

Sexual abuse in the home: Helping children disclose

Abuse within the family home is difficult to detect. Siobhan Pyburn explains how school nurses can help children to speak out, based on her experience.

According to the Children's Commissioner for England (2015), around two thirds of all child sexual abuse (CSA) is committed by a family member. A recent 'key messages from research' paper published by the Centre for Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse described the high levels of betrayal, stigma and secrecy involved in this form of abuse (McNeish and Scott, 2018). Many professionals have grasped that children usually feel ashamed of their experience. However, it can be harder to understand the reasons underpinning those feelings of personal responsibility, and how these can be addressed in conversations with children.

As someone who trains professionals on how to handle workplace concerns that a child may be being sexually abused, I have reflected on how the teachers, nurses or other school staff members might have intervened in my case. I was sexually abused at home by my father from a very young age until I disclosed to my mother at the age of 15. He went on trial over a year later and was given a custodial sentence.

The reasons why I kept the abuse a secret for so many years included an intense fear of being blamed and even going to prison myself, as my father convinced me I would. He leveraged my relationship with my mother to convince me that she would leave me and return to India if she ever found out. He would also threaten to commit suicide if I talked, and I felt a sense of wanting to protect him, despite the abuse that was

inflicted on a weekly basis whenever we were home alone.

One reason for children keeping the secret that I find isn't often talked about is the reality that victims sometimes have a bodily response to sexual abuse. Children don't understand that our bodies are designed to respond to touch and that this is not the same as consent. For the child you're worried about, this could be a big part of why they don't feel able to tell you. Depending on the age of the child, they may not even be able to verbalise those experiences.

As I look back on my childhood now, I can see that there were missed opportunities for detection. For example, a teacher approached me at school one day, having noticed that I was behaving differently and seemed agitated. When she asked, I told her that I didn't want to go home to my father; that there was a secret that I mustn't tell anyone. The explicit reference to a 'secret' should have been a red flag; however, my teacher didn't feel it was her place to pry. If it wasn't her place, then whose place was it?

I don't remember this conversation. I know it took place because that teacher told me about it, years later, when she discovered the work I'm doing now and

how I've gone public with my story. Her suspicions must have driven her to look me up online, and she expressed her sadness for having not intervened when she had reason to suspect. Despite a plethora of policies and 'statutory guidance', there is still no legal duty to report suspected or known child abuse in England, Scotland or Wales. Therefore, perhaps my teacher's safeguarding responsibilities seemed unclear.

In an ideal world, I would have liked my teacher to have approached the conversation in the following way:

■ Open-ended questions—Asking some open-ended questions to check how I was feeling. For example, 'how are you feeling at home? Is there anything on your mind?' Just knowing there was someone who cared would have been a good start. Although I probably would not have disclosed straight away, I was reliant on having a trusting environment around me to encourage open communication.

■ Reassurance—My teacher might have reassured me that I was not in trouble. At first, her interest in my affairs may have made me feel anxious as it was unusual. To avoid me feeling put on the spot, she might have explained her reason for asking. For example, perhaps there was

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an unusual behaviour she had noticed and wanted to see if there was something she could help me with. Highlighting unusual behaviour can let the child know that you are on their side.

■ Addressing child sexual abuse without explicit mention—The staff member could address child sexual abuse, without needing to mention it explicitly. For example, they could say something like ‘I won’t judge you for anything you tell me. If you ever feel like talking, I’m here. You don’t need to keep secrets, even if someone has told you to.’ By addressing the secretive dynamic head on, the underlying themes of child sexual abuse are being responded to, but there is no worry of asking leading questions.

At this point, any number of things could fit the criteria of secret-keeping: perhaps the child is distressed because they cheated on an exam, or shoplifted, or something else. It doesn’t have to be about sexual abuse, though, of course, I would encourage the person having this conversation with the child to look under the bonnet and find out of what’s behind any unusual or anti-social behaviour. It is vital to maintain a level of ‘professional curiosity’ and not take it for granted that the child is just ‘acting out’.

These examples amount to the same end goal: the professional is positioned as someone who would understand if the child dared to disclose to them. They will be recognised as a friendly face who is on the ‘same team’ as the child; someone who won’t dismiss, blame or minimise their experiences. However, without a professional willingness to dare to ask in the first place, there is little chance of intervention. The workshops delivered by myself and other people with lived experience, through the beam Project,

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are therefore called ‘Dare to Ask’, as that is the essence of what we want everyone with a safeguarding responsibility to be ready to do.

The next question is, how would I have wanted someone to respond? I can’t emphasise enough how important it is for a child to feel believed and understood. At the point of disclosure, they will be very afraid of the reaction and possibly regretting saying anything. A simple and effective verbal response could be ‘thank you for telling me, I appreciate you trusting me with this. I believe you and it’s not your fault that this happened to you.’ By responding in this way, children can begin to realise for themselves that they are not responsible for their ordeal.

You can then go on to explain what happens next and offer the child support with the relevant services. I would encourage honesty and transparency during this conversation. If they ask whether you will tell anyone else, be honest about where the information is going, what the next steps will be and when they can expect the changes to take place. At first, I begged my mother not to

tell anyone else, but I am so glad she did.

When they are being abused, children often believe that their secret is entirely undetectable. However, I have since remembered many occasions of ‘letting something slip’, despite my best efforts. These are the moments that can make the difference between a child speaking out or keeping the abuse a secret for years to come, and it is the adults in their life who are best placed to notice and respond to the opportunities for earlier intervention.

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Children’s Commissioner for England. Protecting children from harm: A critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England and priorities for action. 2015. London: Office of the Children’s Commissioner.

McNeish D, Scott S. Key messages from research on intra-familial child sexual abuse. 2018. London: Centre for Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse.

Further information

Beam Project

<https://beamproject.co.uk/>

You can also find Siobhan on YouTube at Siobhan Pyburn.

Childline

childline.org.uk

Victim Support

victimsupport.org.uk

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