

Newsletter



THIS ISSUE

- Signs of sexual abuse
- What to do if you suspect sexual abuse
- A Survivor's Story

Dear Friends,

Listening is hard. This may be why God gave us two ears and one mouth, because listening is twice as hard as talking.

We express our wants, feelings, thoughts and, opinions in a variety of ways. The challenge is in interpreting, listening, and understanding what others communicate to us.

In my work I do a tremendous amount of listening to adults' stories of childhood sexual abuse. What I hear over and over again is how difficult and, most of the times impossible, it was to communicate to the adults what was happening in their lives. The result is often the victim carries the burden, shame, and scars well into adulthood.

We know that the sooner a child who is sexually abused receives support and intervention, the more likely that that same child will begin to heal and thrive.

One of our most important responsibilities as adults is to teach our children not only how to communicate with us, but that it is safe to do so. I encourage you to pay close attention to the survivor's story: it will help you to understand ways in which you can tune into and listen to the children in your lives.

There are times when a child may be too young or just too scared and ashamed to share what is happening to him/her. In this issue, we will give you some tips on identifying signs and symptoms of sexual abuse. Keep in mind that if these signs appear repeatedly or in combination you should take a closer look and *consider* the possibility of child sexual abuse. Remember, a single sign does not prove child abuse is occurring; the key is to take a closer look and pay attention to what your child may be telling you.

Amy Peterson
Victim Assistance Coordinator
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BEHAVIORAL SIGNS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

- Inappropriate interest or knowledge of sexual acts
- Reports nightmares or bedwetting
- Fear of a particular person or family member
- Withdrawal, secretiveness or depression
- Engaging in persistent sexual play with friends, toys or pets
- Withdrawal from previously enjoyable activities
- Unusual aggressiveness

PHYSICAL SIGNS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

- Has difficulty walking or sitting
- Drastic changes in appetite
- Runs away
- Self-injury
- Eating disorders
- Suicidal behavior
- Complaining of pain while urinating or having a bowel movement
- Exhibiting symptoms of genital infections or sexually transmitted disease

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT SEXUAL ABUSE

- Show the child that you understand what they are saying and that you take them seriously
- Encourage the child to talk openly; do not lead discussion or be judgmental
- Assure the child that they did the right thing by telling
- Assure the child that they are not to blame
- Immediately report the abuse. If the abuse is within the family contact your local Child Protection Agency. If the abuse is outside the family, report to the police or the district attorney's office.

Unsafe Touches: A Survivor's Story

If parents will see with new eyes or listen to their children with more attuned ears, then telling my story will be worthwhile. Parents are the first defense, but if they aren't doing the *right kind* of listening, if they don't know what to look for, and if they don't recognize it when they see it they won't know when to act to shield their children.

When I was a child, my family had a friend who spent time in our home. We spent even more time in his home. We grew up alongside of his children. He was "a child at heart," enthralled with play and, like a pied piper, offered enticements that were impossible for children to refuse. Also, like the pied piper, he did not have our best interests at heart. He was regarded as a teddy bear who "*just loved children*" and none of the adults around me, including my parents, viewed him as a danger.

This last aspect is particularly tragic because he was a danger. His touches, even in full sight of others, were overwhelming and suffocating. Disguised as part of a bear hug, his hands wandered to places they didn't belong. As a child, I was unable to reconcile the contrast between the smiles of my parents and the hands touching me in places that made me uncomfortable and afraid. As a four-year-old, I didn't have the language to communicate that something was grossly wrong, so I used the only means I knew. I cried, I stormed, and I threw temper-tantrums when we were going to his house. I was viewed as a 'naughty' child; I was spanked, and off we went.

This man was an amateur photographer; we were a poor family, so when he offered to take our "portraits," my parents were delighted. I did not want to go; I did not want him touching me. I did not want him taking my picture. I cried, I stormed, and I threw a temper-tantrum. I was viewed as a 'naughty' child; I was spanked, and off we went.

I suspect that while reading this story, there are parents who think that the clues are clear, but clues are always clear in hindsight. The behavior I exhibited is frustrating to adults, particularly in a busy world where there are numerous commitments tugging at time and resources. Parents have a challenge managing schedules for multiple people. Amid the regular daily struggles, a child's limited ability to communicate can seem like one more impediment and/or frustration.

Because of my parents' failure to *hear* and protect me, by the time I might have had the skills to communicate what was happening, I had learned that I was not allowed to speak out against this adult. As I became older, his touches became more aggressive. He was an expert at hiding them within an embrace that appeared innocent and loving. As our family's were intertwined, my parents continued to view him as generous and caring. As he intended, my parents regarded him as someone fully devoted to children.

His interest in the families of his neighborhood, his commitment to "loving all children" and his generous offers to take us places, were viewed as kindhearted. On one occasion he volunteered to chaperone a sleep-over for his daughter, with a dozen nine and ten-year-olds. My parents thought it was fortunate that I had been invited. He climbed into the bed he had assigned to me, telling me that I must sleep with him; at the age of nine, I chose instead to sleep on the cold floor without pillow or blanket.

By the time I was eleven and a priest who was intent on harm arrived at my parish, I was ill-prepared to protect myself and the idea of coming forward, speaking out, or telling the truth was beyond my ability. By that time, I was ensnared in a code of silence that I believed my parents required.

The mind of an adult can look at this story and see it for the *wrong* thinking it is, but I wasn't an adult, I was a child. Our lives do not begin anew each school year; as with the lessons of school, the lessons of life are an accumulation of what was learned the year, the month, the day before. My lessons included knowing I was naughty if I tried to say "no"; my lessons included knowing that bad touches were condoned by the adults on whom I depended. These lessons were taught covertly by my parents' lack of awareness and failure to act.

The year the unsafe priest was at my parish, my school and parish my attendance dropped off dramatically. I suffered from painful stomachaches. As there was no medical reason for them, each day I was sent to school, only to be sent home by mid-day in terrible pain.

As an adult, I've learned that children who have been molested often complain of stomachaches. I've learned that children carry their intuition in their stomach and that if they are uncomfortable about something, one thing that often flares up is the tummy. When I learned this, it was as if a huge wave splashed over me and filled all the unanswered cries of my past. I saw my own story with new eyes. I wasn't a naughty child. I was a child in terror. In the only way I knew how, I was begging my parents to protect me. I wasn't a bad student. I was a child who didn't know how to communicate

that bad things were happening to me. I resorted to the only thing I knew would guarantee I'd be allowed to leave a dangerous place.

If you want to understand how difficult it is to discuss sexual assault, you need only look to the suffering of rape victims. Grown women, who have life experience and verbal skills find it difficult to relate their stories. Imagine how much more horrific it must be for a child, who doesn't have the ability to understand what has happened, much less the vocabulary to describe it. Children cannot always explain *why* they don't like someone, they just know they do. Our culture considers it "not nice" to dislike someone. As a result, rather than putting effort into examining the entire picture, the child is scolded for speaking out and sent back into harms way.

When it comes to this issue, my personal opinion is that we expect far too much from our children. We expect a child to say "no" to an adult. Children need a safe place to come forward if a crime occurs, that's important. However, it is not the child's job to stop a criminal after the fact; it is our job to keep the crime from happening in the first place. It is not the child's responsibility to police the adults who are entrusted with their care. It is not the child's duty to develop communication skills equal to the perpetrator's so they can mount a convincing argument that will cause their parents to investigate.

Talk about a system that is grossly out of balance.

Please hear me when I tell you that a child is not likely to resort to tales of sexual assault as a means of getting attention. Tales of sexual assault are painful for me to talk about and I'm middle-aged; at seven, nine, eleven, I would have been incapable of making up the stories that happened to me.

Please understand that not every adult who enjoys children is a danger. Unfortunately, a single offender can harm many children. Sadly, it takes only one to change a child's life forever.

When it comes to people, including family members interacting with your child, please listen to *your* tummy. Please pay attention to *your* intuition. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions. Use your mind and evaluate. If it feels uncomfortable, it is. If it seems too good to be true, it is. And most important, listen to your children. Listen to their verbal and their *nonverbal* cues.

Unfortunately for your children, you may get only one chance to get it right.

If even one child can be *heard* by a parent, then the difficulty of telling this account will be worth the effort. Thank you for listening to my story.

"Kate"



A copy of this Newsletter can be found on the Archdiocese of Milwaukee website www.archmil.org under Safeguarding All of God's Family.

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