

A young child with short brown hair, seen from the back, stands in the opening of a weathered wooden fence. The child is wearing light-colored shorts with a floral pattern. The fence is made of vertical wooden planks, and the child's hands are resting on the sides of the doorway. The background shows a lush green lawn and dense foliage. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Help...

*...my child's been
abused - now what?*

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If you are the parent of a child who has been sexually abused, perhaps by someone closely connected to your family, you face one of the most difficult and challenging situations imaginable. As well as wanting to be strong for the sake of your child you will probably be experiencing powerful and sometimes conflicting emotions of your own. What you want most of all is for your child to be safe and secure. You want your

love to be enough to dispel the hurt and you want to reassure your child that everything is going to be alright. No doubt there will be lots of questions buzzing around in your head and some of these may be impossible to answer in the short term.



First things first

The first priority is to make sure that your child is safe and this involves letting Social Services know (if they don't know already) what your child has disclosed. Don't be afraid to talk openly and frankly to a social worker about what has happened because it is their job, and they have a legal duty, to ensure your child is protected from further abuse, and also any other children who might be at risk. This is another good reason for contacting them. Social Services are used to dealing with families in crisis and they will therefore handle the situation sensitively with due regard to your thoughts and feelings at this time.

Parent's points

Don't be afraid that Social Services will rush in and sideline you. They are trained to be helpful and considerate in their dealings with you and your family.

Helping your child recover

Because children are all different, if they have been sexually abused, they will respond to their experiences in different ways. Obviously the age of the child when the abuse started, how long it continued, and the seriousness of what has happened will have an impact on how the child reacts.

Another big factor is who perpetrated the abuse and the child's relationship with them. Generally, the closer the relationship the greater the harm, but there is no set pattern. You can expect though, that your child will be angry and confused and it is likely some of this upset and emotion is directed towards you! In this situation children need lots of reassurance and, even if you don't feel like it, your love and acceptance of your child and just being there for them, can make a tremendous difference.

In time your child may benefit from some professional counselling but don't rush things because they are unlikely to be ready for this immediately. Some children do recover without professional help and it is important to be flexible in response to their individual needs. Having said this, it is of great help to all children in the aftermath of abuse, to let them talk about what has happened and express their feelings openly. If your child discloses any new information, then this will need to be passed on to Social

Services. The most important thing however, is to listen to your child and not ask lots of questions. It's the secrecy and shame surrounding sexual abuse in particular, as much as the abuse itself, that does the long-term damage. It is also important that you try not to appear shocked by anything your child says (even though you may feel disgusted and angry) and for you to reinforce that what has happened is *not* their fault. At CCPAS we know from years of experience of working with adult survivors of child sexual abuse that where children are listened to and taken seriously, and where justice is seen to be done, long term damage is kept to a minimum.

Parent's points

Take a long-term view - don't rush around trying to sort it all out immediately

You can't lead your child to a place you have never been yourself. It's natural to want to see healing and a full recovery but you need to start with yourself. Your child will not necessarily heal or cope with things at the same pace.

Your own feelings

There may be times when you feel overwhelmed by your emotions. Anger, sadness, loneliness and even shame are all perfectly normal emotions for parents to feel in this situation. Guilt is also a very powerful player for many parents and this can hit Dads particularly hard because often they feel responsible for protecting their children. It's reassuring to know you are not alone; many parents have experienced what you're going through.

For the Christian there is an added dimension of anguish and confusion as you ask yourself: "Why my child? Where is God in all of this?" Unfortunately there are no easy answers and it's good to have friends close at hand who will stick by you as you battle your way through the doubts and questions which are quite natural to anyone whose child has suffered abuse. It is also important to be on the receiving end of pastoral care yourself, and you shouldn't be afraid to express your feelings to a trusted and experienced church leader. Prayer can undoubtedly be a great help, but it needs to be sensitive and discerning. It may be that you would also benefit from specialist counselling but, as with your child, this needs to be when you feel ready.

Parent's points

Don't harbour secret feelings of revenge - express them in a safe environment.

Make sure you, as well as your child, are being cared for.

What about the Bible?

Sometimes there can be immense pressure from within the church to deal internally with a situation such as abuse, and Bible verses such as Matthew 18: v15-17 or 1 Corinthians 6 v1-2 are used to justify such action. However, it should be recognised that the principles contained in these verses concern disputes between adults over something such as property or money, in other words, a civil law suit. In such cases we read that these relatively trivial matters should be resolved within the body of Christ. These principles are not applicable within the context of allegations of sexual abuse, or indeed any abuse of a child. Child abuse is a criminal, not a civil matter. If these scriptures are referring to a criminal matter, then the instructions in Romans 13 about the jurisdiction of governing authorities becomes meaningless. This passage gives instruction for dealing with criminal activity, and the governing authorities are God's instrument for punishing wrong-doing. It is not an issue between

two church members, but between the state and alleged perpetrator. Reporting a crime does not go against scripture and at the beginning of Matthew 18, we can be left in no doubt just how seriously Christ viewed offences against children; “Anyone who welcomes a little child.....in my name, welcomes me, and if anyone causes one of these little ones.....to sin, it would better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and drowned in the depths of the sea.”

Parent's points

The truth is that those around you are probably experiencing the same kind of shock and trauma as yourself. They also want to have a sweep up and then carry on. That's when scriptures can be used incorrectly.



What about forgiveness?

Forgiveness is always difficult where people have been hurt. In some Christian circles, victims and their families are put under pressure to forgive when this is not appropriate and before they have had the time to work through the effects the abuse has had on them (a process which may last a life time). A parent may also have many questions, including why God seemingly allowed such a thing to happen. Although scripture endorses the principles of forgiveness, it is something that cannot be rushed, and the choices made by those involved must be respected.

Parent's points

Forgiveness does not mean that there aren't consequences for the things someone does.

Forgiving someone is not the same as reconciliation (which may not be appropriate or possible).

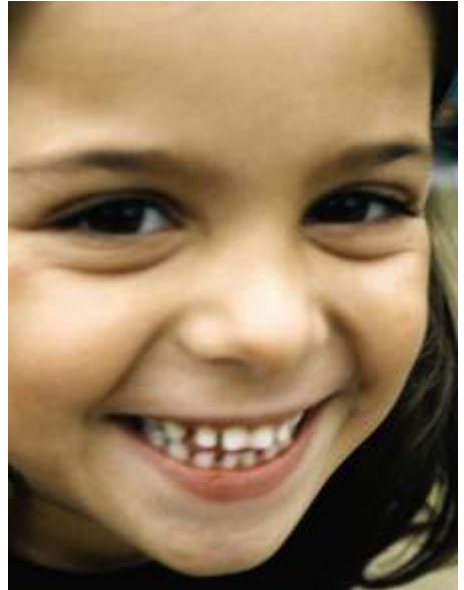
The person we set free through forgiveness is, in fact, ourselves.

Coming through

You may feel that things are never going to get back to normal and, in one sense, they won't because however much we might wish it, we cannot turn the clock back. The impact of what has happened may be felt for a long while, and particularly at significant times in your child's life. It might be that from time to time your child will want to talk things through again with you or a counsellor. Although what you and your family have been through is horrific, things will get easier and it won't continuously be at the forefront of your mind. Reading through scriptures such as Psalm 145 and 1 Peter 5 v 7 may help in the recovery process. As you work through the pain and grief it will lessen, and one day you will be able to accept the nightmare is over.

Parent's points

Take a long-term view. There's no quick fix.



Every week, parents contact the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service helpline following disclosure that their child has been abused. This leaflet is one of a series that has been prepared by experienced members of the CCPAS team, with additional comments from a parent who has been faced with this situation.

Resources

Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service Provides training and advice on all areas of child protection and good working practice to churches, organisations and individuals across the UK as well as a 24 hour helpline service.

Tel: 0845 120 45 50

Address: PO Box 133, Swanley, Kent, BR8 7UQ

Email: info@ccpas.co.uk

Web: www.ccpas.co.uk

Childline 24hour helpline for children

Tel: 0800 1111

NSPCC National Child Protection Charity

Helpline: 0808 800 500

Information & ordering publications tel: 0207 825 2775

Web: www.nspcc.org.uk

Kidscape National charity publishing booklets and information on self-protection skills for children and how to keep children safe.

Helpline: 0845 120 5204

Tel: 0207 730 3300

Address: 2 Grosvenor Gdns, London, SW1 0DH

Web: www.kidscape.org.uk

Stop it now! A national campaign that aims to prevent child abuse by encouraging offenders to seek help. It also provides adults with information to help protect children.

Helpline: 0808 1000 900

Web: www.stopitnow.org.uk

Other titles in the 'Help' series

Help... something bad happened to me (8-10yrs)

Help... I need someone to talk to (11-18yrs)

Help... someone I care about was abused

Help... a sex offender has joined my church

Help... I was abused as a child

CHURCHES'

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