

A young child with curly hair is crying in a classroom. In the foreground, the back of a woman's head and shoulders is visible, suggesting she is the teacher or a caregiver. The classroom background includes a water dispenser labeled 'HARDICIDE', a clock, and a bulletin board with photos.

Help...

*I was
abused
as a child*

Help...

I was abused as a child

For someone who has been abused in childhood, the prospect of speaking out about it, perhaps after years of silence, can be frightening. We know this from people who contact us at CCPAS. This booklet is designed to help anyone in this situation who is facing these issues. It includes comments by Jennifer, a woman known to CCPAS, who experienced childhood abuse but kept silent for many years, and by Steve Currell who is a Christian senior police officer.

Breaking the wall of silence

Telling just one person about your experiences can be like taking a brick out of a dam - such a small thing but the consequences can be enormous. For so long you've kept silent, holding the secret of abuse inside, afraid to speak out, remembering the threats, the bribes or the shame. Maybe you did try to tell someone but they brushed it aside, saying, 'You should be over that by now' or 'Well, it wasn't much not compared with some people' or even 'Why didn't you stop it?' Maybe, inside, you've felt stupid for not being 'over it', for mentioning it now.

Perhaps you haven't spoken out because it would cause so much trouble for everyone; break up the family, cause deep rifts with all the relatives, and if you told, you'd feel at risk of violence,

hateful phone calls or letters from the person who abused you.

Maybe now you feel it's time you saw justice. Why should this person get off 'scot-free' while you've suffered for all these years?

Memories can be so confusing that doubts can arise as to whether what happened really was abuse. You may try to convince yourself that this kind of thing happens to many children. Perhaps you feel ashamed that some of the feelings aroused in you by the person who abused you were quite nice and so you didn't try to stop what was happening. As a consequence, you may as a child, have experimented with other children and although you stopped, you still feel bad about it.

Whatever your reasons for holding back, something has made you want to break out of that misery-filled place where your past keeps tripping you up and you explode into tears or anger so inexplicably. You're sick of being someone who always has to do what others want. You're afraid, perhaps, of the weird dreams and flashback memories from your childhood past.

Taking the first steps

At CCPAS we are quite used to receiving phone calls from people that begin 'Um, I'm not sure where to start, really. I, er....well, er,....I've never told anyone this before but I was abused as a child and....I just feel like I'm cracking up. Can you help me?' Saying these words (or their equivalent) is a massive step forward on the road to wholeness because in speaking out, you have assumed control of this area of your life and broken the secrecy surrounding the abuse.

What should I do next?

What you do next is up to you. Maybe you want to tell someone close to you - your best friend, your husband, wife, partner or parent, but you're worried about how they might react. Will they cope? Will they reject you, feeling repulsed by what you say? Would they want to attack the person who abused you?

In the first instance therefore, it may be helpful to talk to someone who is more detached from the situation, such as a minister, counsellor or someone at CCPAS. We would be happy to listen and help you think through the implications of your situation. Some of the issues you may need to consider are, is the person who abused you still alive? Is he or she still in a position where other children could be at risk, perhaps as a parent or grandparent, an uncle or aunt, or working in a profession where there is contact with children, such as a teacher or youth worker?

Jennifer: I was about 50 years old when the abuse I had suffered throughout my teens began to really trouble me. Feelings of guilt about my past became almost unbearable and I had to tell someone what had happened. I eventually told my GP and then my husband and family. Whilst there was a sense of relief that someone finally knew, I also felt bad because I had 'told'. Following counselling a lot of the guilt disappeared but many people still do not understand about abuse and the far reaching effects it can have on friends and family.

There are probably many questions buzzing around in your head, and if you decide to talk to someone, you imagine that by speaking out you may lose control of your situation. Be assured that the choice is yours and talking, for example, to someone at CCPAS does not commit you to doing anything. Having said this if, from what you tell us, it appears children may still be at risk from that person, we will certainly advise you to speak to someone in the Police Child Protection Team. (They might be known by other names such as Police Child Abuse Investigation Unit or Special Investigation Unit) You can get the number from your local police station. A specially trained detective from the unit would probably like to meet you and listen to what you have to say.

Steve: You would normally be able to choose whether you see a male or female officer and they would offer guidance on the options open to you.

You could decide not to do anything further, and people often say to us things like, 'Well, he was my dad. I want him stopped from abusing children, but I don't want to prosecute.' This is something to raise with the police. Because they are highly trained, they will understand how you feel. Remember, it's still your choice whether or not you make a statement, no one is going to force you. The police do take reports of abuse seriously and work closely with Social Services and

other agencies. Most allegations of sexual assault do not result in a criminal prosecution. One of the main reasons is that often it is not in the interests of a child or adult victim. However, even without Court action, information given to the Police and/or other agencies about an individual can help them ensure the safety of children in the future.

Steve: Your voice can still be powerful. Don't assume nothing can be done about your situation - seek advice.

You might decide to make a formal statement to the police because children could still be at risk of abuse. This could ultimately result in a court hearing, but again this will depend on whether the Crown Prosecution Service considers there is sufficient evidence to bring the case to court. Occasionally the police will exert some pressure for a formal statement because they have other information about the person who abused you. There may have been previous allegations from different people which, when put together, strengthen the evidence against them and makes a successful prosecution more likely, particularly if the other complainants are also prepared to take things further.

Most allegations of sexual assault are denied. The prospect of attending court to give evidence, being in close proximity to the person who abused

you, and facing a cross-examination by the defence barrister is daunting. For this reason some people choose not to go ahead, but with support from those close to you, perhaps a trusted friend or church leader, it is possible to not only survive the ordeal, but also come away with a strong conviction of having done the right thing, even if the prosecution is not successful. The Court Witness Service is also available to provide support.

When a court hearing commences, it is not unusual for the accused to plead guilty. They choose this option rather than have the evidence against them read out in open court and possibly reported in the press, though in cases of sexual abuse, press coverage is often restricted to protect the identity of the person giving evidence for the prosecution.

Jennifer: On reflection I wish I had prosecuted some time ago. I was frightened by the prospect of the person who abused me going to gaol and I couldn't bring myself to do it. However, I would now advise anyone in my situation to talk to the police and do what they advise.

Steve: We can still investigate matters after many years have passed. The police and other agencies take reports of abuse seriously and work closely together. We can and do prosecute where there is sufficient supporting evidence. You will be involved in the process throughout and matters fully explained to you.

A 'not guilty' verdict

Having gone through the ordeal of court, what if the person who abused you is found not guilty? It does happen and you can feel distressed and angry, feeling that no one believes you and your abuser has 'got off'. The facts remain unchanged - you know what happened to you and so does the person who did it. Hold on to the truth that you know and don't let anyone try to get you to retract your testimony. It can be of some comfort for Christians to know that the abuser will one day be answerable to God for their actions.

How could God allow it to happen?

People who have been abused may feel very angry with God. 'He should have stopped it!' 'Why did it have to happen to me?' 'It's not fair!' 'I was only a child!' 'I prayed to God for it to stop and it still carried on!' 'The person who did it said God had told them to do it because I needed to be punished. They even prayed after abusing me.' 'The

person who did it was a minister of religion.' If any of these statements ring true for you, then it's important to get things straight. God gives everyone the ability to choose right from wrong; making the wrong choices can cause hurt to others. Abuse is always wrong, whether it's physical, emotional, sexual, or spiritual. The one who must be held responsible is the person who abused you.

It is important to realise it is not your fault - it was done to you. The Christian believes that God takes abuse very seriously. The bible is unequivocal in its stance against abusive practices. In Matthew 18 v 5-6 Jesus states that it would be better for someone who harms children to have a large millstone hung around their neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea. Jesus may have been speaking figuratively but we can be left in no doubt of his view on this issue. God is on the side of those who have been oppressed, abused and hurt and He is able to bring comfort and healing into the lives of all.

Should I forgive?

Sometimes people can be rushed into forgiving their abuser before they've really understood the effects of what that abuse has done to them. It may have caused relationship difficulties, sexual problems, depression, physical trauma and mental anguish and these

take time to work through.

Forgiveness may happen gradually and it may take a lifetime. Some people choose not to forgive and this must be respected. However, this is an important area for many people of faith, and increasingly those who have been hurt in some way, realise that in resolutely holding onto anger and unforgiveness, they actually cause themselves more harm. Sometimes, by forgiving the person responsible for the abuse, we can help them to accept responsibility for what they have done, make an apology and offer some recompense. Don't assume that will happen, however, because some abusers don't regard what they do as wrong.

Jennifer: Spiritually I have found things very difficult because lots of questions are in my mind such as, 'How could a Christian do that to me, where was God, and why weren't my prayers answered?' It is only since I talked about the abuse that my relationship with Jesus Christ has got better. I now feel he's the only one who truly understands and I have an assurance that each day he's with me.

What about reconciliation?

This is a difficult one and the answer will not be the same for everyone. It may not be safe for you to renew

contact with an abuser because they may continue to abuse. And if you have children, you could inadvertently be putting them at risk. The abuser may also use any opportunity to refute the allegations or minimise the seriousness of what they have done. This could be very damaging emotionally for you. You will need to think the issues through carefully and discuss with someone you trust. It could be a counsellor, minister or someone at CCPAS.

Jennifer: I have been able to forgive the person who abused me but because he won't acknowledge he's done anything wrong, I cannot be reconciled and this is very hurtful. I don't think many abusers accept what they have done but I still feel it is right to forgive for my own healing to be complete.

Pastoral help from the church

The most helpful thing your church can do for you is to offer sensitive support and care. It is also important for them to understand you may have difficulties with the concept of God as 'Father', with physical contact and things like the words of some songs and hymns, sermons about family life, and being prayed for. In order for churches to respond appropriately

CCPAS can provide advice and training in the pastoral care of people who have been abused.

Jennifer: Unfortunately in my experience the church hasn't been much help because of the lack of understanding of the issue. Training is desperately needed in this area. The more the issues are brought out in the open, the more it will help in the future.

When will I feel better?

You may feel that things are never going to get back to normal and in one sense they won't because the abuse has happened; no-one can turn the clock back and some of the consequences may last a lifetime. Some people have found counselling helpful though it can be a painful process. With the appropriate help, care and support you may eventually begin to see a light at the end of the tunnel and come to the point where you realise the abuse does not control you anymore and you are free to get on with your life.

The Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service provides training and advice on all areas of child protection and good working practice, helping all affected by abuse. CCPAS also operates a 24-hour helpline.

Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse (CSSA) is an organisation that supports adult Christian survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

C/o 38 Sydenham Villas Road,
Cheltenham, GL52 5NA

National Association of People
Abused in Childhood
C/o 42 Curtain Road, London
EC2A 3NH

Tel: 0800 085 3330

Association of Christian Counsellors is an umbrella organisation that represents and offers support to Christian counsellors and provides a system of accreditation broadly accepted by churches, counselling organisations and the wider community.

Tel: 0845 125 9569 / 9570
Email: office@acc-uk.org
Web: www.acc-uk.org

Also available from CCPAS in the 'Help' series:

'Help, someone I care about was abused',
'Help, my child's been abused',
'Help, something bad happened to me (8-10yrs),
'Help, I need someone to talk to' (teens),
'Help, a sex offender has joined my church'.

CHURCHES'
Child Protection
ADVISORY SERVICE

© CCPAS 2005

PO Box 133, Swanley, Kent, BR8 7UQ

Tel: 0845 120 45 50

Fax: 0845 120 45 52

Email: info@ccpas.co.uk

Web: www.ccpas.co.uk