

Article 7: Other People Know: Now What Do We Do?

When news of child abuse goes public.

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One difficulty your family will likely confront is how to deal with other people eventually finding out about the alleged abuse. This can cause turmoil within the family if they are caught unprepared. If the initial outcry went to a non-offending parent, the initial public awareness may be limited. However, if someone outside the family was told first, the news may have already “leaked” into the community. There are many variables involved. In any case, the news may surface and the issue will need to be discussed by the family at some point. This will help each family member feel better prepared if confronted.

One issue to discuss involves the extended family.

Relatives may react to the news in any number of ways. They may be saddened and supportive, horrified and hysterical, embarrassed or disgusted, or possibly angry and vengeful. In any case, if it is known that a certain relative will respond negatively, it is wise to leave them out of the loop until it is absolutely necessary. For those who need to know something, the parent can sit down with the family and discuss what needs to be shared. In many cases, the sorted details are known only to the victim anyway, so a general approach is probably best for those you feel need to know. Considering the children’s feelings in such matters will enhance the family’s ability to pull together and get through this difficult time.

As a suggestion for telling any relatives who need to know, something simple is fine. “We wanted you to know that (*child victim’s name*) made a report that (*perpetrator’s name*) abused her/him. We wanted you to hear it from us, and ask for your confidential support.”

If those relatives persist and want to know more details, you can simply say, “It’s been a difficult time for all of us and I’d rather not talk about it right now.” Most family members will let it rest at that point.

This cautiously open approach also helps the victim in another way. Having an open discussion within the family about strategies demonstrates that the outcry of abuse is not being ignored or treated as a “dirty secret” or something so horrible that it can’t be talked about or addressed in any way. This approach acknowledges the huge changes being confronted, and also confirms that the situation is manageable and survivable for all concerned. If a supportive parent is managing various elements, it appears to the child victim that the tragic circumstances can be managed.

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We will deal with this very specific subject of public awareness in two parts. The first part deals with the child’s outcry and the initial phase of other people knowing. The second part deals with the possibility of exposure in local or area news.

The Outcry:

One can consider that the child victim's story has initially gone public to some small degree when someone else has been told. Whether that is a non-offending parent or family member, teacher, priest, or counselor, it's usually done in private. Nevertheless -- someone else knows. Typically that disclosure will lead to a phone call to Law Enforcement or Child Protective Services and then a few more people will get involved. It's important to note that the professionals who participate in the investigation are bound to confidentiality and the general public will not be hearing about your child's outcry of abuse from them. For a number of reasons, child victims worry about others knowing and that is very common. Outcries are often delayed in coming out due to that very fear.

When an outcry is made to a same-age peer, an extended family member, or someone outside the family, all bets are off. Sometimes those folks are not bound so tightly by confidentiality. Thus, calm parental preparation is needed to lessen the stress. Also, if a parent can't initially control their emotions and manage a calm approach with the children, it is best to avoid trying. Buy some time, get to a location where you can vent and ponder and cry away from the children. Once you've regained your emotional balance, you can start working on the more peaceful approach we suggest here. Ultimately, it will be a great service to your children.

Child victim concerns and Parental Strategies:

1. Things are getting out of control.
2. Everybody knows what happened.
3. All my friends at school are going to be asking me about this.

The first three issues can be dealt with by reassuring the child that in spite of some aspects of the situation being out of their control, it doesn't mean all are. Some people may find out about it, some may even ask, and you can help your children prepare for that. (We offer suggestions below. The big message is they are not alone and you're going to be with them every step.

4. My own brother doesn't believe me.
5. I caused this nightmare.
6. I'm the reason (Dad, Uncle Bob, Grandpa, etc.) is in a lot of trouble.

I didn't want that.

Non-offending parents can rely on counseling to help with these issues, but there are things that can be done at home to help, too. A sibling that doesn't believe the victim presents a difficult challenge. But children can be taught that it is all right to have different opinions. The trick is to enforce the mandate that the kids don't let those differences cause more turmoil than is already in place. In time the abuse situation will be resolved, and so too the sibling conflict. Teaching patience at home and utilizing counseling resources are key.

7. My whole life is screwed up now. I've ruined everything.
8. Everything goes wrong for me.
9. I wish I could just disappear.
10. I wish I was dead.

These comments can indicate suicidal ideation. Though encouraging your child to talk about and deal with such feelings, these are topics best suited for counseling or therapy. Experienced professionals will coordinate support between counseling, family, and community. Besides, home should be a respite, not a therapeutic counseling center.

Many child victims exhibit some of these feelings, and in some cases they start acting out as a result of the pressure involved since the outcry. Angry outbursts, mood swings, depression, and emotional “numbness” are not uncommon. Sometimes victims start acting out sexually (inappropriate gestures or behaviors for their age) or through self-injurious behavior (SIB) where they may scratch, cut, or burn themselves. In many if not most cases where this happens, the behaviors are directly related to overwhelming stress.

For this reason, it is generally recommended to seek professional counseling as a support element for the child victim and other siblings as needed. This counseling link can also provide support for parents struggling with certain aspects of the circumstances, or other siblings who are in conflict over what has happened within the family. Experienced, professional assistance is an essential element in support of these situations.

Having said that, we will explore issues that can be accomplished in the home. We'll address specifics when there are siblings who are in conflict with the alleged victim's report of abuse.

Siblings may have conflicted views of the victim's report because...

1. They have not experienced abuse or being hurt in any way by the individual identified by the child victim as the perpetrator. It's hard to believe what you have not experienced or witnessed.
2. Child Protective Services got involved and the accused family member or friend is now restricted from the home until the investigation is complete. The alleged victim may be blamed for this development. Siblings may feel protective of the perpetrator and angry at the victim for “causing problems.”
3. Siblings who don't get along in the first place, find it even easier to disbelieve the child reporting abuse, particularly if the perpetrator is a beloved family member.
4. Siblings can react out of fear that the abuse report is destroying the family.

Disbelieving siblings can make an already stressful situation unbearable, at home and at school. The good news is, there are simple, reasonable ways to manage the conflict.

We will assume that if siblings are supportive and do believe their reporting brother or sister, that support will be less likely to cause problems. They might only need guidance in terms of what to say to others outside the family, much like you would prepare your child victim.

The following, however, deals with those situations where the siblings are in conflict over the allegations.

Dealing with conflicted siblings, the parent may use some of the following strategies:

1. Privately acknowledge to your alleged child victim that you believe his/her story.

Your belief is a key. You can acknowledge shock at the allegations, or you can admit you had concerns previously, but let your child know you believe what they are reporting. Very few children lie about such heinous crimes, and just knowing a parent believes the story brings much strength and comfort to most child victims. It is recommended that this be done in private in order to avoid putting disbelieving siblings on the defensive. But it's not absolute. Some parents might want to get it all out on the table right away. Sooner or later they will know anyway.

2. Whether you tell them, or your child victim alerts non-believing siblings to the fact that YOU believe the report even if the other siblings don't, there is a way to deal with that, too. *As a non-offending parent, you can acknowledge that you believe your reporting child that these types of reports are very serious and you can't imagine the alleged victim would lie about something so important. However, you can also understand the conflicted siblings that don't believe, and acknowledge that they have little reason to believe the outcry because they haven't experienced or witnessed abuse themselves. Both have beliefs based on experiences. As a parent, you can support both sides, still believe your reporting child, and manage to keep a respectful balance between the children until the situation is resolved.*

Sometimes when the alleged perpetrator is a beloved father or extended family member, these feelings can be even more severe. Creating a balance between the two sibling positions is important, so you can validate both sides without alienating either one. This step also helps later when you attempt to coordinate strategies for other developments.

3. When sibling conflict occurs, and you've struck a balance between the two conflicted children, the next thing to do is strike an agreement for acceptable behavior, both at home and at school. They don't have to agree with each other about the allegations, but it's important that they be civil with one another. The entire family is involved, not just the two individuals. In this way, until the chaos is resolved and everyone knows for sure what has happened, it is critical that the siblings don't complicate matters for each other. At home, the victim must try to understand the non-abused siblings' reasons for disbelief, and the non-abused siblings must try to be patient with the victim's needs.

By establishing balance for your children at home, you acknowledge both sides, validate both points of view, and demand support for family in spite of the differences.

4. Regarding school, the parent can set up guidelines for both children. Nobody wants the disbelieving sibling to spread rumors or discontent at school, and thereby bring other unwanted children into the mix. By the same token, the alleged victim cannot be allowed to run down her disbelieving siblings to other students or muddy the water by spreading her story to other children. This is a very sensitive family matter that affects everyone. To minimize unwanted attention, it should only be shared with immediate

family and the most trusted friends and professionals. In doing so, school can be left as a sanctuary where your children can focus on educational issues and have some time off from the abuse-related stress.

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The entire period of experiencing, stopping, and recovering from child abuse has many facets and levels. It also impacts different family members in different ways, and to different degrees. The process impacts extended family members and even close friends.

I recently consulted with a very concerned mother who is going through this process and our conversations (and others like it) were the inspiration for this article. In the past, I've written other articles about surviving child abuse with a focus on stopping the abuse. Another topic has been the long-term recovery process involving counseling support and strategies to help victims and their families move forward.

But in this case, I wanted to focus on that part of the process that involves public awareness of the alleged abuse. This usually occurs after the perpetrator has been arrested and/or indicted for the alleged crimes... and the story leaks from friends or ends up in the local newspaper.

"Oh my God – It's in the news. Now what do we do?" That's a common reaction by non-offending parents when child abuse goes public. Suddenly, their heretofore quiet life is transformed into something unsettling and even horrifying when the details of the abuse and arrest are announced to the world by the local newspaper or network television. At that point, even more people are exposed to this familial tragedy.

The child victim has to deal with the "other kids" at school, who, by nature of being kids, may ask troublesome, disturbing questions. "Was that you in the story in the paper?" Or "Wow – that's so weird! What's THAT all about?"

Young people are not collectively known for their sensitivity to others. Nevertheless, they're curious like most human beings and proximity to the latest story often drives them to interact with the players in strange and inappropriate ways. But as bad as that seems, there are some reasonable ways to respond to overly curious friends and acquaintances. I'll list strategies that the non-offending parents can use, and then highlight the same for child victims and their siblings.

Parental Strategies When The Abuse Story Surfaces:

1. If your family is spiritually oriented, or religious, utilize those elements to reinforce the desire in the family to weather the storm and keep their poise. Faith in something bigger than your situation can be very soothing. If your family is not religiously oriented, it is still wise to encourage taking a deep breath and relaxing. Learning the critical skill of staying calm in spite of the excitement and chaos of the moment will serve your children well throughout their lifetimes. It is an essential survival skill that will apply to all sorts of life situations.

2. Talk with your children about how the story surfaced and do some strategy surfing with them. A little planning can spare your children from allowing curious questions or unwanted attention at school from turning into emotionally charged confrontations.

3. Create a standard response to questions about what's happened. Discuss them with your children and see if they feel that response could help them. Adjust the response as needed, for your particular family.

4. Below are some sample responses if someone asks about the abuse report.

Suggested Response: "You know, that's kinda personal. I'd rather not talk about it right now." *Then you can walk away without ignoring the question or getting mad about someone asking it. Perhaps you've even taught them a lesson about poise under pressure.*

Suggested Response: "I'm sorry. I'm not supposed to talk about that." *This response can give the impression that talking is not an option.*

Suggested Response: "I really don't feel like talking about that, but thanks for your concern." *A softer response, appreciative of their concern, and subtly relying on people to get the message and stop asking such personal questions.*

Suggested Response: "I don't want to (or I'm not going to) talk about that." *This is direct and simple. Talking about the family situation is NOT going to happen. Leave it alone.*

Suggested Response: "I've been told not to talk about that." *This gives the impression that you've been instructed not to talk about the case. This works for parents and children alike.*

5. Talk with your child victim(s) to determine if he/she has friends that they would like to talk to regarding the abuse. If there are, rather than forbidding it, talk to your child about the importance of generalizing the shared information with this friend. *Young people are notorious for sharing information that was secretly (and sacredly) disclosed to them. They do this even when they were sworn to secrecy. I'm not saying there are no best friends that honor the need for privacy. I'm saying there are a good many that won't. If that happens, it is better to be safe than sorry. By generalizing what has happened, your child will still get the support they need from their friend without placing delicate details at risk.*

The message to your child is this: "Talk to your friend for the support, but don't share any details you wouldn't want others to know."

Examples: "Something bad happened to me that involved the police. I wanted you to know because we're friends and I need your support."

"One of my uncles did some things to me that got him into trouble. I'm stressin' and need my best friend's support."

"We're having some big problems at home right now and I need your support."

These suggestions can serve to help parents create ideas that may help their children deal with some of the consequences of a family tragedy appearing in the local newspaper or on television channels. It's also not bad practice for the parents, either. I've had non-offending parents tell me that their friends or neighbors had approached them, wanting to know if the story in the paper was about their family. They asked if it was true. They asked about very sensitive details.

It may be disturbing that people can be so oblivious to the emotional pain of others, but these scenarios do come up from time to time. It's human nature to be curious.

One fact helps soften the stress of nosy friends, be they youngsters or adults. Curious adults are not much different than curious children. They are always interested and nosy about the latest story to surface, and they tend to have short attention spans. Their interest will soon spin to another story within the next couple of weeks – and it will replace your story as the item of interest. In this sense, time is on your side.

If your family has discussed the possibilities and come up with acceptable strategies to use, moving through this part of the process will not be nearly so dramatic or stressful. Learning that one can cope with stressful situations can help now, and even later on, should the case surface again through the public venue of a criminal trial.

As the non-offending parent, you have already laid the groundwork and provided a process that can help them sort through the next challenge that faces them. Mix that with good parenting support in general and you've got a situation that your child can manage without adding greatly to their levels of stress.

As in any crisis situation, a family is wise to have trusted consultants. And though extended family members, friends, and neighbors can be helpful, they are frequently at a loss in terms of knowing what to do. When in need of consultation about something as sensitive as child abuse, it is wise to seek counsel with someone with a background in the field, experience in the local environment in which you live, and one that can be available when you need them.

Child Advocacy Centers (Kids' Advocacy Place is one of 63 in Texas) are good sources for finding these contacts. Frequently, if you have one in your area, it is possible your child victim was interviewed there to begin with, and the staff will usually be available for all kinds of help and support. If not, CACs are still great places for support.

Local counselors can also be invaluable, and you may already have an arrangement with a counselor who can be helpful. If issues arise at school, contacting campus administrators and counselors can be very helpful. They can establish on-campus support for your children, should they need it from time to time during the more stressful parts of the process. Again, you can generalize the information when contacting the schools. It's enough for them to know that your children are going through emotionally challenging times due to a family situation. That's enough to establish the support in most schools. In any case, they'll generally be supportive and sympathetic to your family's struggles.

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There is an over-riding message in this approach. Stay calm, pass that wisdom onto your children by modeling it, and do a little simple planning – and managing those feats can make all the difference in the world to your children.

After all, your children are being challenged like never before, and learning they can survive it – even thrive at the other end of it – is a lesson that will last them a lifetime. In an odd dichotomy of circumstance, child abuse is a horrible tragedy, but it also carries a hidden opportunity. If a parent can help a child successfully overcome something this worrisome – the resulting self-confidence can make children stronger than they would have been otherwise.