

HANDOUT #1: KEY POINTS: RIGHT-TIME VIDEO ON SEXUAL TRAUMA

Key Points

General Information:

- Sexual abuse is something that some children who are in foster care or have been adopted have endured. Sexual abuse is not always known when children enter the child welfare system.
- Some parents are concerned about parenting children who have been sexually abused. However, it is important to know that parenting a child who has been sexually abused is very doable. By providing a safe and nurturing home, parents who are fostering or adopting can help children to thrive and recover.

Part 1: Risk Factors and Indicators of Sexual Abuse

- To recognize signs of sexual abuse, it's helpful to know typical sexual development. Like all development, sexual development varies from child to child. It is typical for all children to do some exploration and have curiosity about their bodies, sex, feelings, discoveries, attractions, and behaviors.
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) defines child sexual abuse as any interaction between a child and an adult (or another child) in which the child is used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or an observer. Sexual abuse can include both touching and non-touching behaviors. Non-touching behaviors can include voyeurism (trying to look at a child's naked body), exhibitionism, or exposing the child to pornography.
- There are certain things that increase a child's risk of sexual abuse, such as:
 - Neglect of the child
 - A parent who is abusing drugs/alcohol
 - A parent with mental illness
 - A home characterized by chaos
 - When the child is living from place to place
- Parents who are fostering or adopting may not know a child's abuse history when they come into the home. As a result, it is important to pay attention to the child's behaviors. Some of the potential indicators that may be present if a child has been sexually abused include:
 - Play that involves sexual themes
 - Imitating sex acts with siblings or other children or toys (like stuffed animals)
 - Sexual knowledge that is above their age

- Masturbating all the time (more than the amount that all children do) or in public places
 - “Sexually reactive” behaviors which occur when a child is acting out in sexual ways based on what they’ve seen or experienced
 - Older children may show other signs such as unhealthy eating/weight gain or loss, changes in self-care/paying less attention to their hygiene, anxiety or depression, self-harm or suicidal thoughts, alcohol or drug use, running away, high risk sexual behavior, having sexually transmitted illnesses, or suddenly having a lot of money
- None of the indicators listed above mean that the child was definitely abused sexually; however, it is important for parents to pay attention to these signs and seek out professional help if they have concerns.

Part 2: Creating an Emotionally Safe Environment

- The first sign of sexual behavior can be very scary to parents and typically brings up a lot of questions:
 - Can I still hold or touch the child?
 - What steps do I now take to help them?
 - What if other people don’t understand this?
 - What if they make allegations against me?
- The most important thing to do if you see or hear signs of sexual abuse is to remain calm, stay open, and get curious. Do not react with alarm or panic. Instead ask questions in a calm, curious tone of voice to understand more, for example: “Where did you learn how to do that?” or “Tell me more about why you’re asking about that?”
- It is important to listen and be there for the child. If the child says something that indicates they have or are experiencing sexual abuse, give them your 100% attention. Make sure you stop what you are doing and allow the child to be open with you.
- It is important to validate the child’s feelings and believe the child even if it does not all make sense. Do not push for details or ask a lot of questions. Make sure that you are very clear that sexual abuse is never ok and is never the child’s fault.
- Inform any professionals you are working with, such as a social worker and/or therapist in order that they can provide help to the child.
- Understand that children have many reasons why they may not share about their sexual abuse, at least not right away or in full. These reasons include:
 - Younger children often worry they will get in trouble.
 - Older children usually experience a lot of shame and guilt about “letting” it happen.
 - It can be confusing for some children because some of it might have felt good, which can be scary and confusing to them because it makes them wonder if they wanted the abuse.

- They may be scared of the person who abused them because the person may have made some kind of threat to hurt them or someone they love if they tell.
- Children need constant reassurance that it is safe to tell the truth, that they will be heard and protected no matter what they share. Be clear that your #1 job is to keep them safe! Keep reinforcing that you are there for them, no matter what they tell you or what happened to them. Use comments like: “There is nothing you can do that can make me love you any less” or “There is nothing so bad that will keep me from loving you.”
- The adult’s reaction to what the child shares will strongly affect the child’s healing and recovery process.
- Childhood sexual abuse has been linked to many physical, social, cognitive, and emotional problems, including a very high risk of being sexually hurt again. A family’s love and protection helps to lower this risk. The more we acknowledge, the more we believe them, the more we reinforce that it is never their fault, and make it clear that sexual abuse is never ok, then the more we can keep their self-image positive.

Part 3: Strategies to Keep Children Safe and Prevent Further Abuse

- Develop a safe, supportive relationship with the child where the child feels comfortable telling you things. The relationship should be built on trust and open communication between the parent and child.
- Have ongoing, open conversations with the child about sexual development as you would with any other topic such as how to manage money or the importance of having manners. Make sure during these conversations that you share information at the child’s developmental level. It will be important to discuss bodies and sexual identities. Consider using books about changing bodies to practice talking about personal body parts with their proper names.
- Parents should be mindful not to share more information than the child is asking for. Think about what the child is actually asking and give information in pieces that they can digest so they don’t get overwhelmed. Build blocks of truth and plant seeds for future conversations as they mature.
- Educate children as early as possible about what consent means and what it looks like. For example, don’t ask the child to hug others just to be polite, but it is ok if they want to give a hug, or maybe they will need to learn how to ask others’ permission before giving hugs. Make sure you discuss with them the following topics:
 - What healthy sexual relationships are
 - What unhealthy sexual relationships are
 - What is considered appropriate touch and what is not appropriate
 - What sexual abuse is

- These conversations will take practice and repetition. It is not just one conversation but instead an on-going conversation that continues to take place as the child grows and develops.
- Be sure there are sufficient good boundaries in your home and stay aware. Avoid situations where the children are not supervised. If a child is sexually acting out, you will need to be especially careful about keeping your eyes on them when they are with others.
- Be especially careful about bedrooms and bathrooms. Nighttime can be scary for children due to their previous experiences. It is important to be mindful of who is sharing a bedroom and who is interacting behind closed doors. Children who have been in foster care and/or experienced sexual trauma may not know about privacy, modesty, or personal boundaries. For example, they may not even realize that opening a shower curtain when an adult is showering is a private time, and you will need to teach them things like this. Set guidelines that ensure all children's safety in the home.
- It is important to say out loud and often to the child that they are safe in your home and with you. It is the parent's responsibility to ensure safety that is both physical and emotional.
- Set guidelines about what is ok and what is not ok in your home regarding touch. Help to redirect children if they are touching in a manner that is not appropriate. If they touch you inappropriately on purpose or by accident, just kindly re-position their hands or body and simply educate them with no judgment. Set up guidelines in advance about touching and ensure that you monitor children when there is a history of sexual abuse. Respect and tune in to each child's comfort level around touch, including hugging, cuddling, or sitting close to someone on the couch.
- However, it is important to remember that it is important for parents who are fostering or adopting to not avoid touch all together. There can be confusion amongst children and even adults about the importance of the need for "sensory" experiences for children vs. what is sensual. Parents who are fostering or adopting can create physical intimacy in a manner that maintains boundaries. For example, providing all children with their own special sleeping bag so that everybody can cozy together for a fun family movie night. It is important to find ways that you can all be together in a manner that ensure all children are kept safe.

Part 4: Promoting Healthy Sexual Development

- It is important to have regular conversations about sexual development before adolescence and romantic relationships begin. Being a parent to teenagers is often challenging, but for children who have been abused, it adds another layer when they start to date. It is important to keep talking and educating teens so they do not become vulnerable again (for example, reviewing what consent means).
- Help children who have experienced abuse to see themselves as survivors rather than victims or "damaged goods". Help them to change their perspective about the abuse they have endured and to see themselves as survivors.