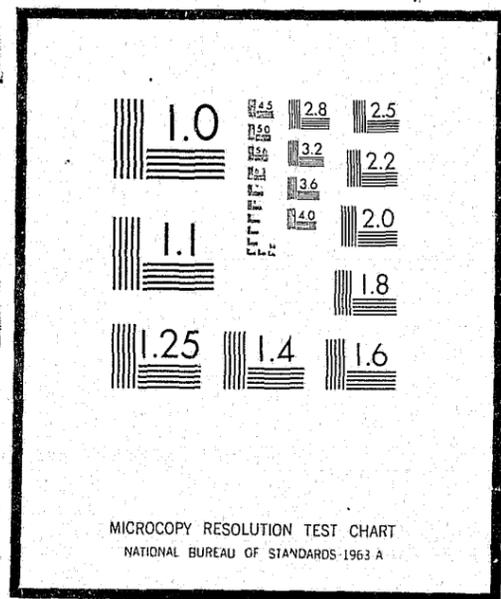


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SEXUAL ABUSE--A PRIMER FOR PARENTS  
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ACQUISITIONS

If you've simply been warning your youngsters not to talk to strangers, you are closing your eyes to a greater potential threat. Because four out of five times, the child-victim of sexual abuse knows the offender, either well or casually. He is living in the same house or is a close relative, or is a friend of the family, neighbor, landlord, shopkeeper, baby-sitter, classmate or acquaintance.

What's more, you really haven't prepared your children or yourself for what might happen and what to do in the event that it does. Scaring the daylights out of them isn't going to help. But a parent-child dialogue does.

First, let's get one point straight. We're not talking about sex education. (Hopefully, you've been able to overcome any embarrassment you may feel and have answered your offspring's questions as they came up.) We are discussing crime--offenses involving the sexual abuse of children. Here are some facts you'll want to know.

FORCE, VIOLENCE AND PHYSICAL INJURY.

You'll be relieved to learn that attacks are seldom violent or forceful. In less than five per cent of them is the child penetrated. Murder, under these circumstances, is practically non-existent.

Yes, there are cases of serious injury reported. In Miami, Florida, at Jackson Memorial Hospital's Rape Treatment Center, a third of the patients are under the age of 16. The youngest victim was two months old. Fortunately, the vast majority of sexual assaults aren't physically damaging to the younger child. (Teenage victims, however, are often sexually assaulted in the same terrifying manner as adults.)

When young children are sexually abused, what usually takes place are acts of indecent exposure, petting, fondling, kissing the genitals or attempting to insert a finger in the child's vagina or anus. In rare cases, the abuser will try to force his penis into the child's vagina, anus or mouth.

EMOTIONAL DAMAGE.

Even when there is some body contact, the danger is not great that the child will be hurt physically. But severe emotional problems can result if the incident is not handled properly. Unless the attack is brutal or committed by an offender closely related to the victim, most of the time the child is able to get over the sexual abuse with few permanent consequences provided that parents do not become hysterical, abusive or over-protective and that other adults who hear about the incident do not take inappropriate action.

Parents respond to their child's plight in many different ways. Some make every effort to calm, reassure and protect the youngster from additional trauma. But others will blame and shame the victim. For example:

"I told you to come straight home. You've never been anything but trouble to this family."

"I don't believe you. You must be making this up. Mr. Jones is such a respected gentleman, he could never have done what you said."

"You see what happens. You brought this on yourself, trying to look like a sex-pot."

"You have such an evil mind to talk about your wonderful Uncle Joe that way."

And some parents are determined to keep it completely hushed up with "Don't you dare tell anyone else about this." The reasons given are unending, such as:

"Your mother would have a heart attack."

"Your father might be sent to prison."

"What would the neighbors think? Our family would be disgraced."

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HOW TO DISCUSS IT.

The time to begin making your youngster aware of practices you consider improper or dangerous is just as soon as he or she is old enough to comprehend an over-simplified talk.

Right from the start, help your children feel free to question or discuss any subject with you. Then they will be more apt to come to you about any activity that doesn't seem "right" to them.

When you have prepared your children for the possibility that such acts could be attempted upon them, told them whom to turn to for help, and what to do if they can't get away, both you and your children will be better able to cope with any crisis that might arise.

Frederic Storaska, author of How To Say No To A Rapist--And Survive offers a way to do this. He suggests talking about some people--people you know and people you don't know--who are unhappy because they don't have friends. They "have a funny way of trying to be friends: they put their hands on you and they want to touch you--on your knee, on your face, or on your vagina (or penis) or neck or back or almost anywhere. Or they want to kiss you, just about anywhere, and they may want you to kiss or touch them. Sometimes they won't stop if you want them to...It's like when you're crying and I tell you to stop. You may want to, but sometimes you can't...Even though this man or woman tells you not to say anything about this to anyone, the best thing to do is tell me or your mother (father) all about it, just as soon as you can, so we can make sure the man sees a doctor."

PRECAUTIONS.

Every family should develop its own clear-cut rules that are followed consistently. Here are several common-sense precautions you might include:

- . If someone acts in the "funny" way you've described, and the child can't come directly home, to tell the teacher or nearest neighbor, or others you designate: If near home, the child should tell you about it immediately.
- . Caution the child that if no one is nearby to help, try very hard not to yell or cry or to make the abuser angry. He might inflict injury, even when he didn't intend to, just to make the child shut up.
- . Teach the child not to give out information over the phone such as "Nobody's home but the baby-sitter and me."
- . Make it clear that the child is not to go for a walk or accept a ride or candy or presents from anyone unless he/she checks with you first.
- . Be sure that the child understands that you will let him/her know in advance if you (or the person who's supposed to) can't pick up the child as usual.
- . Arrange to have someone at home when your children come back from school or play.
- . Don't send a young child to answer your door at home. You go instead. (And make it a family rule not to open the door to strangers before seeing proper identification.)
- . For the child who's old enough to take a bus, to wait at a stop where there are usually others present. Even if this means walking to the next bus stop.
- . Know your baby-sitter. Unfortunately, many children have been sexually abused by uncles, brothers, neighbors and landlords. Listen when the child reports to you about the "games" that they played while you were away.
- . If your child is a baby-sitter, discuss ways to handle emergencies that might happen. Furnish a list of telephone numbers for the rescue squad and fire and police departments. Caution the sitter about not allowing anyone into the home or indicating over the telephone that the sitter is home alone with the child. Make certain you have the name, address and phone number of the parents for whom your child is sitting, and the time they expect to return home.

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WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP.

Sexual standards and expressions or demonstrations of affection differ greatly, even among families in the same cultural and social group. While incest is a universal taboo in our Western civilization, other forms of sexual activity practiced within some families may not be considered "wrong" but could nevertheless cause emotional problems for the child.

Take the recently divorced mother who is terribly lonely and wants companionship. She invites her young son to sleep in her bed. No sex play develops. Yet the child grows up snuggling under the covers with his mother every night. He will have great difficulty, later on, relating sexually to an appropriate partner. He has been sexually abused psychologically.

Abuse can pop up in any family, regardless of race, income or education. There are fathers who can't cope with the sexuality of their growing daughters. Some will make crude jokes. Some will threaten them. Sometimes they bestow lingering french kisses or become overly jealous, possessive and anxious. Adolescent girls have reported being aware of "Daddy peeking at me" as they were dressing or undressing. Or a father might show unusual affection for his small son, perhaps constantly holding him on his lap and frequently kissing him on the mouth.

*"It can be very confusing sometimes to decide when a relationship is too sexualized," states Dr. Roland Summit, a psychiatrist on the national board of Parents Anonymous. "Parents are encouraged to show love for their children. Holding, fondling, kissing, mouth play to various parts of the body, all these are an important part of learning to trust and to love. Without them a parent may seem distant or too reserved and a child may grow up insecure, cold or sexually inhibited...loving parental gestures become sexual abuse if they are too lingering and seductive, continued into adolescence, or become centered on the sex organs, anus or breasts."*

The principal offender in incest cases is the father. It's mostly an on-going situation rather than a one-time lapse of moral judgment. In some cases the act is a frustration of love. Or it may be a form of self-punishment by the parent who views the child as an extension of himself. Or it may be the way chosen to express anger toward the spouse. And caught up in all of this is the child who may be physically, financially and emotionally dependent on the abuser and who, out of fear, guilt or love, may tolerate the abuse. Occasionally you'll hear about a young boy being sexually abused by his mother or aunt. Even though adult females seldom commit physical sexual abuse, it may shock you to learn that the mother often knows what's happening to her daughter and, for a variety of reasons, doesn't do anything about it. She may be afraid of her husband or afraid of losing him. She may feel helpless that if he should be sent away there'd be no means of economic support for the family. She may even be relieved that as long as he's having a sexual relationship with their daughter, she won't have to endure intercourse with him.

A girl might report to her mother that the father, step-father, uncle, brother or mother's boyfriend has done something that doesn't seem right. This action might be pulling her down on his lap and kissing her seductively, coming into her room every night and staring at her, unbuttoning her clothes, putting his hand under her skirt, putting his penis against her thigh, or actually raping her. If the mother refuses to believe or support her daughter, the effect can be devastating. The child becomes dissolutioned, feels betrayed, believes no one cares, and her sense of self-worth is almost destroyed.

If any of the previous situations or any of the following conditions might possibly apply to you or your family, it's time to seek professional help:

- . When you suspect that your child is being sexually used or abused.
- . When your child develops any symptom of venereal disease. This may or may not be an indication that sexual activity has taken place.
- . When you observe your child seeming to have trouble with his/her own sexual development.

- . When it is difficult for you to accept your child's growing sexuality.
- . When you, your child or any other family member feels uncomfortable about the way your family is living together.
- . When you feel great resentment or anger about how things are at home and you don't know what to do about it.
- . When you feel you are losing control of the situation.
- . When you resent your child being a boy instead of a girl or vice versa.
- . When you feel tremendous concern about having the other parent take care of your child.
- . When your personal sexual relationship is not going well.
- . When your fantasies are no longer totally pleasurable and you are beginning to feel uncomfortable about them.

IF YOUR CHILD IS ASSAULTED.

Deal with the situation as soon as possible. And in a manner that will calm and protect your child from any further emotional damage.

If there has been physical abuse, have the child examined immediately by a physician. Internal injuries may not be evident. If you will bring the child to the Rape Treatment Center at Jackson Memorial Hospital, not only will your youngster be given proper medical care, but also you and your child will be counseled to help you handle the crisis.

Although you may be experiencing horror or fright, it's very important that you don't communicate these feelings to your child. Your over-reaction will only present an additional problem for the child and prolong the need for treatment.

Allow the child who wants to discuss the incident the opportunity to talk about it without your showing any signs of embarrassment or panic. Be comforting and supportive and a good listener. But don't press the child for details. And don't let the child get the idea that he/she should feel dirty or disgraced because the body was touched.

A young child will probably be more confused than upset. To the juvenile mind the incident may be perceived of as unusual rather than terrible. So if you don't call attention to the seriousness, it will make the child's emotional recovery easier. If the child was hurt, the association would be pain rather than sex; be sure the child doesn't think this was done because he/she was disliked.

A teenage daughter may need reassurance that she didn't provoke the assault. Relieve her of any guilt feelings she may express. A victim is not responsible for the crime. The offender is.

Blaming the child, directly or indirectly, can be harmful. So refrain from lashing out with: "You're a troublemaker." "You're a liar." "How could you embarrass us like this?" "If only you had followed the rules, this never would have happened to you."

After this experience, parents sometimes become overprotective and overly restrict the child's activities. Make every effort to help your family return to a normal lifestyle.

If the problem is within your family, Protective Services will help provide family counseling or do what is necessary to protect the child. Also, the local chapter of Parents Anonymous can help a parent discover what is triggering the abuse and find acceptable alternatives for releasing tension or expressing anger.