

Fostering the sexually abused child

by Donna Gillespie Foster
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"No, I don't want children who have been sexually abused. I can't handle that."

This is a common statement social workers hear from prospective or new foster and adoptive parents. Caregivers make this type of response for several reasons. They may refuse to accept sexually abused children into their homes because they recognize that they are uninformed or unequipped to meet the needs of this type of child. They also refuse for more emotional reasons. Just the thought of a child being sexually abused stirs strong responses in caregivers and others on the treatment team. Child sexual abuse affects us all in some way unless we have numbed ourselves to this victimization.

When a child already in their home discloses sexual abuse, caregivers experience many emotions, including fear, helplessness, sympathy, and anger. Anger towards the birth parents may prevent foster parents from being supportive of birth family connections. All of these feelings and realizations are sometimes too much for the prospective or new foster and adoptive parents.

The Reality Is . . .

Yet the reality is that many of the children placed in foster care have been sexually abused. The chances that a sexually abused child will be placed with families is high. Many of these children are placed for other reasons, such as neglect, physical abuse, and abandonment. Often the social workers who place these children are not aware of the sexual abuse.

In many cases, this abuse is first discovered by the foster family caring for the child. Nighttime and bath time are scary for many children who have experienced sexual abuse. Having a caregiver there to console them and listen to them may bring forth unspoken birth family secrets such as sexual abuse. Realizing that so many children have experienced child sexual abuse and that they could be brought into care for other reasons, it makes sense that all foster and adoptive families be educated about sexual abuse. As far as I am concerned, this should be a mandatory requirement. My family fostered for seventeen years and at least 60% of the children were sexually abused. Some the social workers knew this up front and shared this information with me. Others didn't know, and I only found out through the behaviors of the children and things they said.

When I started fostering in 1982, foster parents weren't offered education or even support meetings. Today states, counties, and agencies require specialized training for their caregivers, and foster and adoptive parents are often included in the team treating and caring for foster children. Currently there is a course on this topic available through the NCDSS Children's Services Statewide Training Partnership. Entitled "Fostering and

Adopting the Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused (CSA/MAPP)," this course is open to all certified MAPP trainers. If you would like to have special training in your county about fostering sexually abused children, ask your county DSS to send its MAPP trainers to this course. If you are a certified MAPP trainer yourself, simply register for this course. To learn more see the box below.

Child Sexual Abuse

Let's explore the topic of child sexual abuse and how it relates to our work with children. What is child sexual abuse? It is the interaction, including non-physical contact (such as verbal abuse, exposure, or pornographic photos) as well as physical contact between a child and a person in a power position in which the child is used for sexual stimulation of the abuser or others. The word "power" plays a huge role in the how children are over controlled. Child sexual abuse doesn't occur only by family members, but for this article I will refer primarily to family abuse, or incest. Children who have been sexually abused by a family member are commonly enveloped into a secret life. It is the most secretive abuse of all.

Why Don't Children Tell?

They don't understand that it is wrong. It is a family cycle. Children are kept in seclusion without outside interactions so the secret will be upheld.

The child may not have the verbal capacity to tell. Words like vagina could have been replaced by the offender to "knee" to disguise sexual abuse if disclosed by the young child. Children are taught to respect and obey adults. Adults forget to explain that there are boundaries to this respect. Children feel guilty if they tell and could cause their loved one (abuser) to go to jail or their family to be broken apart. This could be a frequent threat from the perpetrator. Boys feel ashamed if they tell because they are taught to fight and take control. They may feel they are homosexual. Society doesn't make it easy for boys to tell.

If the abuser is the child's father or mother's boyfriend and the child's mother is aware or suspects the sexual abuse, she may not tell. Reasons could be her self-esteem has been beaten down, she is ashamed, or she fears the loss of the abuser's love or support. She may also fear the loss of her family if she seeks help. She may not acknowledge the abuse because if she did she would have to take responsibility. Women sexually abuse children too. We don't catch them because we openly accept their "nurturing behaviors." Bathing, sleeping with children, dressing, and touching children is normal to society. So, when the offender's behavior goes from nurturing to sexual assault, no one notices.

Addressing Difficult Behaviors

How can care givers help a child feel safe, not over-controlled and not guilty? There are common behaviors of sexually abused children that frustrate care givers. Excessive masturbating in public, lack of boundaries, and sexually playing with toys are a few of the behaviors. These are "learned" behaviors and can be replaced with more appropriate ones if patiently taught by caring foster or adoptive parents. But this isn't one person's job: it is the treatment team's responsibility to do his together.

Ways to Help

1. Be friendly but clear with your household rules. Develop a plan that spells out how to live in your home. Don't assume children know these things. Write it down and give a copy to your social worker so he or she is aware of how your family functions. This can be helpful if anyone questions your life-style.

Note: Rules are developed only when there is a need. For example, masturbation is a reaction to being sexually stimulated (abused). Babies touch themselves as infants. It is a natural action. It can become an excessive need for a child who has been sexually stimulated over a long time period. It can show up when the child is insecure, deep in thought, or needing to be stroked (much like a child who gently pulls on their hair or sucks their thumb). Many times, the child isn't aware of what he or she is doing. Instead of yelling or shaming the child, establish guidelines for children if they find they need to "touch themselves."

Suggested Guidelines: Must be alone with door shut and shades closed, don't cause pain or bleeding, no objects can be used, time alone is limited to 15 minutes. Add the guidelines you feel are important. Then give children opportunity to develop self-esteem and other interests. Their need to masturbate will lessen.

2. Listen to the child when he or she is disclosing; don't tell the child how to feel or what to say. Children don't always need advice, but they do need to vent. Let them use their own words, even if they are offensive to you. You can help them replace their offensive words with more acceptable ones later when they aren't opening their souls up to you. Trust can be built here. Do not promise not to tell anyone what is shared. Rather, say, "I won't share the information unless I feel there is someone who can help. I will tell you who I feel we need to share this information with."
3. Don't talk badly about the child's birth family. A child's family is part of her identity; these connections are vital to the outcome of the child's life. If she is currently separated from the non-offender and her siblings, she may feel isolated and afraid. Helping the child to visit her family will help build the child's trust in

you. You aren't judge and jury of the child's birth family—others on the treatment team are responsible for this. If you take this position you may not be in place to help.

4. Record any information, such as birth parents' behavior with child, signals of sexual abuse of the child, and disclosures from the child or family. Report these to the child's social worker immediately. Report your reactions to what you observed. Keep a copy of everything you submit.
5. Let the child talk about his feelings about his family, including the offender. "Regardless of how we feel about them, incest perpetrators are still very important to the families they have betrayed. In psychological terms they are still 'central attachments' for the family" (McMahon, 2000). You might want to tell the child, "There are different ways parents can show children 'love' and that is what the social workers and doctors are trying to teach your parents."
6. Teach the child some of the other ways parents can show children caring and love. This is another reason why foster and adoptive parents have to be friendly and clear with boundaries so the child can learn. Remember, repeating the rules and expectations will be necessary until the child can create new positive habits. This is an opportunity to work on enhancing the child's self esteem by spending quality time with her. Have fun, laugh, and play. This may be the first time the child has freely experienced this type of interaction.
7. Create a "life book" with the child so she can put her life into perspective. With stories and pictures, the child can look at her past, present, and future. It will help alleviate her confusion and leave her with time to laugh and play. Social workers and therapists can use the life book as a therapeutic tool in counseling the child. Classes on how and why to create life books will be held this spring in different places across North Carolina. The class is called, "My Life's Book," and is sponsored by the N.C. Division of Social Services. Information about this course can be found in your county DSS's copy of the Division's Winter/Spring 2001 Training Calendar. Ask your social worker to call and register you. Foster and adoptive parents and social workers are encouraged to take this course.
8. Spend time with the child and teach the child how to laugh and play. Give them power in their lives and help them to understand that they are not at fault. This could be life changing for a sexually abused child.

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