

Talking about a subject that causes fear in a parent's heart is not easy. For years, silence has been the rule when dealing with the matter of child molestation. This subject may be particularly hard for you because you may have been a victim yourself. Statistically one in four girls and one in six boys are molested before they reach eighteen.¹ But if you have been a victim, it is important for you to begin talking about it. Why? Because silence only aids the abuser in covering up the crime.

If you were molested and didn't tell anyone or if nothing was done when you did tell, it may be more difficult to see the warning signs of molestation. Adults who were victims of a hidden molestation "learn" to suppress the issues surrounding the event. When adults have hidden away their own painful feelings, it can be more difficult for them to recognize signs of molestation in their own children. Children will tell about the molestation, either with words or actions. It is up to the adults in their life to recognize the messages and take action.

If you are a single mother, the risk of your child being molested nearly doubles because of your dependency on others to help care for your children.² Some molesters intentionally look for single mothers in order to gain access to their children. This doesn't mean you shouldn't trust anyone but you should use caution and good judgment. As a single mom, you need to be constantly looking for the warning signs of molestation and for the signs and signals of possible molesters. Learning about child molestation empowers you to be the best and first defense against the possible molestation of your children.

What Is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse is defined as any sexual activity with a child – whether it is in the home by a caretaker, in a daycare situation, a foster residential setting, or in any other setting, including on the street by a person unknown to the child. The abuse may be by an adult, an adolescent, or another older child. Sexual abuse of children also includes voyeurism, showing pornography, forcing children to watch sexual acts, forcing a child to touch private parts, or touching or rubbing private body parts against a child's body. Most sex offenders are heterosexual. Many are married and have children of their own. Most offenders are known and trusted by the child or are members of the child's own family.

Warning Signs of Grooming

Grooming is a process of desensitization that abusers use on children to prepare and trick them into accepting sexual abuse. Once the abuser has gained the child's trust and confidence, they use everyday behavior, like telling an inappropriate joke, a touch on the upper arm that lingers a little too long, or a kiss on the lips to test whether your child is likely to tell on them. If the abuser is satisfied that your child won't tell, the abuser moves onto other forms of inappropriate touching.

The grooming process takes time and it requires the abuser to interact with children in a particular way. An abuser displays warning signs that you can look for and be cautious about. An abuser may be constantly around children and prefer the company of children over adults. They touch children when it is not necessary, disregard rules of caregivers, give gifts without the caregiver's permission, behave in a juvenile manner, share secrets with children, take photographs or keep mementos of other people's children, become angry when confronted about their actions, talk about sex around children, show pornography to children, provide drugs or alcohol to children, give special attention to one particular child, or seek to be alone with one particular child.

Opportunity

To commit sexual abuse, the offender has to have the opportunity to offend. That means having a child alone without other caring adults present. Offenders want secrecy. What should responsible adults do to protect children?

Caring adults should limit the times their child is in seclusion with other adults and watch for warning signs. Make sure those who watch your child know that you are serious about keeping your child safe. Do not let them leave him or her with anyone you have not already approved of.

Possible Signs That Your Child Is Being Abused

Physical warning signs that your child may have been sexually abused include signs of trauma in the genital area, difficulty walking or sitting, frequent touching or scratching of the genital area, sexual touching of themselves or others, self-inflicted pain or injury, or increased health problems.

Behavioral warning signs include unexplained changes in sleeping patterns, recurrent nightmares, fear of the dark, crying, complaining for no apparent reason, unexplained fear of adults, increased dependency on certain adults, use of sexual language, acting out sexual behaviors, creating sexually themed drawings or writings, an unexplained drop in grades, skipping class, poor hygiene, overly mature appearance, indiscriminate sexual activity or seductive behavior, preference for adult companionship over that of peers, increased moodiness, poor self-esteem, excessive bathing, thoughts of suicide, or attempted suicide.

Why Children Don't Tell

Children often do not report abuse because they are afraid. Children are afraid of being punished, that nobody will believe them, of being blamed, of breaking up the family, of being harmed, or that others will be harmed. If a child tells you they do not want to be around a particular adult or child, ask in a calm and warm manner, "why?" Gently, but firmly, pursue the issue until the child gives you a reason.

If a child trusts you enough to tell you about being abused, you should react calmly. Children rarely lie about abuse. Do not get angry because this reinforces the child's fear of reporting. Stay calm. Let the child know that you are there to help and assure the child that they did the right thing by telling. Tell the child you believe their story and that you are not angry. Be sure the child understands that you are sorry that this happened, that you will do everything you can to protect them, and that you love them no matter what.

If You Reasonably Suspect

If you reasonably suspect sexual abuse, you must shield the child from more abuse. You must also report the suspected abuse to the proper authorities.

If you don't act, abusers will keep on abusing and continue to prey on new victims. The only way to stop the cycle of abuse is by stopping the abuser. You don't need evidence in order to report abuse. Reasonable suspicions are enough. Let the authorities determine how to proceed.

References:

1. Centers for Disease Control. Adverse Childhood Experiences Study. "Prevalence of Individual Adverse Childhood Experiences." <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/ace/prevalence.htm>, accessed 3-17-2014.
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Office on Child Abuse and Neglect. Goldman, J., Salus, M. K., Wolcott, D., Kennedy, K. Y.A "Coordinated Response to Child Abuse and Neglect: The Foundation for Practice." Chapter 5. Washington, DC. 2003.