



# CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: PICKING UP THE PIECES

A guide for parents/guardians after abuse is discovered



CANADIAN CENTRE *for* CHILD PROTECTION®

*Helping families. Protecting children.*

This booklet addresses how parents/guardians may feel after abuse is discovered and what their child may be experiencing emotionally, as well as practical and tangible steps parents/guardians can take to support their child and get support for themselves as a parent/guardian. It addresses some common questions and concerns we hear from parents/guardians, such as how to deal with their child's feelings toward the offender and how to manage their child's day-to-day healing process. It also includes information about the added layer of complexity when sexual abuse has been recorded and potentially shared online.

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## CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: PICKING UP THE PIECES

If your child has disclosed sexual abuse, it can feel as though the rug has been pulled out from under you. When your child is abused by someone in your family, or by a trusted family or community member, the sense of betrayal can be overwhelming. When an adult or youth deceives and misuses a relationship with a child to sexually abuse them, it can be devastating for everyone around the child. As the child's primary caregiver, you play the most important role in your child's recovery. It is therefore critical that you receive the support you need to work through your own feelings in order for you to be emotionally available for your child.





# Discovering Abuse

Many parents have described the disclosure or discovery of their child being sexually abused as a major life crisis. Parents can experience significant psychological and emotional distress, which may include a combination of shame, guilt, and feelings of blame.

## PULLING TOGETHER

Know and repeat to yourself:

- I am not alone.
- I am the most important person in my child's life.
- We will get through this.
- We are strong.

### What your child needs from you once abuse is disclosed or discovered:

- To know that you believe them.
- To hear from you that what has happened to them is not their fault.
- To hear from you that you aren't angry with them.
- To hear from you that you love them.
- To know that you can handle what is happening and can protect them.
- To know they do not need to worry about you.
- To be treated as the person you know them to be, not as fragile or damaged.
- A protective circle at home, school, daycare, and extra-curricular activities.
- Someone to confide in to help them manage emotional stress.

Note: Children often worry about causing upset to a parent/family, and if they perceive they have caused an emotional reaction they may recant or withhold to protect the parent. Children need to be assured their feelings are okay (for them as well as their caregivers) and they are not responsible for managing the feelings of the adults in their lives. Children need to know it is okay for adults to feel sad or upset as well, but it is not their fault and they are not responsible for managing the adult's feelings.

## CREATING A CIRCLE OF SUPPORT

You are the most important person in your child's life so it is crucial to take care of yourself. Consider the following:

- Reaching out to close family and friends, or an ally who can be there for you without judgment. You need a safe place to express your own feelings to someone who will support you through each step of the process. Sometimes family members or friends have a hard time understanding what has happened and become distant or appear unsupportive. These aren't the people you need in your circle right now. Lean on individuals who are invested in helping you get through this difficult time so you have the strength to help your child heal.
- Joining a support group. Many parents find it helpful to connect with other parents who understand what they are going through.
- Reaching out to victim services, which you can access through police or the prosecutor, to provide you with information and guidance for navigating through both the law enforcement process and the legal system.
- Having your health care provider or victim services worker refer you to a counselling service for yourself, your child, and/or other family members.

**Sometimes the abuse of a child will trigger distress from a past trauma that the parent has experienced. If this occurs, take time to address this to help you heal and build your strength so you are in a good position to support your child.**

# Overwhelming Feelings

## Feelings shared by family members of survivors:

- I was in shock.
- I was outraged.
- I was devastated.
- I was terrified.
- It stole my trust of people.
- It stole my sense of safety.
- I felt so guilty.
- I felt so alone.

## Questions that often arise:

- How did this happen?
- How did I not protect my child?
- How did I not know this was happening?
- How do I manage my own anger, fear and sense of guilt?
- Will my child be okay?
- How do I help my child?
- What happens now?





# Understanding How Your Child May Be Feeling

## Common feelings of children who have experienced child sexual abuse:

- Unsafe
- Betrayed
- Confused
- Lonely and isolated
- Vulnerable and stigmatized
- Don't want to be treated differently by people
- Live in fight, flight, and freeze survival responses
- Powerless—have lost their voice or choices
- Mixed feelings towards the offender

## Common feelings of children whose abuse was recorded:

- Worry about being recognized by someone who has seen the images/videos of their abuse
- Continue to feel shame and humiliation about their abuse being recorded
- Feel powerless and hopeless about the sharing of their images/videos online (or the risk that it may be shared at any time)
- If the abusive images/videos were shared online, they may feel like they are being abused over and over again



## **A CHILD'S EYES**

Children often carry an enormous amount of shame about sexual abuse. As such, children are often hesitant, and may seem confused or uncertain during a disclosure. They may worry about how a disclosure will affect their family and how people will judge them.

## **CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL**

When a child's sexual abuse is recorded, it often adds another layer to the trauma, which can make it even more difficult for the child to disclose their abuse. The fear of being exposed and having no control over what happens to the images/videos can add to the silence of children victimized in this way.

## **FOLLOW YOUR CHILD'S LEAD**

Each child who discloses abuse will do so in their own way and in their own time. As they share more information, it is important that you follow their lead and listen. Avoid probing and prompting them for more information. Too much questioning is stressful not only for your child, but also for yourself.





## REPORTING TO LAW ENFORCEMENT

When making a report to law enforcement, it is important to learn about how the criminal justice system works and the processes that need to be followed. Consider the following suggestions to help along the way:

- Before making a report to law enforcement, jot down the information you feel the police need to know to help ensure you don't forget anything.
- Keep your child informed about the process and what will happen with the information they have shared. Children often feel vulnerable and experience a loss of power and control over their information and experience. Help them understand who is being told and why, and ask questions of the police to make sure you understand the next steps in the process.
- Ask for contact with a victim services worker who can help explain the criminal justice process, and support you and your child throughout the proceedings.





# Be Prepared

Child sexual abuse can affect memory function and it is not unusual for survivors (children, youth or adults) to construct memory differently. In some cases, memory of abuse may be recalled gradually years later, or never remembered at all. It is important to remember, however, that the absence of specific memories does not equal the absence of the abuse and that children may not show any obvious signs of having experienced abuse. It's also important not to interpret everything a child does as being a result of the abuse they experienced.

## Children who have been sexually abused can experience difficulty with:

- Learning (e.g., concentration, attention, memory)
- Staying present in the moment
- Regulating their emotions
- Sensitivities (or lack of sensitivities) to sound, touch, taste, smell and bright lights
- Overwhelming emotions
- Organization
- Controlling their impulses
- Building trust
- Developing safe relationships

## Children can demonstrate physical and emotional symptoms, including:

- Hyperarousal – too much activation/hyperactive
- Hypoarousal – too little activation/shut down, withdrawn
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Gastrointestinal difficulties

- Disruption of sleep patterns (difficulty falling or staying asleep, recurring nightmares)
- Disruption of central nervous system — adrenaline, thyroid, reproductive hormones
- Self-harming behaviours
- Chronic pelvic pain
- Eating difficulty (e.g., increase or loss of appetite, disordered eating)

## **YOUR CHILD MIGHT WANT TO CONNECT WITH OR SEE THE PERSON WHO ABUSED THEM**

A child who has experienced sexual abuse may have conflicting feelings toward the person who abused them. From birth, human beings are primed for attachment. Often the connection and feeling of being special to someone can be confusing as the attention they receive can feel good, but is mixed in with the uncomfortable feelings associated with the abuse.

This person who abused the child has manipulated and misused their relationship with the child in order to abuse them. Through this process, the child is often made to feel as though the abuse was their fault, and even though they are happy the abuse has ended, at some level the child may be worried about the person who abused them. It is important to respect the child's feelings towards the offender. Trying to dissuade your child will most likely result in them having to defend the person, especially if the offender is a family member.

A child who has experienced sexual abuse may be concerned about the person who abused them and may want to:

- See if the person still loves them
- See if the person is mad at them
- Ask for forgiveness for disclosing
- Tell the person that they love them
- See if the person is alright
- Know if someone has told the person what they did was wrong
- Make sure nothing bad will happen to the person

# Rebuilding

Numerous studies have shown that the way a parent responds to their child's disclosure of sexual abuse **directly impacts** the child's well-being. The child's psychological and physical health outcomes are connected to how much support and validation they receive. Higher levels of support from caregivers are directly linked to a well-adjusted child.<sup>1</sup> Your love and support is critical to helping your child heal.

If your child was sexually abused by a family member or someone close to your family, a rupture in the family bond occurs and connections must be repaired. It begins with restoring and securing the bond between the protective parent or caregiver and the child.

**Helping your child heal can begin with letting them know that what happened was not their fault and by reassuring them of your love and support.**

Children who have been through trauma can regain trust, confidence, hope, and the ability to create and settle into a new normal and function within it. Help them see the world as manageable, understandable, and meaningful.

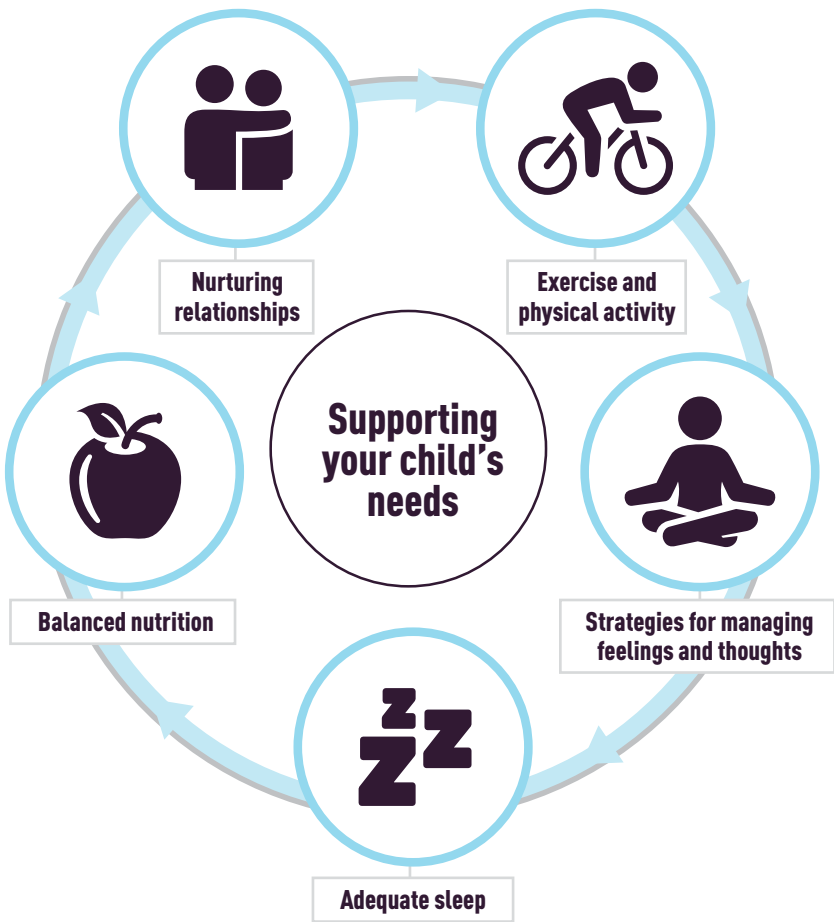
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1 Elliott, A. N., & Carnes, C. N. (2001). Reactions of nonoffending parents to the sexual abuse of their child: A review of the literature. *Child Maltreatment*, 6(4), 314-331; Kendall-Tackett, K. A., Williams, L. M., & Finkelhor, D. (1993). Impact of sexual abuse on children: a review and synthesis of recent empirical studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, 113(1), 164.



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# Steps for Supporting your Child



## 1 **Build a sense of safety.**

Reassure your child they are not alone and together you will get through this tough time.



## 2 **Reach out for support.**

Lean on supportive family members and friends for your emotional support so you can be emotionally available for your child.



## 3 **Consult with your health care provider.**

They will be able to help support you and your child, as well as provide referrals for services such as counselling, occupational therapy, art therapy, music therapy, dance therapy, etc. Earlier intervention promotes better resilience in the long run. Due to the confusion and the blurring of abuse and intimacy, support may be required again at later stages in life as children and youth go through puberty, begin engaging in intimacy, etc. Seek professional services for yourself as well. Engaging in your own therapy can help you to deal with natural emotions that can arise. It can also provide you with skills you and your child can use to recover from what has happened.



## 4 **Learn more about impacts of trauma on development.**

Work with professionals to learn more about impacts of trauma and how to support your child through their healing.





**5 Help your child rebuild a positive sense of self and sense of control over their environment.**

Build on your child's strengths and interests.



**6 Balance nutrition.**

Prepare balanced food options for your child that are low in refined sugar. Balanced nutrition is important for helping their body to regulate.



**7 Provide time for physical activity.**

Engaging your child in 30 minutes of daily physical activity has direct mental health benefits.



**8 Ensure your child has play time.**

Make time for doing fun things that are structured and safe so your child has a chance to be a child.



**9 Be patient and tolerant of moody behaviour such as clinginess, pushing away, and outbursts.**

As you set boundaries and limits to protect your child, they may be resistant. Let them know that you can handle their big feelings, and you'll stay by their side. Remember it isn't about what's wrong with your child; it is about what has happened to your child that is contributing to the behaviour.



## 10 Help manage overwhelming emotions.

The body is the best intervention tool. We have to settle the body before we can settle the brain. Children play when they feel safe, and use it to connect. Throwing a ball or building blocks while you talk can help them regulate and connect. Stay calm and keep the environment low key. Be consistent and help your child understand, express, and tolerate their strong emotions. They will get through strong feelings. Reassure them that the feeling will pass like a cloud. (For more activities, see Additional Activities on p.19).



## 11 Avoid letting your child's emotions escalate your own.

Adults need to remain in control of both their emotions and their expressions. Practice being self-aware and paying attention to your own emotional state when your child's emotions are difficult to manage.



## 12 Help manage your child's flooding thoughts and feelings.

Help your child see the links between their thoughts and feelings. Assist them in understanding how working on controlling their thinking can help control how they feel. Encourage them to take a break from upsetting thoughts by engaging in a colouring or art activity, listening to music, watching a show, or being physically active.





### 13 Help manage night sleeping.

Nightmares and generalized fearfulness are common for children who have experienced abuse. It can be helpful, for example, to leave lights on in their room or to sit outside or inside their room until they fall asleep.



### 14 Establish clear expectations, but with flexibility and reduced consequences when rules are broken.

When there is a rupture in the relationship and your child or you are upset, tell them that although the two of you are butting heads, it won't last. Stay consistent with expectations, but be understanding of their mistakes and resistance. Explain that even when your relationship is strained, you are there for them and love them. Always take time to repair situations encountered between you and your child. **You will always need to be the one who takes the lead to reach out and reconnect with your child.**



### 15 Re-establish regular routine.

Consistency, predictability, and reliability will help your child re-establish a sense of security and control.

## 16 Supervise online activity.

Control access and exposure to sexually explicit content online. Some children may have been exposed to this type of content as part of their abuse. This normalizes the content and can be harmful for their development. As a result, children may become desensitized and may not realize that they shouldn't be viewing it. Supervise online activities, ensure safety settings are in place, and pay close attention to who they are communicating with online. Children who have experienced trauma can have a difficult time assessing risk and could be susceptible to someone misusing their trust and victimizing them using an online platform. Explain the care that needs to be taken with information, pictures, and videos shared.



## 17 Help your child stay connected.

Encourage and support them to stay connected to people who are supportive of them, and activities they enjoy or enjoyed in the past.





## 18 Help your child process their abuse experience.

Help them shape their experience by taking control over what comes next in their life and reinforce that a negative experience doesn't define who they are. Help them understand that healing is a process that takes time. Explain that they will experience good and bad days, and you are by their side to help every step of the way.



## 19 Advocate for your child.

Be their champion and work with professionals and your circle of support to help your child recover from trauma. Help others view your child through a trauma-healing lens so their expectations are realistic and their responses are supportive and caring.



## 20 Take care of yourself.

To be effective, you must take care of yourself. Taking care of a child who has experienced trauma is hard work. It impacts the entire family. Make sure to take time to access the supports necessary for you and the entire family. For example, you may wish to find a counsellor for each family member. Your child is dependent on you for support.

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# A Caring Connection and Hope

## A CARING CONNECTION

A connection with even one caring person—a sibling, parent, teacher, grandparent, or friend—helps to lessen the destructive impact of sexual abuse on a child.

## HOPE

Hope is an essential element in the recovery from trauma. While we think of hope as a feeling, it is actually the foundation of a chemical reaction in the brain that calms fear and anger.



## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Below are some activities to practice with your child (depending on their age) to help them connect and regulate emotions:

- Give your child something to squeeze and move back and forth between their hands, or toss a ball between the two of you to help them focus.
- Practice deep breathing and relaxation exercises. These exercises are among the best ways to regulate the body.
- Slow down thoughts in your child's head by playing "I spy" or picking a colour and finding items of that colour in the room.
- Use air blowing exercises to help slow down their heart rate; blow air to move a pinwheel, blow up balloons, or blow through a straw to move a cotton ball across the table.
- Encourage movement and physical exercise; put on music and dance, go bike riding, run, or play a physically active game.
- Help your child visualize a calm and relaxing place—imaginary or real—where they can go to take a break when thoughts are overwhelming or they feel unsafe.
- Have your child journal, write stories or poems, draw, colour or paint, or listen to music.
- Teach your child emotion words and play games to label how they are feeling. Identifying and labelling feelings can help children manage and process them.
- Engage their brain by tapping into your child's curiosity in something; build something, put together a puzzle, play a game, or cook together.

# References and Recommended Reading

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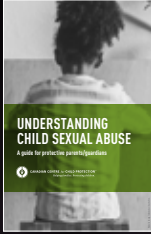




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## OTHER RESOURCES IN THIS SERIES:



**UNDERSTANDING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:** This booklet has been created for protective parents/guardians where child sexual abuse has been discovered or is suspected. It outlines the scope of the child sexual abuse, what child sexual abuse is, how the grooming process works, impacts of the abuse, and tips for parents/guardians on how to handle disclosure.



**SAFEGUARDING YOUR CHILD:** This booklet builds on *Child Sexual Abuse: Picking up the Pieces* and helps parents/guardians continue on the healing journey, addressing issues that may present as their child gets older. This includes rebuilding personal boundaries, addressing concerns surrounding supervision, considering their child's digital presence as they grow up, and providing a basic understanding of child development to help parents/guardians determine if sexualized behaviours are problematic or age appropriate.



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