



Ways to Support a Friend or Relative When Their Child Has Been the Victim of Sexual Abuse

Friends and relatives of parents often don't know how to be supportive following child sexual abuse because this topic isn't widely talked about. Parents and caregivers of abused children frequently report feeling alone. In other situations of grief and loss societies have developed traditions and rituals to provide help and support. This is not true when child abuse occurs.

Parents of child sexual abuse victims face the huge task of helping their child to heal while also dealing with their own grief and violation of trust. This can be additionally challenging while navigating the unfamiliar systems you have to learn about surrounding the abuse. They must make decisions about mental health services and make sense out of intimidating legal systems. These parents and their child may have to testify both at Grand Jury and in court against someone they used to trust as family. Or, they may be struggling with the fact that there was not enough evidence to hold the offender accountable. Some parents are thrown into the role of head of household and primary breadwinner after suddenly becoming a single parent. Others yet, are grieving the abuse of one child by another in the immediate family leaving their children and family in crisis, left to pick up the pieces and go on. All of these situations have a direct impact on functioning.

The persons closest to the offender will often be in denial. Families sometimes divide their loyalties in situations of child sexual abuse, which can add to the caregiver's grief. Some members blame the parent or even the victim for the abuse, rather than placing responsibility on the person who chose to offend. Some people mistakenly believe that each family member plays a part in keeping the abuse going and that each holds a part of the responsibility. Sometimes people mistakenly believe that the caregiver knew on some level that the abuse was happening. However, in the majority of cases, the caregiver was the last to know. Many children do not tell for a period of time for a variety of reasons. Some are threatened not to tell, some care about the offender and don't want the offender to get in trouble. Some know that their caregiver will be upset and want to protect his or her feelings. Other children are too young to understand that what is happening is abuse. Whatever the child did or didn't do, he or she was never responsible. The offender holds the sole responsibility for the abuse. If there is no offender, there is no abuse.

Child victims who receive support from their caregiver(s) and receive counseling (if indicated) fare better in the long run. Support to the caregiver is vital in order for him/her to adequately support the child victim.

What to Expect:

Caregivers often experience grief when they learn of the abuse of their child. Many professionals who work with victims of abuse use a framework that describes grief in stages. These stages can be similar to those that a person would experience if they lost a loved one to death. Over a period of weeks or months the caregiver may have strong emotional reactions and changes of moods; possible periods of depression with physical signs of distress like sleep difficulties, changes of appetite, loss of concentration, and crying. Grief is very individual. It is the process of saying "good-bye" to how things

used to be prior to the abuse, coming to terms with it, and finding resolution and happiness again. The ideal is to move through the stages and not to get “stuck” in one stage for an extended period of time, which can slow the recovery process. Not everyone will experience all of these stages; not everyone will experience the stages in this order; sometimes caregivers cycle through some of the stages more than once. The general stages of grief are: denial and shock, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

How You Can Help:

- Be aware that if the caregiver has an abuse history, this situation may trigger memories and feelings. He or she may need to seek professional support for him or herself in order to be available for the child victim. Liberty House is a resource with support, referrals, and classes offering caregivers and their support person’s assistance.
- Be aware that if you have an abuse history yourself, this situation could trigger your own memories and feelings. You may need to get support for yourself, likely someone else besides the caregiver.
- Remember that the caregiver’s challenges and grief will likely dominate your time together, at least for a while.
- Be willing to witness great pain and believe the unbelievable. Find your own healthy ways to process that pain in order not to be consumed by it.
- Listen without giving your opinion, unless asked. Sit with your friend/relative and let them talk.
- Try to understand. Be as empathetic as you can. Validate the caregiver’s feelings as a part of the grief process and not as something to be rushed through.
- Ask him or her how you can help; what are the immediate needs?
- Learn all you can about child sexual abuse, healing, and resources in the community.
- Lighten his or her load, if you can, by meeting a basic need (bring over a meal, take home their laundry, water the yard, provide childcare, etc.).
- Watch for safety concerns. If the caregiver is unable to function or meet daily responsibilities and you have concerns that s/he might be dealing with depression or feelings of self-harm, call the Psychiatric Crisis Center at (503) 585-4949 to get assistance.
- If the caregiver is isolated, take an active role in helping expand his or her support system and get connected with skilled support.

More Suggestions:

- Don’t bring up your own past abuse history and expect your friend or relative to support you when they are dealing with their own grief.
- Don’t assume you know all about child sexual abuse or that you understand how your friend or relative feels (if you have never educated yourself or been in a similar situation).
- Don’t say or imply that the caregiver is to blame for the abuse that happened to their child. In many cases, he or she will already be blaming themselves.
- Don’t take it personally if the caregiver withdraws, is angry, is sad, or doesn’t want to do the activities that you have shared in the past. Grief takes time.
- Don’t try to smooth things over, minimize what happened, or ignore the situation.

Child sexual abuse is a painful situation, but with the right support in place, children and families can heal. Caregivers need to call on and depend on their support persons in order to stay centered and focused on helping their child at this difficult time. Your friend or relative is fortunate to have people like you come forward to bolster them and see them through to healing.