



rape and abuse
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Intervention with Child Sexual Abuse Victims

How will sexual abuse affect a child?

Children have different limitations and strengths, and no one will know for sure how any child will react to sexual victimization. Although all children are affected in some way by abuse, there are many factors which play a role in how significantly affected a child will be. Once it has been determined that a child has been sexually abused (or there is a strong suspicion, but it can't be proven), it is important to get help for that child.

Some factors that will play a role in the child's reaction include:

- Age
- Personal strengths
- Support systems
- Frequency of abuse
- Extent of abuse
- Reaction of family members and friends
- Relationship with abuser
- Pre-abuse functioning

What is counseling?

Many times children are fearful or embarrassed about going to counseling because they don't know what to expect. A counselor's job is not to judge a child or his/her family, but to help them through the healing process. Counselors do not investigate child abuse allegations. Investigation is the role of social services and/or law enforcement.

A counselor will address several issues during the course of counseling with a child:

- Building trust
- Finding appropriate outlets for the child's anger
- Helping the child understand the dynamics of sexual abuse
- Self-esteem issues
- Teaching self-protection
- Dealing with feelings of shame, guilt, sadness, etc.
- Helping the child understand that he/she is NOT responsible for the abuse or for what happened to the family or perpetrator after the abuse was disclosed
- Issues of body image
- Dealing with any possible court processes

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What is play therapy?

For young children, play therapy tends to be the primary treatment technique used. Young children do not have the ability to process trauma verbally like older children and adults do. Play therapy involves the use of dolls, doll houses, painting, drawing, other art forms, story-telling, puppets, role-playing, games, or any other activity which facilitates the expression of feelings by the child. Through play therapy, the counselor can allow the child to express his/her feelings and fears in a way that is developmentally appropriate. Movies, books, and handouts are also available for counselors to use to facilitate understanding and expression.

What is the parents' role?

It is important that the counselor and the parents let the child know that he/she is believed, and the abuse what not his/her fault. It is also important that the counselor and the parents let the child go at his/her own pace in discussing the abuse and its aftermath. It is important that the parents and other family members also receive support to deal with a child's victimization.

When will counseling end?

There is no defined time period for counseling. Healing from child sexual abuse can take a long time. Even if a child receives initial counseling and support and starts to feel better, he/she may need to seek counseling in the future. As a child ages and reaches various developmental milestones, he/she may need to go back to counseling. New issues may arise when the child reaches puberty, becomes sexually active, marries, or has children. Going back to counseling does not mean the initial counseling failed. It means some issues may not have presented themselves at that time.

Does everyone need counseling?

Even if a child does not receive counseling, it is important that he/she is able to talk to someone who is non-judgmental about the abuse. Keeping sexual abuse a secret can lead to a lifetime of problems.

References:

Mach, K.F. The Sexually Abused Child: A Parents' Guide to Coping and Understanding. Family Insight Books. Williamsburg, MI. (1994).