

Coping with the Shock of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse



Information for Parents and Caregivers

What Is Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse?

Intrafamilial sexual abuse means sexual abuse that occurs within the family. In this form of abuse, a family member involves a child in (or exposes a child to) sexual behaviors or activities. The “family member” may not be a blood relative, but could be someone who is considered “part of the family,” such as a godparent or very close friend.

The discovery that someone you love and trust has sexually abused your child is extremely stressful and can bring up intense feelings of shock, rage, confusion, denial, disbelief, and guilt. Dealing with these reactions—and helping your child recover from the abuse—requires time, strength, and support from your extended family, your community, and from professionals in law enforcement, child protection, and mental health services. Although it may be difficult, it is important to notify law enforcement if your child discloses sexual abuse. This is an important step in keeping your child safe.

Facing the reality of intrafamilial sexual abuse can be painful. But by ending the secrecy surrounding sexual abuse, you can help your family to heal and protect and nurture your child so that he or she can grow into a healthy, successful adult.

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Did you know?

More than half of all children who are sexually abused are abused by a parent or other relative.¹

The Effect of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse on Children

When children are abused by adults who are supposed to protect them from harm, their ability to trust and rely on adults may be shattered. Knowing that the abuser is liked—or even loved—by other family members makes it all the more difficult for children to tell others about the abuse.

Children who have been abused by a family member are more likely to blame themselves for the abuse than those who are abused by someone outside the family unit. This is particularly true of older children, who may be all too aware of the effect that disclosing the abuse will have on other family members.

As a result, it can take victims of intrafamilial sexual abuse weeks, months, or longer to let anyone know that they've been abused,² and even longer to reveal all the details. Children from cultures that frown on talking about sex or sexuality (**See Box**) may be even more reluctant to tell.

After disclosing, children and adolescents who have been sexually abused by a family member are often tormented by self doubt, self blame, fear of the abuser, and distress over what their disclosure has done to the family. Sometimes, in a desperate attempt to make everything better in the family, they may change their story or even deny that the abuse occurred.

Recanting, or “taking back” the disclosure is common and does not mean that children were lying about the abuse. When the abuse is caused by a family member, children may feel pressure to recant because of how the disclosure is affecting the family or because of a lack of family support.



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Cultural Challenges

Virtually every culture has spoken and unspoken rules about sex and sexuality. These rules can make it even more difficult for children to ask for help when they have been abused

For example, in cultures that place a high value on female virginity, a girl who has been sexually abused may feel that she has been disgraced and is now “damaged goods” whom no one would want to marry. This can lead to feelings of shame that in turn lead to further secrecy.

Boys who have been sexually abused may experience shame and self-doubt. Boys who have been sexually abused by a male may struggle with a commonly-held misconception that this makes them gay.

Although your cultural beliefs are important, it is necessary to focus on the physical and emotional health of your child. Remember that the sexual abuse is not your fault and does not reflect negatively on your family or you as a parent. Seek guidance from people in your community that you trust, such as religious leaders, medical professionals, or others who will be supportive.

Seeking help from a counselor who specializes in child sexual abuse can help your child and your family to cope with what has happened. Counseling can reduce the stress and other effects of sexual abuse on your child and your family. With the proper help, your child and the family can overcome and heal from the abuse that has occurred.

The Effect of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse on the Family

Sexual abuse of a child by a trusted adult also puts tremendous strain on relationships within the family. Some family members may find it hard to believe the abuser could do such a thing, and take sides (or feel pressured to take sides) over who is telling the truth. Family members may also struggle with how to manage their divided loyalties toward the abuser and the victim. Even in families that accept that the abuse occurred, reactions to the abuser may run the gamut from “lock him up and throw away the key” to “hate the sin but love the sinner.” Tensions may arise when different family members have different opinions about loyalty, fairness, justice, forgiveness, and responsibility.

If you are a mother whose child has been abused by a spouse or boyfriend, it can take a great deal of courage to stand up for your child. Some of the challenges you may face include:

- Dealing with family members who don't believe the abuse occurred or who continue to maintain their relationship with the abuser
- The possibility of economic hardship if you are financially dependent on the abuser
- Possible loss of friends and acquaintances when they learn your partner is a child abuser
- Making sense of conflicting advice from friends, family, or religious leaders—who may think you should forgive the perpetrator—and child protection and legal authorities who expect you to end your involvement with the perpetrator

For many mothers, the greatest challenge is dealing with their own reactions to the child's disclosure. If your child tells you that he or she has been sexually abused, your response can play a powerful role in his or her process of healing from the abuse.

Coping with Your Own Reactions

Your initial reactions to the disclosure of sexual abuse by a family member may include shock, rage, confusion, denial, and disbelief. If you yourself were a victim of sexual abuse as a child, the disclosure may stir up even stronger reactions and confusion (**See Box**).

Do not be surprised if you go through a painful period of doubting your child, particularly if the abuser is someone you love or depend on, such as a spouse, boyfriend, or grandparent. Because the abuser is almost certain to deny the abuse, you may find yourself in the difficult position of having to decide which family member is telling the truth, and having to weigh the consequences of believing one over the other.

For many parents, it is relatively easy to believe that abuse has occurred when the victim is a very young child. But [when the victim is an adolescent, many parents find themselves doubting the truth of what their child has told them](#).

Adolescence is a rocky time for parents and children alike, when tensions run high and tempers flare. Sadly, adolescents who have been sexually abused are even more likely to exhibit the kinds of behavior problems that lead to tension, resentment, and miscommunication.

If your child is an adolescent, you may find yourself wondering if he or she was in some way responsible for the abuse. You may wonder whether he or she could have resisted, or question why it took so long for him or her to tell you. If your child disclosed the abuse to someone else—such as a teacher or friend—you may also be dealing with feelings of confusion, anger, and guilt about his or her not confiding in you. And if the abuser is your spouse or partner, you may even find yourself feeling betrayed, as if your partner and child were “cheating” on you.

Echoes of Past Pain

For much of human history, children who revealed sexual abuse were rarely believed or supported. Children who disclosed abuse faced negative reactions ranging from being told to keep quiet—or forget—about the abuse to being berated and punished for “telling lies.” In addition to suffering from the effects of the abuse itself, such children grew up feeling betrayed and abandoned by the people who should have protected them.

If you are a survivor of child sexual abuse, the discovery that your own child has been abused—especially by a family member—can bring up a host of painful and unresolved feelings and memories. Getting help for yourself is an important part of being able to provide support for your child. You can [contact the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network \(RAINN\) at 1-800-656-HOPE or <http://www.rainn.org>](#) for help in finding support in your area.

As painful as these reactions can be, they are not unusual, and [working through your doubts and fears will be critical not only to your child's recovery, but to your own.](#)

It is important to remember that power takes many forms, and that your adolescent may have felt coerced in ways that were not directly physical. For example, if your partner is in a position of power and has control over financial resources, over disciplining the adolescent, and over your attitude and reactions to your child, your child may have been afraid that rejecting sexual advances or fighting back would only cause more problems in the family. In fact, many perpetrators “buy” their victims’ silence through veiled or overt threats of all the bad things that could happen if their victims disclose the abuse.



One Family's Story

Christina was a 12-year-old girl whose father, Michael, had been sexually abusing her for more than a year. One night, a neighbor called the police to report a violent argument between Christina's parents. When the police and Child Protective Services representative interviewed Christina, she told them what Michael had been doing to her and was removed from the home.

At first, Christina's mother, Joanna, did not support or believe her daughter. Joanna was financially dependent on her husband and terrified of his violent temper. A recent immigrant, she had no family in the States, and was embarrassed to talk about Michael's behavior with her few friends. When Michael had been violent with her in the past, Joanna had always told herself that it was because she was not a good enough wife, but that he was a good father and could be trusted with their daughter. It took Joanna several months to recognize that she was a victim of domestic violence, and to accept that her daughter had indeed been sexually abused.

The hardest part for Joanna was to realize just how wrong she had been and to let go of her illusions about Michael. It was crucial for Joanna to receive help that would allow her to understand that the problem lay with Michael, not with her. Once she could acknowledge this, she was able to believe her daughter, and to begin healing from her own experience of abuse. Only then could Christina and Joanna restore the trust in their mother-daughter relationship.

Don't let your natural and understandable feelings of confusion and doubt override the fact that [the perpetrator is always at fault](#). If, in the heat of your own pain and distress, you accuse your adolescent of betrayal instead of acknowledging that your child was the victim, he or she may begin to experience dangerous—and potentially damaging—self-doubt. This can be particularly devastating if he or she experienced normal sexual arousal during the abuse, even though it was unwanted and forced. This is not unusual and should not be taken as evidence that the adolescent “wanted” or was seeking out the abuse.

If you are struggling with feelings of anger or betrayal towards your abused child or teen, ask yourself: “What would it take for me to 1) believe my child, 2) not be angry at my child, and 3) not feel betrayed by my child?”

The answer is often revealing. For many parents:

- [Believing](#) your child means facing the fact that a person you have trusted and loved has betrayed, lied to, and used you and your child
- [Letting go of anger](#) means redirecting your anger away from your child and towards the person who perpetrated the abuse
- [Letting go of feeling betrayed](#) means recognizing the real source of the betrayal—the perpetrator. To move forward, you will need to accept that much of what you believed about this person was not true. By letting go of old beliefs, you can help your child—who has also been betrayed—to heal more fully

Even parents who believe their child from the start may struggle with guilt at not having been able to prevent the abuse, or not realizing that something was wrong before the child told. In such cases, it is helpful to remember that even though hindsight is 20/20, none of us have the power to read minds or predict the future. Many of the “clues” that seem clear when looking back are nonspecific behaviors (for example, increased irritability, poor sleep, etc.) that even a mental health professional may not have recognized as signs that the child was being sexually abused.

Moving Forward

Non-offending parents are the single most important resource that children have after they have experienced intrafamilial abuse.³ As hard as it may be to report sexual abuse that has been perpetrated by a family member, this is the best thing you can do to help your entire family heal, including the person who perpetrated the abuse. If you are not sure who to contact, call the ChildHelp® National Child Abuse Hotline at 1.800.4.A.CHILD (1.800.422.4453; http://www.childhelp.org/get_help).

Effective treatment is available to help you and your child move forward—together—towards a happy and healthy future.^{4,5} Children can recover from sexual abuse, with the help of protective, supportive parents. For more information on treatment options, see The National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s video, *The Promise of Trauma-Focused Treatment for Child Sexual Abuse*, available at <http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/asset.do?id=1151&video=true>. Many communities have local Children’s Advocacy Centers (CACs) that offer coordinated support and services to victims of child abuse, including sexual abuse. For a state-by-state listing of accredited CACs, visit the website of the National Children’s Alliance (http://www.nca-online.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=3999).



Children can recover from sexual abuse, with the help of protective, supportive parents.

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This product was developed by the Child Sexual Abuse Committee of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, comprised of mental health, legal, and medical professionals with expertise in the field of child sexual abuse.

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.