

# TURNING THE PAGE

Understanding Child Sexual Abuse  
& The Path To A New Beginning

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A GUIDE FROM

CENTRAL OKANAGAN

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SOCIETY**

Empowering Change



## What I need from you... from a survivor

### Start by Believing.

**Listen** and encourage me to tell you only what I am comfortable with talking about. Focus on my feelings and reactions rather than on the “story” of what happened.

**Restore my power.** The abuser didn't give me a choice. From now on, I need you to help me make decisions by giving me options and respecting my choices.

I need your **support**, but if you try to “rescue” me, give me advice, or take over, you are taking away my power.

**Understand** that I might feel: shock, fear, disbelief, numb, anger, and/or shame these are all normal and valid reactions to the violence

Help me understand that **it wasn't my fault**. What I did or didn't do isn't the problem. The abuser's behavior and action were wrong.

**Respect my dignity.** Please don't tell to others about my experience without my permission.

**Take care** of yourself and understand that your reactions to what happened to me may differ from mine.

**Give me the time I need  
to recover at my own pace.**

## ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE...

Child sexual abuse can be hard to hear about and hard to talk about.

Even though we may never have discussed it openly, we have picked up messages and developed beliefs about sexual abuse. This booklet will provide practical information for caregivers and survivors to develop an accurate understanding of the impact and dynamics of sexual abuse.

## IMPACT OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Research indicates that the impact of sexual abuse on children is dependent on a number of factors including:

- Age and developmental level of the child
- Emotional health prior to the abuse
- Frequency and nature of the abuse
- The child's understanding of the abuse
- The nature of the relationship between the child and the abuser
- The type and amount of support provided to the survivor
- The response of the family, friends, community, school, justice system

Some or all of these factors can affect the impact of the abuse, making it either more or less traumatic. When the abuse is addressed in a direct and sensitive way the impact is reduced.

## LOOK OUT FOR CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR

A child who has been sexually abused may show none, some, or all of these typical changes in behavior:

- Fear of being left alone with an adult
- Unusual fear of certain places, rooms or situations
- Extreme anxiety about things in general
- Withdrawn, uncommunicative or depressed
- Nightmares or sleep disturbances
- Difficulty asserting self, becoming overly compliant, difficulty knowing when and how to say “no”
- Lack of spontaneity and playfulness
- May neglect personal grooming and hygiene
- May avoid physical contact or become overly affectionate
- Frequent headaches, stomach aches, bodily aches and pains; many of which may be focused in the vagina or anal area
- Regression to behavior which the child had previously outgrown, e.g. thumb sucking, bed-wetting, whining, clinging, crying, nightmares
- Outbursts of temper and aggressive, abusive behavior towards parents, teachers, siblings, peers, pets, property and themselves
- Use of drugs and alcohol, self harm, isolation
- Suicidal thought / behaviours
- Sexual behavior problems, For example, acting out in a sexual manner with other children and “seductive” behavior with adults. May masturbate in public and may masturbate excessively. (For more information see the COEFS booklet “Birds & Bees”)



**A CHILD WHO HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED MAY HAVE THE FOLLOWING PHYSICAL AND MEDICAL SYMPTOMS:**

- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Pain, swelling or itching in the genital area
- Bruises, bleeding or laceration of the external genitalia, vagina or anal areas
- Pregnancy, especially in early teen years
- Pain during urination
- Vaginal/Penile discharge
- Sexually transmitted infections( STI's), especially pre-adolescents
- Recurring vaginal infection in a child under 12 years of age

## FEELINGS WHICH MAY BE EXPERIENCED BY A CHILD WHO HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED

- **Fear:** stemming from threats the abuser used to keep the child from telling; of being blamed for the abuse; of disrupting family life; of having been injured physically.
- **Anger:** stemming from not understanding why someone they trusted would hurt them; may blame other adults for not protecting them.
- **Feeling Different:** that they are the “only ones”; believe that if others knew, they would be labeled “weird” or “different”.
- **Guilt and Shame:** children may think they are to blame for the abuse, leading to feelings of low self-esteem, guilt and shame. Children may feel they must have done something to deserve the abuse; shame might come from “good” body feelings they had from sexual abuse acts; may also feel guilt because they feel responsible for family disruption or for getting the abuser into trouble. Children may feel inadequate, worthless, and unloved.
- **Confusion:** It is common for a child to have two or more conflicting feelings. For example, the child might be confused about touching and the difference between what is affectionate and what is abusive.

Healing takes time and it is important to allow children to be able to take their own time. It is very likely that the child will be processing the abuse at each new developmental stage.

A child who seems “worse” can actually be doing better. It may be that they are hiding less inside and are finding ways to express their feelings to you. A child who seems to be “over it”, who then falls back into some of these behaviors, may be trying to understand and deal with what is happening.

## IDENTIFYING TRIGGERS

Recovering from sexual abuse is not a smooth process. Angry outbursts, nightmares or other behaviors can be triggered by seeing the abuser again, having to go to court, seeing something on TV, sounds, smells, visuals or changes in the home which remind the child of the abuse or the abuser.

Being aware of the triggers for your child will help you to gain perspective on the underlying reasons for your child's behavior and allow you to offer the type of safeguards and support that your child needs.



## SUPPORTING A CHILD WHO HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED

- Be patient. As mentioned, recovery may take time.
- Recognize your child's needs: to be loved, accepted, believed, and to feel safe. Your child needs to rebuild feelings of self-worth. Tell your child you care and show affection, reassuring words, or actions that they are safe and loved.
- Create an open atmosphere to talk with your child and help them identify, express, and work through feelings about the abuse and what has happened since. Answer questions calmly and honestly.
- Realize that because your child may want to protect you or not upset you, they may keep their feelings inside. Your child needs to know that you can handle whatever they have to say. If you don't feel that you can handle what they have to say, seek help for yourself too.
- Explain to your child that s/he is not responsible for your reactions. You may need to get help in dealing with your feelings. If you are not in a position to provide emotional support for your child, ask someone else to do so.
- Recognize that some aspects of the abuse (affection, physical contact, and attention) may have been pleasant for your child. Your belief that the abuse was a terrible experience may make your child feel guilty.
- Tell your child that sexual feelings are not bad or wrong, but it is unfair for someone in a position of power to sexually abuse them. Help them to understand their bodies have automatic responses to sexual stimuli and that these responses are normal.

- Children who are concerned about being injured inside should be examined by an understanding doctor.
- Don't let the child think that they caused pain or misery in the family because they told what happened. Validate the child for telling.
- Respect your child's right to privacy.
- Be careful which family members and friends you talk to about the abuse as your child may care who knows and not everyone will be supportive.
- Help your child understand why other people (doctor, police, social workers, and counselors) are involved, and why you need to tell them some things. Be honest with the child about what you tell the police etc.
- Protect your child from any further abuse by preventing contact with the offender and by reducing the number of strangers, family members and friends who are close with the offender.
- Return to a regular routine as soon as possible and try to be consistent and predictable in your behavior and in your routine. Do this so the child doesn't feel like what happened isn't important. Maintain balance.
- It is important to help your child grieve: withdrawal, anxiety, anger, aggressiveness, despair, and sadness may all be expressions of grieving. Try to support them to express these feelings in a healthy way.

*(continued on page 10)*

## DID YOU KNOW...?

- 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18.
- Up to age 12, boys and girls are equally at risk of being abused. After age 12 the risk decreases for boys and remains high for girls and women.
- Society and media focuses on “stranger-danger”; however, in roughly 90-95% of cases, the child is abused in a familiar place (home, car, and/or playground) by someone they know and trust, such as a parent, relative, older friend, babysitter or neighbour.
- Children are often persuaded by their abuser that the abuse is their fault, or the child is threatened so that they don't tell. So it is quite likely that the disclosed incidents are only a fraction of the problem.
- It is not uncommon to see abuse being repeated from one generation to the next.
- Education is a necessary part of prevention. Children and caregivers who are aware of the risks, rights, and body boundaries are less vulnerable.

Children need to feel loved and accepted for who they are. Reassure that child that the abuse was not his or her fault and that they made a good choice. This is the first step to re-establishing trust.

—Paula Farber



are. When a child discloses abuse it's important to  
r fault, and that telling you about the abuse was a  
trust a safety for the child.

rell, BScN, M.A., Sexual Assault Centre Coordinator

*(continued from page 7)*

- Give them positive feedback about themselves (appearance, small achievements, creativity, etc.)
- Talk about normal kid things, not just things that have to do with the abuse.
- Encourage physical and social activities but don't pressure the child to take part.
- Avoid overprotection for older children (i.e. 10+)
- Talk to children about personal rights, about different types of touches, and let them know it is their right not to be subjected to abusive or sexual touching.
- Children who have been sexually abused are struggling to regain control over their environment. Some ways, in which a child can reclaim control by being able to express her/himself, feeling strong rather than helpless, being able to make some choices and trusting feelings.
- You can look forward to your child stabilizing, especially if they are getting help from a professional who specializes in child sexual abuse counseling. Stabilization means your child has returned to children's activities and has resolved as much as he/she can about the abuse at this stage.

## DEALING WITH YOUR OWN RESPONSE

It is common to feel like you are in a crisis after your child has been sexually abused. Trauma and stress can make you feel numb or over stimulated. You may feel able to do only what you need to get through, and not much else. Trying to maintain control of the situation can drain you of your energy. At times, it may seem that if you show your feelings, you will fall apart, and not be there for your child at all.

If you don't feel you can be in control of your reactions during this difficult time, it is important to seek professional help for both you and your child.

Some feelings that might be surfacing:

- Sense of guilt as a caregiver. Remember that parents cannot be expected to know all, see all, and never make mistakes.
- Loss of confidence in your ability to parent.
- Sorrow at your child's loss of "innocence".
- Feeling betrayed by the abuser or by the person to whom the child disclosed the abuse.
- Conflicting emotions: anger, rage, revenge, depression, confusion, shame, helplessness, and powerlessness.
- Not being able to foresee a time when you will feel normal again. These feelings may be expressed in a variety of ways including: difficulty sleeping, moodiness, difficulty concentrating, a knot, pain or ache in the stomach, or other physical reaction.
- Desire to "get over it"
- Denial which may be expressed as hope that you are wrong or that you misinterpreted the disclosure

## CARING FOR YOURSELF AND GETTING SUPPORT

Parents of a child who has been sexually abused are asked to put their feelings aside and concentrate on being a support to their children. That is not possible if you do not have a support system for yourself.

- Surround yourself with friends and select family members who are not critical, join a support group, or see a counsellor.
- If you were sexually abused when you were young, it may be difficult to support your child unless you have dealt with the feelings surrounding your own abuse.
- Avoid thinking about what you could or should have done and focus on what you're now going to do.
- Find time to cry and express your feelings.
- Don't lose your usual self-care: exercise, reading, hot baths, gardening, etc.
- Recognize your own needs.
- Give yourself time to grieve.

# INFORMATION ABOUT THE CRIMINAL LEGAL PROCESS

## **POLICE/RCMP**

- The role of the police is to investigate reported incidents of crime and recommend to the Crown Counsel (prosecutor) what charges should be made.
- The investigation often includes interviewing the victim, the accused, and possible witnesses, as well as ensuring the collection of evidence.

## **DECISION TO PROSECUTE**

The information from the investigation is given to the Crown Counsel, who decides whether there is enough evidence to proceed with the prosecution. If the Crown decides to proceed, the case is prepared for trial and the crown interviews and prepares witnesses to testify at the trial.

## **RIGHT TO COUNSEL**

- At any stage in the legal proceedings, the accused has the right to consult legal counsel (called the defense counsel).
- Defense counsel might persuade the crown to withdraw or reduce the charges.
- The Crown prosecutor represents the best interest of the public and is not the lawyer for the victim. The victim has a right to seek her/his own legal counsel.

## **COURT APPEARANCE AND ENTERING A PLEA**

- The accused appears in court to answer to the charges and to enter a plea. The accused is always entitled to ask for an adjournment in order to obtain legal counsel.
- If the accused enters a “guilty” plea, there is no need for a trial, and a date for sentencing is set.
- If the accused enters a “not guilty” plea then a date is set for trial.

**TRIAL** *(Note: it can take up to a year or more before a case goes to trial)*

- The evidence of the Crown is presented. The victim usually testifies as a witness for the prosecution. The evidence of the defense is also presented. The accused may or may not testify at the trial.
- Very strict rules of evidence are in place to ensure that the accused person is only convicted if there is evidence to establish guilt “beyond a reasonable doubt”.

**CONVICTION, SENTENCING OR AQUITTAL**

- If the accused is found guilty, s/he is then sentenced or a date is set for sentencing.
- Sentencing may include a fine, probation, prison term, or a combination.
- A conviction results in a criminal record.
- If the accused is acquitted they are released immediately.

**APPEAL PROCESS**

An appeal against a conviction or sentence must be filed by Crown or defense counsel within 30 days, unless this period is extended by appeal court due to extenuating circumstances.

**CIVIL REMEDIES**

Whether or not the accused is convicted of the crime, the victim may choose to seek a civil remedy. The civil legal process is different from the criminal legal process. COEFS has information regarding civil remedies for sexual assault victims. If you are interested in pursuing the civil process ask your victim service worker or advocate for information about this process.

# Age of Consent to Sexual Activity

Source: Department of Justice Canada, February 17, 2010

## **WHAT DOES THE “AGE OF CONSENT” REALLY MEAN?**

The age of consent, also known as the “age of protection”, refers to the age at which a young person can legally consent to sexual activity. All sexual activity without consent, regardless of age, is a criminal offence.

## **TO WHAT KIND OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY DOES THIS APPLY?**

The age of consent laws apply to all forms of sexual activity, ranging from sexual touching (eg. kissing) to sexual intercourse.

## **WHAT IS CANADA'S AGE OF CONSENT?**

The age of consent for sexual activity is 16 years. It was raised from 14 years on May 1, 2008 by the Tackling Violent Crime Act. However, the age of consent is 18 years where the sexual activity “exploits” the young person – when it involves prostitution, pornography or occurs in a relationship of authority, trust or dependency (e.g., with a teacher, coach or babysitter). Sexual activity can also be considered exploitative based on the nature and circumstances of the relationship, e.g., the young person’s age, the age difference between the young person and their partner, how the relationship developed (quickly, secretly, or over the Internet) and how the partner may have controlled or influenced the young person.

## **ARE THERE ANY EXCEPTIONS TO THIS?**

The Criminal Code provides “close in age” or “peer group” exceptions. For example, a 14 or 15 year old can consent to sexual activity with a partner as long as the partner is less than five years older and there is no relationship of trust, authority or dependency or any other exploitation of the young person.

This means that if the partner is 5 years or older than the 14 or 15 year old, any sexual activity will be considered a criminal offence unless it occurs after they are married to each other (in accordance with the

“solemnization” of marriage requirements that are established in each province and territory, governing how and when a marriage can be performed, including the minimum age at which someone may marry).

There is also a “close-in-age” exception for 12 and 13 year olds: a 12 or 13 year old can consent to sexual activity with another young person who is less than two years older and with whom there is no relationship of trust, authority or dependency or other exploitation of the young person.

### **ARE 16 AND 17 YEAR OLDS ALSO PROTECTED AGAINST SEXUAL EXPLOITATION?**

The Criminal Code protects 16 and 17 year olds against sexual exploitation, where the sexual activity occurs within a relationship of trust, authority, dependency or where there is other exploitation. Whether a relationship is considered to be exploiting the 16 or 17 year old will depend upon the nature and circumstances of the relationship, e.g., the age of the young person, the age difference between the young person and their partner, how the relationship developed and how the partner may have controlled or influenced the young person. As well, 16 and 17 year olds cannot consent to sexual activity that involves prostitution or pornography.

## RESOURCES AND SUPPORT SERVICES

### **CENTRAL OKANAGAN ELIZABETH FRY SOCIETY**

We provide court support and information to women and children involved in the justice system. We advocate on behalf of women and children to ensure that their legal rights and needs within the justice system are met.  
250.763.4613 (we accept collect calls)

### **RCMP**

250.763.3300

### **MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT (MCFD)**

250.712.7586

### **CHILD ABUSE HOTLINE**

Operated by the Ministry of Children and Family Development  
250.310.1234

### **KIDS HELP PHONE**

1.800.668.6868

### **KELOWNA GENERAL HOSPITAL**

Medical treatment for injuries,  
sexual assault forensic examinations  
250.862.4000

If you or someone you care about has been affected by sexual assault or abuse, call us.

We will stand beside you.

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