

# Helping Your Sexually Abused Child

**Child Protection Service Unit**





## *About Helping Your Sexually Abused Child*

This booklet is intended for parents whose children may have been sexually abused, whether by an individual who is well known to the child or by a stranger. It describes:

- what sexual abuse is
- common reactions that parents might experience
- coping strategies that parents might use to deal effectively with this kind of crisis
- the roles of the child protection system and the criminal justice system in the investigation of an abuse allegation.

The medical and legal fields are renowned for their complex language, which can be confusing and intimidating for many families, especially in a time of crisis. We have attempted to explain as much as possible in simple, straightforward terms.

We hope that this booklet will help parents recognize that there is valuable support available to them, and that they are not alone in their efforts to reduce the impact of the sexual abuse on their children. With the love, support and reassurance of family, friends and professionals, we hope your child will be empowered with the confidence to heal and move forward.

## Acknowledgments

Louise Doyle and Peta Hammersley, counsellors with ACT 2 Child and Family Services, wrote the original version of this booklet. At the Child Protection Service Unit at BC Children's Hospital, we often turned to this booklet to help educate parents and families about the complex nature of a sexual abuse investigation and how they might best guide their children through this challenging time.

Numerous team members, including nurses, physicians, social workers and child psychologists, provided input into this revision of the original booklet. Drawing from years of experience in the child protection field, professionals from each discipline offered a unique perspective on how best to convey a message that would be both clear and succinct.

We would like to thank the Ministry of Children and Family Development for its support in the production of this booklet.

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Original edition 1986, ACT II Child and Family Services; revised 1994

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## **“She” and “he”**

Because the majority of sexually abused children are girls and the majority of abusers are male, we have used the pronoun “she” to refer to the child or victim and “he” to refer to the offender, to avoid having to use “he or she” when referring to each throughout the booklet.



# 1. Sexual abuse of children: Some basic facts

“Child sexual abuse” has many meanings, but in all situations it means the involvement of children in sex-related activities that they have no control over and do not completely understand.

While sexual abuse may include physical contact, such as sexual touching or sexual intercourse, sexual abuse can occur **without** physical contact. Exposing genitals to children is considered a form of sexual abuse, as is engaging children in viewing sexually explicit material, such as video or photographs, and watching sexual acts.

Although the term “sexual exploitation” has a specific legal meaning under the *Criminal Code of Canada*, an adult or older child engaging a child in sexual activity is a fundamental exploitation of the child. Children have neither the knowledge to consent nor the power to resist. The offender’s power or control may be gained through physical size and strength, or through a position of trust or of authority over the child.

The vast majority of perpetrators of sexual abuse against children are family members or friends who are **known** to the children. Sexual abuse happens within families of many different makeups, including one-parent and two-parent homes, as well as families where one parent works outside the home and families where both parents work outside the home.

Child sexual abuse happens in **all** ethnic, religious, racial and socioeconomic groups. People who abuse children come from all walks of life and cannot be identified simply by appearance alone.

Child sexual abuse is illegal in all countries. However, sexual abuse laws and the way in which these crimes are handled by police, lawyers and judges vary widely from country to country. In addition, new Canadians or recent immigrants to Canada may not be aware of the educational and support services available to assist families and victims of sexual assault.

Dealing with the problem of child sexual abuse requires the active participation of all members of society. We need to intervene when it has occurred and educate everyone to prevent it from happening in the future.

## The offender

People often wonder who would sexually abuse a child and why. It is common for people who sexually abuse children to know their victims. An offender is almost always a family member or someone else who is in a position of trust, such as a family friend, educator, coach or spiritual leader.

Offenders are sexually attracted to children. Some offenders are attracted to both children and adults. Sexual offenders may:

- function quite normally and even excel in other aspects of their lives, such as work or community activities
- put a lot of time and energy into creating situations in which they have access to children
- have a long history of abusing children, often beginning in adolescence
- be heterosexual or homosexual.

## Threats

Offenders may threaten that if the child tells anyone about the abuse:

- harm may come to her, her family or her pets
- she may be taken from her home or family.

In the McCreary Centre Society's 2008 BC Adolescent Health Survey ([www.mcs.bc.ca/ahs](http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ahs)), 16 per cent of girls and 6 per cent of boys reported a history of sexual abuse.

## Methods offenders use to target children

### Grooming

Grooming is a method used by an offender to build trust with a child (and adults around the child) in an effort to gain access to and time alone with the child. It includes befriending parents and gaining access to the child by assuming a caring role.

### Tricks and manipulation

Offenders may try to make the child feel:

- “special”
- indebted (i.e., she owes favours) to the offender
- afraid that she will get into “trouble” or won’t be believed
- guilty that she is responsible for triggering the abuse.

Offenders may also:

- give the child a chance to earn money or receive presents
- say that they were “just wrestling or tickling”
- tell the child that everybody does it
- tell the child that this is a way to show love.



## 2. The disclosure

Children often disclose (tell someone about) sexual abuse over time. Disclosure may be a process that the child moves through, rather than a single event.

It is important to understand that children often do not have the words or understanding to make a clear disclosure of sexual abuse. So when young children are going to see an abuser (e.g., a babysitter), they may simply refuse or say they have a physical complaint, like a tummy ache. Or children may make vague statements, only alluding to what has been happening. They may say something like, "I don't like the way dad tickles me" or "I don't like going to hockey practice" or "I don't like my coach anymore." Since children make statements like these very often and for a variety of reasons, many listeners might not interpret these statements to mean anything inappropriate.

Sometimes children tell someone other than their parents – for example, a close family member, school counsellor or best friend – that they have been sexually abused. In other cases, someone other than the child, such as another sibling (sister or brother), will tell parents about the sexual abuse. In these cases, a child may initially express anger toward the person who disclosed the abuse.

### Responding to the disclosure

For both children and adults, it takes great courage to disclose sexual abuse.

On learning of a child's sexual abuse, it is common for parents to react with shock, anger and sadness. While these emotions are all normal, a child may interpret her parents' emotional reaction as something she has caused.

Your response to your child's disclosure is very important: **listen** and **believe**.

Tell her that you recognize how difficult it has been for her to tell someone what was happening. Reassure your child that now that you know, you will get some help.

It is **extremely important** to take the time to reassure your child.

Reassure your child that:	By saying:
You believe her.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I believe you.</li> <li>• I am glad that you told me. You are brave.</li> </ul>
You do not blame her.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's not your fault.</li> </ul>
You are not angry at her, but at the offender.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am not mad at you.</li> <li>• I am angry that someone did this to you.</li> </ul>
She did nothing wrong.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What the offender did was wrong.</li> </ul>
You love her.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I love you.</li> </ul>
You will do your best, with the help of others, to make sure that this doesn't happen again.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I will make sure that you are safe.</li> <li>• The social worker is (or the police are) helping us to make sure that this doesn't happen again.</li> </ul>



## Why didn't my child tell me?

It may be hard for parents to understand why their child didn't tell them, or tell them sooner. But apart from not having the words or understanding when they are younger, there are clear reasons why children don't disclose sexual abuse, or when they do, they tell someone other than their parents:

- An offender is often able to keep the abuse secret because the child does not understand what is happening, or because the offender has physical or emotional power over the child.
- The offender may have convinced the child that her parents would not believe her, would be angry with her or would send her away if she told them.
- The offender may have made specific threats about what might happen if the child disclosed the abuse. These may be threats of physical violence toward the child or the child's family or pets. Or they may be of a more emotional nature and involve major disruption of the child's family and living arrangements.
- Children often have mixed feelings about the offender, especially if he is well known to them.
- Even adults often find it difficult to discuss issues of a sexual nature. It can be particularly difficult to discuss the sexual abuse if the offender is a family member or close friend.

If your child told someone else first, you may feel confused and upset when you find out, and you may wonder why your child didn't tell you. The most important thing to remember is that your child told someone, and that something will now be done about it!

Children often choose to disclose the sexual abuse:

- when they mature and begin to understand that sexual abuse is not part of a normal child–adult relationship (e.g., after personal safety education sessions at school)
- after the offender has gone from their life for some time and they begin to feel that it is now "safe" to tell their secret
- when they realize that the abuse is beginning to happen to a younger sibling.

## The offender's reactions to the disclosure

Offenders will often deny or minimize what they have done. For example, the offender may admit to a certain event occurring but will blame the child or state that the child consented to it. However, experience shows that the child's report is generally more reliable than the offender's. A child has no reason to exaggerate what has happened.

The offender may use guilt to pressure the child to say that the abuse did not happen.

The offender may also blame a non-offending partner for problems in their relationship, and suggest that these problems may have led to the inappropriate sexual activities with the child.

Some offenders may say that they are sorry and won't do it again or that they are willing to get help. However, child sexual abuse is a serious offence and offenders require extensive specialized treatment. Without treatment, the offender is likely to reoffend. It is important to protect the child by **not allowing the offender to have any further contact with her.**

### ***Remember:***

The law states that only children 16 years of age and over can consent to sexual activity.

### 3. Your child

It is important to remember that after your child has disclosed sexual abuse, she will be afraid. She will be afraid that she will be blamed for what happened, that no one will believe her and that her family may break up. You will need to reassure your child **over and over again** that you believe her, you are not angry and you don't blame her.

The disclosure may also make your child feel confused, guilty, helpless and ashamed. Young children have difficulty in expressing feelings, and these feelings may be expressed as changes in behaviour, which at times may be negative (e.g., temper tantrums). Your child may direct these strong feelings and behavioural changes toward you, because you are a safe person in her life. Try not to take this personally.

Occasionally, children may have learned that negative behaviours have actually helped protect them from abuse. These negative behaviours are to be expected until your child learns more healthy ways to cope with the abuse. You can support and guide your child in finding healthy ways of coping.

Here are some common reactions and suggestions for helping your child.

#### ***Your child is OK!***

Children are resilient and will be OK, especially if:

- they are believed
- the abuse stopped
- they have supportive adults at home and at school.

## Feelings

Child's reactions	How you can help
<p><b>Fear</b></p> <p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• can't sleep or can't sleep alone</li><li>• is afraid that the offender will return</li><li>• is afraid of certain places</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Return to your regular daily routine, which provides a sense of security.</li><li>• Provide extra support (e.g., staying in the child's room to help her fall asleep).</li><li>• Provide calming activities (e.g., drinking warm milk together, singing children's songs).</li><li>• Reassure the child and find concrete solutions (e.g., installing an alarm system).</li></ul>
<p><b>Anger</b></p> <p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• is bossy</li><li>• doesn't listen</li><li>• is aggressive</li><li>• fights with siblings</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Be firm and kind.</li><li>• Allow the child to be angry, but set limits on behaviour that is harmful to herself or others.</li></ul>
<p><b>Sadness</b></p> <p>The child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• says negative things about herself (e.g., "stupid," "bad")</li><li>• feels guilty</li><li>• withdraws</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reassure the child that she is not to blame.</li><li>• Engage the child in activities that help her feel good about herself (e.g., sports, art, music).</li></ul>

## Feelings about the sexual abuse

Child's reactions	How you can help
Changing feelings toward the offender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show that you understand, but be clear that the offender did wrong and that you will protect the child from him.</li> </ul>
Worry that others will know that she was sexually abused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reassure the child that others cannot "tell by looking at her."</li> <li>• Remind the child that the doctor said that she is physically healthy and well.</li> </ul>

## Physical symptoms and behaviours

Child's reactions	How you can help
Headaches and stomach aches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take the child to the doctor to ensure that there are no physical problems.</li> <li>• Talk about feelings.</li> <li>• Provide soothing and relaxing activities (e.g., deep breathing and imagining a nice place).</li> </ul>
Clinginess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reassure the child with your presence.</li> </ul>
Bedwetting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depending on the child's age, help her regain bladder control – for example, by:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- adopting consistent bedtime routines</li> <li>- minimizing fluid intake before bedtime</li> <li>- using rewards for dry nights</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Poor personal hygiene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide assistance with self-care routines.</li> </ul>
Changes in eating habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-establish a regular eating routine.</li> </ul>

***Get help right away if your child:***

- talks about having suicidal thoughts
- shows self-harming behaviour
- is acting out sexually with other children or adults
- has drastic behavioural changes that are causing problems at school, at home or in the community

## **Sexualized behaviours**

Depending on the extent and duration of the sexual abuse, your child will likely be confused about the difference between healthy affection and unacceptable sexualized behaviours. This confusion may be reflected in her behaviour – for example, trying to touch an adult’s genitalia or kissing with an open mouth.

Changing these behaviours will require a process of relearning. You will need to be understanding and provide clear guidelines.

In general, try not to be angry in responding to these behaviours. Do not punish your child. When setting limits, speak directly and privately to your child. Try to be supportive yet firm within the limits you have set. Be consistent.

Try to create a family atmosphere that does not provide excessive sexual stimulation. Also, ensure that there are clear family rules about privacy, including knocking on bedroom and bathroom doors before entering, and not walking around the home naked. These rules should be talked about, understood by all and enforced.

You and your child may need to seek counselling to help you deal with both the sexualized behaviours and your reactions to them.

Child's sexualized behaviours	How you can help
Initiates sexual activities with other children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase supervision of your child's play with other children.</li> <li>• If your child shares a bed with younger children, you may need to make other sleeping arrangements.</li> </ul>
Masturbates excessively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell your child that this should be done in private.</li> <li>• Tell your child that it is not acceptable to touch other people in this manner.</li> <li>• Find alternative self-soothing behaviours.</li> </ul>
Shows affection in a sexual way <b>or</b> Behaves seductively toward males	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As soon as you can speak to your child in private, tell her specifically what is unacceptable about her behaviour.</li> <li>• Ask the adult male to set limits on the child's behaviour as well.</li> </ul>
Wears excessive makeup and/or suggestive clothing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set rules about clothing and makeup.</li> </ul>

## Boys as victims

It is a myth that only girls are sexually abused; boys are victims of sexual abuse too.

Boys who are victims of sexual abuse may have more difficulty than girls in disclosing it. When a boy is sexually abused, the offender has control and the boy may feel he has failed or wasn't strong or masculine enough to stop the abuse.

Other fears that a boy (and occasionally girls) may have include:

- If his siblings were abused, he failed to protect them.
- If he was forced to perform sexual acts with other children, he may become an offender or may be considered a criminal already.
- If his father abused him, he may have inherited “bad” genes.
- If his body responded to the abuse in a pleasurable way, he may feel guilty.

In addition, a boy who is sexually abused by a male may have concerns about being or becoming homosexual. However, **there is no known connection between homosexuality and being abused.**

On the other hand, a boy who is sexually abused by a female may have a hard time defining what has happened to him as abuse. In our society, a young or teenaged boy who is involved in sexual activity with an adult female is not seen as a victim; he is seen as fortunate to have sex with an experienced woman. This double standard may prevent not only the boy but also his family and friends from seeing him as a victim of abuse.

It is important to reassure boys who have been sexually abused that they are not to blame for the abuse and to discuss both their fears and societal attitudes with them.



## 4. You: The parent

When you first discover that your child has been sexually abused, you will likely experience a flood of negative emotions, including confusion, shame, guilt, sadness, anger and isolation. Some parents also describe feeling numbness, disbelief and, at times, fear. These emotions are similar to those that anyone may experience after a traumatic event.

There will be times when, like your child, you too may experience ambivalence about knowing what has occurred. You may wish that your child had never disclosed the sexual abuse, that no one had to know and that life could continue on as before. On the other hand, you may want everyone to know what the offender has done, hoping that he will be rejected by your family and your community.

If the offender is someone you know, particularly a family member, you will also be faced with feelings of betrayal and the knowledge that your relationship with this person is forever changed. You may feel ashamed that you could have lived with a person like this, and you may feel guilty that you didn't realize what was happening, perhaps within your own home.

Over the course of the investigation, many new people will become involved in your life, including social workers, police, physicians, lawyers and counsellors. At times, this may feel overwhelming and intrusive, but each professional will play a valuable role in helping you and your child recover from the sexual abuse.



## 5. Reporting the sexual abuse

After a child discloses that she has been sexually abused, a lot of processes are set in motion over which you as a parent will have little or no control. You may feel angry or upset that the police or child protection agencies have to be involved. You may feel that you can handle the situation on your own, that you can protect your child, or that it's a family problem and the family can deal with it.

**You cannot do this by yourself.** The offender is not just a person who has assaulted your child; he has violated your trust. The offender has likely offended before and may offend again.

Since the offender has committed an offence against your child and against society, it is essential that the police and the child protection agency be involved. (In British Columbia, the child protection agency is the Ministry of Children and Family Development or a delegated First Nations agency.)

You will need to make a report to **both** the child protection agency and the police:

- Make a report to the child protection agency (either the Ministry of Children and Family Development or the delegated First Nations agency) at the office *in the community where the child usually lives*. Call the **Helpline for Children** at **310-1234** (no area code needed).
- Make a report to the police *in the community where the crime occurred*.

## The law

*Sex without consent* is always a crime.

### **The age of consent to sexual activity**

The *Criminal Code of Canada* protects all Canadians, including children, against sexual abuse and exploitation. It states that the age of consent for sexual activity is **16 years**. This applies to all forms of sexual activity, from sexual touching to sexual intercourse.

### **The duty to report**

British Columbia's *Child, Family and Community Service Act* requires that anyone who has reason to believe that a child (under 19 years of age) may be abused or neglected, or is for any other reason in need of protection, must report it to the Ministry of Children and Family Development or a delegated First Nations agency. (To see the legislation, go to [www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child\\_protection](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child_protection).)

### ***When the offender is not an adult***

Even if the offender is not an adult, the sexual abuse needs to be reported to the Ministry of Children and Family Development or a delegated First Nations agency. There may be no police involvement or criminal charges if the offender is under 12 years of age. The offender may have access to help through community services that are offered to children with sexual behaviour problems.

## 6. The investigation: The child protection agency and police

The child protection agency (the Ministry of Child and Family Development or First Nations delegated agency) and the police have distinct but complementary roles:

- Social workers from the child protection agency will investigate to **ensure that a child is protected from abuse or from further harm**. The social worker will also work with the parents of the victim to ensure that the child is safe from further abuse. This may mean that the worker and parents come up with a safety plan to ensure that the child does not come into contact with the offender. The social worker may also refer the parents, the victim and her siblings to community services, including counselling.
- The police will investigate to **determine whether a crime has occurred**. The police will gather potential evidence. They may require physical evidence such as clothing, pictures or anything relevant to the crime. A police officer and a file number will be assigned to the case. Parents should record this information. Parents have the right to ask the police what their plan of action will be.

Since both agencies are required to respond, they will try to work in a coordinated way to minimize distress for the child. Both groups must discuss the abuse with the child, but whenever possible will attempt to interview the child together. **The primary goal at this point is to document the child's disclosure.** It may also help reassure the child that she is believed and that the offender, not the child, must take responsibility for what occurred.

In addition, the child protection agency and the police may need to interview any other children living in the home, siblings of the victim, and the offender.

## Crime Victim Assistance Program (CVAP)

The Crime Victim Assistance Program assists victims of violent offences, their immediate family members and some witnesses in coping with the effects of an offence by providing benefits to help offset their financial costs and support their recovery. Applications are available through your local victim service program or through the victim services website: [www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victimservices/financial/index.htm](http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victimservices/financial/index.htm).



## 7. The medical examination

Your child may need to have a medical examination to determine if there has been any physical injury. The physician who does the medical examination must be comfortable doing so and sufficiently experienced to know what to look for, since the medical findings may be needed for any legal proceedings.

The physical examination can also help reassure the child that she is healthy and well.

Research shows that the vast majority of children who have been sexually abused have no physical evidence of trauma. **This does not mean that nothing has happened to the child.** It is important for the child to be interviewed by police to find out what has happened to her.

### Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect clinics (SCAN teams)

There are five specialized teams in British Columbia, made up of child abuse specialists including physicians, nurses, social workers and mental health professionals. In general, examinations are handled in a child-friendly manner and wherever possible are non-invasive. Referrals to the SCAN teams can be made by other physicians, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, delegated First Nations agencies and the police.

#### SCAN teams

Kamloops – Children’s Health Clinic

Nanaimo – Vancouver Island (VI) SCAN Clinic

Prince George – Northern Health SCAN Clinic

Surrey – Health Evaluation Assessment and Liaison Clinic (HEAL),  
Surrey Memorial Hospital

Vancouver – Child Protection Service Unit (CPSU), Child and Family  
Clinic, BC Children’s Hospital

## 8. The legal system

### Two court systems: Family court and criminal justice

There are two areas of law addressing sexual abuse: family law and criminal law. You and your child may therefore become involved with two complementary court systems: family court and criminal justice.

#### Family court

Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) or delegated First Nations agency social workers are responsible for ensuring that children are safe. Ideally, they will work closely with non-offending parents to protect a child from further contact with an offender.

Sometimes it is necessary for the social workers to “remove” a child, which means taking the child into the care of MCFD or the delegated First Nations agency to keep her safe from harm. Removal is a legal process that may involve a number of appearances in family court. You may wish to get legal assistance in order to have your wishes appropriately presented to the court.

#### Criminal justice

When the police complete the criminal investigation, they present their findings to Crown counsel (a lawyer for the province of British Columbia). It is Crown counsel who decides if there is enough evidence to lay criminal charges and what charges are most appropriate.

If Crown counsel decides to proceed with charges, you may have to make a number of appearances in court – usually the provincial court. First is a preliminary hearing, in which the Crown presents its case and the judge decides whether there is adequate evidence to proceed to trial.

At this point, the alleged offender may choose to plead guilty to the charges. In this case, there will be no trial and a sentencing hearing will follow sometime later.

If the alleged offender pleads not guilty, a date will be set for the criminal trial.

At the criminal trial, both Crown counsel and defence counsel (the lawyer representing the alleged offender) present their arguments before a judge and/or jury. They will generally require the testimony of many individuals who were involved in the investigation, including social workers, nurses, physicians and police. You and your child may be required to testify as witnesses for the Crown.

It will be the job of Crown counsel to prepare you and your child for court, explaining both the judicial process in general and the specifics of your child's case. A victim service worker may be assigned to accompany you and your child to the courthouse and explain how the day will unfold.

The court process may be long and complicated, but most children are able to understand the basic concepts of our legal system. They can be told that:

- the offender has done something wrong and must take responsibility for it
- the judge or jury are there so that both sides are heard fairly, and it will be up to them to decide whether the offender is telling the truth or not.

Parents are often concerned that testifying in court will be an additional trauma for children. However, experience has shown that if a child is well prepared and supported, she will generally feel a sense of strength and empowerment in telling her story.

If the offender pleads guilty or is found guilty, a sentencing hearing will be held. At the sentencing hearing, the judge again hears arguments from both Crown counsel and defence counsel as to what sentence the offender should receive. This process may include victim impact statements from both you and your child.

### ***On the day in court***

- Be prepared for long waits. Bring books, a favourite doll/toy and snacks.
- Have a friend or relative come with you to support both you and your child.
- Discuss with your child what to do if she has to go to the bathroom.
- If you feel yourself becoming angry or emotional, try to take a break on your own, or talk to another adult about how you are feeling. Your child will be coping with her own emotions, so will not be able to cope with yours as well.



## 9. Counselling

Most parents wonder if their child should receive counselling. It is generally a good idea to have a child seen by a trained professional (a registered clinical counsellor, clinical social worker or registered psychologist) even if the child seems to have no serious problems resulting from the sexual abuse.

Seeing a trained professional means your child will have one more adult who can provide understanding and reassurance in this challenging time. You will also have someone who can answer the questions you have about your child.

### Frequently asked questions about counselling

#### **I don't want to seek counselling for my child. Do I have to?**

Whether or not you seek professional counselling for your child is your choice. If your child is expressing suicidal thoughts, acting out sexually with other children or adults, or exhibiting significant behavioural problems, professional counselling is strongly recommended.

#### **My child is OK after seeing the counsellor two or three times. Should I keep her in counselling?**

Have a discussion with your child and then have a discussion with the counsellor before deciding what to do.

Some children bounce back quickly, especially when they have a supportive family and community (school and friends). It is important to honour your child's wellness. Viewing your child as potentially having a serious lifelong problem is not helpful when it may not be true!

Some children take longer to establish a trusting relationship and to work on their concerns and worries. Keeping your child in counselling longer could provide the time for this emotional work to be done. Your child's counsellor should be able to provide some guidance about continuing with counselling or stopping.

#### **Family support**

Sometimes the best "counsellor" for a child is the child's parent.

Children are always growing and changing. Some children might benefit from a return to counselling at a later developmental stage.

## Should I get counselling for myself?

Sometimes the sexual abuse has greater impact on a parent than on the child. While your child might bounce back quickly, you may still need help because you may have more on your plate. For example:

- The offender may have other relationships with the rest of the family and you may need to balance everyone's needs.
- The abuse of your child may have triggered memories of your own childhood abuse. Your abuse did not cause the abuse of your child.

Getting counselling for yourself is important. You are acting responsibly by taking care of your needs. Remember the flight attendant reminding everyone to put on their oxygen masks first, before helping someone? The same applies here: You can only take good emotional care of your child and help her heal when you are emotionally well.

## Where to look for counselling

The **Sexual Abuse Intervention Program (SAIP)** is available in most communities in British Columbia. In Vancouver, the Vancouver Incest and Sexual Abuse Centre (VISAC) offers this program.

The **Employee Family Assistance Program (EFAP)** is available at some workplaces. Ask your supervisor or human resources department to see if there is a counselling service or funding for counselling available to you.

You can apply to the **Crime Victim Assistance Program (CVAP)** for funding for counselling. If your application is approved, you can choose your own counsellor, as long as he or she is registered as a provider with CVAP.

### Websites where you can search for a counsellor or psychologist:

- [www.counsellingbc.com](http://www.counsellingbc.com)
- [www.bcasw.org/utility/registered-social-workers-in-private-practice](http://www.bcasw.org/utility/registered-social-workers-in-private-practice)
- [www.psychologists.bc.ca](http://www.psychologists.bc.ca)

## 10. Family, friends and moving forward

### Who should be told

You will need to help your child deal with the many questions that will be asked. It is understandable that you will want to talk to friends and family about what happened. But be aware that this may conflict with your child's need for and right to privacy. Your child may be anxious about walking into a room full of relatives and friends, wondering who knows about the abuse and how they feel about her.

Talk to your child to find out how she feels about others knowing about the abuse. Tell your child who already knows – for example, “Grandma knows what happened and she believes you and doesn't blame you.” It can help if the person can tell your child directly (in person or by phone).

Also discuss who should be told at school. Sometimes a key teacher or counsellor who the child trusts can act as a buffer for the child and help her explain absences from school.

Seek out the people you need to help and support **you**. You need a couple of people who you know will be non-judgmental and will not be shocked by what you have to say. Talking about your feelings has a healing effect and will help you to release your emotions and give you some perspective. Reach out to friends and relatives who have helped you in the past. **Find them** – you owe it to yourself!



### ***Dealing with people who don't understand***

You may sometimes encounter others who do not believe your child or do not understand the situation, and some of your own doubts may resurface. Sometimes friends' and relatives' reactions may increase your feelings of guilt.

Your greatest difficulty may be with family members of older generations. They often do not talk about sex, much less sexual abuse. They may be uncomfortable discussing these topics. If you encounter this problem, remember that they are not rejecting you but may be rejecting the topic.

Other people may be supportive but really do not understand the dynamics of sexual abuse or cannot bear to hear the details. Try not to expect too much support from these people.

Finally, don't waste your time trying to convince people who do not believe you; it uses too much energy. You need all your emotional and physical energies to take care of yourself and your child.

## **Brothers and sisters (siblings)**

Siblings need to know that their brother or sister was abused and by whom. You must explain to them, in simple terms, the involvement of police and social workers and the possible court case that may result.

Siblings of a child who discloses sexual abuse may need to be interviewed to ensure that they were not abused as well, or to find out if they witnessed the abuse or were made to be involved in some way.

Sometimes siblings may not believe that abuse has occurred. They may not believe the allegations against the offender. Siblings may take sides – either the child's or the offender's. You must prevent your child from being rejected.

Your other children may have the same range of conflicting feelings that you do. They need to have a chance to talk about how they feel and to have their feelings accepted. They may feel:

- angry at the child for disclosing the abuse
- that the child was responsible for making the offender leave home
- sad at the loss of the offender (especially if the offender is the father or someone close to them)
- angry at the offender
- guilty if they knew what was going on and were afraid to tell someone.

Whatever their feelings, it is important that your other children be given a chance to express them and be reassured that the feelings are valid, even if they differ from your feelings or the victim's feelings.

## **Moving forward**

Many parents shared their questions, feelings and experiences in the original version of this booklet. One thing they all had in common was that they survived the crisis. They found support from others. They found strength that they never knew they had. And with this support and strength, they were able to help their children regain the sense of love, trust and safety that is the right of every child.

At times, moving forward may seem impossible. Start by bringing some fun back into your family life. Not everything has to be clouded by the abuse. And remember to take care of yourself.

You do not have to go through this alone. With help, you and your child and family can move forward from the experience of sexual abuse.

## Resources

### **Helpline for Children**

Anyone who is being hurt or thinks that someone else might be hurt can call the Helpline for Children. It is a free call from anywhere in British Columbia.

310-1234 (no area code needed)

[www.safekidsbc.ca/helpline.htm](http://www.safekidsbc.ca/helpline.htm)

### **Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD)**

The ministry receives reports of abuse of children (i.e., children in need of protection) and provides referrals for counselling services.

Call the Helpline for Children: 310-1234 (no area code needed)

[www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child\\_protection/](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child_protection/)

### **Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society (VACFSS)**

VACFSS is a delegated First Nations agency that receives reports of abuse of children (children in need of protection) and provides referrals for counselling services.

778-331-4500

[www.vacfss.com](http://www.vacfss.com)

### **Crime Victim Assistance Program (CVAP)**

CVAP provides funding for counselling. To apply, you will need a police file number.

604-660-3888 or 1-866-660-3888

[www.victimlinkbc.ca/vlbc/financial/cvap.page](http://www.victimlinkbc.ca/vlbc/financial/cvap.page)

[www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victimservices/financial/index.htm#cvap](http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victimservices/financial/index.htm#cvap)

### **Vancouver Police Department, Victim Services**

The Vancouver Police Department's Victim Services Unit provides crime victims, witnesses and their family members with assistance to lessen the impact of crime and trauma.

604-717-2737

[www.vancouver.ca/police/crime-prevention/victim-services](http://www.vancouver.ca/police/crime-prevention/victim-services)

## **VictimLink BC**

VictimLink BC is a toll-free confidential and multilingual telephone service available across British Columbia and Yukon 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It provides information and referral services for all victims of crime and immediate crisis support for victims of family and sexual violence.

1-800-563-0808

[www.victimlinkbc.ca](http://www.victimlinkbc.ca)

## **Sexual Abuse Intervention Program (SAIP)**

SAIP provides specialized assessment and treatment services for children and youth under age 19 who have been sexually abused, and their families. SAIP also provides services for children under age 12 years who have sexual behaviour problems, and their caregivers. Call your local MCFD office for information about these services in your community.

[www.saipbc.ca](http://www.saipbc.ca)

## **Vancouver Incest and Sexual Abuse Centre (VISAC) and Trauma and Sexual Abuse Program (TASA)**

VISAC (Vancouver) and TASA (Richmond) offer a variety of services to victims of trauma and sexual abuse and to their non-offending family members.

VISAC (Vancouver): 604-874-2938

TASA (Richmond): 604-279-7100

[www.fsgv.ca/programpages/abusepreventiontraumatreatment/visactasa/index.html](http://www.fsgv.ca/programpages/abusepreventiontraumatreatment/visactasa/index.html)

## **Act 2 Child and Family Services**

Act 2 provides counselling for children who have experienced sexual abuse and for children under 12 with sexual behaviour problems.

Maple Ridge: 604-463-0965

Tri-Cities: 604-937-7776

[www.act2.ca/services](http://www.act2.ca/services)

For a list of websites where you can search for a **counsellor** or **psychologist**, see page 24.

