

Protecting God's Children

After Abuse is Disclosed —What Makes a Difference

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When we talk in our Protecting God's Children® program sessions about children's recovery from the consequences of childhood sexual abuse, we point to five factors that make a difference in that recovery process. First among them is the reaction of the adults in the child's life to the disclosure. Other factors include the type of abuse, the severity of the abuse, the level of trust betrayed by the abuse, and the length of time the abuse occurred. Because we do not know the abuse is happening at the time it is going on, it is difficult for us to impact many of these factors. However, some new research reinforces the need for us to react appropriately as well as the special value of support from the child's mother throughout the disclosure and healing process.



A great deal of research supports the proposition that maternal support is a clear indicator of how a child will recover from child sexual abuse and how that child will continue to develop in a healthy way. (Everson, Hunter, Runyon, Edelsohn, & Coulter, 1991; Spaccarelli & Kim, 1995; Tremblay, Hebert, & Piché, 2000). The reaction of the child's mother is, in fact, a more effective predictor of the child's ability to recover than any other factors we have identified. (Deblinger, Steer, & Lippmann, 1999; Everson et al., 1991; Fromuth, 1986; Johnson & Kenkel, 1991).

A recent study looked further into this question by considering two other questions. First, did the mother and the child agree that the mother supported the child at the time of disclosure? Turns out there was some significant differences there. Apparently what the mother thought of as support was not necessarily perceived as such by the child (Bick, Zajac, Ralston & Smith, 2013). Second, and the central focus of the study, was what difference, if any, did it make when both the mother and the child agreed that the mother supported the child at disclosure and both participated in discussions about the abuse incident following disclosure?

One of the tendencies of parents when a child is molested is to "put it behind us" and avoid discussing it. Parents understandably find it hard to listen to the details of what happened to their child and they just want their child to be able to move on from the damage caused. This study looked at whether that approach was providing children with the foundation they needed to grow and develop into healthy functioning adults.

The research showed that while more than half the mothers and children in the study agreed that the mother "believed" the child's disclosure, less than half reported having a discussion about the details of the abuse. In about a third of the cases, the mother reported that details were discussed and the child said that they were not talked about and about 20% of the study participants reported that mother was not willing to talk about details at all (Bick, et al.).

Once again, the research shows that a caring adult's belief in the child's disclosure makes a difference in the recovery. However, now it also tells us that their willingness to listen to what happened and the child knowing that an adult is listening and participating in a discussion about the abuse is a significant factor in recovery (Bick, et al.). The child's perception that a trusted adult believed the allegations and then was a

willing participant in the discussion about what happened has a significantly positive impact on the behavioral and mental health outcomes for the child (Bick, et al.).

As parents and responsible adults of faith, we are at work on creating environments that protect children from predators. However, we also know that child molesters are very skilled and sometimes, in spite of our best efforts, children are harmed. This new research reminds us of the importance of believing children when they disclose abuse and challenges us to put aside our own opinions, points of view, concerns, and upsets to be willing to discuss what happened with them. They need to know that we are there for them and they can tell us anything. This will help us to also assist in their healing process.

If you are facing this situation, get the help you need to be able to support the child through the whole process. You are hurting too. Seek professional help so you can be what he or she needs for the future and everyone can come through the process in the best possible way.