

Sexual Abuse

What Happens When You Tell

A Guide for Children and Parents



*No one else
can decide for
you, but a lot
of people can
help you after
you've decided
to tell.*

Sexual Abuse Information Series 2008

This is one of ten booklets in the Sexual Abuse Information Series:

SEXUAL ABUSE COUNSELLING

A Guide for Parents and Children

SEXUAL ABUSE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN

YOU TELL A Guide for Children and Parents

WHEN GIRLS HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED

A Guide for Young Girls

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A Guide for Young Boys

WHEN TEENAGE GIRLS HAVE BEEN

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Guide à l'intention des enfants et des parents

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VISAC (Vancouver Incest and Sexual Abuse Centre) is a program of Family Services of Greater Vancouver. VISAC offers a wide range of services including specialized victim support services, individual and group therapy for children, youth, families, and adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and/or trauma.

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A Guide for Children and Parents

This booklet answers these questions:

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Kids Help Phone 1.800.668.6868

A foreword for parents and other helpers

This booklet is written for children who have been sexually abused. It will explain what happens if they decide to disclose the abuse.

It outlines:

- **Why they should tell;**
- **Who they should tell;**
- **The laws about reporting sexual abuse;**
- **How family members might react;**
- **What social workers and police usually do when they receive a report of sexual abuse; and**
- **What happens if a case goes to court.**

Telling about sexual abuse might be the most difficult decision children ever have to make. When they tell, they need all the help they can get – from parents, teachers, school counsellors, social workers and other family members. If children don't get the help they need, they may become frightened, take back the disclosure and pretend that the sexual abuse never happened.

If you are a parent or other adult helper, you can help sexually abused children by reading this booklet with them. Most nine to twelve-year-olds will be able to read it on their own, but younger children may need help. Even though the vocabulary is fairly simple, many of the ideas are not.

Parents can help by reading and talking about this booklet with their child.

How can this booklet help me?

If you are a boy or girl who has been *sexually abused*, this booklet can help you.

It will explain:

- **What sexual abuse is;**
- **How to know if you have been sexually abused;**
- **Why you should tell someone;**

- **Who you can tell;**
- **How your family might act if you tell;**
- **How social workers and the police can help you; and**
- **What happens if you go to court.**

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is a touch on a private part of your body, like your penis or vagina or breast. But the person who touched you didn't seem to care whether it was private or not. The person who touched you did it in a way that made you feel confused and bad about yourself.

The person who touched you may have made you feel that you were the one to blame. You may feel *guilty* even though it wasn't your fault. Sexual abuse may mean that an older person has made you touch his or her private parts.

Sexual abuse may also mean that an older person has made you watch something you didn't want to watch. If you ever had a teenaged babysitter make you watch him *masturbate* (play with his penis), that's sexual abuse. If you ever had an older person make you watch movies of people playing with one another's private parts, that's sexual abuse too.



How do I know if I've been sexually abused?

You know you've been sexually abused if:

- **The touching was done on purpose, and not by accident.**
- **The touching made you feel good and bad at the same time.**
- **The person who touched you told you to keep it a secret.**

Here's an example:

Lucy's stepfather came to her bedroom every night to read her a bedtime story. Lucy liked stories, and she liked her stepfather because he knew lots of good jokes. But before Lucy got her story, her stepfather made her touch his penis. When Lucy did what he wanted, he told her it was a secret, and that she shouldn't tell her mother.

Lucy felt excited and scared and bad all at the same time. She was being sexually abused. When Lucy didn't want to do it any more, she told her mother. Her mother was very angry with Lucy's stepfather, and made him leave because what he did was wrong.

Should I tell someone I've been sexually abused?

Yes. It's a good idea to tell an adult if someone is sexually abusing you, or has abused you in the past. It's a good idea because the person you tell may be able to help make the abuse stop.

Telling is also a good idea because a bad secret can make you feel bad. Letting the secret out will make you feel better. But you have to think about who to tell. You want to be sure that the person you're going to tell can help you or will want to help you. This booklet will help you to decide who is the best person to tell.

It's a good idea to tell an adult if someone is sexually abusing you, or has done it to you in the past. It's a good idea because the person you tell may be able to help make the abuse stop.

Who should I tell?

Here are people you might tell:

Your mother is usually a good person to tell.

Lucy told her mother that her stepfather had been sexually abusing her. Then Lucy's mother protected her by making the stepfather leave the house. It doesn't always work that way, sometimes you have to tell someone else. Here's an example:

Carla's mother had a boyfriend who used to visit every weekend. He would sit Carla in his lap and put his hand down her pants when her mother was busy in the kitchen. Carla told her mother but her mother told her not to worry about it. She said the boyfriend would soon get tired of doing it. When the boyfriend didn't stop, Carla told her teacher instead. Her teacher reported the abuse to a social worker.

The problem was that Carla's mother was afraid that her boyfriend would go away if she complained to him. So she put the boyfriend first and Carla second.

Most mothers are like Lucy's mother and will protect their children. But if your mother won't protect you, then you have to go to someone else like a teacher or a social worker.

Your father may also be a good person to tell. Here's an example:

When Shawn came back from summer camp, he was very quiet and wasn't sleeping properly. His father asked him what was wrong. Shawn told his father that one of the camp leaders kept getting into bed with him, and that he never wanted to go back to camp. Shawn's father was very understanding. He told Shawn that the camp leader had behaved badly, and that it wasn't Shawn's fault. He reported the camp leader to the police. Then he took Shawn to a counsellor so he could talk about his bad feelings.

But fathers don't always behave the way Shawn's father did. Here's another example:

When Robert went to the washroom at the park, a man showed his penis to him. Then he asked Robert to touch his penis. Robert ran home.

When he told his parents what had happened his father shouted at everybody. He told Robert the park was full of 'weirdos', and that he was going to sue the Parks Board. Then he told Robert to describe the man. He said he would go to the park washroom himself with a baseball bat.

He told Robert he would get a spanking if he ever came home late from the park again. By the time his father had finished shouting, Robert wished he had never told.

Two days later, Robert's father told him to forget the whole thing, and not mention it again. That made Robert feel confused.



This booklet will help you to decide who is the best person to tell.

Fortunately Robert's mother had a different response. She listened to Robert, then phoned the police. The police told her that several parents had complained about the same man. They said they would try to keep an eye on the park washroom.

Shawn's father and Robert's father behaved very differently. If you think your father is going to behave like Robert's father, you should tell someone else.

You could tell your friend's parents. This is a good idea if you think they will believe you and help you.

You could tell another family member. Many children who are sexually abused will tell a grandparent or aunt or uncle. Grandparents may not be as busy as your parents, and may have more time to listen.

You could tell someone you trust at school, like a teacher, counsellor or nurse.

It's important to tell an adult if you've been sexually abused, but you have to think about who to tell. Ask yourself who you think will help you and then tell that person.

What is the person I tell supposed to do?

When you tell an adult that you've been sexually abused, that person is supposed to tell either a police officer or social worker .

The law says that adults *must* do this. We have this law because we believe that all children have a right to be protected from sexual abuse.

What will social services do?

When the adult you tell calls social services, a social worker will write down the details of the phone call.

A social worker may interview you in a place where you feel safe. The social worker is going to ask you what happened. If you have been sexually abused in your home, the social worker will want to interview

you somewhere else. This is why social workers do many of their interviews in schools.

Someone at the school will find a quiet place where the social worker can interview you in private.

The interview may go something like this: The social worker will ask you to tell the story in your own words. The social worker will ask you to talk only about things you know – not what someone else told you to say. If you don't know the answer to a question, just say, "I don't know." If there's something you don't remember, just say, "I don't remember."

Sometimes you think you have to have an answer for every question. Answering a social worker's questions isn't like an exam. You don't have to have an answer for everything and there is no right or wrong answer. If you feel afraid to answer questions, the social worker may ask you what you're afraid of. This question is important because the abuser may have said that something bad would happen if you told. The social worker can reassure you that you were right to tell and that you don't have to be afraid anymore.

Answering a social worker's questions isn't like an exam. You don't have to have an answer for everything.

At the end of the interview the social worker may ask you if you know about any other children who were sexually abused by the same person. The social worker may also ask if anyone else has ever abused you.

The law says that social services must protect you if you need it. Here's an example: 11 year old Michelle was sexually abused by her 15 year old foster brother, Marco. The police charged Marco with the abuse, but it was four months before he would go to court. Social services wanted to be sure that nothing else happened to Michelle in the meantime, so they placed Marco in a group home with other teenagers. He stayed there until a social worker said he could go home. Michelle was sad because she missed Marco, but she felt much better when she knew that he was going to get some counselling.

Do you remember Lucy's story? Lucy's mother was protecting her by keeping her stepfather out of the house. That meant she didn't need social services to protect her.

Many sexually abused children will tell a grandparent, or aunt, or uncle because they may have more time to listen.

Do you remember Carla's story? Carla's mother put her boyfriend first and didn't protect Carla. Social Services placed Carla in a foster home until her mother learned how to look after her better.

The social worker may also arrange for you to have a medical examination either at your family doctor's office or at a hospital.

Most children are not physically hurt by sexual abuse unless the abuser has penetrated (pushed his penis or an object into the vagina or the bum). The social worker will want to be sure you are okay.

The social worker may also arrange for you to see a counsellor.

The counsellor will be trained to work with children who have experienced sexual abuse and will be seeing other children like you. If you have been sexually abused you might feel guilty about it even though it wasn't your

fault. The counsellor will help you understand your bad feelings, and to understand other mixed-up feelings. The counsellor can also help you understand what happens in court if you are asked to testify (tell a judge your story in court).

What will the police do?

The police will want to interview you if you've told someone that you have been sexually abused. This is because sexual abuse is a crime, and the job of the police is to catch criminals. The police understand that it can be frightening for you to be questioned.

Sometimes they may interview you when you're with the social worker. Sometimes the police can't do the interview with the social worker. Often they will try to find the right officer to interview you. Most cities have at least one police officer who is especially good at talking to children.

The police want to find out if there is enough evidence to charge the abuser with a sexual offence. The police may make a recording of their interview with you. This process makes sure there is a good record of what you've said in case you forget. It might even be used in

court if the abuser is charged. After your interview, the police will give the information to the Crown Prosecutor. The prosecutor is a lawyer for the state, who is on your side if you have to go to court.

The job of prosecutors is to look at the evidence you have given the police. If there's enough, they or the police may decide to lay charges against the person who abused you. This means that the person who abused you will have to go to court to answer the charges.

What will other people do when I tell?

Your parents. Parents can be angry and sad, and have mixed feelings just like you do. Sometimes they have problems of their own that will make it hard for them to help you. Most parents want to help and will try to do their best.

If your parents don't believe you; are mad because you told; blame you or tell you to forget it; or drink or take drugs a lot, you may have to get help from someone else.

Brothers and sisters. Your brothers and sisters will help you most of the time, but it can be hard for them too. Sometimes an older sister or brother will feel ashamed if a younger sister or brother has been sexually abused. They may think they should have been able to protect you. If your brother or sister was also abused, they may have confused feelings just like you.

If the abuser is a family member, he may have abused only you. If that person bought you special gifts, your brothers and sisters might be jealous of you.

Other family members. Your family may not like it if another family member is the abuser and has to go to jail. Also if there is one abuser in the family there may be others. Other family members might take sides with the abuser instead of helping you.

The abuser. After you have told the police you may wonder about what the abuser will do. You may worry that the abuser will try to talk to you or threaten you. This could happen. If it does, tell the police. There are things they can do to keep you safe.



The sexual abuse counsellor will help you get rid of your bad feelings, and help you to understand other mixed-up feelings.

most children who have been to court say it's worth it.

They find out that a lot of adults believe their story and are willing to spend time helping them.

What happens if I have to go to court?

Charges may be laid against the person who sexually abused you and if that happens you may have to go to court to answer questions (testify). When you go to court to testify it is called a trial.

Trials are expensive and take a long time. Prosecutors do not like to have a trial unless they think there's a good chance of winning. That means they need lots of evidence. When the person who has abused you has also abused a lot of other children, the prosecutor may think there is a 'good case'.

You are not responsible for what happens after charges have been laid. All you can do is tell the truth and try to speak clearly if you are asked to testify. The crown prosecutor will help you. The defense lawyer is on the abuser's side. The judge and/or jury are in the middle and will try to decide if the abuser is really guilty or not. During the trial the person who abused you is called the accused. The accused is innocent until the judge or jury decides whether he/she is guilty.

The crown prosecutor will meet with you to talk about testifying in court. If there are victim services workers in your community, they can also support you through the court process.

What is the good part about going to court?

It might sound as though going to court isn't worth it. Most children who have been to court say it's worth it, even if the abuser doesn't go to jail. They think it's worth it because they find out that a lot of adults believe their story and are willing to spend time helping them.

Another good thing about going to court is that you have a chance to learn about the legal system. A counsellor or your parents can help you prepare for going to court using books and other information.

What is the worst part about going to court?

Most children who have had to go to court say that waiting is the worst part, because the legal system is slow. Sometimes the trial date is put off for months, and sometimes the case is dropped.

Another thing that can happen is that the judge finds the accused 'Not Guilty.' This doesn't seem fair when you know what the abuser did to you. 'Not Guilty' doesn't mean it didn't happen – it just means that there wasn't enough evidence or proof to convict the abuser in court.

Is telling really worth all the trouble?

Now you know that if you tell an adult that you have been sexually abused, a lot of things can happen afterwards:

- **You may be interviewed by a social worker and/or the police whose job is to protect children and investigate a crime.**
- **You may see a doctor just to make sure you're okay.**
- **It may be helpful to talk to a counsellor whose job is to help you with whatever is bothering you.**
- **Telling may upset some of the people in your family.**
- **If the abuser is charged you may go to court to testify and that could take a long time.**

No one else can decide for you, but a lot of people can help you after you've decided to tell.

Most children who have told about being sexually abused say it's worth it because the abuse stopped and they are not alone with the problem anymore.

Most adults who are getting counselling today for sexual abuse that happened when they were children say: "I only wish I could have told someone when I was a child."

The choice is yours. No one else can decide for you, but a lot of people can help you after you've decided to tell.

Additional resources are available at your community resource centre, your local library or the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.