



Parenting a Sexually Abused Child

Parenting a child who has been sexually abused is not easy. Children who have been sexually abused often develop symptoms that can be frustrating for the family.

It is important for parents not to see their child's behavior as being purposefully bad or naughty. These behaviors are often reactions to being sexually abused. Try to separate your feelings for your child from your reactions to the child's behavior. Let your child know that some of the things he does are not OK but that you still love him.

The symptoms most often seen can be divided into three types: fearful behaviors, sexual behaviors, and aggressive behaviors.

Fearful Behaviors

Fearful behaviors may be more common where physical pain, violence, or threats have been part of the abuse. Possible signs of fear are:

- Nightmares
- Fear of a person
- Fear of a type of person (for example, men with beards)
- Withdrawing
- Acting younger than the child's age (thumb sucking, bedwetting, baby talk).

As a parent you should:

- Accept your child's fears as real fears.
- Encourage your child to return gradually to her normal activities.
- Give your child choices in situations where she is afraid. For example, if your child is afraid of the dark, ask if she would rather sleep with a night-light on or have the door open.
- Reassure your child that you will protect her as much as you can.

You should not:

- Force your child to do things she is really afraid of.
- Allow your child's fears to control her life or your life.
- Punish your child for being afraid.
- Tell your child her fears are silly or stupid.

Sexual Behaviors

There are several possible reasons why sexually abused children may act sexually:

- They have learned it as a way to please people.
- They may confuse sexual behavior with affection.
- They may see it as a way to be "in charge", unlike when they were sexually abused.
- They may have learned that sexual touch can feel good.

Sexual behaviors include:

1. Increased or excessive masturbation
2. Putting objects inside their genitals
3. Touching other children in a sexual manner particularly children younger or smaller than they are
4. Being overly affectionate with adults.

As a parent you should:

- Teach your child that it is important to keep genitals private. Make clear rules about not touching others' genitals.
- Gently remind your child that no one likes to be touched against their will.
- Depending on the child's age, talk about healthy sex and the relationship between sex and love.
- Remember that **some** masturbation is normal for children and is OK if done in private.
- Make every effort to protect your child from further abuse. A child showing sexualized behaviors is at high risk for further abuse.
- Make clear rules about not hitting others or destroying property.
- Create healthy ways of releasing anger, such as exercise or artworks. For example, you could ask your child to paint a picture of why he is mad.
- Use consistent, fair consequences for aggressive behavior.

Do not hit your child as punishment for hitting others. This is confusing to the child.

The fearful, sexual, and aggressive behaviors listed above may be seen in sexually abused children. However, they can also be seen in children who have suffered other traumas such as divorce, physical abuse, death in the family, or seeing violence. Some symptoms can simply be a part of growing. If your child has been sexually abused, contact a mental health professional. Working with a mental health professional can help the child and also families who are dealing with the effects of sexual abuse.

*NOTE: This information is provided as a public educational service. The information does not replace any of the instructions your physician gives you. If you have a medical emergency please call 911 or call the Hospital at (208) 529-6111. If you have questions about your child's care, please call Idaho Falls Pediatrics at (208) 522-4600.