



WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER
What Every Caregiver Should Know
About Child Abuse & Trauma

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WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse is defined as both contact and non-contact activities of a sexual nature that takes place between an adult and a child or between two children where one child has power over the other.

Stop It Now!, a non-profit organization dedicated to the prevention of child sexual abuse, provides this list of harmful contact and non-contact behaviors:

ABUSIVE PHYSICAL CONTACT AND TOUCHING INCLUDES:

- Touching a child's genitals for sexual purposes
- Making a child touch someone else's genital or play sexual games
- Putting objects or body parts inside the vagina, in the mouth or in the anus of a child for sexual purposes

NON-CONTACT SEXUAL ABUSE INCLUDES:

- Showing pornography to a child
- Deliberately exposing an adult's genitals to a child
- Photographing or videotaping a child in sexual poses
- Encouraging a child to watch or hear sexual acts
- Inappropriately watching a child undress or use the bathroom

WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS?

When asked what a child molester looks like, most people describe a quiet male who appears out of place. It's also a common belief that child molesters are "creepy, shady men" who are loners or strangers to the family. This image could not be further from reality.

In 90% of child sexual abuse cases, the child knows and trusts the person who perpetrated the abuse. Most perpetrators are authority figures (coaches, teachers, clergy, parents, etc...) whom are innately trusted by the child as well as the family. As a society, we raise our children to obey adult authority figures. Imagine, then, how difficult it can be for a child to say "no" to one of these people of authority.

WHO ARE THE VICTIMS?

It is a nationwide estimation that 1 in every 10 children experience of some form of sexual abuse prior to age 18. It is very likely that you know a child who has been or is currently being sexually abused. Due to fear, confusion or embarrassment only 12% of children will tell someone. Children who hide abuse, or

children who disclose abuse and are subsequently denied belief, are at a much greater risk for psychological, emotional, and physical problems.

People who experience child sexual abuse are 3 times more likely to suffer from depression, 4 times more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, 4 times more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol and are more than twice as likely to contemplate suicide. However, we know that with support and treatment, people who experience child sexual abuse can and do find healing.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

A traumatic experience can be described in many different ways. According to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, a traumatic experience is a frightening, often dangerous, and/or violent event or condition. There are many different kinds of potentially traumatic experiences; these experiences would most certainly include sexual violence and rape. After a traumatic event occurs, an individual often reports feelings of apprehension and fear. These feelings can be temporary (lasting only a short amount of time) or enduring (lasting several months or many years).

It is possible for people who experience trauma to experience post-traumatic stress symptoms or develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Young people with PTSD report re-visiting the traumatic experience through vivid memories, flashbacks, or other kinds of upsetting thoughts. As a result, the child may attempt to avoid places, people or objects associated with the trauma. They may also overreact when startled or have difficulty sleeping.

KEY SYMPTOMS OF PTSD:

- Re-experiencing the traumatic event. This may include flashbacks, nightmares, exaggerated emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the event, or (for younger children) trauma-specific re-enactment or repetitive play.
- Avoidance of people, activities, places, thoughts, feelings, or conversation related to the trauma. People may show a restricted range of affect (emotional numbing) or may have a sense of foreshortened future.
- Changes in thinking or affect. People may be unable to recall aspects of the trauma; may show diminished interest in significant activities; present negative expectations or beliefs about self or others or place unreasonable blame on self or others; and/or may have persistent negative emotions such as fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame, but constricted ability to feel positive emotions.
- Increased arousal. People may have difficulty sleeping, irritability or outbursts of anger, reckless behavior, difficulty concentrating, hyper-vigilance, and/or exaggerated startle response.

HOW DOES TRAUMA IMPACT CHILDREN?

Traumatic events cause extreme stress that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. Trauma can have serious consequences for the normal development of children's brains, brain chemistry, and nervous system. Trauma-induced alterations in biological stress systems can adversely affect brain development, cognitive and academic skills, and language acquisition. Children and adolescents who experience trauma display changes in the levels of stress hormones similar to changes seen in combat veterans. These hormone changes may affect the way children and adolescents respond to future stress in their lives, and may impact their long-term health.

Children and adolescents who experienced ongoing trauma may experience impairments in many areas of development and functioning that include the following:

- **Attachment:** Children exposed to trauma feel the world is uncertain and unpredictable. They can become socially isolated and can have difficulty relating to and empathizing with others.
- **Biology:** Children exposed to trauma may experience problems with movement and sensation, including hypersensitivity to physical contact or insensitivity to pain. They may exhibit unexplained physical symptoms and increased medical problems.
- **Mood regulation:** Children exposed to trauma can have difficulty regulating their emotions as well as difficulty knowing and describing their feelings and internal states.
- **Dissociation:** Some children experience a feeling of detachment or depersonalization, as if they are "observing" something happening to them.
- **Behavioral control:** Children exposed to trauma can show poor impulse control, self-destructive behavior, and aggression towards others.
- **Cognition:** Children exposed to trauma can have problems focusing on and completing tasks, or planning for and anticipating future events. Some exhibit learning difficulties and problems with language development.
- **Self-concept:** Children exposed to trauma frequently suffer from disturbed body image, low self-esteem, shame, and guilt.

RESPONDING TO YOUR CHILD

The single most important factor affecting a child's recovery from trauma is a supportive caregiver. When a child discloses abuse, it is important to:

- ***Believe your child and make sure they know it.***
- Thank them for telling you and praise their courage.
- Encourage the child to talk and be an active listener, but do not ask questions about the details. (Asking for details can alter the child's memory of events.)
- Assure the child that it is your responsibility to protect them and that you will do all you can.
- Report any additional disclosures of abuse to DCBS and/or Law Enforcement.
- Remember: Sexually abused children who receive support and psychological help *can and do heal*.

COMMON BELIEFS AND FEELINGS OF CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCE THE TRAUMA OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND HOW WE MIGHT HELP

Children who experience abuse may have an array of thoughts and feelings that influence their behaviors. The following are possible reactions and things you can do to respond.

A therapist or advocate can help you with these reactions more specifically.

Reactions	How to help
Fear Children may not want to separate from caregivers, may feel isolated or alone, or may need constant support	Reassure your child that they are safe, providing support when they need it. Remember, they are learning how to cope.
Embarrassment Children may be embarrassed to talk about what happened to them, or feel shame.	Reassure them that they can share as little or as much as they want with you. You might begin a regular activity together, establishing a safe place.
Guilt Children may think the abuse was their fault or they could somehow control it. They may take responsibility or blame themselves.	Explain that the abuse was not their fault and that they are not responsible. Reassure them that you're going to do everything you can to keep them safe, because that is your job-not theirs.
Loss of Control/Security Children may feel vulnerable, helpless, or hopeless or feel like they cannot influence or trust their world.	Give your child safe choices when possible, such as choosing play activities or dinner, and structure a regular daily schedule.
Low Self-esteem Children may experience feelings of worthlessness or feel self-conscious.	Take opportunities to show appreciation of your child's positive behaviors. Let them know they are doing the right thing by disclosing the abuse and that you are proud of them.
Anger Children may feel anger toward themselves or others, and may act out or take risks.	Let them know it is ok to be upset and give them space to talk about their feelings. Always contact a professional if you have concerns about their safety.
Physical symptoms Children may not want to sleep alone, have difficulty sleeping, may experience a change in eating habits, or have headaches or stomachaches.	Allow them to talk about their fears, staying neutral. Provide understanding about physical complaints and reassure them that they're safe.

HOW DOES TRAUMA IMPACT THE CAREGIVERS?

When abuse is reported, caregivers sometimes feel a roller coaster of emotions. This is common. The report can affect your life in many ways, and it takes time to adjust. But it is important to cope with this stress in healthy ways, not in front of the child. If a caregiver responds to their child with anger or disbelief,

the child is likely to shut down, change their story or feel a great sense of guilt over their disclosure. Children who are victims of sexual abuse are vulnerable. A caregiver's reaction to disclosures of abuse are critical to the child's recovery.

COMMON THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS CAREGIVERS MAY EXPERIENCE

Remember that emotional responses vary from caregiver to caregiver. You may feel one reaction or any combination. The most important thing you can do for your family is to find support with a trusted adult, therapist, or support group so that you can express your emotions in a healthy, adaptive manner. Talk to our advocates about developing a healthy support network.

- **Denial/Minimization:** You may go through a period when it is difficult to believe the abuse really happened. Remember, children rarely lie about abuse. You cannot be supportive of your child or take care of yourself if you continue to minimize or deny. You have to look at the facts. You need to talk about the details of the abuse with a counselor or professional to help make the situation more real to you. This will allow you to start to heal and allow you to help your child heal.
- **Shock/Numbing:** You may feel distant or separated from people or events around you. This is a natural response to a stressful event and may last from a few minutes to several hours or days.
- **Anger:** It is natural to feel angry when your child discloses sexual abuse. It can be general or may be directed at your child, the offender, yourself or the messenger. Be honest about your feelings and share them with someone in your support network.
- **Hatred:** You may feel an intense desire to hurt the offender. This is a natural reaction but you must express it in a socially acceptable manner. You need to think of your child and the harm it would do to them to have their caregiver in jail for committing a crime.
- **Helplessness:** You probably do not know what to expect and you feel that things are out of your control. Some parents fear that their children will be taken away. Try to learn about how cases go through the legal system. Ask our Advocates about Legal Advocacy Services and material explaining the legal process!
- **Feelings of Insignificance:** Following a disclosure of sexual abuse, attention will focus primarily on your child and the offender. You may feel "lost in the shuffle." You may also feel that in order to be a good caregiver, you need to put your needs secondary to everyone else. You need to determine what your needs are and find a way to take care of them. In order to take care of your child, you have to take care of yourself. A support system of friends and family is an important and valuable part of self-care.
- **Guilt/Self-Blame/Shame:** You may feel like you should have known about the abuse. If you did not at first believe your child or were unable to stop the abuse you may feel a great sense of guilt. While it is vital for you to explore these feelings with an appropriate professional, remember the alleged offender is responsible for the abuse-not you.
- **Hurt/Betrayal:** It is common to feel hurt. These feelings are especially apparent when the alleged perpetrator was a trusted friend or family member. It is important to take the time to grieve these losses.

- **Sexual Inadequacy:** When the offender is a caregiver's significant other, some people believe the offenders abuse children because their intimate relationship with the offender was not adequate. Research shows that this is in no way related to abusers harming children; rather, offenders have an illness that could stem from many different issues that are in no way influenced by your intimate relationship.
- **Financial Concern:** These feelings are more apparent when the alleged offender contributed to the family income. There are programs and community assistance that may be able to help you. Please talk with our Advocates about these options.
- **Fear of violence/retaliation:** You may fear the alleged offender will try to harm you or your family. Threats or intimidation to the child or family during a criminal investigation of child sexual abuse are taken seriously. Please talk with our Advocates about your concerns. In cases of emergency, always call the police.

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE LEGAL SYSTEM

- Avoid talking about the abuse in your child's presence.
- Be calm and reassuring to your child, but do not tell them what to say. It is important the information comes out in your child's own words.
- When you are asked for information, try to give as many facts as you can. Do not try to guess. If you do not know, it is always better to just say you do not know.
- Always be honest, even if the truth may not seem favorable to you or to others.
- Love, support, and protect your child. Avoid asking your child about the abuse. If the alleged offender is someone important to you, it may be difficult to balance your feelings. Remember that your child only has you to make healthy, protective decisions for them.
- If you have questions, it is always ok to ask the Team! We understand that many things will be happening quickly and a lot of information is presented to you. Always know that you should ask questions if you do not understand. You can always call our Center after your appointment if questions come up for you later.

HOW DOES TRAUMA IMPACT FAMILIES?

Established family dynamics may change and evolve throughout this process. This can be largely due to the families need to adapt to their new and unfamiliar circumstances. Here are some ways your family might see an impact, and ways to make the impact positive.

Sibling Relationships:

Sibling relationships can be experienced as a strong support, a friend, a companion, and a person of comfort to the child who experienced abuse. In order for the relationship to move past any negative

experiences like rivalry or conflict, it's important for the siblings to participate in actively listening to each other's needs and practicing effective communication.

Extended Family and Kinship:

In cases of trauma, it can be helpful to seek out family members or friends that you trust. These people can help you process the traumatic event and gives them an opportunity to be there for you during your time of need. The support that extended family and kinships offer help to sustain unique and vital family traditions that consolidate the family and aid in healing and strength.

The Family as a Whole:

Once a family member discloses abuse, initial familial distress is likely, but will be different for each family. It is important for the family members to support each other, including providing safety, love, food, shelter, and education for one another. Traumatic experiences often drain families of important resources that can add additional stress and unfamiliar burdens (e.g. court proceedings, moving into a new residence, transitioning into a new school, etc.). When faced with these challenges, it is more important than ever to unite the family and sustain vital traditions that bind the family together.

Communication:

High levels of stress can generate large gaps in communication, contributing to subsequent problems that may quickly pile up. A lack of communication can rapidly lead to a tumultuous home in which emotions are difficult to manage, deficits in intimacy begin to develop, and the risk of separation or even interpersonal violence increase. It is important to practice effective communication with all members of the family in order to reduce the likely of these problems.

YOUR FAMILY IS IMPORTANT TO US

Lotus is a 501(c)3, non-profit organization that has been providing direct services to victims of crimes since 1987. Our purpose is to reduce the impact and prevalence of sexual violence and child abuse by promoting empowerment, resiliency, and justice in our community. We envision a nonviolent world with freedom for every person to live fully.

We engage in all phases of support for people who experience sexual crimes to better support victims and families through the criminal justice system and beyond.

Legal Advocacy

Provides support to victims and families throughout the duration of the criminal justice process. The investigation and court process can be overwhelming. We offer support to families at the beginning of the investigation during forensic interviews and/or medical exams. We also offer advocacy throughout the criminal justice process; providing court education and accompaniment services.

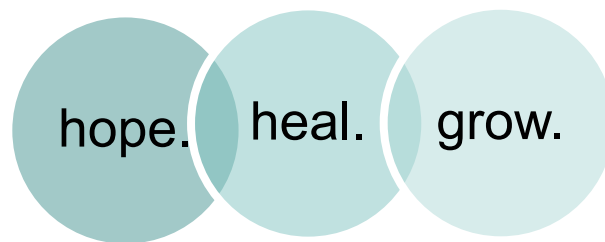
Family Advocacy

We understand each family is unique and has a variety of needs. Lotus will work with your family to utilize community resources and connect families to organizations that aim to aid the family in their time of need. If at any time you experience an emerging need, we will work to help provide relief. This can include housing, employment, education, and (most importantly) safety.

Caregiver Support Groups

It is common for caregivers to focus on the direct needs of their children and sometimes neglect themselves. By offering support and education while focusing on your personal self-care plan, this group is intended to offer a safe and supportive environment to caregivers as they work towards healing from what is often one of the most difficult situations that a parent will ever have to endure.

We understand that sexual abuse can be a traumatic and life altering experience for everyone involved. If at any time you feel a need for further support, we will be happy to help you in any way we can. You may contact our Family Advocates, Lee Whitney Rudolph in our Paducah office or Bethany Roach in our Murray office, by calling 270-534-4422 during normal business hours (Monday-Thursday 9:00am-5:00pm, Friday 9:00am-3:00pm) or speak with any of our staff members.



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RECOMMENDED READING

Darkness to Light – *7 Steps to Protecting Our Children; A Guide for Responsible Adults*. Available at www.d2l.org.

Stop It Now! – *Prevent Child Sexual Abuse: Facts About Sexual Abuse and How to Prevent It*. Available at www.stopitnow.org.

Stop It Now! – *Let's Talk: Speaking Up to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse*. Available at www.stopitnow.org.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network – *Coping with the Shock of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse*. Available at www.nctsnet.org.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network – *Questions and Answers about Child Sexual Abuse*. Available at www.nctsnet.org.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network – *What To Do If Your Child Discloses Sexual Abuse*. Available at www.nctsnet.org.

The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program – *Behaviors Related to Sex and Sexuality in Children*. Available at http://www.pacwcbt.pitt.edu/curriculum/CTC/MOD5/Hndts/HO17_BhvrsRltdToSxAndSxItyChldrn.pdf