



WHY MY CHILD?

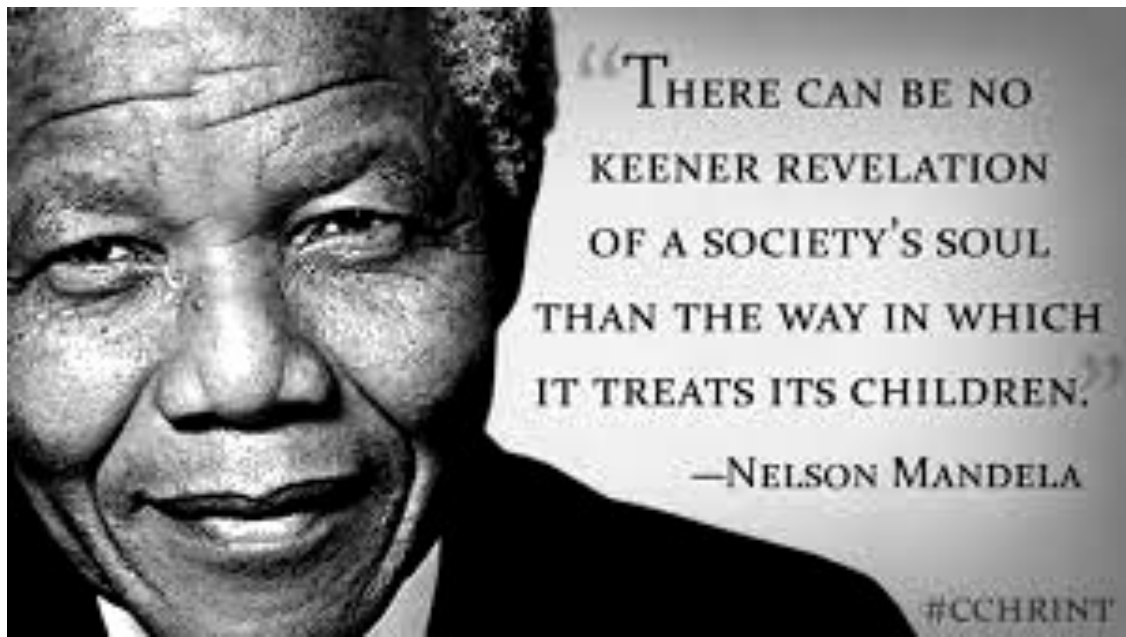
A guide for parents, guardians and caregivers
of child victims of *sexual abuse*

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This guide is dedicated to all the parents, guardians and caregivers who so bravely are travelling a difficult and emotional journey with their child, dealing with the sexual offence process



Finding out ...

Finding out that your child has been sexually abused usually comes as a massive shock to parents or caregivers. Parents or caregivers of a sexually abused child therefore experience a wide range of intense emotions when they become aware of what had happened to their child.

“When I found out my child was sexually abused, it felt as if nothing was going to be okay ever again” (Ellie, 45 year old)

Some parents or guardians describe the feeling as similar and as intense as grieving without someone dying. A sense of loss, combined with disbelief are often experienced.

“I kept thinking the same thing over and over again; asking how can someone do something so gruesome to my child. This kind of thing happens on TV, I never believed it could happen to me” (Anna, 35 years old)

Sexual abuse can also bring anger to everyone involved. If you are the parent or guardian of the child, you may react with disbelief and you may even feel that you want revenge. The fact that your child might have been physically hurt, may also bring pain and anger. Fear is not an uncommon feeling, especially if the perpetrator has not been apprehended.

“Seeing my child in pain was overwhelming and consumed my thoughts” (Zandi, 31 years old)

Parents or guardians can even react in that they may not want to believe that what has happened to the child is the truth and that it ‘will pass’.

Parents and guardians often feel helpless, because they don’t know what to do about what has happened.



Finding out that the perpetrator was a family member – someone you know and trust – can further complicate and intensify your feelings. Friends and community members might find it difficult to understand how you feel. You may also try and keep it a secret to prevent the stigma and further pain for the child.

“To think that the monster who damaged my child lived under my roof was too much for me to cope with. I felt as if I could not breathe” (Zodwa, 25 years old)

You may be feeling different feelings at the same time. You might also feel guilty about the fact that you could not protect your child and you may start questioning your parenting skills.

The feelings that you are experiencing can be intense and difficult to deal with. It is important however, for you to manage your feelings in order to prioritise your child’s safety. Having the necessary information may help you to get through this difficult time.

This booklet will provide you with some information to help you understand sexual abuse better.

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse refers to sexual activity forced upon a child by an adult or an older, more powerful child. It is important to understand that sexual abuse does not always involve violence. Sometimes the perpetrator develops a ‘trust – or ‘friendship’ –relationship with the child over a period of time and he/she introduces the child slowly to different kinds of sexual activity. Children are often not old enough to understand what is really happening to them and they become powerless to stop the abuse. Sexual abuse forces children to deal with intensive thoughts, feelings and experiences that they are not ready for.



Sexual abuse can happen without intercourse or sexual touching. If the child is exposed to adult sexual material, such as movies, pornography or sexual activity, this can also damage them emotionally. The abuser can cause further emotional damage to children by making them keep the abuse a secret and threatening them to harm one of their loved ones or a pet.

Sexual abuse can happen to anyone in any community. You can be of any race group, it does not matter if you are rich or poor, it affects everybody young and old, boys and girls. Sexual abuse does not choose. The abuser can be a stranger a friend, one of your trusted family members or even a teacher. Sexual abuse can happen as a single incident, or as many incidents over an extended period of time.

Why did my child not tell?

As adults we find it difficult to talk about our own bodies and our sexual experiences. It is therefore important to understand that children find it even more difficult, especially because they don't understand what has happened to them and they may experience shame and guilt when they eventually realise what has happened to them, or what is happening to them.

There are many different reasons why children often do not tell someone about the abuse immediately; some of them being because the child:

- * May believe that he/she is the only one whom this has ever happened to;
- * May think it was his / her fault (for example, the incident occurs while they child is doing something or going somewhere the parents/guardian warned them against, such as walking alone to a shop);



- * May feel scared of being judged by family members and friends;
- * May think the world and all the people can't be trusted;
- * Has been threatened by the accused and believe the threats to be real (for example, if the child speaks they will kill one of their parents);
- * Is scared that his/her parents/guardian will not believe them;
- * Is scared that his/her parents/guardian thinks they are simply looking for attention;
- * Is scared that they will be removed from parental care if people find out.
- * May feel a sense of loyalty to the abuser or feel a need to protect them, especially if the abuser was a family member.

What can I expect from my child after the abuse?

Sexual abuse interferes with the child's process of development and it may affect the way they see themselves in the world.

They may feel different to other children and other people and his or her attitude about things may have changed. They often do not know or understand what has happened to them immediately. A wide variety of different responses may follow the abuse.

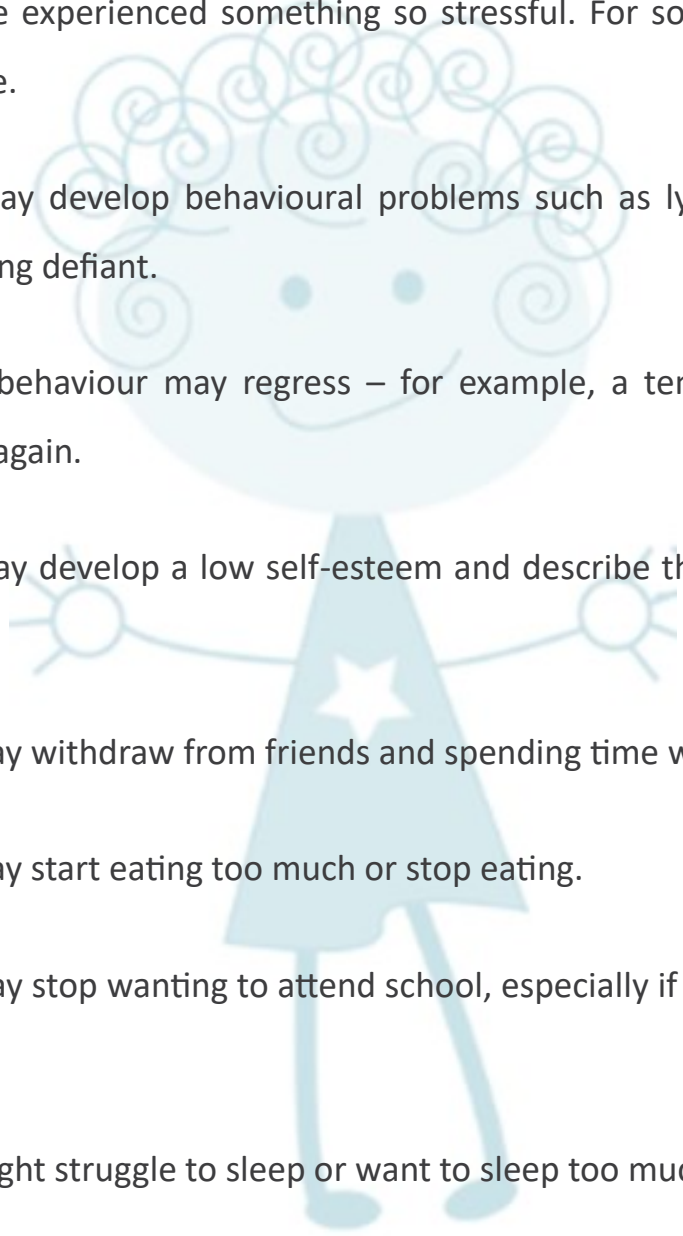
The effects of sexual abuse vary from child to child.

We know however that children who have been sexually abused often continue to suffer even after the abuse has ended. The process of healing from sexual abuse can take a long time. Accepting this might be difficult to do.



Some of your child's reactions can cause you discomfort and pain, frustrate you, anger you or even surprise you.

- * Your child may start wetting his/her bed.
- * Academic performance can decrease. Learning and focusing become hard when children have experienced something so stressful. For some children the opposite might be true.
- * Your child may develop behavioural problems such as lying, crying a lot, missing school or being defiant.
- * Your child's behaviour may regress – for example, a ten-year-old wants to sleep close to you again.
- * Your child may develop a low self-esteem and describe themselves as ugly, useless or bad.
- * Your child may withdraw from friends and spending time with the family.
- * Your child may start eating too much or stop eating.
- * Your child may stop wanting to attend school, especially if rumours are being spread at school.
- * Your child might struggle to sleep or want to sleep too much.
- * In certain instances, your child might be unable to control their bowel regulation and soil their clothes.



- * Your child might also feel guilty in a number of ways; for not being able to stop the abuse, for not telling someone about the abuse or for the effect it has had on other family members.
- * Your child can become anxious or scared for no specific reason.
- * Some children may hurt themselves, become suicidal or run away from home.
- * Others run away from home especially if the abuser was a family member like a father/brother/aunt/mother.
- * Children often experience nightmares after sexual abuse.

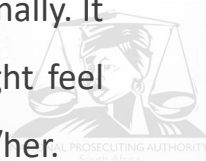
In short your child may experience a whole change in the way they function in this world.

Please take note that some of the above mentioned conditions, such as bed wetting or uncontrolled bowel movements, can also be signs or symptoms of other health issues. Ensure that you follow up with a doctor should this continue.

If your child threatens to commit suicide or shows suicidal tendencies, you MUST act immediately and find professional help. Never think that a child is only looking for attention. Parents often make this mistake. Don't let it happen to you.

What should you do when you notice any of the above mentioned signs or symptoms in your child?

- * The number one thing and the most important thing is to simply love your child. Your child will need a lot of reassurance and care from yourself and other people/family that your child trusts. Tell your child that you love him/her unconditionally. It is one of the most important things to remember, because your child might feel that he/she has disappointed you so much that you have stopped loving him/her.



- * Spending time with your child is vital. This shows your child that you really care. Whether your child is a toddler or a teenager they will want to have people around them who are comforting and believe him/her, even if their behaviour suggests otherwise. Spending time does not have to mean that you need to go anywhere, spend lots of money or buy gifts. It simply means doing things together, like cooking, playing games and being there for him/her to listen to their fears or feelings.
- * Try and remember that this is not because he/she does not trust you – it might just be extremely difficult for him/her to deal with what has happened.
- * Remember that your child may not be ready to talk about the abuse. As much as you should encourage your child to speak to you about their feelings, you should never force your child to speak about the details of the abuse. Not all children are ready to talk about the abuse and if you force your child he/she might start suppressing their feelings and then refuse to talk about it totally. Give your child time to deal with the pain and when ready he/she will share with you. Try and remember that this is not because he/she does not trust you – it might just be extremely difficult for him/her to deal with what has happened.
- * Your child needs to know that you believe him/her. This is more important than you can ever imagine.
- * The fact that your child has been abused does not mean that you are a bad parent. Be forgiving and kind to yourself. You did not see this coming.

Remember that your child is counting on you for support.



The importance of counselling

Your child will most probably need counselling from a professional person like a social worker or a psychologist as a result of the abuse. Many parents are opposed to this and they think their child will overcome the problem by themselves. Some parents think that if they don't talk about the abuse, the child will forget. In rare cases, we find children who are what we call 'resilient'.

They somehow manage to move forward from abuse without months of counselling. This is however not the case for most children. Most children need professional help over an extended period of time for them to experience real healing from the deep scars of abuse. As a parent you should also know that one session of counselling can never be enough.

Sometimes child victims of sexual abuse are very young and their intellectual, social and emotional ability is not such that they can really benefit from counselling. This is when counselling for the parent is extremely helpful as the counsellor will guide you on how to deal with your child's behaviour such as anger outbursts etc.

As a parent you might find counselling for yourself and your spouse just as helpful even when your child is older. Teenagers can for example start with self-harming or eating disorders. You will need all the help to understand and cope with this.

It can also be normal for your child to not want to go for counselling. It may be that it makes them uncomfortable talking about the issues. It is your role to encourage and try your best to keep your child in counselling.

It is true that counselling services are not readily available everywhere in our country. In rural areas it is hard to find someone to help, but never impossible. The biggest challenge is the cost to and from counselling. Discuss this with your counsellor. He/she might be able to come up with a workable plan or see you less often but continue with therapy.



Coming to court

If a case was opened with the police and the decision was taken to prosecute the accused, your child, yourself (if you were a witness) or anybody else who saw or knew about what happened will have to testify in court. To testify means that your child and/or you (if you are a witness) will have to tell their story to the court.

As a parent it is normal for you to experience anxiety about the court process and all the procedures that you do not know. You might even feel that you don't trust the authorities and that you want to protect your child against it – especially after what he/she has been through.

It is important to remember that the court can only find a person guilty of a crime if they have heard all the evidence and the magistrate is sure, beyond all doubt that the accused is guilty. Helping your child to be brave and positive about the court process will be one of your other very important tasks.

Will we get help at court?

Court Preparation Officers are appointed at some of our courts in the country. They are specialised practitioners working for The National Prosecuting Authority and they are there specifically to help you and your child.



Their role is to take you and your child to a safe and comfortable place at court and inform the prosecutor that you have arrived. The Court Preparation Officer will explain carefully to you and your child what to expect at court and exactly what happens in a court room. They will also tell you about all the different role players like magistrates, prosecutors, intermediaries, attorneys etc.

They will take some background information from you as a parent/guardian to ensure that they can assist you and your child in the best possible way. The Court Preparation Officer will form a trust relationship with you and your child and they will not expect your child or yourself to talk about the merits of the matter, they will rather empower and encourage your child to be the best possible witness when they give evidence. The Court Preparation Officer will look after you and your child for the duration of your time at court and will do their best to make sure that you and your child's needs are seen to. They will teach your child how to deal with the stress of giving evidence and they will be there should your child to assist your child emotionally whilst they give evidence. The Court Preparation Officer will also refer your child for counselling should it be necessary.

If you attend a court where there is no Court Preparation Officer, the prosecutor will take care of you and prepare you and your child for what is to come.

My child's rights as a witness in court

The Service Charter for Victims of Crime was approved by Cabinet in 2004 and officially launched in 2007. This charter contains the rights that all victims of crime has.

This means that your child also shares in those rights and that as the parent/caregiver you can and should help them observe their rights.



Even though your child may feel that his/her rights have been violated by being abused, it is important to remind him/her that no one can take their rights away from them. Even just by coming to court they are exercising their rights. Children should be encouraged to speak but not to be forced to speak if they are not ready.

As witnesses at court children have the right:

To be treated with fairness and respect for dignity and privacy:

This means that your child should be treated respectfully at all stages by any court official whilst you are at court. Your child should at no stage feel humiliated or victimised. Information about the case should be dealt with confidentially and should for example not be discussed with you or your child in passages or where other people can hear what is being discussed. This means that the court official has to call you to his or her office and talk to you privately.

To offer information:

Your child has the right to tell their story in court. The prosecutor might also request your child to tell him/her what has happened when he/she consults with your child. It is important that you as the parent encourage your child to tell the truth and everything that he/she can remember. Don't be harsh on your child if they struggle with this process. Not all children are the same. That is why your warm support is so important. If you have knowledge that might be helpful to court you should not withhold that information but share it with the prosecutor. Sometimes children are not ready to share all the information immediately and they might be referred for counselling first.



If the accused is found guilty your child as victim, as well as you or any other indirect victims, may complete a Victim Impact Statement. This is like a 'letter' to the magistrate or judge in which the child and/or you an/or friends or family members indicate the amount of harm that the crime had on the family. This helps the magistrate/judge to give an informed sentence and your voice and that of your child can be heard in court. Children often submit drawings or poems and then describe how the crime impacted on their lives.

To receive information:

As the parent/guardian remember that you are there to assist your child. You are allowed and should ask about the status of your case at court, where in the process the case is, what you can expect or why certain decisions have been made. If you know exactly what is going on it will be easier for you to explain in a child friendly manner to your child.

To protection:

If you as parent/guardian feel that your child's or your own life is in danger you should communicate this to the investigating officer or the prosecutor immediately. If you do not talk nobody will know. There are measures that can be put in place to ensure your safety.

To assistance:

Assistance means 'help'. The golden rule at any court is to ask if you are uncertain. From the security guards, to the officials at the Help Desk, Court Preparation Officers, Prosecutors or any other officials will be able to help you.



If all the above fails and you feel that you and/or your child has been mistreated, you may contact the Senior Prosecutor at the court. If you are still unhappy, you may ask to talk to the Chief Prosecutor or contact the Office of the Deputy Director in your area (see numbers at the back).

The most important things that you as a parent/guardian should know before coming to court and what you should tell your child:

- * Giving evidence at court is not easy. Build on your child's self confidence in the weeks preceding the trial, giving them a lot of positive feedback when they succeed at something.
- * Be honest with your child. Tell him/her the truth about where you are going. Do not tell the child that you are going to the doctor whilst you are in reality going to court. This may cause the child to be resistant and angry when they find out the truth and might jeopardise the process.
- * Make sure that your child gets to bed early the day before they come to court so that they are rested on the day.
- * Make sure that your child eats breakfast and also bring lunch and fruit for the child. Court proceedings take time and you may spend hours waiting.
- * Do your best to dress your child as neatly as possible. Make sure they have something warm to wear as it can be cold in a court building. Ensure that your child is not wearing revealing clothing. You are welcome to bring a small blanket in winter should your child need to rest or sleep.
- * As difficult as it may be, parents should try not discuss the case with the child and what the child must say before coming to court as this may affect with the child's evidence negatively. Your own emotions should be kept separate from your child's.



- * Encourage your child to tell the truth, but refrain from telling them what to say and do not make them repeat the story to you.
- * Sometimes a child can be an excellent witness, but other things can go wrong in the trial and the accused is acquitted. This can leave parents and children angry, frustrated and disillusioned. You have to prepare you for anything.
- * Remember: Even if your child displayed all the self confidence in the world and even if he/she was well prepared, things can go wrong for them when they testify. It can happen that they develop 'stage fright' and just forget all the details or that the trauma of what happened is just too big. If that happens and there is an acquittal you should still be proud of your child. He/she was brave enough to come to court to try and prevent future abuse by the perpetrator. You still have to praise them for that.



References

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Spies, GM. 2011. Sexual Abuse Dynamics, assessment & healing. Pretoria: Van Schaik



This service is available in most of the bigger centres in South Africa.

For more information on services in your area contact:

National Prosecuting Authority

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