



'I never thought this could happen to us' – information for parents and caregivers

Every day, many parents/caregivers face the shocking reality that their child has been sexually abused. Most sexual abuse takes place within homes and is usually committed by someone who is trusted by the child.

If your child has been sexually abused you may experience a mixture of feelings such as:

- Shock and confusion
- Disbelief and numbness
- Guilt and betrayal
- Fear and hurt
- Anger at yourself for not knowing, or not being able to stop it
- Anger at the abuser
- Anger at the child for not telling you
- Worried about what other people will think

You may want to know exactly what happened, or you may not want to hear about it at all.

You might find it difficult to listen if your child tries to talk about it. Child sexual abuse can provoke many different reactions and feelings.

Remember:

- **Children cannot stop abuse from happening.**
- **Children have less power than abusers.**

Why didn't I notice? Why didn't I know about it?

These are some of the questions that may go round and round in your mind after you find out about the abuse. You might have noticed that things were not quite right at home or that your child has been acting a little differently. You may have noticed nothing at all or it may have been hard to put a name to what you felt.

Some people talk about having a 'gut feeling' that something was wrong. At the time they usually found a reasonable explanation for what was happening. Looking back, it may be easy to see what was really going on **but** sexual abuse is the last thing we think will happen to our child.

**It's not your fault that you were not aware of it sooner.
It's not your fault that it happened.**

Why did the abuser do it?

Many perpetrators will use the excuse:

- They were not receiving sexual satisfaction
- No-one tried to stop them (blaming others)
- They could not control themselves

'I never thought this could happen to us' – information for parents and caregivers (continued)

BUT: Many people who sexually abuse children are having normal sexual relationships with their partners.

The reason people sexually abuse children is connected to their need to feel powerful and in control. It is not about sex.

They are in control of their behaviour and can choose not to abuse.

But wasn't I responsible for it happening, too?

You are not responsible for the abuse, even if you were:

- Trusting of your partner or the perpetrator
- Sick or working long hours
- Unhappy, frightened of the perpetrator or preoccupied at the time
- No longer interested in your partner sexually (if the abuser was your partner)

The person responsible for the sexual abuse is the abuser.

It is up to each individual adult to be responsible for his or her own behaviour.

Most abusers take great care to carry out the abuse in secret. Often they arrange the situation so that no-one else will be present and no-one will find out what is happening. They often threaten to harm children or others to stop them from telling.

Was it my child's fault?

Your child was not responsible for the sexual abuse, even if:

- They wanted to spend time with the abuser
- They didn't tell you about what was happening

No-one ever asks to be sexually abused.

It is possible for children to care for the person who is abusing them but this doesn't mean that they want the abuse to happen or that they like it.

What can I do to help my child now?

There are many things you can do to help your child to deal with the effects of the sexual abuse. Some important ones are:

- Believe the child and praise them for telling
- Understand the barriers that stop children telling
- Allow them to have as much control as possible over the decisions that are made about them
- Allow them to feel and express the whole range of feelings that they may be experiencing
- Help them to feel safe and protect them from further abuse
- Help them to find someone they can trust, someone they can talk to about what has happened

Sexual assault does affect children and families, but with good support and counselling these effects can be lessened.

If you want someone to talk to call SASS. SASS can offer:

- Support, information and referral
- Separate counsellors for you and your child
- Group programs
- Community education

Sexual Assault Support Service

Ingomar House, 34 Patrick Street, Hobart
03 6231 1811 (9am–5pm, Mon–Fri)
admin@sass.org.au | www.sass.org.au

**24 hour sexual assault response and counselling service: 1800 MYSUPPORT
1800 697 877**

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SASS holds Quality Improvement Council (QIC) accreditation.