

DID YOU KNOW . . .

That it's easier than you might think for a parent to miss a child's cues about abuse? Last month, we talked about what to do when a child clearly starts to disclose abuse, [which is vital information for anyone who has children or who works with children](#). It may seem as if the approach to these issues has been backward, but in reality, having the information discussed last month lays the groundwork for understanding this topic, which is how to recognize the warning signs of child victimization before a child actually feels able to disclose.

In last month's article, we reviewed how difficult and even traumatic it is for a child to disclose abuse, and how to properly respond when a child finally feels that it is safe to tell at least some of the story. What is equally important to understand is how many times a child gives indicators, sometimes silent or even unintentional, of abuse, but they are missed in the course of a busy lifestyle.

The catalyst for this article stems from a heartbreaking story heard at a recent conference. The story shared there was told in person by the victim, who is now an adult, but who remains profoundly affected by his victimization. Sadly, his story is similar to stories all over the country, of children who were abused but whose abuse went undetected until it had nearly destroyed a man's life.

This man was 12 years old when his mother, who was widowed, sent her son to work for a neighbor in their small town, doing odd jobs to earn extra money. This was a few decades ago, when parents still assumed that neighbors they knew were automatically safe. On the first day of this boy's job helping out around the store, the owner sexually violated the boy in a particularly vicious manner. The next day, in pain and terrified, the boy tried to get out of going to his new job by feigning illness and by showing a lack of enthusiasm. Can you guess what his mother did? She did what the majority of parents would do in that situation—she scolded her son and told him that he had to live up to his responsibilities. In her mind, she was teaching him how to be a responsible adult and she had absolutely no idea that she was sending him off to be abused on a daily basis. On Sundays, this man would sit behind the family in church, so that the boy would have to shake the hand of his abuser each Sunday and smile as if nothing were wrong.

The abuse went on for a number of years and had a profound effect on the boy as well as the man he later became. It took decades for him to be able to talk about his abuse and when I met him, it was the first time he had felt he could discuss it in a public setting. The pain in this man was palpable; the tears free flowing for him and the entire audience. The impact on his life was clear yet immeasurable.

He was willing to answer questions at the end of his talk and I asked what, if anything, might have made a difference in his experience. He replied that if someone had taken the time to talk to him and ask him what was wrong, he might have felt like he could tell what was happening to him. His story, like so many others across the country, left all of us there that day deeply affected and more determined than ever to ensure that children are safe. They deserve nothing less.

The moral of this story is this—if you see your child resisting something that s/he normally enjoys or at least does not resist, especially if it involves another individual, [take the time to talk to your child about what you have observed](#).

Remembering the lessons from last month, do not start out with something like, "Is Mr. _____ hurting you" or "Did _____ touch you where s/he shouldn't?" Start with something general,

such as, “You know, I used to see you looking really happy about going to _____, and now you don’t seem to enjoy it as much. Is that true?” If the answer is affirmative, ask if there is any special reason that the child does not enjoy the activity, then move to asking if something happens that the child doesn’t like. Remember to keep your questions general and not to fill in the information for the child, but do take the time to ask about changes in behavior.

For young children, abuse can manifest as bedwetting, crying, anger, becoming clingy or fearful of being out of the parent’s presence, and many other symptoms ([see the webpage on signs of neglect and abuse](#)). For older children, they can become depressed, withdrawn, start running away, turn to alcohol or drugs, have trouble sleeping, change eating habits or show other signs of changes in personal patterns. The bottom line for parents is to make sure that regardless of how busy your life is, you *know* your child’s moods and behaviors. That will help you recognize when something has changed and if you see such changes, take action. Depending on the particular child, you may need to spend some alone time together, strengthening your bond before you ask about changes, or you may be able to ask the child directly about the change in behavior or attitude. The point here is that you are showing your child that you are interested, that you notice differences, and that you care.

For some children, it may take reassurance that if something is happening, they are not at fault and they will not be in trouble for telling. Many children feel dirty or ashamed and are fearful of telling the parent. It is also important to remember that in some cases, abusers push the child to take alcohol or drugs, then threaten that the child will be in trouble with the parents and may even go to jail for what they did if they tell about the abuse. If you sense that your child has an uncomfortable secret to tell, assure the child that you will not be angry; that more than anything, you love the child and want to help if there is a problem. Depending on the situation, you may feel that your child would do better by talking with a doctor or counselor, and that is fine, too. What is of the utmost importance is that your child has access to someone with whom the child feels safe, where sharing the darkest of secrets is okay. Sometimes, it may take more than one attempt for the child to feel it is okay to disclose. If that is the case, be patient but continue to let the child know that s/he is loved and that you are willing to be present any time there is a need to talk.

Obviously, if abuse is disclosed on any level, even a little bit of a story, and the child needs to be seen by a doctor, that exam should take place immediately. Physical evidence of sexual assault can disappear in 24 hours or less, so if there is any chance that there may be physical evidence, the child should be taken to the doctor immediately. If the abuse is not sexual but there is still evidence, such as cuts or bruising, the child should still be taken to the doctor immediately, as medical experts know how to document injuries and that is crucial for potential legal actions later.

If any type of abuse has occurred, it is also necessary to get the child into counseling, even if it is only short term, to ensure that the child will emerge from the abuse healthy and whole. What may seem minor to you and me can have a devastating impact on the psyche of a child, so never assume that what you don’t feel is serious abuse has not caused the child great pain. And, since caretakers are close to children, the caretaker is not the one to provide therapy of any sort, only support. Professionals are the ones who are trained to deal with the full range of emotions and behaviors that a child may manifest after abuse, and it is imperative that any child who has suffered abuse has this type of help in healing. The professional will also have the resources to support the parents/caretakers as they deal with their own emotions as well as the changes in the child. Healing is an individual experience and the pace varies, so if abuse happens in your family, understand that there is no timetable by which time everything should be “back to normal.”

Much like the grief process, each person has to have the freedom to work through the healing in his or her own time.

Now some of you may be thinking that I have ignored the fact that children, some more than others, will do just about anything to get out of doing things they don't like. I was particularly good at finding any number of reasons to not help with clearing up the kitchen after dinner or cleaning my closets when company was coming (does anyone ever really know why moms insist on that anyway)? Any distraction or pitiful reason would do and my mother caught on very quickly. I am in no way suggesting that parents make a big production out of every situation in which a child does not want to do something that is expected. What I am saying, over and over again in these monthly chats of ours, is that taking the time to know your child and to nurture an open, trusting relationship with your child is absolutely *essential*. When you have that kind of a relationship, you will know when a child is faking or just trying to wriggle out of doing a chore, which is very different from a child who is truly disturbed by something.

Children who are really bothered about an incident will sometimes shut down, but others will become very insistent that the parent listen. The moral of this story is to never ignore your child's warning signs that something serious may be wrong. In the story of the boy who was abused by his employer, the boy's mother never knew the truth until recently, when her adult son finally felt able to tell her about the abuse. One can only imagine the impact his story had on his now aged mother. Don't let your senior years, or any others, be marred by guilt over missing important cues about your child's safety. Take the time to talk with your child and to be there for your child. It is an investment in your child that you will never regret, and it may just save your child's emotional, spiritual and/or physical life.

Praying for God's guidance, protection and peace as you raise your family,

Debora Jones

If you are seeing signs of discomfort in your child and are uncertain of what to do, please call the Office for Child Protection at (508) 674-4681. I would be happy to talk with you and help you figure out what to do next. We are here to support you in any way that we can!