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The University of Tennessee
Institute of Agriculture

W021

Preventing Sexual Abuse of Children

Anna Mae Kobbe, former Professor & Leader, Family Life

Child abuse is a widespread problem the in United States. According to the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, more than 3 million children are abused each year. Of this number, 8 percent are sexually abused. Although sexual abuse is difficult to talk about, families must be willing to teach their children how to protect themselves from sexual abuse. Protecting children is everyone's responsibility.

Sexual abuse is defined as any sexual activity between an adult (or older child) and a child. This includes indecent exposure, fondling, genital or oral stimulation, sexual intercourse, rape, watching sexually explicit media or sex acts, and incest. Sex involving an adult (or older youth) and a child is never okay. The typical offender is a male; however, women do abuse both boys and girls.

Sexual abuse is traumatic for the child victim. Usually the adult abuser takes advantage of the child's innocence, trust or affection. In many cases, the abuser threatens or bribes the child to keep silent. Because of the threats, fear and embarrassment, most children do not tell anyone about the abuse. Keeping the secret of abuse only causes more emotional stress for the child and the family.

Because of the betrayal by an adult, the child feels a lot of guilt. Often the child feels the abuse is his or her fault. It becomes difficult for abused children to trust people. Anger, guilt and fear become common feelings for abused children.

Childhood sexual abuse can cause lifelong psychological and physical damage. The emotional affects of sexual abuse may not be evident immediately. Victims may discover abuse-related problems as adults. Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse may find the abuse affects their ability to trust people and form close relationships. Adults also report feeling intense anger, low self-esteem and co-dependent and addictive personality traits.

Both boys and girls are victims of child abuse; however, females are more often victims of sexual abuse than males. The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect reports that studies of adult women show 15 to 38 percent of females were sexually abused during childhood and adolescence. About 10 percent of men report sexual abuse during childhood and adolescence.

Approximately 90 percent of the offenders are known to the child. An estimated 77 percent of reported abusers are parents, 16 percent are other relatives and 6 percent are non-related.

Children need to learn basic rules of safety to help protect themselves from sexual abuse. Appropriate personal safety rules are:

- If anyone tries to touch a child in any way that makes him or her feel uncomfortable, bad or afraid, the child should say "no."
- Children should tell someone they trust (parent, teacher, family friend, school counselor) about the touch/abuse immediately.
- Children need to be taught the difference between a good and bad touch. They need to know the proper names of body parts. This helps children report any sexual experience.
- Encourage good communication with your child. This is the best way to protect children from sexual abuse.
- Children should never go anywhere or get in a car with anyone unless you have given them direct permission.
- Children should never take candy, gifts, toys or money from strangers.
- Children should avoid playing alone or walking to and from school alone. When home alone, children should not open the door or tell telephone callers they are home alone.

If a child tells you he or she has been touched or abused in a sexual way, believe him or her. Children rarely lie about sexual abuse. Children need to know you believe them and will find them help to cope with what has happened.

Seek professional help for the child. Although emotional or physical symptoms may not be detected, the child should see a professional trained to work with sexual abuse victims. Trained professionals can make recommendations about the need for counseling or group therapy for the individual and the family. Even if the abuse occurred many years earlier, it is not too late to seek professional help to cope with the emotional feelings. Contact the nearest mental health center and ask about programs for survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Avoid blaming the child. Tell the child he or she did nothing wrong. Sexual abuse is never the fault of the child. Reassure the child he or she did the right thing by telling you about the abuse.

To Report Child Abuse: Contact the county office of the Tennessee Department of Children's Services or local law enforcement officials.

Sexual abuse is a crime and must be reported. To report child abuse and neglect, including sexual abuse, contact the local county office of the Tennessee Department of Children's Services or local law enforcement officials.

Everyone is required by Tennessee law to report any known or suspected incidence of child abuse. Children are at risk of further abuse as long as the incident is not reported.

Child abuse is a tragedy that affects us all. Everyone has a responsibility to become knowledgeable about child abuse prevention. For additional information, contact the following resources:

Prevent Child Abuse Tennessee provides parenting classes, parent support groups and a parent help line. This phone number also serves as a domestic violence hotline. For information about family violence or help for yourself or your family, call the telephone number below.

Prevent Child Abuse Tennessee
333 S. Gallatin Road, Suite 10
Madison, TN 37115
attn: Carla Snodgrass
(800) 356-6767
(In Nashville: (615) 868-4468)
Fax (616) 868-2169

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service has an office in all 95 Tennessee counties. Check your telephone directory for a local listing. The Extension Service has educational materials on child abuse prevention, parenting, child development, stress management and related topics. In addition, workshops and seminars are available on a variety of family life education subjects.

Visit the Agricultural Extension Service Website at http:www.utextension.utk.edu and the Family Consumer Sciences Website at http:www.utextension.utk.edu/fcs/

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