

Working with mothers of sexually abused children

Abusers often deliberately separate children from sources of support - particularly their mothers. Angela Rivera of ISO-SAC (In Support of Sexually Abused Children) argues that one of the best ways of supporting children disclosing abuse is by supporting their mothers.

Everyone working with sexually abused children wants a happy outcome for that child if at all possible, and safety from further abuse. I believe that one of the best ways to reach a child is through their mother - and helping the mother is the most direct way of helping the child.

Of all the many calls I have received from women the most distressing are from those who have been separated from their children. How can women be best helped to ensure their child's safety and to prevent the double tragedy of separation?

The vast amount of sexual assault reported is reported by mothers. Yet, once an assault has been discovered by teachers, nurses or other professionals, the child's mother is often the last person they think of contacting. Is this because she is also seen as the enemy? That she is colluding?

It is important to remember that women are not obliged to go to Social Services when their child discloses, and at least half of all the calls I receive are from women who have decided not to involve Social Services. This is not collusion, as is often thought. Many women are very wary of Social Workers, having heard of mothers losing children via Social Services.

How a woman is initially alerted to the abuse of her child greatly determines her reaction and the eventual outcome. If, for example, the first time she's told of the suspected assault her husband or boyfriend is with her, denying the implication emphatically, her first reaction may well be one of

disbelief. After all, this man is her lover, father of her children - and she was brought up to stand by him at all times...

The sexual abuser has a vested interest in separating mother and child. This can be achieved in many ways: the great "secret" between just him and the child, or by him belittling the mother in the child's presence. Communication between mother and child can be broken down. If he then succeeds in convincing the woman of his "innocence" he creates a situation where the child is removed from the mother as well as himself for the child's safety. The abuser will have effectively bound the mother to him, against Social Services, and against the child.

The media has highlighted cases of sexual assault, but even so, some women may still find the idea completely unbelievable. These women need to be told that children speak the truth in sexual assault cases, and that even the nicest/ most gentle/ kindest men abuse. On the other hand, there is often a link between men beating women and sexually assaulting children. Sexual abuse is progressive - a gradual lowering of inhibition, and abusers are adept at covering their tracks. It is entirely possible for abuse to have taken place without her knowledge. He may have told the child or children that their mother would not believe them. The appearance of a bond between captor and captive seems entirely logical when you are entirely helpless. Clinging in a child may not always be an indication of affection.

Once the seed of the possibility of sexual abuse has been sown a change in the women's attitude can be seen. Various past events may unfold in her mind and she will be better able to view the situation from the child's point of view, taking her child's side - and once convinced of the abuse she will want to protect her child.

Humans in crisis often lose the ability to function clearly, and their initiative becomes sapped. The non-abusive parent can resist pressure from the abuser if she is fully informed and able to absorb the facts of the abuse, away from the abuser. It can be most detrimental to alert her of her child's abuse for the first time with the perpetrator present. (In order for her to digest the information, to allow herself to feel the inevitable shock and anger she must be allowed the space away from the confusion of his presence and convincing and manipulative words.)

As with women in Women's Aid Refuges it is often only possible to think and function clearly once apart from the abuser. Therefore the removal of the abuser from the home seems a logical answer. Women need counselling on how to approach the abuser, with the suggestion that he leaves the home for the sake of the child. Women who discover the abuse themselves, or who were alerted to it without the perpetrator present often have a totally different initial reaction. As do those women who were themselves abused as children. They know such a thing *is* possible, and are also more likely to notice any vague clues. Children whose mothers were abused as children are more likely to have their abuse detected, not because their mothers "chose" to live with a potential abuser, but because for her, sexual assault would *not* be the last thing she could imagine happening to her child.

Old attitudes of mother-blaming die hard. Everyone, including her children, expects her to be clairvoyant, able to protect them even, as in some cases when the abuse has taken place in a foster home. Teenagers, on being questioned as to their mother's knowledge swore that their mothers knew of their abuse. It was only after many discussions that it transpired that they were only dropping hints and clues, saying nothing definite about the abuse to their mothers. These women were clearly seen to be at fault for not reading the signals. Children will find it much safer to direct feelings of anger towards their mother, rather than the abuser.

The general focus is not on the abuser, who is dismissed as a monster with no responsibilities. All attention and anger is aimed at the mother. The woman is seen to be at fault for living with/having "chosen" an abuser - it's her character that becomes tainted by the abuse. In the past victims of rape were seen to be tainted by their assault. The perpetrator becomes invisible.

Apart from practical considerations, the sexual abused child is always better off with a mother who totally believes and supports and safeguards her children. Foster-homes offer no guarantee of sexual safety. Children often re-enact a situation of abuse in foster-homes and end up abused again. Sexually-abused children can make people very angry. They can be sexually provocative in order to test adults. For these children's safety everything must be done to ensure they have their mother's support and protection. Mothers need also to understand

and be prepared for behavioural changes and distress from a child having counselling /treatment, and need support for their own feelings. A woman whose child has been sexually assaulted must be viewed as a survivor of abuse herself. The perpetrator has abused her by assaulting her child/ren. She is going through a bereavement. The lover/friend/husband she once thought she had is no longer part of her life. Overnight she has become a single parent, with perhaps little economic independence. She doesn't need sympathy, she can be amazingly resilient, and with support will become stronger through this crisis period.

Mothers of sexually assaulted children need advice, as anyone needs professionals in a sphere they're unaccustomed to. Not because they can't cope or are inadequate. If we need a doctor, or a plumber we're not assumed to be inferior or lacking in any way - just requiring a particular skill. Women can be empowered to help themselves and their children.

Referring to women as "mums" trivialises them, it's an over-familiar term which de-values women when used by anyone other than their children. *We must seek to address women as clients in their own right, even in their absence.* Words have a direct effect on our attitudes.

If a child has come from a family heavily dominated by an abusive father she or he needs reassurance that their mother has now got the power to protect them. If Social Workers keep women informed at all stages, of what is expected of them, this restores their confidence in their own ability to safeguard their children. The child's confidence in their mother can then also be restored. Being believed by their mother is an important part of a child's healing process, as is talking of their experiences to her in their own good time. Living in the family home with their mother who has made a choice in their favour also helps their survival.

Practical help can include book lists, titles of recommended videos for children, and the reminder that she is not alone. Information on any groups specifically for mothers of sexually assaulted children or advice in setting one up. Every effort must be made to ensure mother and child stay together and are supported and counselled when they require this. By helping mothers of sexually abused children we automatically help the child.

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