

If Your Child Has Been Sexually Abused

By CJ Scarlet

It happened. Your precious baby has been the victim of sexual molestation or assault. I'm so sorry this happened to her and to your family. Know that it wasn't her fault or yours and that neither of you did anything to deserve it. The perpetrator deserves all the blame for choosing to commit the offense.

Now what? There are decisions to be made, and at a time when you may feel least able to make them. Your mind and body are numb, or you're completely freaked out. You may be faced with people who are peppering you and your child with questions: "Who did this?", "What happened?", "Do you want to call the police or Child Protective Services?"

Time seems to be whirring by and everything is foggy. Who do you tell? How do you handle the police? The perpetrator (if you know him or are related to him)? Your daughter's feelings? Her life? *YOUR* life?

It may feel as if the world is ending. This is seriously tough stuff to deal with... but you and your child are tougher, and you'll find your way through this by sticking together.

The purpose of this chapter is to tell you what your options are and the consequences of the choices you make in the critical period after you learn your child has been sexually abused. I'll begin by going back to the first moment you suspect or learn that she's been molested or assaulted.

If You *Suspect* Your Child Was Sexually Abused

It's estimated that only about a third of children tell an adult when they've been sexually abused. Some kids, many of whom were taught beforehand to tell if something happened, will tell their parent or another adult that they've been assaulted. The majority, however, will disclose the abuse indirectly, accidentally, or not at all.

Regardless of whether or how they tell, I assure you your child desperately hopes you'll find out and protect him from the perpetrator. His secret weighs a million tons and it's wreaking havoc on his mind and crushing his spirit.

Why Kids Don't Tell

There are so many reasons children don't tell. They may:

- Feel too ashamed or embarrassed.
- Blame themselves, especially if their bodies automatically reacted and they experienced pleasure during the incident.
- Have promised not to tell.
- Fear the perpetrator because they or their family have been threatened.
- Not have the vocabulary to describe what happened.
- Not fully appreciate that what happened constitutes sexual abuse.

Hinting at Abuse

Regardless of the reason, your child may not feel comfortable telling you directly and may take a roundabout approach, dropping hints about the abuse, hoping you'll notice and ask questions so he can get it off his chest. If he says things like, "I don't like Aunt Sophia anymore," or, "My coach hugs too tight," you need to find out what's going on underneath those remarks.

He might also attribute the incident to another child in order to gauge how you might react, saying something like, "What happens if a kid tells his mom someone touched his private parts. Would his mom believe him?" Again, he's hoping you'll ask questions and get to the bottom of the situation. Assure him that the "other child's" mom *would* believe him and would never be mad. Ask what he knows about this child. With gentle questioning and your reassurances that it's safe to tell, your child might admit he's the one who has a concern.

Try saying: "I've noticed that you seem really quiet/angry/anxious lately. I hope you'll tell me why so I can help. I promise I won't get upset or angry, no matter what you tell me." You have to really mean it when you say you won't get upset or angry. (Keep reading to learn what to say and what not to say when your child discloses abuse.)

If your child denies anything's wrong but you feel certain something's up, you can add: "Sometimes bad things happen to us and we think it's our fault or we're afraid we'll get in trouble or get someone else in trouble. Sometimes we're even afraid other people may get hurt or angry if we tell. But telling is the very best thing we can do, so we can get help to make sure the bad things stop."

You can ask him to show you how he feels using dolls, stuffed animals, or other toys, or ask him to draw a picture. Children are so expressive and good at reenacting

their feelings and worries, and he may feel more comfortable acting them out than talking about them.

If he still won't share, add: "I know you don't feel like talking about it right now, but I'm always here for you. I love you, honey. And remember, you can also always talk to the people you put on your 'safe people' list, like Grandpa or Ms. Randall."

Talk to Grandpa and Ms. Randall to give them a heads-up about what you've noticed and ask for their observations and support. Sometimes, just giving a child the time and attention of a safe person will create the opportunity for him to talk. It takes tremendous courage for anyone, even grown-ups, to disclose that they've been abused, so don't be surprised if your child can't tell you or another safe person right away.

Symptoms to Act on With or Without a Disclosure

Even if your child can't or won't answer your questions, you don't need the full story to get help. If you even *suspect* something has happened to him, you absolutely need to report it. And if your child is experiencing any of the symptoms below that point to abuse, don't wait for him to tell you the full story; call the police or CPS immediately. If any of the physical symptoms from the list below are present, also get him to a pediatrician for treatment.

Here are the symptoms of child sexual abuse you need to act on right away:

- Pregnancy (yes, if your child has started puberty she can get pregnant).
- Being diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease or infection (like herpes, syphilis, gonorrhea, vaginal infection, etc.).
- Sexual promiscuity.
- Genital or rectal pain or bleeding.
- Underwear or sheets are stained with blood or other discharge.
- Urinary tract infections, or abnormal vaginal or penile discharge.
- Pain while urinating or with bowel movements.
- Obvious difficulty walking or sitting.
- Sudden fearful behavior, such as nightmares or new fears of certain people, places, or things.
- Depression or social withdrawal.

- Extreme increase or decrease in appetite, or the development of an eating disorder.
- Sudden lack of self-esteem or confidence.
- Frequent stomachaches or headaches with no medical cause.
- Bedwetting (if he's already toilet trained).
- Sudden personality changes (e.g., a normally outgoing child stops speaking, a well-behaved child develops discipline problems).
- Bullying others or being bullied.
- Extremely aggressive or passive behavior.
- Regressive behavior (meaning he reverts to behaving like a younger child).
- Sudden interest in sex or sexualized behavior that seems inappropriate for his age, including excessive touching of his own private body parts, persistent sex play with friends, toys, or pets; drawings with sexual content; or asking age-inappropriate sexual questions.
- Sudden drop in school performance.
- Secretive behavior (he seems to be hiding something).
- Attempts to run away or skip school.
- Self-mutilation or careless behaviors that result in self-harm of any kind (e.g., cutting, burning, or otherwise injuring one's self).

If Your Child Does Disclose Abuse

Be aware that when you talk to your child about the dangers I address in either *Badass Parenting* or its cleaner version, *Heroic Parenting*, she may very well confide that she's already been or is actively being abused.

Whether you learned of the abuse from your child or another person, your job is to take her claim seriously and to focus on what she needs in that moment. Don't be concerned about getting to the bottom of everything that occurred—leave that to the police, CPS, and the therapist who are trained to help children disclose the whole story.

Your reaction to your child's disclosure—or lack thereof—could mean the difference between her knowing deep in her bones that it wasn't her fault and healing relatively quickly, or her being further traumatized and requiring years or even decades of

therapy. I can't tell you how many adult survivors have told me they were actually chastised or even punished for "lying" about the abuse they endured. Some of them said they were more traumatized by their family's reaction than by the abuse itself.

How to Respond to Your Child

If Your Child Is 0 to 3

Many babies and toddlers don't even understand that they've been abused. Others who experience severe abuse may be traumatized and fearful of everyone, including you. If your toddler tells you she's been sexually abused (or you learn that she has been), the most important thing is to reassure her that she's safe and that you'll protect her from further harm.

Say, "You're very brave for telling me this. I'm so proud of you. Everything's going to be okay." At this age, your actions more than your words will help your child feel safe. Maintain her usual routine and be with her as much as you can.

If Your Child Is 4 to 9

Say something comforting, like: "Oh, sweetie. I'm SO sorry this has happened to you! And I'm so proud of you for telling me about it. It's not your fault; you did NOTHING wrong. I promise you; it's going to be okay. *You're* going to be okay. I'm going to stop this right away. I love you and I promise we'll figure this out together."

If you think you can handle it, gently ask her to tell you what happened. Ask open-ended questions like, "Tell me more" or "What happened next?" Avoid leading questions like, "Did Miss Emily touch your private parts?"

Don't grill your child to try to get to "the bottom of it." Child Protective Services have specially-trained counselors who know exactly how to question children in a manner appropriate to their age and maturity level, and in ways that are admissible in court in the event the offender ends up being charged.

Don't be afraid to share *appropriate* emotions in front of her; just don't act hysterical or wail and beat your breast, which may cause her to shut down. This is about her, so don't make it about you. Still, showing your sadness and even tears gives her permission to do the same.

If you need time to think about what she told you and/or regain your composure, say, as calmly as you can: "Thank you so much for telling me this. I need to think about it for a bit. Can we talk again in a little while? I love you, sweetie."

When you've calmed down, go back to her and say: "Remember what you said about Mr. Holman touching your private parts? Can we talk about it now?"

Tell her what you're going to do to protect her. Say: "Here's what I'm going to do now. First, I need to make sure you're protected, so I'm going to make sure you're never alone again with XX (even if the abuser isn't in the home, your child needs to hear that she's safe). I'm also going to call Grandma/other safe person to come be with us while I make a few phone calls. It's important to tell people who can help. I need to let the police/Child Protective Services know what happened so XX doesn't hurt any other children. Do you understand?"

Allow your child to have her reaction to what you just said, but remain firm that you're going to call the police (or CPS) because you need to protect both her and other children from the abuser.

Ask what would make her feel safe and brainstorm ideas. For example, she might want a friend (or other safe person) to come over, or she may find comfort by following her usual routine of going to school, doing her homework, playing on the computer (which is okay unless the abuser contacted her online), and so on.

If the Abuser Is Someone You Love or Are in a Relationship With

Man, this one's tough. It'll be hard not to have a visceral reaction to the disclosure by your child that your spouse/partner or boyfriend/girlfriend sexually abused him.

If your child accuses someone you love, your first instinct may be to deny the claim. If you find yourself in this situation, rather than flat out calling your child a liar, be honest and tell him that his claim has surprised you and that you need time to think about what he's said.

Do NOT tell your child he's mistaken, wrong, or confused. Take him at his word. Wait to talk further until you can be supportive and really listen with an open mind to what he has to say. If you need help and support yourself to get to this point, call your local rape crisis center or one of the child abuse hotlines I reference in the Resources section of my website.¹

If you're afraid to report the abuse of your child by someone in your home—because you don't want the offender to get in trouble or because you don't want to admit it happened under your watch—get over it! You've got a job to do, which is to protect

¹ www.cjscarlet.com/resources

your child from further harm and report the incident to authorities. If you don't report it, other children may be abused by this person (and may already have been).

End all contact with the abuser, even if it's a close family member or your partner. Your first responsibility is to protect your child, regardless of the consequences to the abuser. In fact, you could be at legal risk if you don't report, depending on the state you live in.

If you have concerns for your child's or family's immediate safety, call the police and then head to the home of a supportive friend or relative and contact your local domestic violence agency or the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network's hotline at 800-656-HOPE.

If Your Child Was Abused by a Sibling

Aaaannndddd it gets tougher still. No parent wants to believe their child could be a perpetrator, but it happens—a lot.

Refer to [Chapter 3](#) on Siblings, Peers & Older Kids in *Badass Parenting* or *Heroic Parenting* for more information on this subject.

A Word about False Accusations

Some parents react to their child's disclosure with disbelief. This is especially common when he names a close relative—even your partner or a sibling—as the abuser. Here are the facts to consider:

- False reports of child sexual abuse made by children are very rare. Most of the 4 to 8 percent of fabricated reports are made by adults (who should be ridden out of town on a rail) involved in custody disputes or by adolescents 10 to 19 years of age.ⁱ
- Your child *could* have misunderstood or misinterpreted the other person's comments or behavior as being inappropriate when they were not.
- The child *could* be seeking attention or revenge on the accused. Possible, but that's pretty sophisticated behavior for a child under 10.
- Some children recant their claims, but that doesn't mean they were lying. Later claiming the abuse didn't happen is fairly common among young sexual abuse victims for a variety of reasons. For example, the child may not want the offender to get in trouble, he could be in denial (which is easier than admitting the abuse occurred), or he's been pressured by others to deny anything happened.

- Small children (5 and under) may sound confused or inconsistent when they talk about the abuse, but this doesn't mean they're not telling the truth either. It's up to a trained therapist to determine whether there's any "there" there.

Getting Help for Your Child

First Things First—What NOT to Do After an Assault

If your child comes to you immediately after a sexual molestation or assault happened, her body and clothing may contain critical evidence that could help police catch the predator and take him off the street before he hurts another child. It's imperative that you carefully maintain any physical evidence of the attack.

This means you need to safeguard the clothing she was wearing during the attack, including her underwear, and not try to clean them. It means she doesn't take a bath or shower right away. It means she doesn't eat or drink anything or brush her teeth if she was orally sodomized (meaning the perp placed his penis or semen onto or into her mouth).

I know. You want to scour all evidence of that monster's presence from your child's body, but I caution you to *please* delay. Let the police and CPS collect any evidence so they can build their case against the predator.

So, please:

- No showers.
- No food or drink.
- No brushing her teeth.
- No manicures or heavy scrubbing of her nails.
- No washing of her hair.
- No disposing of items that were on her during the attack (clothing, shoes, jewelry, etc.).
- No deleting any written or digital evidence of her whereabouts during the time of the attack.

A Word about Mandatory Reporting

If your child discloses sexual abuse, you need to report it immediately to your local Child Protective Services (CPS) agency (also referred to as Social Services or Child

Welfare) and/or law enforcement agency (police or sheriff's department). This is not only the right thing to do to protect your child, in most states it's the law.

In many states, parents are included on the list of "mandatory reporters," and failure to report suspected or known abuse to CPS or the police can result in criminal charges against them. They could also have their children removed from the home and placed in foster care.

In all 50 states in the US, mandatory reporters, such as healthcare professionals (e.g., nurses, doctors, psychiatrists, therapists, dentists, and staff members working for these individuals), teachers, and childcare workers are required to report child abuse if they reasonably believe the child is being subjected to maltreatment (including sexual abuse) or neglect.

Of course, anyone who's concerned that a child is being abused can report it; you don't have to be in a professional or even personal relationship with the family. Some young people have stepped forward and reported the victimization of their own siblings in order to stop the abuse.

If you're not sure whether to call CPS or the police and you need guidance, contact the National Children's Alliance (www.nca-online.org) or other national hotlines that I have listed in the Resources section of my website.²

Reporting to CPS

When you report suspected child sexual abuse, your case will be assigned to a caseworker who will investigate your concerns, ensure your child is safe from further harm by the abuser, and arrange medical care and counseling, if needed.

For a list of your local CPS agency, visit www.childwelfare.gov (see endnote for full website address).ⁱⁱ

Reporting to Police

These stats are from old sources, but I imagine they're still true today: Just 3 percent of all child sexual abuse casesⁱⁱⁱ and only 12 percent of all child rapes^{iv} are ever reported to the police.

Holy. Cow.

² www.cjscarlet.com/resources

Don't be that parent who doesn't report because you want to "protect your child" from all the hullabaloo that will follow (you're not, in fact, protecting her at all), or because you don't want the abuser to get in trouble (too bad, so sad), or because you don't want to deal with the fall out (suck it up). Getting justice by seeing the perp pay for his crimes not only protects other children, it shows your child that the abuser was the one who did something wrong, not her.

I'm going to say it as plainly as I can: If you don't report the abuse, *you're complicit*. AND you're responsible for any other children the perp abuses in the future. AND you're playing ostrich and putting your head in the sand (and another, darker place I won't name).

Now you know why they don't call me just plain ole' "Grandma." It's because I have no sympathy for people who knowingly perpetrate or enable others to perpetrate abuse against children.

But I'm sure *you're* not one of those people, and that you will ABSOLUTELY report sexual abuse if you learn of it, especially if it happens to a child.

I think we understand one another.

What the Police Will Do

Call or visit your local Police or Sheriff's Department (depending on where you live, and hereafter referred to simply as "law enforcement") to make a report of suspected or known child abuse.³

Before you go either to law enforcement or CPS, it'll be helpful to document what you know or suspect, including:

- Who the offender is (if your child knows).
- What the abuse involved.
- When and where the abuse occurred.
- What events led up to the assault (e.g., efforts by the offender to groom your child).
- How the abusive incident(s) ended.
- Where the offender lives.

³ For a listing of your state's local law enforcement agencies, visit <https://golawenforcement.com/state-law-enforcement-agencies/>.

- Any identifying or distinguishing features the predator has (e.g., tattoos, piercings, scars, big ears, etc.).
- Any threats or statements the perpetrator made to your child.
- Whether any weapons were used to threaten or harm your child.
- What external injuries, if any, she received.
- What injuries the attacker received (e.g., scratches, bites, etc. by your child), if any.

When the police arrive, they'll first check to see if your child needs medical attention. Next, they'll want to know any details you and she can provide about the assault and the perpetrator. As her parent/guardian, you or your attorney may have the right to be present when she's questioned.

It's okay if she can't remember every detail during the first interview. If they ask her a question and she doesn't know the answer, she can just tell them she can't remember right now.

It's also okay if she can't give a statement right away because she feels dissociated, numb, hysterical, or too fearful to recall events. The police have specially trained investigators who know how to ask questions in ways that might help her remember what happened. If she's unable to give a statement immediately after the assault, they can interview her later, when her memory has become more clear.

The police will investigate the report, prepare a case to present to the prosecutor's office, if warranted, and make any arrests. If the case does move toward prosecution, it'll be assigned to a prosecutor with the District Attorney's Office.⁴

The Forensic Exam

Regardless of when the sexual abuse occurred, CPS and/or the police will want your child to have a forensic exam by a specially trained physician or nurse examiner to look for any physical signs of the abuse (which may not be obvious), such as internal or external scarring, tearing, evidence of sexually transmitted diseases or infections, etc.

⁴ I go into the criminal justice process in more detail in the Legal Remedies handout of the Freebies page of my website at www.cjscarlet.com/freebies.

If your community doesn't have a trained child abuse pediatrician available, consider asking for a referral to one.⁵

Here's what the pediatrician or nurse examiner will do:

- Record your child's medical history.
- Talk to your child to ask what happened, in her own words.
- Perform a thorough examination of her body from head to toe.
- Submit a full report to CPS, the police, and a multidisciplinary team (if your community has one) that includes other doctors, CPS workers, law enforcement investigators, and child therapists.

If the case goes to trial, the child abuse pediatrician will often testify in court to explain to the judge and jury any evidence of injuries that were found and medical concerns that resulted from the abuse.

Getting Counseling for Your Child

The great news is, when abuse is quickly addressed and the child is given appropriate therapy, she can heal in a surprisingly short time. Getting your child into counseling after she's been abused is a no-brainer! As I mentioned earlier, when the children who came to my child advocacy center got the counseling and support they needed, they were able to quickly process what happened and move on. When kids don't get that kind of support, they can spend years or even decades crippled by the trauma.

Counselors and licensed therapists trained to deal specifically with child sexual abuse cases can walk your child through the issues that are bothering her the most, one step at a time, which makes the incident less frightening and easier to handle. They can help you both process your emotions about the whole ordeal. With patience and wisdom, they'll help you both recover from the trauma, find your "new normal,"⁶ and move past the experience to live happy lives.

⁵ You may be able to get compensated for this visit by your state's crime victim compensation fund. Contact your state Attorney General's Office to learn about victim compensation.

⁶ "New normal" refers to a different way of living and thinking to the one you had before the incident occurred. No matter how much you wish things would go back to the way they were, it's just not possible. However, with support and work, life can be great again—or even better than it was before.

I personally could never have dealt with my traumatic past on my own. Group and individual therapy saved my life as far as I'm concerned.

For free, confidential help if your child has been abused, call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-HOPE (4673). Their trained staff can provide:

- Support finding a local health facility trained to care for survivors of sexual assault, including services like sexual assault forensic exams.
- Someone to help you talk through what happened.
- Local resources that can help with your child's next steps toward healing and recovery.
- Referrals for long-term support in your area (e.g., counseling).
- Information about the laws in your community.

If you or your child don't like or feel totally comfortable with the first therapist you go to, keep looking until you find the right fit—meaning the person who makes your child feel comfortable and who's easy to talk to.

Ongoing Protection & Support for Your Child

When you discover or suspect your child has been sexually abused, the most important thing you *must* do is ensure he's safe from further harm from the offender. During any investigation by CPS or the police, don't let him see or ever be alone with the perpetrator. You'd be surprised how many parents fail to protect their children after abuse has clearly occurred, usually because the perp is a love interest or relative.

Continue to reassure your child that he's safe and that everything's going to be okay. He needs to hear often that you love and will protect him because he's likely terrified and feeling guilty for getting the offender in trouble, particularly if it's someone in the family.

Especially during the investigation, keep what happened close to the vest,⁷ telling only those who need to know and asking them not to share it with others. The last thing your child needs is to be the subject of rumors and speculation. You also don't want to potentially put him in the path of people who might try to intimate or discourage him from reporting or testifying because they want to protect the perp.

⁷ Don't go blabbing it to people who don't need to know.

As much as this situation affects you and impacts your life, it's not primarily about you; it's about your child. Keep your anger, fear, guilt, and other strong feelings out of any conversation with him. Kids tend to take responsibility for the feelings of others and your son will feel badly for "making" you upset. Fake it if you have to, but show up as strong, comforting, reassuring, and confident.

That being said, you *will* have strong feelings about all this, so be sure to take care of *yourself* during this difficult time. Consider getting counseling for yourself, especially if you have your own history of abuse and are feeling triggered or guilty for not protecting your child.

If You're a Survivor Yourself

If you yourself are an abuse survivor, your child's disclosure may trigger you and dredge up painful memories and unresolved issues of your own. It's imperative that you get help for yourself so you can address these while still being there for your child.

There are a number of resources on my website you can call for help and support. Probably the best is the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (www.RAINN.org), which has a hotline (800-656-HOPE) and can refer you to survivor resources in your local area.

What You Can Do to Minimize Your Child's Trauma after Disclosure

- Maintain your family's routines and keep home life as normal as possible to make your child feel safer and more secure.
- Reassure and comfort your child and talk to him about ways he can soothe himself (e.g., sleeping with a favorite stuffed animal, talking to his therapist or one of his safe people, etc.).
- Let him talk about his feelings and validate them. Reassure him that his fears and anxiety will get better with time.
- Don't ignore sexualized behavior or play, which indicate distress and should be stopped in a matter-of-fact, supportive way. Talk about this behavior with his therapist.
- Anticipate difficult behavior and respond gently, but consistently to rule violations.

What You Can Count On

Your child should expect to enjoy the freedom of living her life without the fear of being sexually molested or assaulted. That children can't always do that is a sad reality.

You may find you can't even count on the support of your friends and family after your child has become a "victim." They may not want to believe her, or they may even blame her and try to shame her. While it's easy to embrace the victim mentality and buy into their projections (and that's all they are, projections of their fear and ignorance onto your child), you must help her fight that urge and stand on her own two feet.

Your beautiful child was the target of a crime; that's a fact. But it doesn't say *anything* about who she is at her core or in her spirit. Still, like a major earthquake, trauma has psychological and physical aftershocks that continue to rock survivors long after the initial catastrophe. These are discussed below.

The Psychological Aftermath

There's no "right way" for your child to react after he's experienced a moral wound like sexual abuse. Some children go into shock and feel completely dissociated from the event; they may appear calm and unemotional. Others become very emotional and can't stop thinking about what happened.

Some degree of shock is common, which can impair his thinking and ability to react "appropriately" afterward. Because he may not be able to feel or recall the trauma at first, he might downplay the event or be confused about what really happened. Other children remember every detail and are completely overwhelmed by the emotions and sensations, which can be paralyzing.

It sounds counter-intuitive, but children who've been traumatized often seek balance and control, which sometimes includes self-blame and punishment in order to regain equilibrium. They don't want to accept that they were vulnerable and powerless to stop the predator; it's easier to blame themselves for "stupid" or "bad" behavior than to accept that they live in a world where such a soul-shattering thing could happen to them.

Survivors often believe that if others—especially those closest to them—could see how damaged and flawed they are, they would run from them in disgust and horror.

Post-Traumatic Stress⁸

The bad news is your abused child may experience post-traumatic stress (PTS) as the result of the abuse she suffered. The great news is, you have a lot of power to help mitigate it or even keep it from happening (depending on the duration and severity of the abuse).

I say this because one of the biggest factors that determines whether a child acquires PTS is the quality of the support she receives from her family and extended circle.

You're obviously a good, caring parent or you wouldn't be listening to this audiobook. Just by teaching her the information and techniques I share, you're giving your child the gift of self-esteem and resilience, which can help ward off long-term traumatic reactions.

AND, if anything bad does happen to her, she can count on you to support her and give her the loving care she needs to quickly recover.

Post-Traumatic Stress Defined

Most people have heard of post-traumatic stress as it relates to men and women who fought in combat, but PTS is an equal opportunity condition—it can affect survivors of any kind of trauma, from violence to natural disasters, and from car accidents to severe childhood physical and emotional neglect.

Many people go through traumatic events and may have difficulty adjusting and coping for a period of time, but they don't have PTS; with time, support, and good self-care, they usually get better. PTS is generally diagnosed when the symptoms get worse, last for months or years, and interfere with one's ability to function.

Post-traumatic stress manifests a little differently according to the age of the child involved. In babies who are pre-verbal and toddlers (particularly those with disabilities) who have very limited verbal skills, it can be difficult to know for certain whether a child is experiencing PTS, but there are clear indicators for children through age 9, babies included, such as:

- Emotional distress. Anxiety that results from being exposed to sensations (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches) or emotions that remind the child of the triggering event or person.

⁸ Formerly referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder.

- Hypervigilance. Being tense, watchful, and constantly on guard, even when in safe, familiar environments.
- Separation anxiety. Watch for clinginess that occurs before or far beyond 6 months to 1 year of age, when that kind of behavior is expected.
- Sleep disturbances. Children who are afraid to be left alone in their room or are terrified of falling asleep, who have excessive fear of the dark, who experience severe nightmares, or who are convinced there are monsters under their bed or in their closet.
- Fear or avoidance of places that remind them of the abusive event or person.
- Repetitive play. This includes play that repeats scenarios similar to the sexual trauma.
- Depression and/or anxiety.
- Losing interest in things they used to enjoy.
- Difficulty offering or accepting affection.
- Aggressive or even violent behavior.
- Problems in school; sudden drop in school performance.
- Dissociation. The children may mentally “check out” and lose touch with reality or feel numb.
- “Omen formation.” The belief that there were warning signs that predicted the trauma, and that if they’re alert enough, they’ll be able to recognize and avoid future traumas.^v
- Difficulty focusing.
- Obsessive worrying about their personal safety and/or fear of dying.
- Regressive behavior, such as thumb-sucking or bedwetting.
- Physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches.

Not every child who experiences sexual abuse will get PTS. A lot depends on her normal personality (confident or anxious), the strength of her social support (that’s you!), other childhood experiences (positive versus negative), her natural ability to handle stress, her arsenal of coping mechanisms, and the nature of the traumatic event.

The more frequent and severe the trauma, combined with poor coping skills and low social support, the more likely it is a given child will develop PTS.

How You Can Help Your Child Heal

As I emphasized above, one of the most important factors that determines your child's ability to bounce back from a traumatic incident is your love and support, and those of his inner circle. When you combine good therapy with the suggestions I offer below, you can feel confident you're doing everything in your power to help your child.

Here's what you can do to help your child heal from and move beyond the trauma he experienced:

- Offer him your unconditional love, comfort, support, and understanding.
- Let him talk, draw, or write about what happened when he's ready.
- Tell him how proud you are of him for being so strong and brave.
- Treat him like an ordinary kid. Yes, be sensitive to his needs following the trauma, but don't coddle or baby him too much or he may begin to feel insecure about his ability to deal with what happened.
- Maintain his routine and schedule as much as possible and avoid introducing any major changes if you can.
- Find ways to give him a sense of control and rebuild his self-esteem and confidence. Trauma can make kids feel powerless, so let him make choices that affect him when possible.
- Build a strong support network around him that includes his friends, those on his "safe people" list, relatives, teachers, coaches, and other caregivers.
- Get him into individual therapy with a therapist who specializes in child sexual abuse treatment.
- Have him attend a support group for children in his age range so he'll have the support of peers. I can tell you from experience that it feels really good to have people around you who can relate to your story.
- Be patient with regressive behavior (e.g., thumb sucking, bedwetting, clingy behavior, etc.). However, if it goes on for more than a few months, do talk to a therapist about it.

- Watch for signs of self-harm and suicidal ideation. If you spot these, get him to a therapist right away.
- Remind him that the incident wasn't his fault and that he didn't deserve to have that happen to him. This is really important to do. I grew up believing there was something wrong with me that made good people do bad things. That's such a tragic way for anyone—child or adult—to feel, and so unnecessary!

Badass Grandma's Two Cents

I shared a lot of information in this handout and you may feel overwhelmed. It's critical to recognize that there's a ton of support and so many resources in your community and around the country to help you and your child work through the aftermath of her experience.

It's so important that you know that what happened was NOT your fault and that your child possesses the strength and courage to find her new normal and move on to have a wonderful life.

ⁱ Everson, M., and Boat, B. (1989). False allegations of sexual abuse by children and adolescents, *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 28, 2:230-35.

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https://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunctionsaction=rols:main.dspList&rolType=Custom&RS_ID=56.

ⁱⁱⁱ Finkelhor and Dzuiba-Leatherman, 1994; Timnick, 1985.

^{iv} Hanson, et al., 1999.

^v https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/specific/ptsd_child_teens.asp#one.