A PARENT’S PRACTICAL RESPONSE TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

TULIR – CENTRE FOR THE PREVENTION AND TREATMENT OF CHILD ABUSE (CPTCSA)
&
Ellements

The prevention and healing of Child Sexual Abuse requires equal parts of caring, optimism and pragmatism. We must care deeply for our children, be optimistic about human beings’ capabilities for change and be pragmatic how to work with children and the larger community to bring about positive transformations.

Tulir-Centre for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Sexual Abuse (CPTCSA) assumes that caring and optimism already reside with the majority of people and focuses on the pragmatic – how to translate the abstract notions of prevention and healing into a blueprint for action.

While more importantly prevention enables children to exercise and feel their right to be safe all the time, it increasingly has also gained recognized as the most prudent and cost effective strategy for addressing Child Sexual Abuse.

Nonetheless this most important violation of childhood happens and the impact may be significant.

Tulir-CPTCSA however believes a timely, proactive and appropriate response in conjunction with the innate ability of the human spirit to prevail, will eventually lead to a life lived to the fullest. Since this process of supporting abused children in their journey of healing cannot happen in a vacuum. Tulir-CPTCSA is committed to work holistically while empowering children triumph over the worst experiences that they may ever have.......that they should never have.

As we know safe and happy childhoods last a lifetime.

Ellements is a women’s collective of four hundred members coming together to learn and share the concerns of society, enriching their own lives while striving towards making the world a better place to live in.

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Dear Parents,

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is frightening, abhorrent and very often an unimaginable issue but the reality of the situation is that it exists. At times the idea of dealing with it may seem daunting but don’t let it overwhelm you; Response to CSA should be handled with a view to increasing awareness rather than its denial.

This booklet is for you. We at Tulir-CPTCSA know that you are the most important adults in your child’s world and to whom your child looks up. We also know that you care for your children and their well-being and safety is of paramount concern to you.

Unfortunately, you cannot always be sure of your child’s safety. But you can equip them with information and skills to build self-protective behavior. And the most important factor for your children’s protection is a strong self-esteem. Let them know how important they are to you. Be available when they need to talk. Be honest and open with them when they ask difficult questions. And always believe what your child tells you, no matter how unbelievable or difficult to believe it is.

Talking to your child about child sexual abuse may seem challenging, but the possible consequences of not talking with your child is even worse—that they may be sexually abused and don’t know where to turn to help.

Child sexual abuse is any behavior committed by an older or more powerful person on a younger or more vulnerable person for the sexual gratification of the former. The abuser is often an adult, but can be an older child as well. The victim is always a child. Boys and girls are both vulnerable. It is important to mention that most of the time the abuse is committed by someone known to the child.

Examples of sexual abuse include exhibitionism, voyeurism, obscene, language, showing or taking pornographic pictures, touching private body parts, fondling, masturbation, making the child touch the other’s private body parts, and rape. Many other behaviors could actually be abusive, despite the intent of the giver as a child has the right to deny any touch regardless of intent if the child does not want the touch or the touch makes the child feel uncomfortable.

At the juncture, please be assured, all of your fears and concerns are relevant and must be dealt with, since if its not it could minimize the effectiveness of prevention and treating child sexual abuse.

We at Tulir-CPTCSA are committed to assisting you so you can better support and help your child.

Sincerely,

All of us at Tulir-CPTCSA
A Parent’s Practical Response to Child Sexual Abuse

- When and how can I talk with my children about sex and sexual abuse?
- The touching rules
- How would I know if my child experienced sexual abuse?
- Why is it hard for my child to tell me?
- How should I, as a parent, respond to my child’s touching problem?
- Some tips to help prevent child sexual abuse
- Early warning signs of sexual offending
- Organizations who can help.
**When and how can I speak with my children about sex and sexual abuse?**

Discussing sexual abuse with your child is difficult. Equally as difficult and confusing is “how” to bring up the topic. Here are some suggestions on introducing the topic of sexual abuse with your child:

- Learn to feel comfortable with the topic of human sexuality and abuse by talking about it with your close friends and relatives. Make sure that you first know the information yourself before talking with your child.
- Set general and personal safety rules with your child. For example, teach your child safety rules such as “look both ways before crossing a street” or “never play with matches”. Include personal safety rules such as “it is never OK for another person to touch your private body parts except to keep you clean and healthy”.
- Make use of the moments when your child is naturally being inquisitive. Don’t avoid questions like “where do babies come from”, or “what is sex”. Dignify children by answering their questions; otherwise they might look to other ways, often inappropriate, to satisfy their curiosity. Teach your child appropriate sexual vocabulary at a young age (such as the names of the private body parts along with the other parts of the body). This makes talking about sex easier as the child grows. Children are sexual beings too, but their sexuality corresponds to their age. As they grow they will need different information.
- Play the “What if.....” game with your child. For example, ask your child, would you do?” “What if someone wanted to touch your private body parts, what would you do?” Use relevant situations and encourage your child towards the correct answer (refer to the Touching Rules on page 2).
- Read stories to your child about children who have been in difficult circumstances and how they overcome those difficulties. These stories will give your child positive skills and proper outlook regarding his/her safety concerns. This could also provide the child with the opportunity to tell you about problems s/he needs help with.
- Make a list of people you would allow your child to be alone with anywhere (listen to your child’s response to the names you suggest)

Be prepared, we know you can do it!
The Touching Rules

Rule # 1:

It is never all right for someone to touch your private body parts (or for someone to ask you to touch their private body parts) except to keep you clean and healthy.

Rule # 1 includes being touched in any way that makes the child feel uncomfortable. Helping your child identify his/her feelings is important, especially those relevant to different types of touches.

Rule # 2:

If someone tries to break this touching rule, say “NO” and get away.

There are many ways to say “No!”, including “STOP”, “I don’t like that!”, “I’m going to tell on you!” or “I don’t want to do that!”. The important thing is to train children to speak in a way that they really mean, with a firm voice and standing tall. It is also important to teach them about different places where they can run for help and safety. Sexual abuse usually occurs in private places, so public places could be safe places to seek help, even if the people there are strangers.

Rule # 3

Tell someone and keep telling until you get the help you deserve. Never keep secrets about a touching problem.

Rule # 3 teaches children to TELL, and the list of trusted adults could be short or long, depending on the support system as perceived by the child.
How would I know if my child experienced sexual abuse?

The best way would be to have your child tell you directly. However, telling about being hurt is difficult. Children who cannot directly tell you may express it through their behavior. These behaviors might include:

- Showing an unwillingness or general discomfort to talk about a person or an experience.
- Expressing unusual fear or anger about certain people, places, or topics.
- Exhibiting a sudden change of behavior, such as regressing (e.g. thumb-sucking, bed-wetting), becoming aggressive, withdrawn, displaying sexualized behavior or disinterested and showing no emotion.
- Experiencing sudden changes in behavior in schools, like a drop in grades, change in classroom behavior and a sudden change of friends.
- Becoming very uncomfortable when you talk about sexuality or abuse.
- Pregnancy or Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), especially at a very young age.

If or when you feel that your child may have a problem, please use the suggestions in this booklet to help your child. If your child will not talk to you, don’t force her/him. Keep pursuing the matter in different ways.

You may also call Tulir-CPTCSA for ideas and support.
**Why is it hard for my child to tell me?**

Children find it hard to tell about abuse for many reasons. Disclosure comes with fear such as:

**Remembering the hurt.** Children often cope with their abuse by pushing it so far back in their minds that they “forget”. They convince themselves that the abuse did not happen or that it was an accident or they choose to believe whatever the offender told them.

To remember means to feel hurt again. Once the child tells what happens, then it becomes a reality which the child must now face.

**Loss of love.** Children often worry that their parents or friends won’t love them once they know about the abuse; they think they are now “dirty. Children often take responsibility for their abuse. They also fear that their disclosure will cause the breakdown of their family. The abuser is often someone whom the child trusts and loves. The child could fear the loss of love from the offender.

**Shame and guilt.** Children usually know or sense that their sexual experiences with an adult are wrong. By telling someone and acknowledging that this happened, they fear being shamed.

Children and adolescents can also experience pleasurable sensations, as sex is a physiological response. This often makes them feel more confused, ashamed and guilty. Older children sense more guilty than younger children.

**Blame.** Children fear that they will be blamed for the sexual touches. Offenders are very good at placing the blame and responsibility on the child; they often reason out that the child “asked” for the sexual touch. The truth is that children ask for affection; it is their right. They do not ask for sex. The sad thing is, adults tend to be believed above/over the child.

**Harm.** Offenders often maintain control over their victims by threatening to harm them or their families if they tell. Children are then burdened with the inappropriate responsibility of keeping their families safe.

If you understand these fears of disclosures, then you will be able to better listen to your child and help if they tell you about a touching problem.
How should I as a parent respond to my child’s touching problem?

Children communicate through words, signs and behavior. We adults need to listen when they speak, and understand what their signs and behaviors tell us. When children don’t talk to us about their problems, it may be because we don’t listen to them well, or we are not available for them. As parents you are an important part of your child’s protection, as well as recovery if they are abused or molested.

How you respond to disclosure is important for your child’s as well as your well-being. It is not uncommon for a parent to feel shock, disbelief, denial, self-blame, anger, confusion and/or doubt, if a child tells you s/he was abused.

The following guidelines will help you:

1. **Believe your child.** Children rarely make up stories of abuse. A major reason children do not tell about sexual abuse is the fear that they will not be believed. Believing the child is a major step for healing the pain of abuse. You could tell them “I believe you” or “It’s not your fault”.

2. **Remain calm.** Children are sensitive to your reactions. A reason they may not tell you is because the worry that you may not be able to handle what happened to them. They worry about your feelings. If you respond with anger, the child may feel you are angry with her/him. If you respond with disgust, the child may feel you are disgusted with her/him. Children need to feel that they are not different from everyone else because of the abuse. Remaining calm will allow children to feel normal and help begin to restore their dignity. Remaining calm could also help the child to talk more about the experience.

3. **Affirm your child’s feelings.** Abused children are often confused about feelings or are in denial about their feelings because their feelings have been manipulated by the offender. Children must be permitted to voice their feelings and have them affirmed and taken seriously in order to continue the telling healing process. Samples statements could be, “I know this may be hard, frightening, etc. for you” or, “You are very brave for telling”.

4. **Tell your child what will happen next.** Children who have been abused lack control or options (lack of empowerment). Children need to understand that sexual abuse cannot be overcome alone, that other people need to be involved to help. However, children need to be given a part in this process by giving them option about how to report, or whom to report, or what support is needed to report. A sample statement could be, “Your opinion is important to us in keeping you safe from now on”.

5. **Support your child.** A sexually abused child often feels that they are all alone, this has happened to nobody else, or no one will believe them. Disclosure can be an traumatic as the abuse and thus the children who tell need as much positive adult support (while still making the child feel “normal”) as possible. Sample statements could be, “You are not alone because I will stay with you as much as you like through the process” or, “we will get over this together”.

6. **Report the abuse.** It is important to report all abuse or suspected cases of abuse an alleged offender could be prevented from abusing again and appropriate intervention provided.

Examine the ways you respond to what your children tell you.

- Do you only hear your children or do you listen to them?
- Are you preoccupied when you listen to them?
- Do you tell your children you’re busy and to talk to you later?
- Do you interrupt them while they speak?
- Do you deny their feeling if they tell you they are sad or mad about something?
- Do you avoid certain topics with your children?
- How many minutes in a day do you spend listening to your child rather than talking to them?
- So you listen during certain occasions only?

How can we all make ourselves better listeners, and hear what our children have to tell us? You may be surprised to see a pattern in the way you listen and respond to your children.
Some Tips to Help Prevent Child Sexual Abuse

It is impossible to protect your child completely against sexual abuse. However, the following tools and activities will help your child less likely to become a victim or sexual abuse:

1. **Set family safety rules**, such as:
   - Don’t give anyone private information about yourself including your name and address;
   - It is never okay for grown-ups or older kids to touch private body parts, except to keep you healthy and clean;
   - If someone touches your private body parts and asks you to keep it a secret, tell someone about it right away. If the person doesn’t believe you, tell someone else;
   - Anytime you feel confused about a touch, ask the person to “stop” and talk about it with a grown up you can trust.

2. **Teach children proper terms for private body parts.** This allows children to understand their bodies and gives them the vocabulary to talk about an incident of sexual abuse or a touching problem they may have encountered. Do NOT give private body parts names that also represent something else (such as “flower” or “snake”). An exception can be made in the case of very young children.

   Children who are not taught terms for private parts of their bodies get the implicit message that there is something “wrong” about these parts of their bodies, or that it is not acceptable to talk about them. They are thus less likely to report an incident of sexual or confusing touching.

3. **Children, like all of us, have a right to personal space and can declare who is and is not allowed to enter it.** Set rules for children about privacy and undressing, and teach them how to assert their rights if their personal space is violated.

   (Please be aware that being assertive means to assure your own rights in a way that does not infringe on another’s rights. Understand the differences between passive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors, and make opportunities for your children to practice positive assertiveness skills).

4. **Trust your children’s feelings** and let them know they have a right to their feelings. Children can say “NO” without being disrespectful. Work with your children to be able to communicate their feelings in a way acceptable to you as an adult.

5. **Teach your children that keeping secrets is not okay**, especially when this involves breaking family safety rules. Sexual offenders protect themselves by getting their victims to keep the abuse a secret. Children need to know the difference between keeping a “secret” and preparing a “surprise”. They need to know the consequences of silence.

6. **Children need strong self-esteem** to be able to protect themselves from sexual abuse and tell you about what happened. Sexual offenders are most likely to victimize children with low self-esteem. Help build your child’s self-esteem by:
• Praising accomplishments, even small ones;
• Listening to and accepting feelings;
• Acknowledging and not downplaying your child’s statements and feelings about an event or occurrence;
• Giving your child the opportunities to make choices and feel a sense of accomplishment and ability (“I can!”)

7. **Teach your child to contact people s/he trusts if a problem occurs.**

Make a resource list with names for your child. Teach them that if they can’t get help from the first person they contact, or if that person doesn’t believe them, they should keep telling to others until they are believed and helped.

8. **Children to know that people they know are also capable of doing hurtful things.** In fact, most sexual abuse is committed by someone the victim knows. Teach your children to look out for certain “situations” or “actions” instead of people themselves. Children should be taught to differentiate between “unsafe actions” and “unsafe people”, thus removing the fear of adults, and allowing good and healthy physical contact. Children should be taught that most people are strangers and strangers when needed.
Early Warning Signals of Sexual Offending

Teach children that sexual offenders have a pattern of behavior that serve as early warning signs. These include:

- Treating you differently from other children.
- Wanting to spend time alone with you, making excuses to go to places where only you would be with the offender, causing situations that would have others leave only the two of you together.
- Asking you to do activities that involve physical contact, like giving backrubs, massaging you, wanting to help you wash.
- Touching your private parts in a manner which may seem accidental, but most probably intentional, like brushing against breasts while playing or rubbing body against yours.
- Looking at or touching your body and saying it is an inspection or to see how you are developing.
- Putting lotion or ointment on when others are not around or when nothing is wrong.
- Pretending to unintentionally enter your room while you are undressing, or the bathroom while you are inside.
- Not respecting your privacy, coming in room without knocking, not allowing you to close doors to bedroom or bathroom.
- Asking questions or insinuating sexual activities between you and your friends.
- Pretending to teach sex education by showing pornographic pictures.
- Saying sexual things about your body or how you dress.
- Talking to you about intimate sexual details.
- Saying you are special, different, and the only one who really understands, better than anybody else.
- Treating you like an adult with her/him acting like a child.
- Giving you special privileges or favors and making you feel obligated to him/her.
- Treating you meaner than others.
- Not letting you have friends or do activities that other kids your age do.
- Telling you not to tell people close to you about things that happen between you.
- Coming into bedroom at night for no reason.
Organizations who can help.

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