notice a younger child involved in sexually related behaviors with other children.
- Older children might resort to destructive behaviors to deal with the pain, such as uncharacteristic alcohol or drug abuse, self-mutilation, or even suicide attempts.
- **Physical signs.**
- A child may have trouble sitting or standing, or have stained, bloody or torn underclothes.
- A parent may notice swelling, bruises, or bleeding in the genital area, which is a red flag.
- A parent may discover a Sexually Transmitted Disease or surprising pregnancy, especially under the age of fourteen.
- Some children start wetting the bed or soiling themselves, when they've never done so, or it has been a long time since they stopped.
- **Caregiver signs.**
- The caregiver for that child may seem to be unusually controlling and protective.
- The caregiver may limit contact with other children and adults to an extreme degree.
- One might notice a child routinely dressed in filthy clothes or going without food, or playing in dangerous ways with no adult supervision.

### **Sexual child abuse: The online risk**

Children who use the Internet are also vulnerable to Internet predators. Among the warning signs of online sexual child abuse are these:

- Your child spends large amounts of time online, especially at night, and may turn the computer monitor off or quickly change the screen on the monitor when you come into the room.
- You find pornography on your child's computer, or other violent or occult-like links.
- Your child receives phone calls, mail, or email from people you don't know, or makes calls to numbers that you don't recognize, or don't match friends.
- Your child becomes extremely withdrawn from the family.

Emotions are the building blocks of every relationship in our lives, and the power of those emotions cannot be overlooked. Emotions override our thoughts and profoundly influence our behavior – often without our awareness. All of which makes dealing with the emotional fallout

from child abuse even more important. As with so many other forms of personal health, the sooner the matter is dealt with, the better – for everyone concerned.