



RASASC
rape and sexual abuse
support centre
RAPE CRISIS
SOUTH LONDON

The impacts of childhood sexual abuse

INFORMATION FOR SUPPORTERS

Helpline: 0808 802 9999
Telephone: 0208 683 3311
Email: info@rasasc.org.uk

Childhood sexual abuse involves an abuse of power and an abuse of trust - the abuser being an adult, or, sometimes, an older child.

As children we look to adults and older children for guidance about how to 'be' in the world, to show us what is acceptable and what is wrong. If a manipulative adult or older child abuses that trust it is extremely difficult for the child to disobey. Grooming is common practice amongst abusers who will spend time and effort manipulating a child to do as they are told and not to tell anyone - to keep it a "secret".

It is beginning to be acknowledged that childhood sexual abuse happens a lot more frequently than most people believed, or wanted to believe, in the past.

Power and Control

Perpetrators sexually abuse children and young people because they want to feel powerful and in control. They know what they are doing is wrong. This is why they might tell children not to tell anyone about the abuse or try and make them believe that it is OK. Abusers may also use threats, bribes and intimidation. An abuser may be an adult or an older child - a relative, family friend, a neighbour or a peer. More than likely s/he was someone the survivor thought they could trust. Abusers have had a lot of practice at manipulating other adults into believing that they are 'nice people'. This can be very confusing for children who cannot understand why their parent is friendly with the abuser and this can result in the child feeling like they won't be believed if they tell anyone about the abuse.

Common feelings

A survivor of childhood sexual abuse will be severely affected or traumatised by the abuse they have been through. They may find that they have been affected by some (or a lot) of the following:

- recurrent depression or anxiety
- panic attacks, phobias and/or flashbacks
- anger and feelings of worthlessness
- self-blame and feelings of guilt and shame
- difficulties trusting others
- have coped with the difficult feelings through substance dependency, self-injuring, aggressive behaviour and/or "acting out"
- eating disorders such as bulimia, anorexia and compulsive over-eating
- difficulties with intimacy and relationships
- sleep disturbance such as nightmares and insomnia

Sometimes, a child who is being abused finds a way to escape in the only way they can: in their heads; there they can escape their physical environment and the abuse by blocking it out, or dissociating. When children dissociate they put the trauma they are suffering into compartments in their minds, and create personalities within themselves to deal with the trauma - to bear the pain the child cannot.



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An adult who has learnt to dissociate as a child is likely to experience time loss, memory gaps and a sense of unreality as well as, possibly, alternative states of consciousness or personalities.

Survivors who dissociate are neither mad nor suffering from schizophrenia - dissociation is a creative attempt at self-protection to survive the trauma of abuse.

Supporting survivors

When someone tells you that they were sexually abused as a child, you need to be aware that doing this is an enormous step for them. It means that they are trusting you to hold this information and it is important to offer your wholehearted support without taking over. The survivor will be all too familiar with feelings of powerlessness and they need to feel in control now.

What they will not need is:

- being asked why they didn't tell you earlier
- being asked why they did not tell anyone / why they got into this situation
- you doubting what they are telling you
- repeatedly being asked about what happened / how they are feeling
- being told what to do to feel better
- screaming and shouting at the abuser and swearing revenge
- you making appointments for them to see people who you think will help them
- being asked if they are 'over it yet'
- you assuming you know what is best for them
- you taking control of the situation

What they will need from you is:

- to **listen** when they need to talk
- to **believe** them
- to help them understand that it was not their fault
- acceptance that however they feel is OK and is a result of the trauma
- to understand that all areas of their life may be more difficult
- to understand that it may be difficult to trust people
- to give information if they ask for it and let them decide when to act on it
- help when they ask for help

If the survivor is thinking about reporting to the police, or has done so, what they will need from you is:

- all the time they need to make the best decisions for themselves
- understanding that the criminal justice system can be difficult and exhausting
- support to access and understand the criminal justice system
- space for how they are feeling
- accurate information - it is OK not to have all the answers yourself
- you to be OK with them getting support from elsewhere



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What they will not need is:

- you speaking over them or for them
- you making things about you and your feelings
- telling them what to do when they are considering what to do next
- pressure on them to make the same choices that you think you would make in the same situation

Childhood sexual abuse is not something that can be easily forgotten, but if it feels right for the survivor, they can work through their feelings with a specialist counsellor and learn to put it behind them and recover. The length of time a survivor needs to recover is personal to them but talking things through with a specialist counsellor is an option for them to consider in their own time. They will know when they are ready to begin the healing process. It cannot be emphasised enough how important it is for a survivor to feel empowered by taking control of their recovery and not feeling that they are just going along with what someone else feels would be best, however well-intentioned that someone is.

Childhood sexual abuse is never acceptable; no one has a right over anybody else's body. Guilt, blame and shame belong to the perpetrator, not the survivor.

It may also be useful for you to find someone that you feel able to talk to about your feelings around the sexual abuse of the person you care about - being supported will make you better able to support them. Sometimes you will need space for yourself and your feelings and it is important to acknowledge this.

Talking about feelings

Our national helpline (0808 802 9999) offers one call for supporters of survivors of sexual violence where you are able to talk through your feelings and experiences in a completely confidential and safe space with a trained specialist helpline worker.

Our helpline is open 365 days of the year from 12.00 - 2.30pm and 7.00 - 9.30pm, as well as 3.00 - 5.30pm from Mondays to Fridays.

MOSAC, www.mosac.org.uk, is a voluntary organisation who supports all non-abusing parents and carers whose children have been sexually abused. Their helpline number is 0800 980 1958.

If you would like more information about the criminal justice system and what to expect, our overview can be found on our website: <http://www.rasasc.org.uk/independent-sexual-violence-advocate-service/criminal-justice-system/>.