

# ICASA Parent Pamphlet

## **From the beginning ...**

This guide provides basic information about the issue of child sexual abuse. When your child is sexually abused, you want to be helpful, but you may not know how to handle the problem or what to expect from the agencies that may become involved in the case.

If parents of child sexual abuse victims can understand what has happened to their child and learn what to expect, they are often better able to help their child recover from the abuse.

## **What to do?**

One of the most helpful things you can do is find information and support for yourself and your child. Sexual abuse is upsetting and confusing for parents, as well as for the child. Being informed will help you make good decisions. It is also helpful to talk with your child and let her be involved in decisions. This will help her regain a sense of control.

Remember that even though your child may not have physical injuries, she may be upset, afraid or worried. It is not easy to discuss the abuse, but your child may not worry as much if you talk about it. She needs to know that you are not afraid and that you are listening to her.

You should not seek revenge against your child's abuser or the abuser's family. This is a natural desire, but it will cause more problems and divert you from your main goal: helping your child and your family recover.

## **You are not Alone ...**

In the United States, one in three girls and one in six boys have been sexually abused before the age of 18.

In response to such abuse, special services have been developed to help victims and their families. This booklet tells you about some of those services. Ask for help: for your child, yourself and your family.

## **What is Child Sexual Abuse?**

In the broadest definition, child sexual abuse may refer to:

- Any forced or coerced sexual activity involving a child;
  
- Sexual contact between a child and another person (whether it is an adult or another child) in which treats, bribes or other tricks are used to get the child to participate in the activity;
  
- Any sexual contact between an adult and a child.

Some sexual abuse is physically violent. Most is not. This might include:

- Sexual talk;

- Flashing of sexual body parts or exposure to sex acts;
- Voyeurism or peeping activities;
- Child pornography;
- Encouraging or promoting child prostitution.

You should take any of these behaviors seriously and report them to law enforcement.

Often, the abuser will persuade the child to cooperate and to keep the abuse a secret. This persuasion may involve the promise of special treats or privileges or threats of physical punishment and other consequences to loved ones or pets. Or, the abuser may not need to make any threats. Children are taught to obey adults and the abuser may take advantage of this, especially if he is a person the child knows and trusts.

### **The Offenders?**

People who sexually abuse children come from all economic, ethnic, social and educational backgrounds. You cannot recognize abusers by their appearance. They do not fit any stereotypes. They do not look like any images of dirty old men, perverts or loners.

About 80% of all sexual abuse of children is perpetrated by someone known to the child. Many abusers are people the child loves and trusts. Most of the people who sexually abuse children are heterosexual men. Abusers are often married and have children.

Abusers may prey on young boys as well as girls.

Although it is often difficult for adults to believe, children sometimes sexually abuse other children. Sometimes, sexual contact between children is curiosity or exploration. But if one child is older or bigger than the other, or if the behavior between the children seems unusual or abusive, parents should intervene.

### **The Effects on Your Child ...**

After the abuse, the behavior of your child may change for a time. You may notice any of the following:

- Heightened fear or anxiety;
- Increased tearfulness or crying;
- Disturbed sleeping patterns such as fear of going to bed, fear of sleeping alone, nightmares and bedwetting;
- Loss of appetite;
- Irritable nature, losing patience easily;
- Temper tantrums;
- Isolation or secrecy;
- Difficulty at school, such as poor concentration and loss of

interest in classroom activities.

The absence of these symptoms doesn't mean the abuse didn't occur. While you should be aware of any changes in your child's behavior or attitude, some children are not visibly changed by the experience.

### **How Long Will it Last?**

Symptoms you can see usually last a few weeks. However, other problems may remain. The child's reaction depends greatly on how parents and other important people handle the situation. If the child feels especially loved and protected during this time, she may recover from the trauma more quickly.

### **How Should I Respond?**

After learning your child has been sexually abused, try to respond with patience and kindness to your child, yourself and your family. Try these suggestions:

- Help your child to express her feelings.
- Do not blame the child for what has happened. Tell your child that you are not angry with her and that she did nothing wrong. Tell your child that you are concerned about her and want to help her.
- Be honest with your child. Share what you know. She needs to trust you more than ever.
- Restore your child's sense of control. Allow her to help decide what to do. Assure her that you will be with her and help her.
- Do not push your child to talk about the experience. If the subject comes up, discuss it honestly and openly.
- Maintain routines and return to your family's usual activities as soon as possible. Don't become too protective of your child. You want to calm any sense of urgency or emergency and not escalate the fear or anxiety.
- Give your child safety information, but avoid causing her to be more fearful of people than she already is. Help her identify safe people to go to when she is scared or sad.
- Pay attention to the needs of other children in your household. Give them the information and support they need to deal with their concerns.
- Discuss your feelings with someone you trust, such as a friend, relative or counselor. This is not a time for you to be "tough." It is a good time to seek support for yourself.

### **Where Can I Get Help?**

#### **From a Rape Crisis Center ...**

You can call a rape crisis center for advice and help. Phone numbers are listed at the end of this booklet. Each crisis center has workers that can help you get medical care and legal assistance. Centers also provide ongoing individual and family counseling services.

Crisis center staff and volunteers can help you report the abuse to police and DCFS and can provide emotional support for you, your child and your other family members. Crisis center staff will go with you to meetings with police, the prosecutor and the DCFS caseworker. Staff will also go to court with you and your child. Staff counselors at the rape crisis center can assist you and your family in the healing process after sexual abuse.

These services are free and confidential to victims and their friends and family. Your confidentiality when contacting a rape crisis center is protected under Illinois law.

### **From a Doctor or Hospital ...**

Your child may not appear to be injured, but a medical exam is needed to check for injuries, sexually transmitted diseases or other physical evidence of sexual abuse. It is important to preserve any medical evidence of the abuse. Therefore, a sexually abused child should have a complete physical exam by a doctor as soon as possible after the incident occurs, even if you don't learn of the abuse until months later.

### **From the Police or DCFS ...**

Child sexual abuse is a crime and should be reported to your local police department. If the abuser is a parent, teacher or other caretaker, call the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services at 1/800-25-ABUSE. The hotline worker will tell you if DCFS can help with your child's case.

## **What Happens Next?**

### **At the Hospital ...**

The hospital emergency room has special kits and procedures to use in sexual abuse cases. You also can call or request that the hospital call a rape crisis center advocate for assistance during this time. The doctor will examine your child, fill out a legal report and do certain lab tests that may be used as evidence in court. The doctor will ask you about the abuse to decide what types of tests must be done.

Most sexually abused children have not suffered any serious physical injuries. However, if they have been injured in any way, the medical staff will tell you how to care for them. Don't be afraid to ask questions. If you are not sure you understand what you have been told, ask more questions. It is usually necessary to schedule a second appointment for follow-up care. Follow the instructions of the hospital staff.

Before or after the exam, the doctor or nurse will call law enforcement and a person who is specially trained in child protection to speak with you and your child.

The child protection worker should answer any questions you have and help you and your child talk about the experience and what to expect.

### **With the Police/DCFS ...**

When you call the police, they will take a report and schedule an interview. A police detective or child protective services caseworker will ask you and your child about what happened.

The investigator needs to know:

- What happened;
- Where;
- When;
- Who else was present at the time.

This information will help the investigator decide what to do next. It is important for the investigator to talk with your child. The child's statement may be tape recorded or it may be taken again at the police station and documented to take to court.

The police will also ask you and your child if you know the offender and if he is a relative. If you and the child do not know the offender, the police will ask your child what the offender looks like and may have her look at pictures to help in identify the offender. It usually takes time to get all the needed details. Try to be patient, and help your child remain calm. Sometimes victims won't remember every detail in every setting, so don't be alarmed if your child's story of the abuse varies with each telling.

### **At Court ...**

If a suspect is arrested, your child may have to go to the courthouse to speak with a prosecutor. The prosecutor will review the results of the medical examination and lab tests. He or she will read the statement your child gave to the police and review other information about the incident. The prosecutor will decide whether to file charges against the person who is accused of abusing your child.

If charges are filed, the judge will decide whether the person who abused the child should be kept in jail until the day of the trial. The judge may release the suspect until the trial.

If there is a trial you will receive a subpoena. The subpoena will tell the date, time and room where your child must appear. To make it easier for children to testify against their abusers, testimony may be taken in private, rather than in open court, and transmitted via closed circuit television equipment.

The person who abused the child will have a lawyer; this is the defense attorney. This lawyer may want to talk to your child or you before the trial date; you and your child do not have to talk to this person.

If the person who abused your child tells the judge he or she is guilty, you and your child will not have to go back to court. If the person who abused your child says he is not guilty, a trial will be scheduled. Prepare your child for the trial. A rape crisis advocate can help you. It may be months from the arrest until you go to court for the trial. Except in rare cases, you will not have to go to court anymore after the trial is over.

When you go to court with your child, take along a quiet toy and a snack. You may need to keep your child occupied because the waiting time can be long.

### **What Can I do to Protect My Child?**

No one wants to think that their child will be sexually abused, but it may happen. Here are a few things you can do to protect your child.

- Teach your child that some behavior by adults or other children is wrong. Do not frighten the child; just make her aware that she does not have to go along with someone else's idea.
  
- Tell your child she has the right to say "no" and ask for help immediately. Teach your child not to do something that bothers her. Teach your child what to do if she is in a situation where she is scared or threatened. This may include yelling loudly or running for help.
  
- Help your child find "safe adults" who can help her. This may be you, other family members, friends, teachers and others.
  
- Teach your child the difference between a "good secret" and a "bad secret." A "good secret" is one that will be shared with others at some point, such as birthday party. A "bad secret" is something that is hidden and never told to anyone. If an adult does something to a child that the child feels is wrong, the child should tell someone right away, even if the adult has told the child to keep it a secret.
  
- Teach your child the proper names for parts of the body. This will help her disclose if anyone attempts to or does touch her inappropriately.
  
- Let your child know that you want to hear what she has to say. Then, be a good listener. A child should know you will listen and will believe her if something happens .

***This pamphlet may not be reprinted without the permission of the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault. For information contact Sean Black at 217-753-4117.***