

NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children)

On an online service working to protect children and young people, offering advice to parents.

www.nspcc.org.uk

Freephone 24/7 0808 8005000

Helplines for Children and Young People:

Childline

A confidential helpline for children and young people to discuss any issue that concerns them.

www.childline.org.uk

Freephone 24/7 0800 1111

Brook Advisory

Support and information for young people around sexual health.

www.brook.org.uk

Freephone Mon-Fri 9am-5pm 0808 8021234

Why My Child?

*Dealing with the Trauma of
Sexual Assault
A Leaflet for Parents
of Children who Disclose*

Ynys Saff Sexual Assault Referral Centre,
Cardiff Royal Infirmary

Telephone: 02920 335795

The Experience

A child's disclosure of abuse and the following investigation by agencies like the Police and Children's Services, has a huge impact not just on the child but on the whole family. Families have told us that.

'It feels as though we are all victims. You know 'it' happens but you think it is to other families and then you realise that you are that 'other family.'

The purpose of this leaflet is to offer some insight that might be helpful in coping with the trauma of sexual violence for you and your family. In some ways it is hard to write a leaflet that will offer general support when each family will have its own way of managing and each victim's story is unique.

Feelings and Emotions

Families will ask

'What is it normal to feel'

It is likely that parent and child will show quite different feelings and emotions about what has happened. For example, if the child hadn't disclosed for sometime, their behaviour prior to telling may have seemed 'very out of character.'

'We didn't know what had happened, one minute she seemed ok, the next shouting and fighting with her brother, banging doors. Every little thing seemed to cause an argument. Now we know what happened to her, we just feel bad for not realising...'

Support Services for Parents:

Parentline Plus

Support for parents or carers who want to talk through any issue within that role.

www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Freephone 24/7

0808 8002222

MOSAC

A service for the non-abusing parent or carer of children who have been sexually abused.

www.mosac.org.uk

Freephone—open Tues 2pm-6pm. Wed & Fri 10am-2pm

0800 9801958

NHS Direct

Advice and information around health issues.

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Freephone 24/7

0845 4647

The Samaritans

24 hour emotional and support helpline for adults in crisis.

www.samaritans.org.uk

Email jo@samaritans.org

0845 7909090

CEOP (Child exploitation on line Protection Agency)

An online service working to protect children and young people, offering advice to parents.

www.ceop.gov.uk

- The above are normal reactions, but there is a concern if these changes do not seem to right themselves over time and instead deteriorate further. If this is the case, do consult a GP or link into the Advocate who can help assess and guide you to support services.
- Schools are often very helpful in supporting your child. However, it is not uncommon for other children to ask questions, to repeat things that they have heard (even if very inappropriate) and to misunderstand. This can be hard for a victim and their siblings. Ask the class teacher to be vigilant of this and allow your child to talk, recognising how important school and friends are.
- Many families believe that in times of crisis they will all be able to pull together. This can be true, but if the alleged abuser is in the family, you may find that people 'take sides'. Shock and denial can go a long way in convincing someone that something hasn't happened, while it is not your job to understand this, draw on the support you have to manage this. Be aware that a child may see any conflict as their fault, which of course, it isn't. Make sure that you give them this message and recognise that they will also be sad.
- Finally, healing and moving forward takes time - children are amazingly resilient and can cope providing they are allowed to be honest and are met with honesty. If you can't manage to do this, because of the trauma you are feeling, that is ok. Seek support from your GP, Advocate, Children's Services or a specialised charity. But be assured, the experience we have at Ynys Saff tells us that things do get better, just slowly.

'I was really scared at first and I had to keep telling what happened, but now, I am glad I did, because that made it stop and I got to stop being scared and feeling like I did something wrong'

Abuse affects all the family, each is a victim. If the abuser is known to the family, then for the parents guilt and betrayal can be overwhelming. The child who seemed to be full of anger prior to disclosing, may in turn seem much calmer, dealing with the 'secret' being out.

It might be that if the child is very young they may have no understanding of what has happened, thinking of it as 'something that hurt'. Parents on the other hand, will understand and may be shocked and angry. The parent's feelings can confuse the child, who may then perceive that they have done something wrong that 'they made mummy angry'.

In truth there are no correct or incorrect feelings when dealing with the trauma of sexual abuse - shock, anger, guilt, confusion and sadness are all very common and are part of the emotional process. Each feeling is important and despite being painful, often very helpful in healing and enabling you to slowly move forward.

The most difficult feeling can be that of guilt. Parents often blame themselves for feelings as though they did not 'protect their child'. This feeling can often be shared by the victim who may feel guilty for not stopping the abuse.

It is important to remember that hindsight offers very little except more reasons to feel guilty. Abusers work to make sure abuse is undiscovered by forcing the victim to keep quiet. What matters is what you do now; time spent wondering about what you could have done, may be more damaging than helpful.

What do we do now?

It is important to realise that each person will find their own way through. For some that will involve talking, for others the exact opposite. However, children may need to be allowed to talk, and if not allowed they will get the sense that everyone is upset and may develop the idea that, it is their fault. If the subject is 'taboo', then it is likely that the child will interpret this as proof it is their fault.

It is ok, if you are struggling to come to terms with your own feelings. It can help if you can explain some of this to the child. i.e.

'You have done really well to tell, I am proud of you, but I feel really sad that this happened to you, so sometime I may be crying or really quiet and that is ok'.

There are a variety of sources of support to help you and your child. Within Ynys Saff there is the advocate for Children and Young People known as a CYPsVA (Child and Young Persons Sexual Violence Advocate). As a matter of routine, Children's Services will be contacted for all children and young people who attend the SARC. Their role is to assess how best they can support you and your child. Your GP can also be useful in setting up counselling **if** and **when** it is appropriate.

Guidance for Parents

- Be honest with your child about your feelings in a way that is appropriate and manageable for the child.
- Be aware that children often need to talk, if you do not feel able to listen, perhaps you can identify someone in your family or friends that can help

- It might be important to allow whoever the child talks to, to keep it confidential, intervening only if there are concerns
- It is tempting to think of counselling as necessary right away. It is important to allow some time before following this up. Draw on your own support systems, and speak with those who know your child i.e. the school. Or inform the advocate and allow them to take some of the responsibility.
- Boundaries are important to children, especially so in times of trauma and uncertainty. If you have a misplaced sense of guilt for what has happened then you may try to compensate. In other words, you may relax rules around bedtimes, school, acceptable and appropriate behaviour. Try to resist responding from a place of guilt - it won't help anyone.
- Following on from the above - remember as parent you are dealing with a lot too. Be aware that children's behaviours can change rapidly and uncertainty doesn't help. If you put a boundary in, be prepared to hold your ground and your frustration if it is challenged.
- After sexual assault, it is quite common for parents to reassess the amount of 'freedom' a child has. i.e. if they have been allowed to go out and play previously, suddenly your need to keep them close may override everything else. This is especially so with teenagers (including siblings in the family.) Be honest about your reasons, stress the need for updates via mobile for location and time and stick to these, your stress levels do not need to increase any further.
- Notice any changes in eating behaviours and sleeping patterns, including any sleep disturbance. It is not uncommon for these to change as a result of trauma and may also be a way for the feelings to come out if the person is not able or willing to discuss them.