One of the most stressful situations a parent or caregiver can face is finding out that their child has engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviour. Once it has been acknowledged that your child has engaged in problem sexual behaviour, you may experience a range of reactions, including:

• Disbelief or denial that the sexual behaviour really happened.
• Anger – at your child, at the other young people involved, at yourself, and at the world in general.
• Feeling upset with or withdrawing affection from your child.
• Sadness and depression.
• Guilt, shame or feeling that you are responsible for your child’s behaviour.
• Shock – in thinking that it is usually only adults who are sexually harmful.
• Fear of what will happen next.
• Concern that your child has been harmed themselves.
• Isolation – not knowing how your family and friends will react or whether they will support you and your child.
• Disappointment in your child and/or yourself.

• Confusion and uncertainty, especially if it is unclear why your child is sexually acting out.
• Nightmares and other traumatic stress reactions, particularly if you yourself have previously experienced sexual assault.

All of these reactions are normal. Whatever your reaction, know that you, your child and your family can move beyond this stressful time (with professional support). You are not alone; many other families have experienced this situation and have faced similar emotions and reactions.

Problem sexual behaviour within families

Sometimes young people will display problem sexual behaviour towards their siblings, cousins or other children or adolescents in their family. These situations present a unique challenge for parents, carers and professional counsellors.

If your child displayed the harmful behaviour towards their sibling or another child in the family you may experience additional emotions such as:

• Protectiveness towards your other child or other family member.
• A sense of being torn between supporting the child displaying the behaviour and the child targeted by it.
• Worry about how this will affect your family and the relationships within it.
• Uncertainty about how to ensure everyone’s safety in the home.

What the child targeted by the harmful behaviour might be feeling

Children who have had problem sexual behaviour directed towards them from a sibling or another young person in their family can have a wide range of responses. Some children show almost no reaction and life goes on as normal. Others may experience trauma symptoms such as nightmares, a heightened startle response, and avoidance of the sibling, relative or any memories of the event. Other children may develop symptoms of depression, anxiety, behaviour problems, social and peer problems, or even display inappropriate sexual behaviours themselves. These reactions are all normal and can stem from the child feeling:

• Confused loyalty to their sibling or relative.
• Guilt or relief at seeing their sibling or relative ‘in trouble’.
• Fear of or distress at not being believed or getting into trouble themselves.
• Fear of retaliation by the sibling or other family members.
• Fear of breaking up the family.

If the sexual behaviour was threatening, aggressive or painful it can have a particularly negative effect on the targeted child. Other factors that may increase the traumatic effect of problem sexual behaviour by a sibling or relative include:

• The length of time over which the behaviours took place.
• The nature and closeness of the relationship between the children.
• The response and support received from parents, family members and other caregivers.

Parents, family members and professionals are crucial in helping the child to manage any feelings or trauma symptoms that may arise.

Professional support

Professional support can be very helpful for the young person displaying the behaviour, the child targeted by the behaviour, and other family members who are affected by the PSB – including you as the parent or carer. Professional support might include options such as:

• Counselling and intervention for the young person displaying the behaviour;
• Counselling for the child targeted by the behaviour and other family members who are affected by the behaviour;
• Support for families in creating safety plans for the home, school and other settings or activities; and
• Support with referrals to other relevant services you might need to access.

It’s really important for parents and carers to give the young person encouraging verbal and non-verbal messages that counselling is positive and beneficial – particularly if the child is reluctant to participate.

Last but not least - supporting yourself

Dealing with this kind of situation can take a large toll on parents and carers. It’s very important to be aware of your own reactions and how you are travelling.

Remember:

• You can’t do this alone – it’s vital to involve other family members and professionals in supporting your child and your family; and
• Professional counselling is important for your child, but also for yourself. Specially trained counsellors can help you with strategies and assistance to work through your reactions and feelings, and help you find the best path ahead for you and your family.

Remember that it is the behaviour that is the problem, not the child or adolescent.

The young person is able to learn different behaviour.

If you are unsure about how to manage your child’s behaviour seek professional help and support.

Sexual Assault Support Service

Ground Floor, 31-33 Tower Road
New Town, 7008
03 6231 0044 (9am–5pm, Mon–Fri)
admin@sass.org.au | www.sass.org.au

24 hour sexual assault response and counselling service: 1800 MYSUPPORT 1800697877

Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS) Inc. receives funding from the Tasmanian State Government and the Federal Government. SASS holds Quality Improvement Council (QIC) accreditation.