

Childhood Sexual Abuse

QUICK REFERENCE COUNSELING KEYS Excerpt

One Secret Is Surfaced . . .

Musical, athletic, beautiful—yet with the winsome appeal of “the girl next door”—Marilyn Van Derber walked down the Atlantic City runway as the newly crowned Miss America. After reigning for a year with whirlwind spotlight appearances, she embarked on a highly visible speaking career.

As the epitome of self-confidence and composure, this host of 23 television specials served for 16 years as the only female guest lecturer of a major corporation.

Then, 33 years later, Marilyn stepped up to a very different podium, this time to deliver a very different message: “Tonight, I break my silence. . . . It means speaking the unspeakable word.”¹ She revealed, “From the time I was 5 until I was 18 and moved away to college, my father sexually violated me.”²

As a motivational speaker, Marilyn had a new motivation—a passion to help other victims break their silence, salvage their lives, and be made whole. Describing her hidden horror has helped other victims reveal their terror and survive their shame. Still there are many victims in the midst of their own secret storm who inwardly cry . . .

*“My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling
have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.”
(Psalm 55:4–5)*

To those who have suffered such a heartbreaking, soul-shattering travesty, the Bible offers this promise:

*“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”
(Psalm 34:18)*

The Power of the Secret

The secret—knowing the child won’t tell—is the perpetrator’s most powerful weapon in child abuse. God’s strategy for the protector is to surface the secret and thus enable the TRUTH to set the child FREE.

*“You will know the truth,
and the truth will set you free.”
(John 8:32)*

Surface the Secret

Victims of childhood sexual abuse are in bondage to “the secret.” Revealing the truth is the only strategy for breaking the power of the secret. To open the hearts of victims, give them loving care and compassion that flow from the Spirit of God.⁵

- Pray for supernatural wisdom from God.
- Provide a safe atmosphere.
- Ask whether the child is experiencing something uncomfortable or confusing.
- Listen, reflect, and observe carefully.
- Let the authorities determine the truth.
- Communicate that you believe the child.
- Acknowledge that the offender is wrong.
- Give assurance that the child is not to blame.
- Confirm that “telling” is the right thing to do.
- Provide a safe atmosphere by displaying genuine love and compassion.

*“The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters,
but a man of understanding draws them out.”
(Proverbs 20:5)*

Definitions

Childhood Sexual Abuse is any physical, visual, or verbal action toward a minor for the sexual gratification of an older child or adult. It is almost always committed by someone the child knows or with whom the child has frequent contact.

Incest is sexual interaction with a child or an adolescent by *any* member of the child's family. Incestuous relationships usually continue over a long period of time.

*"No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations."
(Leviticus 18:6)*

Do's and Don'ts of Awareness³

Do

- Be aware . . . children are usually abused by people they know.
- Be aware . . . children seldom lie about abuse.
- Be aware . . . most often, physical abuse is violent, but sexual abuse may not be.
- Be aware . . . children may deny or change their stories because of fear.
- Be aware . . . sexual abuse is progressive and will get worse, if not stopped.
- Be aware . . . child abuse is illegal, a crime, and must be reported.

Don't

- Be in denial, no matter how difficult it is to believe
- Assume that if it happened only once, it is not serious
- Minimize the abuse
- Let the offender go without confrontation
- Blame other family members
- Keep abuse a "family secret"

*"When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers."
(Proverbs 21:15)*

Why Children Don't Tell

For a number of reasons, most abused children never share "the secret" of their abuse. And when they do . . . it's usually many years later! They protect their perpetrators because . . . ⁴

- They feel guilty (false guilt), assuming the sexual encounter is their fault.
- They feel love and loyalty for the abuser.
- They fear the one they tell may respond with disbelief and denial or horror and judgment.
- They fear the abuser's authority and power.
- They feel threatened by the abuser.
- They fear what will happen to the abuser.
- They feel obligated to the abuser.
- They feel no one cares because no one asks!

However, the Lord says,

*"The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.
Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."
(Deuteronomy 31:8)*

A child victim of sexual abuse is overwhelmed with a sense of powerlessness. The child . . .

- Has no choice about being abused
- Does not have the ability to stop the abuse
- Is defenseless against the emotional pain
- Feels helpless and totally alone

No matter the age, a child should never ever be blamed for the abuse. The Bible describes God's concern for victims . . .

*"You, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless."
(Psalm 10:14)*

What Do You Do?

If You Suspect Child Abuse . . .

Seek the help of a professional who is trained to work with children.

- **To Verify or to Relieve Your Suspicions . . .**
 - Contact a child advocacy program to discuss your concerns privately.
 - Consider having the child professionally evaluated.
- **To Further Inform Yourself (not in the presence of the child)**
 - . . .
 - Contact Child Protective Services.
 - Contact the local police or a law enforcement agency.
 - Contact a pastoral counselor or a child abuse counselor.
- **If a Child Discloses Abuse . . .**
 - Listen sensitively and provide emotional support.
 - Make no promises you can't keep—such as, "Your mom won't be angry." or "He won't get into trouble."
 - Explain that the law enforcement agencies must be informed and what will happen next.
 - Be prepared to provide protection, arrange for a medical exam, and obtain professional counseling.
- **If You See Questionable Marks on a Child's Body . . .**
 - Take the child to a pediatrician or the local hospital emergency room for immediate examination and documentation.
 - Ask for copies of the medical record and photographs.

—If local help is unresponsive, keep appealing to a higher authority.

*“We urge you . . . encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:14)*

Questions and Answers

“If a child is abused at a very early age, won’t time erase any memory of what happened?”

Emotional damage to the soul of a child can last a lifetime. Even when there is no memory of the event and without understanding why, victims of sexual abuse can carry a crippling loss of self-worth, an overwhelming amount of shame, and a fear-based outlook on life and relationships. The Lord can open any prison door.

*“Listen to my cry,
for I am in desperate need;
rescue me from those who pursue me,
for they are too strong for me.
Set me free from my prison,
that I may praise your name.”
(Psalm 142:6–7)*

“Will a child who fell victim to early sexual abuse have problems with promiscuity?”

Early sexual experiences can sometimes produce sexually promiscuous adolescents. Not all children respond to abuse this way. But once sexual desires have been aroused, sexual boundaries may be destroyed. Longing to feel loved, many victims harden their hearts to God and turn to sexual promiscuity. With a distrust in the Lord, they can “look for love in all the wrong places.”

*“I have strayed like a lost sheep.”
(Psalm 119:176)*

“Why is it difficult for many abused children to trust God?”

Children tend to see their earthly fathers as a reflection of the heavenly Father. If their earthly father is untrustworthy and abusive, they assume that the heavenly Father is abusive and cannot be trusted.

*“The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble.
He cares for those who trust in him.”
(Nahum 1:7)*

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