

Surviving childhood sexual abuse

IMPORTANT NOTICE: This information sheet does not constitute medical advice or guidance. Its purpose is to give general information about trauma. Beira's Place is not a medical service and cannot diagnose physical or mental health conditions.

If you have been hurt or injured and think you need immediate medical treatment, call 999, or call NHS 24 on 111 for physical or mental health advice.

- In 2008, Health in Mind and the Scottish Government produced a booklet for professionals working with childhood sexual abuse survivors. It was written by Dr Sarah Nelson and Sue Hampton and was entitled 'Yes You Can'. In Chapter One of the booklet, the authors cited the formal definition of child sexual abuse from the Scottish Child Protection Guidelines. This clear and powerful definition stated that child sexual abuse happens,

".. when any person, by design or neglect, exploits that child ... in any activity intended to lead to the sexual arousal or other forms of gratification of that person or any other person(s), including organised networks. This definition holds whether or not there has been genital contact and whether or not the child is said to have initiated, or consented to, the behaviour."

This definition is important because it clearly states where the blame for sexual abuse lies – with the abuser. By stating that there does not need to have been any genital contact, the definition acknowledges that non-contact sexual abuse can be as harmful as contact sexual abuse and is very relevant where online abuse and grooming is more prevalent. It is clearly stating that the responsibility for deciding to abuse belongs with the perpetrator. He makes the decision to abuse, and the child cannot consent to the sexual act.

● Childhood Trauma

Children experience trauma in two ways: by acts of 'commission', where they are directly experiencing the abuse aimed at themselves or another, and by acts of 'omission', where affection, attention, comfort, or safety is withheld. Acts of commission can include:

- Direct physical or sexual violence, often repeated violence, and abuse
- Psychological abuse
- Witnessing violence and abuse on a parent or other siblings, often over an extended period
- Coercive and controlling behaviour
- Living in constant fear of violence, abuse, or death

Acts of 'omission' can include:

- Neglect (physical care and wellbeing, food, neglect of child safety, health care)
- Withholding affection, attention, and physical contact/comfort/soothing
- Abandonment
- Intermittent separations
- Isolation from family or peers

Adults frequently ask why children don't speak out about the abuse they experience, and studies show us that only around 30% of children will talk about the abuse when it's happening. A report¹ from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse – Nottingham Council stated that:

“Research indicates that up to two thirds of children do not disclose abuse during childhood and only around 25 percent of those who are abused disclose when they reach adulthood. For those who do disclose, it takes them on average around 24 years to do so from the time of the abuse. Older children who disclose will most frequently do so to their peers.”

There are many reasons why children don't, or can't, speak out about the abuse they are experiencing. While we educate children about 'stranger danger', in most cases, the perpetrator of the abuse is within the family, or in some way close to the family. Of course, children will often face a crisis of loyalty within their family and are often told that they will be responsible for breaking the family up, having the abuser arrested and put in prison, or not being believed and taken into care. The child is put in the position of having to be responsible for the behaviour of the abuser and of keeping him safe. There are many reasons why children don't speak out about the abuse, including:

- The child may not recognise it as abuse. If the abuse has been happening since the child was very small, she might think this is normal behaviour within a family. And if the child or children are very isolated, they might not know what normal behaviour in other families is, where no abuse happens.
- The child might love the abuser. From the outside this can be hard to understand but a child can love a parent but hate the way the parent is behaving.
- The child might like the attention she gets from the abuser. This must never be presumed to be consent on the child's part. The grooming behaviour of the abuser is very powerful, and it is well documented that abusers seek out vulnerable and sometimes isolated children who may be getting bullied, or who have problems in their home. There are also times the abuser convinces the child that they are having a 'love affair' that must be kept secret because 'nobody will understand'. This is part of the grooming process.
- It's not unusual for the child to feel guilty and ashamed because the abuser has convinced her that she is to blame for his behaviour. This is also part of the grooming process and helps to ensure the child's silence.
- The child may think there is no-one safe to tell. This can be particularly true where there is institutional abuse, and the child is not sure who is involved in the abuse of the children in the institution.
- The child may not have the language to tell.

There are times when children do speak out and disclose what is happening to them and they are not believed or are punished for 'lying' about the abuser. Abusers groom not only the child or children they are abusing, but often the whole family including the main carer (most often the mother) into believing them.

¹ [F1: Barriers to disclosure | IICSA Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#)

For some women who have never spoken about their abuse, there might be a 'trigger' that brings their trauma to the surface and makes them look for help and support. Sometimes, the survivor's own child reaches the age when the abuse started for her, and she begins to experience trauma symptoms. The trigger may be a high profile abuse case in the media that brings the woman's own trauma back to her, or it may be that another woman has spoken out about the abuser and the woman feels she has the support and courage to also disclose her own experience.

It can sometimes be difficult to put the trauma memories into words because those memories are often fragmented, they may lack a 'narrative' or story, and they may be made up of small scraps of memory, pictures, feelings, and emotions. It may be that the only memories a woman has of the abuse are intrusive images that come at random times, in dreams or when the woman is upset or stressed. For some women, they will recall everything in detail.

Everyone will experience the memory of their abuse differently.

Having a safe, confidential and women only space to work through the trauma memories can be positive at a time like this. It can offer a space away from home and family to focus on the feelings related to the trauma, to help develop some positive coping strategies, and focus on healing and moving forward.