

Parenting Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused and May Be Sexually Reactive

This topic is one of the most fearful that foster and adoptive parents encounter. The reality is that most foster and adoptive parents will care for a child who has been exposed to some level of sexual abuse—from visual or auditory stimulus to molestation. Some children who were sexually abused display sexually reactive behaviors, meaning that they respond or react in a sexual manner to things that happen. Sexual reactivity in children is a common response following sexual abuse. Inappropriate sexual behaviors may be a learned form of relating to and communicating with others.

Some people use coping behaviors to deal with the stigma associated with sexual abuse. Following are some examples:

- **Denial:** The belief that no one could do that to a child or a belief that it did not or could not happen to *your* 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 more informed parent. Some of the behaviors or thoughts of a child are a direct result of the trauma, shame, and survival skills that a child who experienced sexual abuse was forced to create.

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 costs
- 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 may try to hurt themselves (self-hurting/cutting)



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Many of the core feelings victims of sexual abuse 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. In some cases, children learn that adults are not to be trusted—ever. They may become hyper-vigilant, always in fear that they will be abused again. Some children recreate the experience to feel that they at least have some control over it, and might even be able to create a different outcome this time.

Children who have been sexually abused very often 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.” And, in the words of Arletta James, author of the book, *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*, “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.” Children who have been sexually abused may go to great lengths to rid themselves of these feelings of shame and anxiety. They may have developed coping behaviors as survival skills while living in an abusive environment.

One of your roles as a foster parent, is to set clear, stable, and safe boundaries for everyone in your family. Reassure survivors of childhood abuse that they will not be sexually victimized in your home. Let them know that you will protect them from harm

and provide them with a safe place while in your care. While, ultimately, these are just words and children might not believe you, broaching the topic of sexual abuse may help the child begin to know that they have nothing to feel ashamed about.

Tips to Help Children Heal

- Recognize that the child may initially have a hard time believing and accepting that they are safe.
- Establish personal space boundaries for all family members.
- Ask the child if it’s okay to hug them, touch them on the shoulder, etc. in order to alleviate some anxiety.
- Discuss the need for privacy and how the family will honor everyone’s privacy needs.
- Express unconditional commitment to and acceptance of the children for whom you care.
- Clearly state when and where various family members meet their own sexual needs, especially if there are other children in the home. For example, you may say to an adolescent youth that, “It’s okay to masturbate in your bedroom as long as you’re alone and behind closed doors.” Or, “When our bedroom door is shut, it means Mom and I want privacy.”
- Break the “secrecy barrier” by discussing the past sexual abuse. As you do this, be mindful of how the child responds; the topic can create a high level of anxiety for many children.
- Discuss the potential benefits that survivors of child abuse can learn from attending support groups.



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- Concentrate on feelings and acknowledge that the child may be scared. You may say, for example, “I can’t imagine how scary it was to not feel safe.”
- Set standards around physical touch, including physical play, such as:
 - Making sure every family member’s comfort level with touching, hugging, and kissing is known and respected.
 - Being cautious with playful touch, such as wrestling and tickling. Caution other children in your home to be sensitive to this, as well. Depending on the circumstances, you may want to have a no tickling or no wrestling rule.
 - Being aware of sexual messages received through the media and trying to clarify situations children might not understand. Depending on their age, you might ask the child if they 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 six-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.”)
 - Creating a family sexual safety plan. (For examples, see the resource section at the end of this tip sheet.)

abuse or who is sexually reactive.

Remember that the most important person in a child’s life is you. *Don’t give up.* We encourage you to seek out and use all of the resources available to you—other experienced parents, support groups, mental health professionals, your faith community, respite, and anything else that can support you and your family.

NOTE: This tip sheet is for those who are parenting or caring for children who are sexualized, sexually reactive, and/or who may have been sexually abused. For support when caring for children who are actively perpetrating on other children, get help right away. Contact the Wisconsin Family Connections Center at 1- 800-762-8063, or info@wifamilyconnectionscenter.org for support.



Take Care of Yourself

Parenting children who have experienced sexual abuse or who may be sexually reactive comes with many mixed emotions. You may find that you need to examine and work through some of your own views about sex and sexual abuse in order to be best care for and support a child who experienced sexual

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Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *The Sexualized Child in Foster Care*, by Sally G. Hoyle
- *Parenting the Young Sexually Abused Child*, by Lauri Nichols
- *Please Tell! A Child's Story about Sexual Abuse*, by Jessie Hazelden
- *No Secrets No Lies: How Black Families Can Heal from Sexual Abuse*, by Robin Stone
- *Living a Lie: Surviving Sexual Abuse*, by Youth Communication
- "Sexualized Behavior: Training for Adoptive, Kinship, and Foster Families," by Rick Delaney, Foster Parent College (DVD)

Tip Sheets

- [Creating a Safe Space: Healthy Boundaries for Children Impacted by Sexual Abuse](#)
- [Child Sex Trafficking: Signs, Risk Factors, and Tips to Keep Kids Safe](#)

Additional Resources

- [Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents](#)