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SEXUAL ABUSE
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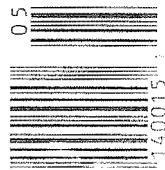
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The statistics are shocking: Although estimates vary, about one in four girls and one in ten boys will be sexually abused by age 18. Studies, such as one I am conducting on children's recovery, are only beginning to provide information about what kinds of trauma children suffer and what kinds of help they need, but we know now that parental response is a critical factor in how these children fare.

Sexual abuse can range from a single episode of exposure or fondling to years of torture and rape by multiple perpetrators. Abusers may be family members, other care givers, friends or strangers.

We have learned from research and clinical practice that the effects of child sexual abuse can range from little or no apparent distress to disabling psychological harm. It appears that when the abuse is chronic, when the

SURVIVING SEXUAL ABUSE

HOW DO THE CHILDREN FARE?

Healing comes through personal strengths, parental support and professional help.

perpetrator is a family member, when secrecy is coerced, and when force or terror is used, children suffer greater emotional damage.

**INCIDENTS OF ABUSE:
HOW CHILDREN RESPOND**
Research suggests it is not the acts alone that are traumatizing but their meaning to the child. If the abuse leaves the child feeling powerless, betrayed, dirty or guilty, the trauma is greater than if he or she felt some measure of con-

trol or was unaware of being sexually abused. The child's age, for example, may influence the extent to which the child feels victimized. A preschooler fondled by an otherwise loving relative may show no signs of being traumatized. An older child in comparable circumstances, knowing such touching is wrong and being unable to stop it, might develop nightmares, fears of being left alone, or other psychological symptoms. Sometimes children who were abused when very

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young develop symptoms years later, when they come to understand the wrong that was done to them.

Children's personal strengths and frailties also influence the extent to which sexual abuse is traumatizing. Children who suffer low self-esteem, perhaps due to learning problems, difficulty making friends or severe family stresses, may interpret their victimization as confirmation of their own failings.

Difficulties sometimes emerge as children enter new developmental periods. For example, a child abused as a preschooler may start to talk about being "no good" at age seven. This is a time when children begin to understand larger societal standards. When entering adolescence, sexually abused children may withdraw from boy-girl relationships or jump prematurely into sexual contact. Both responses are efforts to cope with new

issues raised emerging sex

There is ev some adoles adults who n have been se as children th does not mee that children been abused abuse others. believe that a child who rec priate attenti unlikely to tu molester him:

**PARENTAL SUP
THE CRITICAL**
A youngster's one of the mo experiences a dure depends on how his or respond. I urg
◆Believe the c rarely make up being sexually
◆Assure the cl neither the ab aftermath is h responsibility.
◆Report the at

everything that had happened to him, for Kate the process of unburdening herself took a year. Kate began with the least

issues raised by their emerging sexuality.

There is evidence that some adolescents and adults who molest children have been sexually abused as children themselves. This does not mean, however, that children who have been abused will grow up to abuse others. Most do not. I believe that a molested child who receives appropriate attention and help is unlikely to turn into a molester himself.

PARENTAL SUPPORT: THE CRITICAL STEPS

A youngster's recovery from one of the more traumatic experiences a child can endure depends in large part on how his or her parents respond. I urge parents to:

- ◆Believe the child. Children rarely make up stories about being sexually abused.
- ◆Assure the child that neither the abuse nor its aftermath is her fault or responsibility.
- ◆Report the abuse to the

proper authorities (See "Should We Call the Police?"). It is reassuring to a child to know that other adults besides the parent take the abuse seriously and are on his side.

◆Respond to the child's fears. Because many children suffer heightened fearfulness following sexual abuse, the child may go through a period during which she is afraid to be alone, to walk to school without a parent, or to do other things she was not afraid to do before the abuse. These feelings need to be respected. The child is asking for reassurance that the lapse in safety is an exception rather than the rule.

- ◆Allow the child to talk about the incident or incidents, but do not pressure him to do so.
- ◆Seek medical care. Although children are rarely seriously damaged physically by sex offenders, internal injury may have

our own
home.

occurred and the risk of a sexually transmitted disease must be considered.

SEEKING HELP

THROUGH THERAPY

Children as well as other family members may benefit from therapy with an experienced, sensitive clinician. This can help a child to work through painful and difficult feelings safely, and to reestablish a sense of legitimacy and control. Therapists with experience in this area may be found through the recommendations of the child's pediatrician, hospitals, mental-health clinics and rape-crisis centers.

I do not, however, recommend forcing a child into therapy. Rather, if the child does not want to go,

showed many classic symptoms of molestation: sleep disturbances, increased

find out why. If a child (or parent) feels uncomfortable with a particular therapist, it is perfectly appropriate to find another.

Sexual abuse does not go away any more than other physical or emotional traumas do. But many individuals are able to utilize personal strengths, professional help, and the support of others to recover in wonderful ways.

There is no statute of limitations on healing. A person victimized at age three can profit from treatment at age 30 or can reach new levels of resolution at age 45. Our children have the advantage of living in an era when sexual abuse can be spoken of and believed, where knowledge about recovery is accumulating, and where help can be offered. With parental support, and professional support where needed, children can and do recover and lead strong and healthy lives.