

You and your child

For parents of children who have been sexually abused

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Foreword

Child sexual abuse is more common than we like to think. Children of all ages, from all cultural and from all economic groups are sexually abused. Child sexual abuse is harmful to the child and the long term harm can be tragic if not handled in a sensitive way.

Child sexual abuse is a crime. It cannot take place without secrecy. Although abusers often develop excuses for their behaviour, they know it is wrong and go to great lengths to keep their victims silent.

Child sexual abuse affects all members of the family as well as the child who has been abused. In particular, if the sexual abuse has occurred within the family and one of the child's parents is the abuser, then the parent who did not harm the child is left with a confusing range of feelings and the responsibility to make choices they would never have imagined necessary. It is often difficult for a non-offending parent to know how to act when faced with the news that their child has been sexually abused.

This booklet has been written for non-offending parents of children who have been sexually abused.

Some assumptions have been made about the people who are reading this booklet. Firstly, while the booklet may be helpful for parents whose children have been abused by a stranger, or someone outside their circle of family or friends, the booklet is written for parents of children who have been abused by a parent, caregiver or someone close to the family.

Because it is mainly men who abuse children – ninety-eight per cent of abusers are male – it is assumed that most non-offending parents are women. However, there will be some men whose children have been abused by family members or close friends to whom much of the information in this booklet will be relevant.

As a non-offending parent, you probably didn't know that your child was being sexually abused. Most likely, the person who abused your child is a member of your family or someone your family knew and trusted.

This booklet also makes one other important assumption – that the role of the non-offending parent in helping their child's recovery is essential. We believe that without the support of the parent who did not abuse the child, it will be much harder for the child to recover from sexual abuse. Therefore, this booklet has been written to offer you, the non-offending parent, some information about child sexual abuse; what you might expect from your child following the abuse; what feelings you may experience; and what some of the legal implications are for you and your family. This booklet also gives information about sexual abusers.

Reading the booklet may help with some of the choices you will face – choices about who to believe, who to support, who to hold responsible for the abuse and what you can do now. You may find it helpful to share this booklet with other members of your family or friends. Brothers and sisters of the child who has been abused, aunts and uncles, and close friends may benefit from gaining an understanding of the situation for you and your child.

It is hoped that this booklet may be one source of help for both you and for your child's recovery from sexual abuse.

Introduction

You have been given this booklet because you have a child in your care who has been sexually abused. It is likely that if your child has been sexually abused they have been abused by a male who is well know to them, probably related in some way. It may be that you are still in some state of shock and feel you are on a roller coaster ride of feelings and reactions. You may feel numb. Your family, Child Protection, the police, the offender, your child and others may be placing demands on you to act in ways they think are best.

Now that you know about your child's sexual abuse, an opportunity exists for you to play a unique and crucial role to assist your child. To pretend that it has not happened, to try to just forget about it altogether, it unlikely to be best for you or your child in the long run. It is important that steps are taken immediately for yourself and for your child which will lessen the impact of this abuse. It is also important to remember that, with time and care, you and your child can recover from the sexual abuse. Whether you suspected abuse or not, it is very important to remember that the person who committed the sexual abuse is the only one responsible for the abuse.

How do we define child sexual abuse?

Child Protection defines child sexual abuse as:

A child or young person is sexually abused when any person uses his or her authority over the child/young person to involve the child/young person in sexual activity. Child sexual abuse involves a wide range of sexual activity including fondling genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal or anal penetration, penetration by a finger, penis or other object, voyeurism and exhibitionism. It can also include exploitation through pornography or prostitution.

Sexual abuse is called incest when the abuser is a member of the child or young person's family – for example, a parent, sibling or uncle.

Some other definitions

- Perpetrator, offender, abuser. These are all words used to describe the person who abuses the child or young person.
- Disclosure. The statement the child or young person makes to another person which describes or reveals the abuse.
- Non-offending parent. The parent or caregiver who has not abused the child.
- Statement. You, your child and the offender may be asked to tell your side of the story to the police — this is called a statement.

Can we explain why sexual abuse happens?

While we are learning more about child sexual abuse, it is difficult to give reasons why it occurs. So rather than try to explain why child sexual abuse occurs, we can describe various beliefs that are held about child sexual abuse.

Over the years, our understanding of child sexual abuse has changed. In the past, some people believed that the child or the mother was most responsible for the abuse. Many people believed that children led men on or mothers set their children up to be abused by men. However, as we are learning more about child sexual abuse, we have changed our ideas about responsibility and blame for the abuse. We can look at the following areas to gain a greater understanding.

Society

Any understanding of child sexual abuse needs to take into account the society in which we live. Understanding the way men and women interact is very important in understanding child sexual abuse. Many counsellors and researchers now look at child sexual abuse from the point of view that men have more power in our society than women. Women are often economically dependent on men – they may rely on their male partners for money for their day-to-day living. Some say that men have a need to control women and that behaviour such as rape, domestic violence and child sexual abuse all stem from a man's need to be in control. However as women often are seen as protectors and carers of children, when children are harmed within a family many people blame the mother for that harm — no matter what actually happened. Again, remember that it is always the abuser who must take responsibility for the abuse.

Secrecy

Child sexual abuse is a private act. Usually there are no witnesses. The abuser will make all sorts of statements to the child to stop them from telling anyone about the abuse. The abuser will also use threats to keep the child silent. For example, to a very young child, the abuser may say that what is happening is their own very special secret. To older children the abuser may say to the child that if they tell they will be sent away to a home or that their mummy will die. To teenage children the abuser may say that they are preparing them for marriage or just teaching them about sex. Some men never make threats but know that the child would find it very hard to tell anyone about what is happening.

In these ways the abuser is clever and very careful to make sure that the sexual abuse will stay a secret. The implication of this is that the abuser realises that what he is doing is wrong and does not want the abuse to come out in the open.

Relationships

The abuser relies on the child not telling the secret. A strong relationship between your child and you means that it is more likely that your child will tell you about the abuse. Therefore the abuser may have been working hard, in quite subtle ways, to break down the relationship between you and your child.

You may find that your child's behaviour may have been increasingly difficult or hard to understand over the years or your child seems different to how they used to be. If your child is a teenager then they may have been cheeky, defiant, depressed or withdrawn for some time. This may be because the abuser has told the child that they, or you, are to blame for the abuse and that the child is unlovable. A child may have been told that if their mother loved them then she would not let the abuse continue. This would not have made your child feel good about themselves and would have led them to question their trust in you and others. We know that children who can't trust, who have low self-esteem, may act in all sorts of

ways. We talk about the implications for children who have been sexually abused elsewhere in this booklet.

If your child has been told that no-one would believe them if they told, then it would have been very hard for them to tell you about the abuse. Therefore, when sexual abuse is uncovered, you may need to work hard to re-establish trust and openness with your child. Many adults who were sexually abused as children talk about their feelings of anger towards their mother. Some say that their mothers should have known about the abuse and done something to stop it. A smaller number of survivors of abuse, whose mothers did know about the abuse, are still angry and cannot understand why their mother did not act to protect them. It may be difficult to accept that your child has been sexually abused within your family and that you were unaware of this. Particularly if the abuser is someone you loved and trusted.

Responsibility and blame

The abuser will have worked hard to shift responsibility away from himself to others; it is now time to shift that responsibility back. The role that the abuser played in the sexual abuse now needs to be understood and placed out in the open. The abuser has been responsible, not only for the abuse, but for making sure that everyone believes that the abuse was not his fault but somebody else's –usually the child's and the mother's. As the parent who did not abuse your child, how can you now place responsibility for the abuse where it belongs?

As stated earlier, the person responsible for the abuse is the person who committed the abuse. However, it is unlikely that saying this will suddenly make you or your child feel less responsible in some way for the abuse.

Your child is likely to go on feeling responsible because they did not tell anyone sooner. They may feel responsible for the changes that have occurred within the family, and responsible for your feelings too.

You may feel responsible for not finding out about the abuse. Many mothers of children who have been sexually abused say that looking back they can remember incidents which may have alerted them to something not being right. You may have even confronted the abuser at some time and he denied that he was abusing your child, leaving you feeling confused. You may keep these feelings of responsibility with you for some time. Perhaps it will be most helpful for you to understand the context in which child sexual abuse occurs. It is important to realise that child sexual abuse happens in many families and that the people who abuse children work in very similar ways to ensure that everything is kept secret and that they are not held responsible.

Some myths about child sexual abuse

There are lots of myths about sexual abuse. Some of these myths place the blame for the abuse on the child, some blame the mother, some take all the responsibility away from the abuser. Some myths say that sexual abuse is more common because of the decline of morals in our society and others say that, in some cultures, sexual abuse is okay. There are other myths that say sexual abuse is just a loving relationship between an adult and a child.

We need to look further at these myths to help us to understand them. These myths may have been created to help explain behaviour which is very difficult to explain. The effects of these myths may be that the victim of the abuse is blamed and the abuser remains free of guilt.

Myths that blame the child

Myth: Children are sexy

This myth says that children are sexy and therefore their sexiness encourages people to sexually abuse them. This suggests that men cannot control themselves when faced with an attractive young child.

Fact: We know that many children who are abused are very young — including babies and toddlers. Children of all ages – both boys and girls are sexually abused. A child's appearance can never excuse an adult's abusive acts.

Myth: Children don't mind the abuse too much or they would not let it go on for so long

Some people say that children are sexually abused for many years without telling anyone, therefore, it can not be as bad as people make out.

Fact: In reality, children are often very frightened and intimidated by the person abusing them, thus making it almost impossible for them to tell anybody. They may also feel guilty about what is happening to them. Common threats used by abusers include, if you tell, I'll go to jail and if you tell, I will be very angry and never see you again.

Children often do let others know that something is wrong by their behaviour. Behaviour may change considerably because of sexual abuse. For example, they may become more defiant or aggressive. Alternatively, they may become passive and withdrawn. In each case, the behaviour is different from how the child usually behaves.

Myth: Sexual abuse only happens to children who ask for it

The idea that certain children ask to be sexually abused is a myth. People sometimes say that children who run away, who cause their parents trouble – rough kids or disobedient children — are asking for trouble.

Fact: What we now know about child sexual abuse is that children who show this type of behaviour are probably doing it because they have been abused, either sexually or in some other way. Also, we know that sexual abusers carefully choose the child they abuse. They may look for a child who is seeking attention from adults; a child who is very obedient and unlikely to tell anyone; or a child who may not be believed if they do tell.

Myths that blame the mother

Myth: The mother is just as much to blame

If you are the mother of a child who has been abused you may find that many people blame you for the sexual abuse of your child. Researchers in the past suggested that the mother somehow joined with the person who was abusing the child to make sure that the abuse continued or that the mother did not care to stop the abuse.

Fact: Many people now realise that the person responsible for the abuse is the abuser.

To accept that someone known to you – such as your partner, father or brother – may have abused your child may seem to reflect on you. You may feel that it was your fault that you chose such a partner, or that you allowed your child to have contact with that person. It may seem easier just to deny that the abuse could have ever taken place.

Most women have no knowledge that their child has been sexually abused by a person well known to the child and the family. Therefore, to blame the parent who did not abuse the child is in no way helpful.

However, there are some women who may know about abuse but did not, or could not, act to stop the abuse.

There are many complex reasons why a parent does not act to stop sexual abuse that they know is, or may be, happening. Some researchers point to the power imbalance between men and women as being similar to the power imbalance that exists between men and children. As much as a child is vulnerable to the threats from the abuser not to tell anybody, many women are intimidated and threatened by those same men not to tell anybody what is happening. Women also are often in positions where they rely on the male to provide an income, housing and other security. To disturb this by speaking out about sexual abuse may be to threaten the only form of security that they know for them and their family.

Women are taught in our society to be obedient and loyal partners, as well as being taught to care for and protect their children. Thus, if a woman is in a position of having to decide between believing her partner or believing her child then the stress of making that decision can be enormous. Some women may have tried to tell someone of their concerns only to be told that they are crazy and are not believed.

Additionally, many people are unclear about what would happen if they told Child Protection or the police that their child has been sexually abused. You may have felt that action by Child Protection would make things worse. You may also feel that everyone will somehow know about the abuse and this may be embarrassing for you.

Myth: The mother must have been unable to satisfy her partner's sexual needs

This myth states that women who are sexually unavailable to their partners cause men to turn to their children or other people's children for sex.

Fact: It may be easy to agree with this, wanting to accept responsibility for the abuse. Other reasons may be added by women, such as them having an affair that their partner found out about, thus driving the man to have sex with a child. In no circumstance should a man believe that he has a right to have his sexual needs met by anybody. In addition, research tells us that most men who are sexually abusing children are in a sexual relationship with their partner at the same time. There is no consistent link between the sexual relationship of the offender with his partner and child sexual abuse.

Again, we state that in no way could the behaviour of the person who did not abuse the child ever cause the abuse. You are not the one who sexually abused your child. So no matter what was going on for you in your relationship with the person who abused your child – whether you were sexually unavailable to your partner, whether you had a suspicion but did not act – the only person responsible for the sexual abuse of your child is the abuser.

Myth about the abuser

Myth: He only did it because he loves children

The idea that abusers sexually abuse children because they love them so much is a myth.

Fact: While there may be many reasons why people choose to sexually abuse children, the idea that it is an extension of a loving relationship does not hold any weight. If men are threatening children to keep them silent or physically hurting them, or if children are so afraid of the abuse and so damaged by it, then this behaviour does not represent love. People who love children do not have sex with them. Sexually abusing children is an abuse of the trust that should exist between a child and an adult, an abuse of the power that an adult has over a child, and, where the abuser is a father or stepfather, a betrayal of the special bond between a parent and child.

Myth: He was abused as a child, so he could not help it

A reason some people use to excuse child sexual offenders is to argue that as a child the offender was abused and therefore he cannot help abusing children.

Fact: Some people who abuse children have been abused as children themselves. However, most people who have been abused do not go on to abuse their own or other people's children. In addition, girls are more likely to be sexually abused than boys, yet overwhelmingly men are the perpetrators of sexual abuse.

Myth: Women never sexually abuse children

Fact: The majority of those who sexually abuse children are men. However some women do sexually abuse their own and other people's children. Many people find it particularly distressing to believe that women sexually abuse. The same issues such as exploitation of the child and the abuse of the child's trust remain when a child is abused by a woman.

Some feelings you may be experiencing

‘It’s like a kind of grieving’

Parents whose children have been sexually abused talk about experiencing a kind of grieving after the disclosure of the abuse. Some parents of children who have been abused describe the grieving as death without someone dying. They feel the pain is long and never-ending as the abuser remains, to some degree, in their life. There is a sense of much loss when a child has been abused. For the non-offending parent there may be the loss of what may have been a good marriage or partnership. You may feel the loss of years of work put into a marriage and perhaps creating a family. You may grieve for your child’s loss of a sense of safety and trust. Feeling that your other children, your parents and other relatives may have a sense of something lost is common.

‘But I feel so responsible’

Even though you may come to accept that you are not responsible for the abuse itself, often the non-offending parent is left with many feelings of responsibility. You are expected to be strong and supportive of your abused child and others. You are expected to make the right decisions for your child, even though you may not know what these decisions are. You may be responsible for making choices such as: Should I tell my other children, parents and relatives? Should I allow my children to have any contact with the person who abused my child? How do I protect other children now that I know he’s an abuser? You might feel that it is almost impossible to make any of these choices. Some women find solutions to these problems quickly, while for many the decisions will only come with time – after speaking with supportive friends, family and counsellors.

‘I feel lots of conflicting emotions’

As well as grief and responsibility, it is likely that you and your child are experiencing a whole range of conflicting emotions. Listed opposite are some of the emotions children and adults may feel when sexual abuse becomes part of their experience. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to feel. Each person will react in their own way and confusion is common.

Adult		Child
‘It must be all my own fault’	Guilt	‘I must have caused all this trouble ‘
‘Who do I believe - him or her?’	Confusion	‘I don’t know whether I did the right thing in telling ‘
‘What is going to happen to us all now?’	Fear	‘I’m so scared about everything -what if he goes to jail’
‘I can never trust another man again’	Distrust	‘Who really believes me?’
‘I can hardly think straight’	Shock	‘I didn’t think I’d cause this much trouble’
‘It makes me sick to think what he did’	Disgust	‘How could he have done that to me?’
‘I’m so glad it’s been uncovered and stopped’	Relief	‘Thank goodness someone believed me’
‘I feel like I have lost a partner and everything I know’	Grief	‘I miss all the good things about my family’

What can I expect from my child in the future?

Behaviour

It is possible that your child has been displaying a whole range of behaviours which child protection practitioners call behavioural indicators of sexual abuse. It may make sense to you now – looking back on events – why your child changed their behaviour.

These may include behaviours such as lying, stealing, crying a lot, being defiant, missing school, school performance dropping, being aggressive, or being withdrawn. As you can see, some of these behaviours are opposite to each other. Often children who have been abused show some of these behaviours, but many do not display any behaviour which seems out of the ordinary.

The long-term effects of child sexual abuse are varied. Researchers have seen some behaviour and emotions which include:

- **Low self esteem** – many children describe themselves as stupid, bad, ugly or useless.
- **Ongoing learning problems** – learning becomes hard to focus on when children have experienced something so stressful.
- **Difficulty forming trusting and positive relationships** – children who have been sexually abused often believe they are wrong, have little faith in themselves and may find it difficult to make friends.
- **Lack of self-respect** – abused children have not had their rights respected by an adult, often someone they should be able to trust, which may destroy their ability to respect themselves.
- **Confusion about their own role within their family** – the blurring of the boundaries between them as a child and them as a sexual being can make it difficult for a child to work out the correct role for themselves within the family.
- **Ongoing anger that cannot seem to be resolved.** One of the most common feelings that a child can experience as a result of sexual abuse is anger – sometimes the child finds it difficult to work out why they are so angry and counselling can be very helpful.
- **Soiling and wetting** – some children and young people may revert to soiling or wetting – this can have a physical or emotional base.
- **Guilt** – a child or young person may feel guilty in a number of ways – for not stopping the abuse, for telling someone about the abuse or for the effect the disclosure has had on other family members.
- **Self-destructive behaviour** – this can result from the low self-esteem a child or young person feels as a result of the abuse.
- **Depression** – a child or young person may become depressed or withdrawn and this can often be an indicator that sexual abuse is occurring.

With sensitive counselling, the longer term effects of child sexual abuse can be reduced. Again the importance of stopping the abuse and supporting the child is essential for the child's long-term well being.

What about my child's relationship with the abuser?

Children and young people who have been abused vary greatly in their reaction to the person who abused them. Some children make a decision that they never want to see that person again. They may make this decision soon after the abuse has come into the open and never change their minds. Other children may find, over time that they want to begin to see the person who abused them again. Some children surprise the non-offending parent by wanting to maintain strong ties with the person who abused them. The relationship between the child and the abuser may also depend on the type of abuse the child was subjected to, and how the child experienced the abuse at that time. Abuse which included force and physical violence may mean that the child is afraid to ever have anything to do with the abuser again. The way in which the abuse was discovered, the circumstances to the disclosure, and other people's reactions to the abuse can also have an effect on the relationship between the abuser and the child. If the abuser is the child's parent then the child or young person may want to re-establish a relationship with the abuser at some stage.

If child protection practitioners are involved with your family they will also be concerned about your child's relationship with the person who harmed them. They will want to make sure that if the child sees the abuser again, the child is safe from further abuse. The child protection practitioner is likely to want to assess this relationship over a long period of time. If the matter goes to court, access between your child and the person who abused them may come into question. There may be pressure for your child to see the abuser. Many counsellors believe that it is best for the child to see the abuser from time to time rather than have absolutely no contact. Some counsellors believe that if the child has no contact, they will develop fantasies about the abuser which may be worse than the abuse which actually occurred. Other counsellors may believe otherwise. A sexual assault counsellor will be able to give you more information on this.

What about my relationship with my child?

No matter what your relationship was like with your child before you found out about the sexual abuse, it is likely that it will be different now. For some parents and their children the disclosure of the abuse may lead to a stronger closer relationship; however, it may lead to increased distrust and difficulties.

Many mothers of daughters who have been sexually abused by their fathers struggle with a range of conflicting emotions. While it is often difficult to discuss or acknowledge, you maybe feeling jealous. Some women talk of jealousy for the child as the other woman. If a child has been forced to become the sexual partner of your partner then it may be that they start to act like an adult partner. They may side with the abuser over yourself. Some abusers can convince a young person that they are right and that you are wrong.

Dealing with these feelings of jealousy will not be easy and may make you feel guilty or angry if your child has taken the abuser's side. However, knowing that you are not alone in feeling this and knowing that it is another manipulation by the abuser may make it easier for you.

How can I be strong for my child when I feel so helpless myself?

No doubt you are experiencing types of emotion unlike those experienced before. As stated earlier, you may feel pulled in many directions and feel that you do not have enough energy to meet your own and your child's needs. Some parents may choose to have a break from both their child and their partner while they sort out what to do next, some may want to spend time with just their partner without their child being present. While there is no right or wrong way to react, it needs to be remembered that your child will be making less sense of what is happening than you so they will need your ongoing belief, support and protection in whatever way you can manage to give it.

Will my child need special treatment from me from now on?

Your child will need reassurance and care from yourself and understanding from others. There are a number of things that you may do to help your child during this period. Spending time with your child will be important. Whether your child is a toddler or a teenager it is likely that they will want people around them who are comforting and who believe them. Spending time with them does not have to mean that you need to go anywhere special or spend a lot of money. Activities such as cooking together, walking, reading together or just being in the same room may be all that is required. Some children may appear to act younger than their age and you may find your child behaving like they did a few years ago. A five year old may want to have a bottle, or a thirteen year old may want you to read stories to them in bed. These will be ways of your child seeking extra comfort and also checking out to see whether you are available for them.

On the other hand some children or, in particular young people, may want to distance themselves from yourself, family and friends for a period while they make sense of what has happened to them. It is important to respect your child's wishes at this time and be sensitive to their mood changes and emotional needs.

Some 'dos' and 'don'ts' for speaking with a child who has been sexually abused

It may be hard to know where to begin talking with your child. What is best said and what is best left alone? Possibly the most important message to get across to your child either through words or actions is that you do not blame them for the abuse.

Do	Don't
<p>Tell them you believe them.</p> <p>Reassure them.</p> <p>Tell them that you do not blame them.</p> <p>Tell them that you will do all you can to keep them safe.</p> <p>Let them know that you still love them.</p> <p>Let them know that you are glad that they told you.</p> <p>Give them time to talk to you at their pace.</p> <p>Make time to spend with your child so you can talk privately.</p> <p>Be open and clear with them.</p> <p>Explain to your child in words they can understand what is happening with any court or legal action which may be taking place.</p> <p>Allow your child to talk about the confused way that they may feel.</p> <p>Try to be calm when talking with your child as they may be confused by anger.</p> <p>Try to understand as much as you can about the effects of child sexual abuse so that you can best support yourself and your child.</p>	<p>Blame your child for what happened.</p> <p>Suggest it would have been better if they had stayed quiet about the abuse.</p> <p>Tell your child that you blame yourself.</p> <p>Tell your child to forget it ever happened.</p> <p>Tell your child not to talk about it.</p> <p>Get upset every time your child talks about the abuse.</p>

How do I explain to others what has happened to my child?

There will be people who will be curious to know what has happened to your child and want to know why changes have occurred recently in your family. It is your child's and your family's business and where possible it is best for you and your child to decide who should be told and when. It may be helpful for you to confide in a few trusted friends or relatives in order to gain support for what is likely to be a difficult time for you and your child.

You may like to ask yourself the question – who needs to know? If your child is of school age, it may be helpful for your child's classroom teacher to have some understanding of what has occurred. This may help the teacher deal with behaviour that your child may display at school. It may also help to explain to the teacher why your child has been behaving in a certain way. However the teacher does not need to know all of the details of what happened and they might not need to know at all if your child is not displaying any changes in behaviour or any change in their school performance. If your child sees the same doctor regularly, it may be helpful to tell them that your child has been sexually abused.

What are some things I can do to look after myself?

It is important that you look after yourself during this stressful time. You should do this for yourself and for your child's sake as they will be relying on you. Your own needs should not be ignored. It may be helpful for you to see your own counsellor or arrange to speak to other parents of children who have been sexually abused.

You may want to organise some time out for yourself – do something that will give you a break from the current situation. Although difficult to organise, this may be one of the best ways for friends and relatives to help.

Looking after your health will be important. It will be easier to make decisions for you and your child if you are not run down and exhausted.

Some consequences of sexual abuse for your family life

If the sexual offender is your partner and he has left the family following the disclosure of the abuse then perhaps for the first time you are parenting on your own, maybe with a much smaller income or limited financial security. You may be worried about your housing situation. It is likely that the consequences of your child's disclosure are far-reaching.

You will need support and advice to help you through this difficult time. The resource guide at the back of this booklet will give you a list of places that offer financial support, housing services and counselling support. For many women, decisions about how to react to the abuse may come down to economic considerations. For example it may be that you need to maintain a relationship with the abuser as you may have joint bank accounts and a house in both of your names. Dealing with the legal and financial implications of this may feel overwhelming, at least for some time.

It is likely that your family life will remain uncertain for some time. You will be experiencing a whole range of feelings and a lot will be required of you. You may have to make decisions about whether you want to continue a relationship with the person who abused your child; whether that person be your partner, husband, brother, father, son or friend of the family.

Counselling: Won't talking about it just make it worse?

Some people want to put the experience of their child's abuse behind them. They may think that it is best for everyone to get on with their lives. However many researchers, psychologists and counsellors find that the sooner that children and young people can be provided with an opportunity to talk about their experiences then the better able they are to deal with abuse as a child and later as an adult.

Some counsellors will recommend a long period of counselling, some will suggest that your child may require a few sessions only. Some children, in particular older children, may not want to attend any counselling or may only go once and choose not to attend again. This may be frustrating for you if you feel that they would benefit from seeing a professional who specialises in counselling. In such a situation your continued attendance at counselling may be helpful to the child anyway because if you are being helped to cope with the disclosure of the abuse then you may well be helping your child. Reminding (without nagging) your child that counselling is available to them, or providing them with booklets or pamphlets that they can read at their own pace may be helpful. Your child may find that they prefer to talk with a special teacher, a friend's mother, or an older sibling for example rather than see a counsellor. This may be all that they are ready for and they may choose in time to see a professional counsellor.

It may also be useful to remember that your child may require counselling at various points in their life. For example a child abused at four years of age may obtain some immediate counselling, then feel the need to talk to a counsellor further when they are a teenager and maybe again when they are an adult. It seems that major life events throughout the child's life may lead to a point of crisis at which they feel a need to seek professional counselling.

Events such as a child's first adult sexual relationship, marriage, childbirth and so on may trigger memories which require counselling.

Counselling for yourself and other immediate family members such as brothers or sisters is also important. With counselling support you may be able to find some answers to the many questions you are bound to have. Some counsellors will see you and your child together. At some point, depending on the circumstances, it may be helpful for you, your child and the abuser to have counselling together. However this is only advisable if the offender is undergoing or has completed an individual treatment program.

In some areas you will find support groups of parents whose children have been sexually abused. Often talking with other parents who are facing similar dilemmas can be very helpful. Those who have joined support groups for parents of sexually abused children usually find these useful.

Who are the people who sexually abuse children?

There are a number of different theories and explanations about why people, almost always men, sexually abuse children. Research into this area is continuing and we are learning more all the time about why men are violent to children and others.

We do know that most people who sexually abuse children are men – about 98 per cent. Of the cases that are reported to authorities, the victims of incest are about 80 per cent female and 20 per cent male. If a child has been sexually abused it is rare that the abuse has only occurred once.

One research report says that the average number of times that a female child is sexually abused is 81.3 times, with the average number of times for boys being 62.3 times. Additionally, research indicates that of those men who abuse children within their families, 66 per cent of them are also abusing children outside their own family and many also abuse adult women.

Research tells us that the people who sexually abuse children do so in a planned way and work out times to be alone with children. Without intervention to protect the child we know that sexual abuse will continue, become more frequent and more intrusive.

Sexual offenders come from all walks of life. One research study found that about half of the men who sexually abused children were in a stable relationship and nearly half had completed at least one year of university.

Between 20 per cent and 50 per cent of men who are sexual offenders claim to have been sexually abused themselves as children.

Can we teach sexual offenders not to offend?

Again, different people have different ideas on the best way to respond to men who sexually abuse children. Some researchers conclude that treatment programs are useful in helping the offender own up to what they have done and to stop them from offending again.

Most people who work in treatment programs agree that treatment needs to be a long term proposition lasting from between twelve months to several years.

More will be learnt about why men sexually abuse children as more men are treated. Child sexual abuse is a crime and some abusers are tried before the courts and some receive jail sentences. However it is unclear how helpful jail sentences are in stopping the abuser from abusing again.

What happens legally?

You may choose not to inform the police about the sexual abuse of your child. This decision may be one that you want to talk over with a sexual assault counsellor, or with a lawyer. You may want to talk to the police and then choose not to go ahead with charges.

Child sexual abuse is a crime and there are a number of legal implications that may result from the discovery of abuse. It may be that a report has been made to Child Protection to investigate a report somebody has made about your child.

Child Protection must involve the police whenever a child is suspected to have been sexually or seriously physically abused. Child Protection and the police work co-operatively but conduct separate investigations for different purposes. The police are interested in knowing whether a crime has been committed and will conduct their investigation around gathering evidence and statements from those involved. The role of Child Protection is to ensure that your child is safe and protected from further abuse.

Unfortunately, only a small number of sexual offences against children get to the criminal court. Reasons include the difficulty in children's statements being believed, the difficulty of children's evidence being given in court and the lack of witnesses to child sexual abuse crimes. As a result of criminal proceedings some offenders may be ordered to undergo a treatment program instead of a jail sentence.

Intervention orders

Intervention orders can be taken out by yourself or by the child protection practitioner on behalf of your child. An intervention order can be used as a way of getting the person who committed the offence to leave your home thereby seeking safety for your child. Conditions can be attached to an intervention order. These orders are made in the Magistrate's Court or Children's Court. The child protection practitioner and the police can give you more information on how to apply for an intervention order.

Protection applications

It may be that child protection practitioners make the decision that your child is not safe to stay within the family for a period of time. The child protection practitioner may therefore issue a protection application. The issuing of a protection application means that child protection practitioners can remove your child from your care. If this is the case then your child will have been placed with either a foster family, a member of your family or placed in a house run or approved of by Child Protection. The child protection practitioner must take the application to the Children's Court within 24 hours of the decision that a child is at risk, or if it is a Friday, by the following Monday. If the matter is heard on the weekend or when the courts are closed, then the child protection practitioner will arrange for a bail justice to hear the protection application until the matter can go to court at the earliest possible time.

If you do not agree with your child having been placed out of your care, then you can apply to the Magistrate at the court to have your child returned to your care. A solicitor at the court will be able to explain your rights to you.

The child protection practitioners may have decided that your child is safe within your care but may issue a protection application by notice to apply to the court to have an ongoing role in monitoring your child's situation in relation to his or her welfare.

You can obtain free legal advice at the Children's Court about the legal implications of any protective action. The child protection practitioners will also provide you with information about any court application they make.

Medical examinations

The police or child protection may want your child to have a medical examination. There are two reasons for this. One is to make sure that your child is okay medically; that they do not have any infection, or damage that needs treatment. The second reason is to assist with the possible Court proceedings. The presence of some sign of sexual trauma may help with an investigation by helping to prove that the child has been sexually abused. However the absence of medical evidence does not mean that the abuse did not happen.

Will the offender go to jail?

In Victoria at this time a relatively small number of people who sexually abuse children go to jail. This is for a number of reasons, including the fact that children's evidence can be easily challenged in court by lawyers.

Laws have changed recently making it easier for the police to charge people in relation to crimes against children, however convictions still remain low.

Mothers of sexually abused children speak

Janine's story

My hands trembled as I tugged at what appeared to be a photo through the slot of a money box belonging to my husband. And there it was. Finally the proof I had been searching for three years. A photo of my daughter (16 years old at the time) performing a sexual act on my husband. Oh yes, I had suspected for three years that something was going on – instinct or whatever you might call it. I had confronted my husband on several occasions about my fears (no easy task considering the physical and emotional abuse suffered during the marriage), and each time he would vehemently deny it, and on the last occasion he told me I was going mad, and if I ever brought up the subject again he would leave me! At that time I felt that I could not live without him. Finally in desperation, I confronted my daughter as tactfully as I could and she just laughed and told me I was being crazy, I was going mad. I really believed that. An appointment was made with a psychiatrist, but I couldn't tell him my real problem. I was sent away with some tranquillisers to 'calm me down'.

And so it was with a mixture of relief, and all sorts of other emotions that I found myself that day of discovery. For the first few weeks I was living on pure adrenalin. So many things to do. First of all – kick my husband out! Go to court for an intervention order; daughter not willing to press charges because my husband had been brainwashing her into believing that he had to do those things to her; desperately trying to get daughter to have counselling, but her unwillingness to do anything was a part of the denial process. I knew what had to be done – but my hands were tied until my daughter was ready.

At that time I felt as though all my emotions were exposed for the world to see. I hated all men. They were all potential sex abusers of children. I was completely obsessed with this nightmare. I could no longer pass the time of day with anyone. All my conversations centred on the abuse of my daughter. I prayed sometimes for a break in the form of denial so I could escape. But there was nowhere to go. I just had to deal with it and that was it. After the first weeks of the adrenalin rush had worn off, every other emotion imaginable surfaced. Guilt, anger at myself, anger at my husband (I stayed awake at nights plotting ways to kill him), anger at my daughter (I asked, but she wouldn't tell me), severe depression, panic attacks, fits of crying, and a deep sadness that reached to the very core of my being.

I now know that this was all part of the mourning process which effects all of us at the end of a marriage. It doesn't have to be the physical death of a spouse, but the knowledge that this person is now out of your life forever. It doesn't matter if the marriage was a bad one, you will still have to endure some level of the mourning process. Once I was aware of this, I found it a little easier to cope, as I knew that time would eventually help me recover. It is so important to have a network of support for yourself. Talk, talk, talk. Cry, cry, cry. You must release all the poison. If you don't it will continue to poison you.

As parents we are expected to be strong for our children at these times – but I often asked myself 'How can I be strong when I feel like a child myself?' I needed to be nurtured and mothered as well. And this is where the counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists are important. I'm not discounting the importance of family and friends, but sometimes they are suffering too, and we to off-load some pretty heavy stuff onto someone who is not emotionally involved. I guess the most important coping skill would be day by day – and if that seems too much, even minute by minute. Anyway, I'm here to tell you that in twelve months, I've been to hell and back, but I'm still standing. I now look to the future with hope, and I know that my daughter has been given back her life. The pain does lessen, but you never forget.

Vivien's story

I had been married thirty years with three children, a son 23 and two daughters 21 and 17, when my youngest made the disclosure, in the form of a letter handed to me, that her father had been sexually abusing her, and had previously abused her older sister.

The shock, the mental numbness and confusion cannot be fully described. I no longer knew what to believe. On confronting my husband with the alleged situation, to have him admit that all my daughter had written was true, added more to the confusion. Somehow I had foolishly imagined he would deny it.

I decided to contact my local Community Health Centre, who then referred me to a Family Therapy Centre. My children, all three of them, and I have been receiving counselling. My husband has also been attending separately.

It will take a long time. The far reaching effects are never ending. Daily, issues occur that need to be dealt with – a phrase from an uninformed acquaintance, a question from a neighbour, an advertisement in the media, school/parent situations, family functions, and it just goes on.

I feel as though there has been a death in the family. But it is worse than that, as the person is still here. I had no idea it would feel as it does. Something just dies inside. I guess it is a dying, but not a death. I wish I had been prepared for how I feel – but how can you be prepared for something like this?

For me, the most important factor was to be as strong as I knew how for my daughters – support them until they no longer need such support. There is always a positive aspect in everything, no matter how overwhelming the negatives. I know that all this has brought out the best in my children and me, and that we have a wonderful 'oneness' of which we are all aware and appreciate.

My advice to anyone involved in a child sexual abuse situation would be to seek assistance/ counselling as soon as possible after disclosure. To let time elapse and hope the situation will 'go away' fools no-one and only prolongs the recovery process, mental trauma and suffering being endured by the victim, the non-offending party and associated family members.

Conclusion

It is hoped that you will have found some use for the information contained within these pages. You may have a worker involved with your family who will be able to guide you to other written material or to videos that might be helpful. There may be groups run in your local area for parents of children who have been sexually abused. At the end of this booklet is a list of some of the resources across Victoria.

Remember that as the parent who has not sexually abused your child, you are not responsible for the abuse. However, there is a vital role that you can play in helping your child. It is hoped that this booklet may have helped you make some choices how you may best help your child and yourself.

Contacts

Child protection

If you suspect that a child you know is being abused, contact a Department of Human Services office to discuss your concerns.

After Hours

13 12 78

During business hours ring the number covering the local government area where the child lives.

Divisions

East

East metropolitan

Boorondara, Knox, Manningham, Maroondah, Monash, Whitehorse, Yarra Ranges

Intake Unit 1300 360 391

East rural

Alpine, Benalla, Greater Shepparton, Indigo, Mansfield, Mitchell, Moira, Murrindindi, Strathbogie, Towong, Wangaratta, Wodonga

Intake Unit 1800 650 227

North

North metropolitan

Banyule, Brimbank, Darebin, Hume, Melbourne, Moreland, Nillumbik, Whittlesea, Yarra

Intake Unit 1300 664 977

North rural

Buloke, Campaspe, Central Goldfields, Gannawarra, Greater Bendigo, Loddon, Macedon Ranges, Mildura, Mount Alexander, Swan Hill

Intake Unit 1800 675 598

South

South metropolitan

Bayside, Cardinia, Casey, Frankston, Glen Eira, Greater Dandenong, Kingston, Mornington Peninsula, Port Phillip, Stonington

Intake Unit 1300 655 795

South rural

Bass Coast, Baw Baw, East Gippsland, LaTrobe, South Gippsland, Wellington

Intake Unit 1800 020 020

West

West metropolitan

Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong, Melton, Moonee Valley, Wyndham

Intake Unit 1300 664 977

West rural

Cola, Coranamite, Glenelg, Greater Geelong, Moyne, Queenscliffe, Southern Grampians, Surf Coast, Warrnambool

Intake Unit 1800 075 599

Ararat, Ballarat, Golden Plains, Hepburn, Hindmarsh, Horsham, Moorabool, Northern Grampians, Pyrenees, West Wimmera, Yarriambick

Other resources

Victoria Police

Sexual Offence and Child Abuse Investigation Team Coordination Unit

Telephone (03) 9611 8800

Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs)

These centres offer a specialist support, advice and counselling service for all victims of sexual assault, male and female, adults and children.

Metropolitan CASAs

South Eastern CASA

Moorabbin Campus

Monash Medical Centre 867 Centre Road, East Bentleigh

Telephone (03) 9594 2289

Website: www.secasa.com.au

The Gatehouse Centre

Royal Children's Hospital

Flemington Road, Parkville

Telephone (03) 9345 6391 or 9345 5222

Website: www.rch.org.au

CASA House

Royal Women's Hospital

270 Cardigan Street, Carlton

Telephone (03) 9349 1766 (After Hours Crisis Line)

Telephone (03) 9344 2210 (during office hours)

Website: www.rch.org.au/casa

Northern CASA

Building 26, Repatriation Campus Austin Health
Banksia Street Heidelberg
Telephone (03) 9496 2240
Website: www.northern.casa.org.au

West CASA

53 Ballarat Road Footscray
Telephone (03) 9687 5811

Eastern CASA

17 Ware Crescent Ringwood East
Telephone (03) 9870 7330

Rural CASAs

Bendigo-Loddon Campaspe CASA

Bendigo Base Hospital
Corner Lucan and Arnold Streets Bendigo
Telephone (03) 5441 0430

Ballarat CASA

115a Ascot Street South Ballarat
Telephone (03) 5320 3933

Barwon CASA

291 Latrobe Terrace Geelong
Telephone (03) 5222 4318

Child Assault Management Program

P O Box 63 Moe
Telephone (03) 5127 5555

Davey House Family Resource Centre

P O Box 120 Wanthaggi
Telephone (03) 5671 3278

Goulburn Valley CASA

130 Nixon Street Shepparton
Telephone (03) 5831 2343

Gippsland CASA

PO Box 1124 Morwell
Telephone (03) 5134 3922

Latrobe Community Health

Morwell Centre Morwell
Telephone (03) 5136 2400

Mallee Sexual Assault Unit

Suite 1, 144–146 Lime Avenue Mildura
Telephone (03) 5025 5400

Upper Murray CASA

38 Green Street Wangaratta
Telephone (03) 5722 2203 Toll Free: 1800 806 292

South West CASA

299 Koroit Street Warrnambool
Telephone (03) 5563 1277

Statewide 24 Hour Access

Telephone 1800 806 292

Workers at this centre can refer you to local community based organisations and self help groups, and advise on specialist counsellors in your area.