

HELPING CHILDREN COPE AFTER SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION

Introduction:

No matter how concerned or overwhelmed you may feel, as parents you have the power to help children recover. Your comfort, support and reassurance can make them feel safe and secure, guide them through their fears and grief, and prevent them from suffering lasting psychological effects.

This information package discusses the nature of sexual trauma, its effects on children and youth, and ways to help your child. By increasing your understanding of sexual trauma, you can help support your child's healing, your relationship with them, and your family as a whole.

What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child's life or bodily integrity. Witnessing a traumatic event that threatens life or physical security of a loved one can also be traumatic. This is particularly important for young children as their sense of safety depends on the perceived safety of their attachment figures.

Traumatic experiences can initiate strong emotions and physical reactions that can persist long after the event. Children may feel terror, helplessness, or fear, as well as physiological reactions such as heart pounding, vomiting, or loss of bowel or bladder control.

Children who experience an inability to protect themselves or who lacked protection from others to avoid the consequences of the traumatic experience may also feel overwhelmed by the intensity of physical and emotional responses.

Even though adults work hard to keep children safe, sexual abuse still happens. Sexual abuse can come from outside of the family or from within the family.

Sexual trauma can:

- Be overwhelming
- Exceed one's ability to cope
- Invoke an overpowering feeling of hopelessness and helplessness
- Involve some degree of loss of control and/or vulnerability
- Impact the sense of safety

Signs of Trauma

- ❖ Constantly replaying the event in their minds
- ❖ Nightmares
- ❖ Beliefs that the world is generally unsafe
- ❖ Irritability, anger and moodiness
- ❖ Poor concentration
- ❖ Appetite or sleep issues
- ❖ Behaviour problems
- ❖ Nervousness about people getting too close
- ❖ Jumpiness from loud noises
- ❖ Regression to earlier behaviour in young children, such as: clinging, bedwetting or thumb-sucking
- ❖ Difficulty sleeping
- ❖ Detachment or withdrawal from others
- ❖ Use of alcohol in teens
- ❖ Functional impairment: Inability to go to school, learn, play with friends, etc.



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HELPING CHILDREN COPE: TIPS FOR ANY AGE

Understand. Sexual victimization is a trauma, and trauma is like no other experience. It brings out reactions that you may never have seen before and your child has never experienced.

Help your child feel safe. Trauma destroys a child's sense of safety and security. Your child will need time to feel safe again and to feel you can protect.

Be Nurturing. All children, from toddlers to teens, will benefit from your touch — extra cuddling, hugs or just a reassuring pat on the back. It gives them a feeling of security, which is so important in the aftermath of a frightening or disturbing event. For specific information on what to do and say, see the Age-by-Age Guide below.

Act calm. Children look to adults for reassurance after traumatic events have occurred. Do not discuss your anxieties with your children, or when they are around, and be aware of the tone of your voice, as children quickly pick up on anxiety.

Maintain routines as much as possible. Amidst chaos and change, routines reassure children that life will be okay again. Try to have regular mealtimes and bedtimes. If you are homeless or temporarily relocated, establish new routines. And stick with the same family rules, such as ones about good behavior.

Help children enjoy themselves. Encourage kids to do activities and play with others. The distraction is good for them, and gives them a sense of normalcy.

Share information about what is happening. It's always best to learn the details of what to expect from a safe, trusted adult. Be brief and honest, and allow children to ask questions. Don't presume kids are worrying about the same things as adults.

Pick good times to talk. Look for natural openings to have a discussion.

Understand that children cope in different ways. Some might want to spend extra time with friends and relatives; some might want to spend more time alone. Let your child know it is normal to experience anger, guilt and sadness, and to express things in different ways — for example, a person may feel sad but not cry.

Listen well. It is important to understand how your child views the situation, and what is confusing or troubling to them. Do not lecture — just be understanding. Let kids know it is okay to tell you how they are feeling at any time.

Acknowledge what your child is feeling. If a child admits to a concern, do not respond, "Oh, don't be worried," because he may feel embarrassed or criticized. Simply confirm what you are hearing: "Yes, I can see that you are worried."

Know that it's ok to answer, "I don't know." What children need most is someone whom they trust to listen to their questions, accept their feelings and be there for them. Don't worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say – after all, there is no answer that will make everything okay.

Realize the questions may persist. Because the aftermath of a traumatic event may include constantly changing situations, children may have questions on more than one occasion. Let them know you are ready to talk at any time. Children need to digest information on their own timetable, and questions might come out of nowhere.

Do not give children too much responsibility. It is very important not to overburden kids with tasks, or give them adult ones, as this can be too stressful for them. Instead, for the near future you should lower expectations for household duties and school demands, although it is good to have kids do at least some chores.

Give special help to kids with special needs. These children may require more time, support and guidance than other children. You might need to simplify the language you use, and repeat things very often. You may also need to tailor information to your child's strength; for instance, a child with language disability may better understand information through the use of visual materials.

Help children relax with breathing exercises. Breathing becomes shallow when anxiety sets in; deep belly breaths can help children calm down. You can hold a feather or a wad of cotton in front of your child's mouth and ask him to blow at it, exhaling slowly. Or you can say, "Let's breathe in slowly while I count to three, then breathe out while I count to three." Place a stuffed animal or pillow on your child's belly as he lies down and ask him to breathe in and out slowly and watch the stuffed animal or pillow rise and fall.

Watch for signs of ongoing trauma. Within the first month after a traumatic event it is common for kids to seem okay, or to seem generally cranky or clingy. After the shock wears off kids might experience more symptoms — especially children who have witnessed injuries or death, lost immediate family members, experienced previous trauma in their lives or who are not resettled in a new home.

Take care of yourself. You can best help your child when you help yourself. Talk about concerns with friends and relatives; it might be helpful to form a support group. If you belong to a church or community group, keep participating. Try to eat right, drink enough water, stick to exercise routines and get enough sleep. Physical health protects against emotional vulnerability. To reduce stress, do deep breathing. If you suffer from severe anxiety that interferes with your ability to function, seek help from a doctor or mental health professional; if you don't have access to one, talk with a religious leader. Recognize your need for help and get it. Do it for your child's sake, if for no other reason.

Age Specific Reactions

Children Aged 2-5

At this age, although children are making big developmental advances, they still depend on parents to nurture them. As with babies, they typically respond to situations according to how parents react. If you are calm and confident, your child will feel more secure. If you act anxious or overwhelmed, your child may feel unsafe.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Make your child feel safe. Hold, hug and cuddle your child as much as possible. Tell them you will take care of them when they feel sad or scared. With children who are learning to talk, use simple phrases such as, “Mommy’s here.”

Watch what you say. Little children have big ears and may pick up on your anxiety, misinterpret what they hear or be frightened unnecessarily by things they do not understand.

Maintain routines as much as possible. No matter what your living situation, do your best to have regular mealtimes and bedtimes. Create new routines if necessary. Try to do the things you have always done with your children, such as singing songs or saying prayers before they go to sleep.

Give extra support at bedtime. Children who have been through trauma may become anxious at night. When you put your child to bed, spend more time than usual talking or telling stories. It’s okay to make a temporary arrangement for young children to sleep with you, but with the understanding that they will go back to normal sleeping arrangements at a set future date.

Encourage children to share feelings. Try a simple question such as, “How are you feeling today?” Follow any conversations about the recent event with a favorite story or a family activity to help kids feel safer and calmer.

Enable your child to tell the story of what happened. This will help them make sense of the event and cope with their feelings. Play can often be used to help your child frame the story and tell you about the event in their own words.

Draw pictures. Young children often do well expressing emotions with drawing. This is another opportunity to provide explanations and reassurance. To start a discussion, you may comment on what a child has drawn.

If your child acts out it may be a sign they need extra attention. Help them name how they feel: Scared? Angry? Sad? Let them know it is okay to feel that way, then show them the right way to behave — you can say, “It is okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hit your sister.”

Get kids involved in activities. Distraction is a good thing for kids at this age. Play games with them, and arrange for playtime with other kids.

Talk about things that are going well. Even in the most trying times, it’s important to identify something positive and express hope for the future to help your child recover. You can say something like, “We still have each other. I am here with you, and I will stay with you.” Pointing out the good will help you feel better, too.

Reassure your children. They might feel what happened is their fault, somehow; let them know it is not.

Expect repeated questions. That is how young children process information.

Children Aged 6-11

At this age, children are more able to talk about their thoughts and feelings and can better handle difficulties, but they still look to parents for comfort and guidance. Listening to them demonstrates your commitment. When scary things happen, seeing that parents can still parent may be the most reassuring thing for a frightened child.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Reassure your child that they are safe. Children this age are comforted by facts. Use real words, such as hurricane, earthquake, flood, and aftershock. For kids this age, knowledge is empowering and helps relieve anxiety.

Keep things as “normal” as possible. Bedtime and mealtime routines help kids feel safe and secure. If you are homeless or have been relocated, establish different routines and give your child some choice in the matter — for example, let them choose which story to tell at bedtime. This gives a child a sense of control during an uncertain time.

Spend time talking with your child. Let them know that it is okay to ask questions and to express concerns or sadness. One way to encourage conversation is to use family time (such as mealtime) to talk about what is happening in the family as well as in the community. Also ask what their friends have been saying, so you can make sure to correct any misinformation.

Answer questions briefly but honestly. After a child has brought something up, first ask for their ideas so you can understand exactly what the concern is. Usually children ask a question because they are worried about something specific. Give a reassuring answer. If you do not know an answer to a question, it is okay to say, “I don’t know.” Do not speculate or repeat rumors.

Draw out children who do not talk. Open a discussion by sharing your own feelings — for example, you could say, “This was a very scary thing, and sometimes I wake up in the night because I am thinking about it. How are you feeling?” Doing this helps your child feel they are not alone in their concerns or fears. However, do not give a lot of detail about your own anxieties.

Keep children busy. Daily activities, such as playing with friends or going to school, may have been disrupted. Help kids think of alternative activities and organize playgroups with other parents.

Calm worries about friends’ safety. Reassure your children that their friends’ parents are taking care of them just as they are being cared for by you.

Encourage kids to lend a hand. This will give them a sense of accomplishment and purpose at a time when they may feel helpless. Younger children can do small tasks for you; older ones can contribute to volunteer projects in the community.

Find the hope. Children need to see the future to recover. Kids this age appreciate specifics. For example, in the event of a natural disaster, you could say: “People from all over the country are sending medical supplies, food and water. They’ve built new places where people who are hurt will be taken care of, and they will build new homes. It’ll be very hard like this for just a little while.”

Find out what your child is thinking. Ask questions before you make assumptions about what your child wants to know. For example, you can say, “What’s been different for you since _____ left? What feelings have you been having? All of this is really hard to think about, but it’s important for us to talk about it.”

Be as concrete as possible. Use simple drawings to describe things such as the body and injuries.

Prepare the child for anticipated changes in routines or household functions. Talk about what the changes will mean for them.

Inform your child. Let them know that anger and sadness are typical, and that if they avoid feelings they may feel worse later on.

Prepare the child for anticipated changes in routines or household functions. Talk about what the changes will mean for them.

Reassure your child. Help them understand it is okay, and normal, to have trouble with school, peers and family during this time.

Be patient. Kids up to age 11 may think that the loss is their fault, and can have trouble accepting the fact that the person may not return.

Children Aged 12-18

Adolescence is already a challenging time for young people, who have so many changes happening in their bodies. They struggle with wanting more independence from parents, and have a tendency to believe they are invincible and nothing can harm them. Traumatic events can make them feel out of control, even if they act as if they are strong. They will also feel bad for people affected by the disaster, and have a strong desire to know why the event occurred.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Make your teen feel safe again. Adolescents do not like to show vulnerability; they may try to act as if they are doing fine even though they are not. While they may resist hugs, your touch can help them feel secure. You can say something like, "I know you're grown now, but I just need to give you a hug."

Help teens feel helpful. Give them small tasks and responsibilities in the household, then praise them for what they have done and how they have handled themselves. Do not overburden teens with too many responsibilities, especially adult-like ones, as that will add to their anxiety.

Open the door for discussion. It's very typical for teens to say they don't want to talk. Try to start a conversation while you are doing an activity together, so that the conversation does not feel too intense or confrontational.

Consider peer groups. Some teenagers may feel more comfortable talking in groups with their peers, so consider organizing one. Also encourage conversation with other trusted adults, like a relative or teacher.

Help your teen take action. Kids this age will want to help the community. Find appropriate volunteer opportunities.

Be aware of substance abuse. Teens are particularly at risk for turning to alcohol or drugs to numb their anxiety. If your teen has been behaving secretly or is seemingly drunk or high, get in touch with a doctor. And talk to your teen in a kind way. For example, "People often drink or use drugs after a disaster to calm themselves or forget, but it can also cause more problems. Some other things you can do are take a walk, talk to me or your friends about how you feel, or write about your hopes for a better future."

Be very open. Discuss the ways you feel the trauma may be influencing her behavior.

Be flexible. It is okay, at this time, to have a little more flexibility with rules and academic and behavioral expectations.

Resume routine as much as possible. Children tend to function better when they know what to expect. Returning to a school routine will help students feel that the troubling events have not taken control over every aspect of

TYPICAL REACTIONS

Typical reactions of children ages 2-5:

- ❖ Talking repeatedly about the event or pretending to “play” the event
- ❖ Tantrums or irritable outbursts
- ❖ Crying and tearfulness
- ❖ Increased fearfulness — often of the dark, monsters or being alone
- ❖ Increased sensitivity to sounds like thunder, wind and other loud noises
- ❖ Disturbances in eating, sleeping and toileting
- ❖ Believing that the disaster can be undone
- ❖ Excessive clinging to caregivers and trouble separating
- ❖ Reverting to early behavior like baby talk, bedwetting and thumb-sucking

Typical reactions of children ages 6-11:

- ❖ Anxiety
- ❖ Increased aggression, anger and irritability (like bullying or fighting with peers)
- ❖ Sleep and appetite disturbances
- ❖ Blaming themselves for the event
- ❖ Moodiness or crying
- ❖ Concerns about being taken care of
- ❖ Fear of future injury or death of loved ones
- ❖ Denying the event even occurred
- ❖ Complaints about physical discomfort, such as stomachaches, headaches and lethargy, which may be due to stress
- ❖ Repeatedly asking questions
- ❖ Refusing to discuss the event (more typical among kids ages 9-11)
- ❖ Withdrawal from social interactions
- ❖ Academic problems (like trouble with memory and concentration, or refusing to attend school)

Typical reactions of children ages 12-18:

- ❖ Avoidance of feelings
- ❖ Constantly thinking about the assault
- ❖ Distancing themselves from friends and family
- ❖ Anger or resentment
- ❖ Depression and extreme sadness
- ❖ Panic and anxiety, including worrying about the future
- ❖ Mood swings and irritability
- ❖ Changes in appetite and sleep habits and personal hygiene habits
- ❖ Academic issues, such as trouble with memory and concentration, or refusing to attend school
- ❖ Participation in risky or illegal behavior, like drinking alcohol