

Understanding the Non-Offending Parent in Cases of Child Sexual Abuse

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Emotions Experienced by Non-Offending Parents



- Guilt and shame
- Sadness and grief
- Hurt and betrayal
- Jealousy
- Confusion
- Sexual inadequacy and rejection
- Hatred
- Financial worries

Common Reactions

- **Numbness** – inability to feel anything
- **Distance** – feeling separated from people and events around them
- **Anger** – toward everyone around them
- **Disbelief** – “Maybe my child dreamed this”
- **Denial** – not accepting that the abuse happened, especially when the offender denies the accusation

Common Thoughts

- Of all the children in the world, why did this happen to my child?
- How did I not realize this was happening?
- I am a terrible parent.
- I should have prevented this from happening.
- This was all my fault.
- My child will never be the same again.
- My child was partly to blame.
- I can never trust men again.
- Why did this happen?

Believing the Allegations

- The majority of non-offending mothers believe their children's allegations
- Belief does not ensure support or protection
- More likely to believe their children when:
 - Perpetrator is not a sexual partner
 - Postponed giving birth until adulthood
 - No knowledge of abuse prior to disclosure
 - Child did not exhibit sexualized behaviors

Factors Influencing Initial Reaction

- Was mother sexually abused as a child?
- How does she cope with crisis in general?
- What kind of relationship does she have with the child?
- What kind of relationship does she have with the offender?
- Are families and friends supportive?
- Did she suspect a problem?
- How old is the child?
- What are her cultural and religious beliefs?

Non-Offending Mother's Experience

- Asked to choose between children and intimate partners
- Loss of partner (divorce, separation, incarceration)
- Loss of custody of children
- Loss of social support (friends, family, coworkers)
- Loss of financial support
- Difficulties at work
- Change of residence

Clinical Distress in Non-Offending Caregivers

- Secondary trauma – symptoms of PTSD
- Depression
- Generalized anxiety
- General psychological distress

What Children Need

- Support from caregivers
- Appropriate reactions from caregivers
- Good role models for coping with negative feelings
- Accurate information about their body and sex
- To be listened to and told that their feelings are normal

Helpful Statements From the Non-Offending Parent

- What happened to you is not your fault
- I believe you
- I will do my best to keep you safe
- I would be happy to listen if you want to talk about this
- Telling someone about this was the right thing to do
- I'm so proud of you for telling an adult



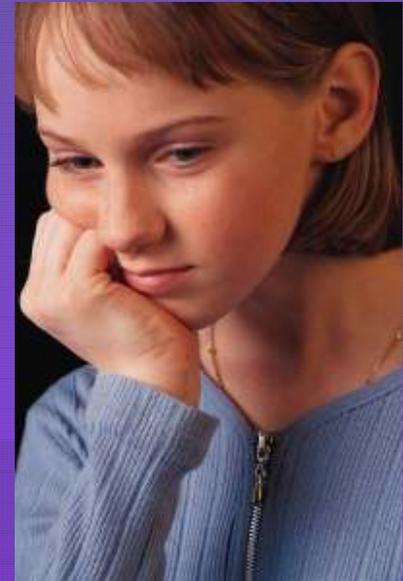
What Non-Offending Parents Need

- Someone to listen
- Most do not want to know the details
- Information about what will happen next and when
- Financial assistance
- Reassurance that they are doing the right things
- Support from family, friends, and others
- To regain control of their life
- Access to information on protection orders, shelter, domestic violence, counseling

Common Questions From Non-Offending Parents

What can I expect from my child?

- Crying, sadness
- Sleep disturbance – nightmares
- Changes in appetite
- Acting out behaviors
- Sexualized behaviors
- Irritability, anger
- Low self-esteem
- Problems in school or with peers
- Fear and anxiety
- Physical symptoms – bedwetting, stomach aches



Why did my child keep this a secret?

- Feelings of guilt and self-blame
- Feeling ashamed
- Feeling alone and isolated
- Fear that they will not be believed
- Fear of getting in trouble
- Threatened or intimidated by offender
- Offender told them it was okay

Why would someone sexually abuse a child?

- Believe they are showing affection
- History of sexual or physical abuse
- Problems with alcohol or drug abuse
- Socially isolated and low self-esteem
- Interpersonal problems with peers
- Only sexually attracted to children
- See children as adult-like
- Poor coping skills
- Problems with power, authority, and impulse control

What effect will this have on my other children?

- Variety of emotions – guilt, anger, fear, sadness, confusion, jealousy
- They may unintentionally do or say things that can upset the victim
- Many siblings respond in a caring and positive way, which is helpful to the victim
- Important to share with the siblings what happened, that the victim was not to blame, and answer any questions they have



Does my family need counseling?

- It can be beneficial for most parents
- Not all children need counseling after disclosure of sexual abuse, but most children can benefit from it
- Significant psychological distress
- High-risk child behaviors
- Lack of social support
- Benefits of group therapy – Project SAFE

Other Questions

- Should I ask my child about what happened?
- Is it normal to feel jealousy and anger toward my daughter?
- Why is my child so angry with me?
- Will my child have sexual problems later in life?
- Will my child sexually abuse others?

Summary

- Non-offending parents are experiencing several significant changes and very strong emotions – these reactions are very normal
- If the initial reaction is not helpful or supportive, this is not predictive of future support
- Many parents and children experience clinically significant levels of distress and may need treatment
- Children need support from their caregivers – this is the most important factor that predicts later adjustment

Things You Can Do

- Listen whenever possible
- Help the parent remain calm and focus on the needs of the child
- Avoid judging the parent based on their initial reaction
- Return their phone calls
- Encourage the parent to believe their child
- Allow the mother to make basic decisions for herself and her family
- Help parents find support
- Refer for psychological treatment if it would be helpful