

Children and sexual assault

Children's behaviour and sexual assault

Not all your child's behaviour will be related to the sexual assault. Children have different worlds to grown-ups. As a parent, you think you know everything in their world, but you don't. Things are important to a child that perhaps a grown up wouldn't register as important. This is because we have big people's concerns. Parents need to remember the child's world.

It is important to remember that everyone in a family will feel distress following a child's disclosure of sexual assault, and will each react or behave differently as a result of this distress. A common reaction for parents is to suddenly place their child or children 'under a microscope' where every thought, feeling and behaviour is attributed solely to the sexual assault(s). Similarly, if you have read about or know of a child who had disclosed sexual abuse, you may begin to 'see' such signs in your child. Perhaps you were sexually assaulted as a child, and now feel hyperaware in relation to your child's behaviours.

Things that impact on a child's world

Remember that many things might influence your child's behaviour. Take into consideration the bigger picture of the child's world. Things like:

- having difficulties at school
- a falling out with their best friend
- the death of a pet
- arguments with siblings
- nearby people changing their behaviour
- the onset of puberty or other developmental considerations

Some other examples;

Changes in normal routines. Perhaps your child used to love to go to the shops for you and this has suddenly stopped following the child's disclosures. They may have liked going to the shops because the people at the local milk bar gave them a chocolate or friendly words. Now they don't want to go because the shopkeepers have changed, or perhaps they are afraid to walk past a new dog.

Being afraid of the dark. Your child may always have been dubious or afraid of the dark, but you were either unaware of it or had just forgotten about it. It may not have just started when they got sexually assaulted at age seven.

Being sad or upset. You as parents might be arguing. This does impact on and upset children. These arguments may not be linked to the sexual assault. Parents tend to think of these incidents as minor and of little importance in the grand scheme of things, but children do not see it this way. You may not think the kids can hear you or know you are fighting. Kids have a way of going quietly about the house and hanging around the doorways without you being aware of them being there. Sometimes they might just go back to their room if you're having an argument, and not say anything. However, all the while they will be trying to make some sense of the argument for themselves and may make misinterpretations such as "you don't love me", "you are fighting because of me", or "you don't believe/care about me."

Attention seeking behaviours. Sometimes the child will be doing things just for attention. Kids get a good response when they do certain things, and when they want attention, probably subconsciously, they do the same thing that got a response last time.

Knowing about sexualised images. Some people say "my child has never seen sexual images". Unless they blindfold them whilst out driving around to avoid seeing billboards, of course they will see them. The child might have come out at 8.45 at night to ask for a drink of water and you are watching Basic Instinct or some other modern movie or advertisements on the television and they see things or hear things that you are not really aware of. It is difficult to monitor what images your child absorbs whilst visiting at friends' or family members' homes, or indeed even at the local shopping center. So of course they are exposed to sexual images. These need to be taken account of.

School avoidance. If the child doesn't want to go to school you may suspect one of the teachers of sexual abuse, but perhaps it's a bully, missed homework or perhaps the child just doesn't want to go to school.

Being sad for 'no reason'. It could also be an anniversary, like if something happened around Christmas time, then a child might remember that. A developmental consideration would explore the onset of puberty and topsy-turvy hormones. On a general note, your child may well require more sleep.

Separation issues vs sexual assault

Some parents say that a child has been sexually assaulted when they come back from an access visit with their father. You ask, "How do you know?" They then list all the symptoms that you get from a child who is distressed about separation. They are very similar to a child who has been distressed by a sexual assault. In young children you may not get the same degree of sexualised behaviour, but you may get some sexualised behaviour such as masturbating for comfort.

The adults are already experiencing their own pain from the separation, and they may be unable to look clearly at how their child is coping or suffering. Children may well try to try to parent you by comforting you or by not showing you the extent of their sad feelings. Very often children may tantrum, howl, regress or withdraw. As a result, despairing parents may begin to doubt their decision. We all try to think that everything will be ok. This will happen on balance, but things probably won't be ok for the first six months or year.

What do I do?

People need to think about what else is going on around them. You as parents see these behaviours, and you may think your child has been sexually assaulted. Don't struggle with worries about sexual assault on your own. Telephone a trained counsellor at SECASA or the Department of Human Services (Child Protection) to discuss your concerns and explore what may be happening for your child and family. Whilst these concerning behaviours may indicate sexual assault to you, they may also be signals related to other things impacting upon your child or family.