

Parenting Children Who Are Sexualized



This topic is one of the most fearful issues that foster and adoptive parents encounter. The realities are that most foster and adoptive parents will have a child placed with them who was exposed to some level of sexual abuse—from visual or auditory stimulus to molestation. The stigma associated with sexual abuse in our society is so much greater than verbal or physical abuse. Some people tend to use the following coping techniques to deal with this type of abuse.

How Parents Deal with Sexual Abuse

Denial: The belief that no one could do that to a child or a belief that it did not or could not happen to my child.

Rationalizations: Giving excuses to prior family or caregivers because of drugs, alcohol, or lack of judgment.

Secrecy/Avoidance: “We do not talk about this in our family.” (If we avoid this, it’ll go away.)

Disbelief: “He couldn’t have raped her; she is only three years old.”

Blaming the victim: “She acts promiscuously; she must have asked for it.”

Understanding the needs of a child who was sexually abused will help you become a better parent. Some of the behaviors or thoughts of a child is a direct result of the trauma, shame, and survival skills that a sexually abused child was forced to create.

“Concentrate on feelings and acknowledge that your children may be scared.”

Possible Behaviors and Emotions from Children Who Have Been Abused

- Do not trust adults.
- Feel no control over their lives.
- Blame themselves.
- Feel the need to protect themselves at all cost.
- Have secrets that are a part of their lives.
- Act older than their age.
- Mistake sexual actions for love.
- Do not understand privacy.
- Try to get needs met through sexualized behaviors.
- Have strong feelings about the abuser; both good and bad.
- Masturbate excessively in private and public—or conversely, may be very prudish regarding any sexual activity.
- Feel angry a lot and try to hurt themselves.

Many of the core feelings abuse victims have are fear, lack of trust, and shame. Most perpetrators of sexual abuse are close friends or family members who have broken all levels of trust.

Children learn that adults are not to be trusted—ever. They are hyper vigilant—always in fear of it happening again. Some children recreate the experience to feel that they at least have some control over it, and might even be able to come up with a different outcome this time.

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According to Arletta James, author of *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*, “Once the body experiences sex, it seeks sexual gratification no matter what ones age.” It is your role as foster and adoptive parents to set clear, stable, and safe boundaries for your family.

Children who have been sexually abused carry a sense of deep-rooted shame. According to healthline.com, “The body of the shamed person seems to shrink, as if to disappear from the eye of the self or others.”

Children who have been sexually abused will go to great lengths to rid themselves of this shame and anxiety.

“Overall, sexual abuse survivors have up to five times greater likelihood of being diagnosed with at least one anxiety disorder than their non-abused peers,” says James. Children developed many of these behaviors as survival skills while living in an abusive home.

Reassure your children that they will not be sexually victimized in your home and you want to protect them from harm. While these are just words and your children might not believe you, it still helps to have the subject out in the open.

What can we do to help our children heal?

- Recognize that the child may have initial difficulty in accepting that he/she is safe.
- Discuss how affectionate your family is compared to others. Especially at first, ask your children if it’s okay to hug them, touch

them on the shoulder, etc. in order to alleviate children’s anxiety.

- Discuss need for privacy and how the family will honors everyone’s privacy needs.
- Express commitment and acceptance of your children.
- If there are other children in youe home, discuss expected areas of support and tension such as embarrassing behaviors in public.
- Clearly state when and where various family members meet their own sexual needs, especially, if there are other children in the home. You might say, for example, “It’s okay to masturbate in your bedroom as long as you’re alone.” Or “when our bedroom door is shut, it means your mom and I want privacy.”

- Break the “secrecy barrier” by discussing the past sexual abuse with your children and help them normalize abuse by talking with others who have also been abused. Also, be aware to not over-discuss, since the topic of sexual abuse creates high anxiety for most children.
- Concentrate on feelings and acknowledge that your children may be scared. You might tell them that you can’t imagine what it would be like to grow up in a home where you weren’t sexually safe and how scary that must be.

It will also help to set standards around physical touch, including physical play, such as:

- Make sure every family member’s comfort level with touching, hugging, and kissing is respected.



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- Be cautious with playful touch, such as wrestling and tickling, and caution the children in the home to be sensitive to that as well. Depending on the circumstances, you may want to have a no tickling or no wrestling rule.
- Be aware of sexual messages received through the media and try clarifying situations your children might not understand. Depending on the age, you might ask your child if you think something is appropriate.
 - What do “private parts” mean in context of a diaper commercial?
 - What does cleavage mean in the context of a beer commercial?

One foster parent recalls a 6-year-old girl walking out of the bathroom with nothing on except high heels and saying, “I’m a sexy girl.” The foster parent gently told the girl, “No, you’re a sweet little girl, not a sexy girl.”

- Create a family sexual safety plan. For examples, see the resources listed below.

Parenting children who are sexualized comes with many of your own mixed emotions. Were you sexually abused as a child? Was sex a forbidden topic in your home? Did your parents kiss and hug each other in front of you? You may need to deal with some of your own views about sex and sexual abuse to be effective.

Seek help from a therapist, another parent, or a support group when you need it—there are many people who have similar experiences as you, and they may be able to offer some insights. A healthy relationship with your children will lead to more healing in their lives than you can imagine.

This tipsheet is for parents of children who are sexualized and/or who may have been sexually abused. For more serious issues like children who are actively perpetrating on other children, talk to a therapist and get help.



Resources

The following books are available from our library. Call us at 800-762-8063 or go to:

<http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/plugins/library/advancedsearch.asp>

The Sexualized Child in Foster Care

by Sally G. Hoyle

Sexually Reactive Children in Adoption and Foster Care

by Joan McNamara

Adoption and the Sexually Abused Child

by Joan McNamara and Bernard H. McNamara

Parenting the Young Sexually Abuse Child

by Lauri Nichols

Parenting Workbook for Adopting the Sexually Abuse Child

by Joan and Bernard H. McNamara

Did the Sun Shine Before You Were Born

by S. Gordon

Beyond Sexual Abuse: The Healing Power of Adoptive Families

by W.D. Duehn, M. Piantanida and S. Anderson

Spiders and Flies-Help For Parents of Sexually Abused Children

by D. Hillman and J. Solke-Telft

Sex Educations for Toddlers to Young Adults: A Guide for Parents

by J. Kenny

Parenting A Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents

by the Child Welfare Information Gateway

(<http://childwelfare.gov>)