



Advocacy with Nonoffending Parents and Caregivers Who Are Also Child Sexual Abuse Survivors

A trauma-informed approach to advocacy with parents of children who have been sexually abused means considering the range of stressors that families encounter. (We are using the term “parent” to include nonoffending parents as well as other caregivers in a parental role, such as grandparents raising children or foster parents.) Specifically, we must recognize the possibility that parents may also have experienced sexual abuse as a child. Parents’ reactions and interactions with their children may certainly be influenced by their own trauma history.

Parents who are survivors may feel particularly isolated and stigmatized in the aftermath of their child’s abuse. In conjunction with the services offered to children, supporting the healing of parent-survivors helps both generations. A child’s disclosure of abuse may be the first occasion on which a parent identifies, reveals, or addresses a personal abuse history. Thus, advocates may be helping several family members to deal with multiple forms of abuse on many levels. For example, upon learning of his daughter’s abuse by a family member, a dad may confide for the first time to his partner and daughter that he was abused as a child. The family then has to work through each person’s reactions and emotions, as well as the daughter’s immediate needs.

Advocates have an excellent opportunity to help parent-survivors focus on their strengths. While their childhood experiences may present added challenges in coping with their child’s abuse, these survivors have also developed resilience and knowledge over the years. Acknowledging these parents’ love for their children and the strengths that they already possess can help them as they work to meet their children’s needs. Here are some core principles of strength-based advocacy to keep in mind (Saleebey, 1997, pp. 12-15):

1. Every individual, group, family, and community has strengths.
2. Trauma and abuse, illness, and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity.
3. Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change, but take individual, group, and community aspirations seriously.
4. We best serve clients by collaborating with them.
5. Every environment is full of resources.

WCSAP has created a handout for advocates to give to or use with parents who are also survivors. We hope that reviewing this handout and the following resource list will help you think through the considerations for advocacy with these parents and provide you with some helpful talking points for your daily work.

Reference

Saleebey, D. (Ed.). (1997). *The strengths perspective in social work practice (2nd ed.)*. New York: Longman Publishing.

Resources

Action, Engagement, Remembering: Services for Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse.

Kris Bein, Resource Sharing Project

http://www.resourcesharingproject.org/attachments/374_SASP-Services%20for%20Adult%20Survivors%20of%20CSA.pdf

Parent Support Group Guide: A Guide to Psychoeducational Support Groups for Nonoffending Parents and Caregivers of Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused – see especially page 19

Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs

<http://www.wcsap.org/parent-support-group-guide>

The Long Shadow: Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse

Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, Ph.D., IBCLC, Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire

<http://www.breastfeedingmadesimple.com/thelongshadowHFM.pdf>

This includes some specific advice for breastfeeding moms, but most of it is about all the long-term effects of childhood abuse and how to deal with them as a survivor.

When a Parent Was Sexually Abused As a Child

Blog Post by Carolyn Lehman

<http://strongattheheart.com/blog/2010/12/30/promise-not-to-tell-on-fbomb/>

Netmums: Okay...Being a child sexual abuse survivor and a parent

<http://www.netmums.com/coffeehouse/advice-support-40/serious-stuff-43/810750-okay-being-child-sexual-abuse-survivor-parent-all.html>

This is a British blog, and this thread discusses parents' worries about their thoughts and feelings as survivors when their kids are toddlers. It is intense, and you will want to look at it first before suggesting it to a survivor, but it does deal with the issues that many parents worry about.

Survivors Breaking The Cycle of Abuse

Stop It Now!

http://www.stopitnow.org/adsearch/survivors?_kk=sexual%20abuse%20survivors&_kt=1be77b3f-d0ab-4a56-865b-8665e16e4b66&gclid=CI7cpefSvLoCFex7QgodHRUAcg

When Survivors Give Birth

Penny Simkin and Phyllis Klass

http://www.amazon.com/When-Survivors-Give-Birth-Understanding/dp/1594040222/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1383070695&sr=1-1&keywords=when+survivors+give+birth

Healing The Harm Done: A Parent's Guide to Helping Your Child Overcome the Effects of Sexual Abuse--see especially the chapter on "Helping Yourself"

Jennifer Y. Levy-Peck

http://www.amazon.com/Healing-Harm-Done-Parents-Overcome/dp/097436262X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1383070944&sr=1-1&keywords=healing+the+harm+done

The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse (4th Edition, 2008)

Ellen Bass and Laura Davis

http://www.amazon.com/Courage-Heal-4e-Survivors-Anniversary/dp/0061284335/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1383070830&sr=1-3&keywords=adult+survivors+of+childhood+sexual+abuse

This new version of a classic book includes a chapter on parenting as a survivor.



When Your Child Has Been Sexually Abused, and You Were Also Abused as a Child

- You are a strong, loving parent.
- Your child's abuse is not your fault – it is the fault of the abuser. Most parents of children who have been abused feel responsible in some way, because they feel they have failed to protect their child. You are not the abuser. Be kind to yourself.
- Get help – from friends, family, an advocate, a therapist, a spiritual counselor, or anyone else who can provide true support. If "it takes a village to raise a child," it certainly takes a community of support to help you and your child heal and recover. You need love and support of your own in order to help your child.
- If you were sexually abused as a child, it may be valuable to work with an advocate or therapist of your own in order to be on solid ground to help your child with abuse issues. Even if you have accessed advocacy or therapy services in the past, seeing an advocate or mental health professional now can help you to address the new challenges involved in supporting your child. Be sure to seek a therapist with extensive experience in working both with adult survivors and with child victims of sexual abuse. Advocates are available at community-based sexual assault programs, and provide free, confidential assistance to those affected by sexual assault or abuse.
- Remember your own strengths as a survivor. Your experiences may help you to be more in touch with your child's needs and the resources available.
- Don't expect your child to react as you did. Remember that you and your child are different people, and that your experiences are different. Talking with an advocate or a therapist can help you to separate your own experiences and emotions from your child's.
- Because many children blame themselves at least partially for what happened to them, you may find yourself blaming your child for the abuse or for not telling you about it right away. Children are not to blame for being abused – not your child, not your younger self. Ever.
- Give yourself time to grieve and accept your own emotions. You may be sad, confused, or angry; you may feel other strong emotions such as shame or disgust; or you may feel numb. You may feel re-victimized because your child was abused.
- You may even be angry at your child at times, for a variety of reasons. Feelings are just feelings. Find a healthy way to express them (such as journaling, discussing your feelings in a support group, or talking to an advocate) so you don't direct them at your child.

- Make a plan to deal with triggers, which are any experiences that set off your feelings of being traumatized again. Your child's experiences and coping responses may trigger your own feelings from the past.
- Educate yourself about how to help your child. Your desire to promote a healthy, happy life for your child will help you both to cope and grow, despite the difficulties you may face. An advocate can help you with this.
- A parent support group can be life-changing, because it is easy to feel terribly alone as you go through this experience. The information, tools and encouragement these groups offer can make a big difference for you and your child's healing.
- Self-care is important for every parent, but even more so for parents who have their own abuse history. Learn healthy ways to care for yourself--socializing, meditating, cultivating your spiritual life, connecting with supportive friends, engaging in creative pursuits, and participating in physical movement activities, such as yoga, tai chi, or walking.
- Identify a supportive person that you can talk to. Your child may want to talk about the abuse, and it may be difficult to hear. It can be reassuring to know there is someone who will listen to your concerns and help you through your feelings about the conversation. Sometimes having an advocate can help when others in your life have a hard time hearing about sexual abuse.
- Try to structure your life so you and your child have enough sleep and regular, nutritious meals. If financial concerns or any other reasons make it hard to get healthy food and a safe place to live for your family, talk with an advocate about resources in your community that may be available to support you.
- Sometimes, sexual abuse can cause survivors to set boundaries that are too open or too closed. This may make it difficult for you to know when you need to be more protective or when you can be more flexible. Talk to an advocate or to friends you trust to help you respond appropriately to your child's needs for safety and independence.
- Be aware that your trauma history may affect your ability to seek appropriate medical or mental health care for you or your child. You may have a greater knowledge of and comfort with available resources, or you may find yourself avoiding needed services. An advocate can help you feel more confident and find trauma-informed professionals (those who really know and understand how to help survivors feel safe and respected).
- Listen to your child. And listen to your own "inner child," the part of you that remembers and was hurt by your own abuse. Try not to confuse these two. When your child is talking to you, breathe, focus, and try your best to remain fully present for your child, not centered in your own experiences.
- Believe that both you and your child can have a happy, productive life despite the abuse. Abuse affects you both, but it doesn't define you or your family. Practice gratitude for the positive things in your life, focus on the best in your child, and hold onto your dreams for yourself. Acknowledging the trauma and getting help are steps towards a healthy future. The cycle of abuse does not have to continue.