

A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR PARENTS

# WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED

*Turning Surviving Into Thriving*



By Helise Pollack, MSW



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## **Discovering that your child has been sexually abused is traumatic.**

You may be feeling angry, overwhelmed, confused, and frightened. Sexual abuse affects the entire family, but with appropriate intervention, recovery and healing are possible.

*This pamphlet was created to guide you through the practical, legal, psychological, and emotional steps that have helped many families in their process of recovery and healing. It also includes a removable section with stories written by children for children. Although all the stories are true, identifying details have been changed to protect the children's identities.*

*During more than 25 years of working with abuse victims, perpetrators, and their families, this author has seen many families survive and even thrive after a loved one has been sexually abused. May this pamphlet be a source of guidance and comfort to all who need it.*

### **Sexual Knowledge in Children**

Don't forget that children's knowledge of human sexuality differs from an adult's, and is rarely discussed. Because of this lack of information, sexually abused children have no context for understanding what happened to them. They sense that something is wrong, but often they cannot understand why it is wrong or who is at fault. Usually, only after children experience their parent's reaction, do they realize that something bad happened. An adult's reaction can confuse and frighten children. For this reason, children need guidance and information to help them understand and cope with sexual abuse.

### **The Healing Process**

Feeling devastated when you discover that your child was sexually abused is normal. At first, many parents cannot eat or sleep and spend most of their waking hours preoccupied with the abuse. Coping with the trauma of your child's sexual abuse requires all your strength. Experiencing flu-like symptoms is a normal reaction. You need to eat well and rest to stay strong both physically and emotionally. If you fall apart, you will not be able to help either your child or your family manage this crisis.

Eventually, total preoccupation with the abuse will fade. Returning to a daily routine with its old issues and stresses is a sign of healing. With this new perspective, the abuse becomes part of the family's past instead of its definition.

Forgetting the abuse is not possible. Memories will occasionally arise. Learning how to cope with them allows families to continue growing and thriving. Many parents report that healing from a child's sexual abuse has improved their family's communication and ability to work together.

### **Why Don't Children Tell?**

The first question parents usually ask their child upon discovering sexual abuse is, "Why didn't you tell me?" Responsible parents strive to protect, help, and support their children. Children, however, are often unaware of their parents' efforts to protect them. In extreme situations, such as sexual abuse, children are often scared and confused about whom to trust. Abused children do not always know who is safe to tell about their experience and what the consequences of telling might be. Sometimes children want to tell, but they don't have the words to express themselves.

The following are some concerns that prevent children from reporting:

- Is what happened my fault?
- Will my parents believe me?
- Will my parents be angry at me?
- Will the abuser get angry with me for telling?
- Will he hurt me if I tell?

Children intuitively know that what happened to them is wrong, but they might not know what is wrong, why it is wrong, and who is responsible. Children are taught to trust and respect their elders, and they expect protection in return. Being hurt or betrayed by an adult or older child, especially when it is someone they know, confuses them. Instead of blaming the perpetrator, children may doubt and blame themselves. Without intervention, these misplaced negative feelings can torment children for many years.

### **Where Did I Go Wrong? Prevention is not Fool Proof**

When parents discover that their child was sexually abused, they naturally ask themselves questions like:

- Where did I go wrong?
- Should I have spoken to my children more about the dangers of abuse?
- Could I have prevented this from happening?
- Why didn't my child tell me?



Most parents understand that they are not at fault for what happened to their child. Healthy parents would prevent or stop sexual abuse if they could. Normal parents always try to keep their children safe, yet are not always successful. The only possible conclusion is that even good parents do not have total control over what happens to their child. This is hard to accept.

### **So what can a parent do? How can a parent help?**

The answer is to respond well.

The parents' response to their abused child is one of the most critical factors in the child's healing. Understanding and supporting abused children is the beginning of their healing process. This is where parents can make all the difference in the world to their child.

*I worked with a nine-year-old boy who had been molested by his teacher. His mother had attended one of my talks two years prior to the abuse. When we met, she told me she became angry during the lecture when I claimed that a parent cannot completely prevent his child from being abused, especially when the perpetrator is an authority figure, family member, friend, or neighbor. In addition to discussing prevention, I emphasized the importance of speaking openly with children about all aspects of their daily lives. I stressed that this open communication will enable children to discuss difficult issues with their parents. While this mother resisted the idea that she couldn't completely protect her children from harm, she worked on establishing open communication in her family, which, years later, enabled her son to share the ongoing abuse he had been experiencing in school. The outcome of this courageous boy's trust in his parents was that he saved many boys in his class and in the classes that would have followed. The molester was ultimately arrested, and the case went to trial.*

### **What to Say to Your Child**

Parents are naturally shocked and outraged when they hear that their child was abused. It is hard to know what the right response should be in this overwhelming situation. Even when children report the abuse themselves, most parents respond emotionally by asking questions like: Why didn't you tell me sooner? Why did you keep it a secret for this long? Children usually have no answers to these questions and feel guilty when asked. Therefore, don't ask. A more helpful response would be, "I am so glad you are telling me this now. This must have been so hard for you." These children should be praised for the courage it took to tell, and their parents should be applauded for the trusting relationship

they created that ultimately protected their child, and possibly others, from further harm. Writing down exactly what children say as they talk about their experience helps them to feel heard and helps parents avoid questioning them repeatedly. Parents must be careful not to interrogate their child as this may influence or damage any legal investigation (See What To Do Next).

Discovering the abuse from someone else is common. Children should not be made to feel guilty for not telling their parents directly. Only about 20% of abused children ever report, and often not to their parents. Children feel badly enough about what happened, and parents make them feel worse by being hurt or disappointed that they did not tell them directly. Remember, a parent's compassionate response begins the healing process. When hearing from someone else, parents can subsequently say to their child, "I am so glad that I know now. This must have been so hard for you to keep inside." These are reassuring words and give children a strong sense of relief.

*Leora was a 12- year-old girl whose grandfather fondled her during a family visit. The abuse took place while others were in the room although no one noticed. Leora didn't tell anyone about it for a year. When her parents told her that her grandparents were returning for a visit, she broke down, or rather gained courage, and told them what had happened the last time.*

*In Leora's case, the parents believed her and took immediate action. They called and confronted her grandfather, telling him they would do everything they could to protect their daughter.*

*Leora's treatment was short term, since her parents' belief in her and decisive action had already begun the healing process. She felt part of a team with her parents in charge. In our work together, she was able to reframe the situation and understand that she was a survivor, even a hero. She appreciated that reporting on her grandfather stopped him from hurting others. In therapy, Leora was able to write her grandfather a letter confronting him with how much he had hurt her, and asking him to get help for himself, just like she was getting help for herself. In the end, she no longer feared that he could hurt her.*

If parents initially react with disbelief, shock, and horror, and upset their child by asking too many questions, there is always an opportunity to approach the child with a different response. Parents should explain that they were too upset during the first conversation to say what they really meant. In most cases, children will feel relieved and accepted, and will begin to open up to the healing process. Children should be reassured that now everything is okay since they no longer have to cope alone. They need to know that their parents love and support them and are doing everything they can to protect them. Children thrive when they feel acknowledged, encouraged, and supported.

It is important to tell children that what happened to them is not okay; that the perpetrator needs help, has possibly been hurting children for a long time, and will probably continue if not stopped; that you intend to take decisive actions to stop him; and that the child is not guilty or alone. It is in everyone's best interest that the perpetrator is caught and stopped. Abuse is illegal, innocent people are deeply hurt by it, and the sooner the perpetrator is stopped, the safer and better off everyone will be.

## **Understanding How Children Cope and How to Help Them**

Like adults, children have different ways of coping with stress or trauma. Children are not developmentally capable of understanding how their behavior is connected to their emotions. They are feeling bad, they usually do not understand why, and they do not know how to ask for help. When young children are tired or hungry, they whine and cry. They rely on their parents to understand them and take care of them. Similarly, sexually abused children need their parents' compassion and expertise to guide them in understanding the connection between the sexual abuse, their emotions, and their reactive behavior. This guidance is a tremendous relief for children.

Children can show signs of anxiety that seem unrelated to the abuse such as:

- Difficulty focusing in school
- Difficulty sleeping
- Bedwetting
- Change of appetite
- Change in affect: sadder, quieter
- Angry and aggressive in school and/or at home

These behaviors are a child's cry for help.

*Thirteen-year-old Yonatan was molested by a family friend. His parents were told by an outsider. When asked if it was true, Yonatan acknowledged the abuse and thus began a huge transformation in his life. Until that point, Yonatan had been an angry child. His parents assumed this was part of his nature. In treatment, Yonatan was able to express his anger through art and writing. Almost immediately, his family noticed a remarkable change in him: he was less angry and had joined the flow of the family. Yonatan was able to fully understand that he was innocent and that the real culprit was the molester. His parents' immediate action in filing a police report contributed to his recovery. Yonatan finished therapy feeling brave and strong. The perpetrator had hurt many children, and these decisive actions stopped future abuse. In this case, the accused was found guilty and is serving time in prison.*

Alternatively, disbelieving or blaming children will reinforce or create feelings of confusion, guilt, and self-doubt.

*Yair, eight, was physically and sexually abused by a well-liked teacher. When Yair told his parents that he did not want to go to school because his teacher was hurting him, they did not believe him. Yair already had a reputation as a troublemaker. His parents had already been working with the school on his difficulties. As his behavior deteriorated, and Yair was running away from school daily, his parents wondered if something might really be happening to their child. They began listening to his story. Other children in his class also began talking, and it became clear that their teacher was physically and sexually abusive. Yair was angry about the abuse, but he was even more enraged about not being believed. This complicated and prolonged the therapy because he had not been believed from the start. Through art therapy, Yair was finally able to work through his anger and pain and return to being a healthy, happy child.*

For abused children, the key to healing is being believed and protected by the adults in their lives. Ideally, the perpetrator would be sorry for his actions and apologize, saying that it wasn't the child's fault. Since this rarely happens, many children are left feeling confused, unprotected, betrayed, and guilty. Parents and therapists need to teach and guide children to help them make sense of their mixed emotions.

Most older children or adolescents who sexually abuse others have experienced some emotional, physical, or sexual trauma. Others may have been exposed to inappropriate sexual content. In either case, these young people lack inner boundaries, and often resort to hurting others to cope with their confusion and pain. They need to be professionally evaluated to determine their level of risk to society and whether they should be treated within the community or within a legal framework. Without appropriate intervention, which includes treatment and clear limit setting, there is a risk that offenders will repeat their actions.

When sexual abuse is not divulged and/or is left untreated, children may compartmentalize their emotions, which enables them to behave as though nothing is wrong. With the onset of adolescence, however, and the development of integrative thinking, this coping mechanism often stops working. Secondary issues, like difficulty focusing and staying in school, aggressive behavior, social withdrawal, drinking, drug use, or sexual experimentation may develop. For this reason, all abused children, even if they look fine, should be evaluated.

*Shira had always excelled academically and socially. She had also been sexually abused for many years by an older brother, which no one knew. When Shira was 17-years-old, she was slightly injured in a car accident. A few months later, her physical injuries had healed, but Shira was emotionally breaking down. She didn't understand the reason for the breakdown, since she had always been so successful. Ultimately, Shira dropped out of school, and it became clear that something other than the car accident was bothering her. In therapy, Shira finally understood that her emotional breakdown was connected to the ongoing sexual abuse she had experienced by her brother. For years, Shira had compartmentalized the abuse in order to remain successful. Fortunately, the accident triggered an emotional reaction, which subsequently revealed her deep wounds. With appropriate treatment, Shira began her healing process, and was once again able to take control of her life and feel successful.*

## **How to Respond To Sexual Behavior/Abuse between Children**

When there is sexual behavior between children, adults must determine whether it is just inappropriate or actually abusive. Some sexual behavior between children is natural, although unacceptable. The correct response in this situation is to teach children about appropriate behavior. If there is any doubt about the nature of children's sexual behavior, it is advisable to seek professional advice.

Sexual abuse, on the other hand, requires intervention. The immediate natural response is to ask questions and find the "guilty" party. While it is important to understand what happened, the goal of questioning should be to facilitate an effective intervention. If children, both victims and aggressors, sense shock or upset in the adults interrogating them, they will automatically worry about what they have done wrong and may shut down.

Children's natural instinct is to protect themselves. Therefore, if they feel frightened, they will not hesitate to lie. Staying calm, understanding, compassionate, and nonjudgmental toward both the victim and the aggressor is critical. A supportive approach will encourage all the children involved to tell the truth.

**Aggressive children either do not understand that they are doing something wrong, or they are unable to control themselves. As mentioned earlier, some children have been exposed to sexual content, for example, on the internet or through friends, and are acting out from an inability to process the information.**

Other children are aggressive because they are in distress. They have often been emotionally, physically or sexually abused themselves, and crave sensitivity and compassion.

### **How to Respond to Sibling Abuse:**

Sexual abuse within families is devastating. Parents naturally love and protect all their children, yet in cases of sibling abuse, parents tend to side with and protect only one child. The problem with this is that both the perpetrator and the victim need their parents understanding and support in order to heal. Parents must learn how to provide this as they cope with their own trauma. For this reason, it is highly recommended that, in cases of sibling abuse, parents seek counseling to support them through the healing/ treatment process so they can fill all their children's needs.

*The Cohen's two teenage boys had been molesting their nine-year-old sister. When the abuse was discovered, the parents initially defended their sons, fearing that the boys would be prosecuted and sent away from home. They claimed their daughter was fine and did not need treatment. Eventually, when the parents agreed to go to therapy, they were able to acknowledge their daughter's needs as well, and subsequently align themselves with her. As a result, they were angry with their sons. In time, through understanding their family dynamics and why the abuse took place, they were able to feel compassion and empathy for all of their children, as well as for themselves. The boys were removed from the home and placed in a healthy environment where they could receive ongoing therapy. There is no doubt that, despite the challenges of this family's ordeal, the therapeutic process helped each of them to heal and eventually reunite.*

### **What to Do Next:**

The next important step in a child's healing process is to do something. Every action parents take on their child's behalf legitimizes the child's experience and restores a sense of security.

In some abuse cases, it is required to file a report with the police or a social welfare officer. This is always emotionally challenging, especially when the abuser is a family member. For this reason, parents may want to seek guidance from one of the agencies listed at the end of this pamphlet.

In the following sexual or physical abuse cases concerning children, the law requires that a report be filed:

- Abuse by a parent or legal guardian
- Abuse by a sibling
- Abuse by a caretaker, relative, teacher, babysitter, etc.
- Abuse between children at school

## Different options are available for filing a report:

**1.** Parents have the right to file a report directly with the police. For children under 14 years old, then the family will be contacted by Merkaz Hagana for an interview, since police cannot interview younger children. The advantage of filing an official police report is that parents will have the right to receive information and updates on the subsequent investigation and the legal process.

**2.** If parents prefer not to file a police report, but would like their child to be interviewed, they can contact Merkaz Hagana directly. A professional interview will confirm whether a child has indeed been abused and will help parents determine what the next step should be. In cases where there is a need to report, Merkaz Hagana may do so in place of the family.

**3.** In cases of abuse within the family, or when the molester is a minor, parents can file a report with the social welfare officer, *Pkidat Saad*, located in the social welfare office in their area (Sherutei Revacha). The advantage of filing a report with a

*Pkidat Saad* is that the initial intervention is more supportive than that of the police, as they help guide families through the legal and therapeutic process. All minors who

## What is Merkaz Hagana?

*Merkaz Hagana is a national agency located in four centers around the country: Jerusalem, Beer Sheba, Haifa, and Tel Hashomer Hospital. Merkaz Hagana is comprised of highly trained social workers, investigators, a doctor, and a state attorney. They work with abused children, up to 18-years-old, and with perpetrators up to 12-years-old, the age of legal responsibility.*

*All initial interventions are conducted under one roof, in a highly supportive environment, so that children and their families are not exposed to repeat interviews in various agencies simultaneously. The professional staff makes legal and therapeutic recommendations to the family, and when necessary, files a police report on behalf of the family.*

*Many children experience the interview process as therapeutic. After being victimized, children need to be acknowledged and supported, and to know that something is being done about what happened to them.*

*The investigative social workers are mandated to testify in court for children, to avoid exposing them to additional trauma.*

have been abused are eligible to receive free treatment through the *Revacha*. In specific cases, the *Pkidat Saad* can refer the case to a professional interdisciplinary committee, that has the mandate to wave a police report in favor of treatment. This committee is under the auspices of the *Praklitut*, the State's Attorney's Office, and presides primarily over sexual abuse cases between siblings.

Ultimately the goal of taking action is to provide appropriate intervention and treatment for all parties involved. Everyone's individual needs must be weighed without sacrificing one for the other. Victims usually need therapy to heal from the abuse. Perpetrators should be evaluated to determine their level of risk to society and then treated accordingly.

Parents have a tendency to withhold legal information from their children, in an effort to protect them. Most children, however, express a desire to know the legal details of their case. Being part of a team, led by parents, comforts, reassures, and empowers children and is part of their healing process.

### **Creating a Safety Plan**

Children, who have been sexually abused, feel vulnerable and often fear that the abuse will reoccur. They are afraid the abuser will be angry at them for telling and will want to hurt them. Sometimes these fears are expressed through inappropriate behaviors (See Understanding Your Child). Parents can help their children understand their emotions and legitimize their fears by creating a safety plan. Safety plans usually include two components:

- Increased supervision or protection for children who are in actual danger or even just feel afraid.
- Preparation for a future meeting with the abuser.

Creating a unique safety plan based on a child's particular situation will help decrease anxiety and increase feelings of well-being.

*Daniel, a 12-year-old boy, was molested by a neighbor. The neighbor was tried in a minors' court and sent to a treatment center. As the molester's release date approached, Daniel grew increasingly worried. He came to me for short-term therapy, during which we imagined all the places he could possibly meet the older boy after his release. We then listed specific actions Daniel could take in each imaginary circumstance. He left my office feeling less anxious than before because he felt prepared.*



## Will My Child Be an Abuser?

Research shows that most children who have been sexually abused will not subsequently abuse others. However, because children often feel humiliated, angry, or guilty about what happened to them, they may express these feelings by physically or emotionally hurting others.

*Eight-year-old Tzvi was sexually abused by a 15-year-old neighbor. He was overwhelmed by the anger and humiliation he felt and had difficulty expressing these emotions appropriately. As a result, he would usually lose control when angered or frustrated and often hit his siblings. In therapy, Tzvi learned that the real object of his anger was his abuser. He learned to express his true emotions rather than hurt his siblings. Without appropriate intervention, Tzvi would likely have continued hurting others. By learning to express himself appropriately, he was able to stop his abusive behaviors.*

Alternatively, some children turn the anger inward.

*Six-year-old Yael was abused by her older brother. As a result, she became violent and tried to hurt herself with sharp objects. In treatment, she was able to redirect her anger toward her brother, work through her feelings, and eventually reframe the situation so that she could reconnect with her brother.*

With appropriate intervention, children can learn new skills and stop hurting themselves and others. Because children and adolescents are still in the early stages of their personality development, they are more easily able to receive help, change their destructive behaviors, and reverse any damage done to themselves or others. Adult abusers, even when caught, are far more likely than their young counterparts to repeat the abuse.

## Seeking Outside Help and Support

In most traumatic situations, such as accidents, illness, or death, families generally receive extensive emotional and technical support from the community. Although the sexual abuse of a child is equally traumatic, unfortunately the response to a family coping with this type of trauma can range from understanding and supportive to blaming the victim and defending the perpetrator. Parents must be extremely cautious and strategic when seeking outside help and support, to avoid the added pressure of being misunderstood and even accused of wrongdoing by their misinformed community.

In situations that parents have sought advice and help from a respected authority figure, it must be kept in mind, that even those who truly want to help may have an agenda that conflicts with the family's needs. These individuals may know the perpetrator and wish to help prevent the abuse from being reported to law enforcement officials, sometimes mistakenly believing that perpetrators are better helped therapeutically within the community.

*David was molested by a teacher in his school. When he told his parents about the abuse, they immediately went to the school principal. The principal seemed very concerned and asked the parents to allow him to handle the matter. The parents agreed. The principal then confronted the teacher, who denied the allegations. The principal found himself in a dilemma regarding whom to believe. He then asked the parents to take David to a community professional to determine if David was telling the truth. The therapist who questioned him was not trained in this field, and when David felt that he was not believed, he refused to speak in the interview. The principal defended the teacher, relieved that sexual abuse had not occurred in his school. David's parents decided to seek help outside of the school community. They took him to Merkaz Hagana where he was found to be telling the truth. The complaint was filed in the police department, and David received therapy through the Revacha. Although eventually the school fired the teacher, the principal remained angry with David and his parents for exposing the abuse and maligning his school. Unfortunately, rather than receiving the support he so desperately needed, David had to leave the school.*

Children usually have no one but their parents to protect and defend them. Parents must create substantial support for themselves to be able to advocate on behalf of their child. Although outside pressures may be significant, parents are strongly urged to listen to and trust their instincts and do what is best for their child.

If parents have followed the bad advice of an authority figure, they should know that it is never too late to change an intervention. There is no need to feel bad about the possibility of having made a mistake. Feeling bad makes it difficult for parents to take care of their children and fully address their needs. Only through showing love and support, and taking responsibility for having made a mistake, will parents help their children heal and thrive.

## **Final words:**

My message to you is that no matter what happened, whether your child was abused by a stranger, a teacher, a friend, or a family member, you have the opportunity and ability to powerfully impact your child's healing and your family's healthy evolution. Parental support is the key to your child's recovery. To maintain the strength and capacity necessary to support your child, you must be kind to yourself by focusing on self-care and letting go of self-blame. Try to stay firmly planted in the present instead of dwelling on all the "if onlys," and "should haves." Instead, concentrate your energy on strengthening your relationship with your child. There is no reason for your child to go through life feeling like a victim. Therapy and parental support can help a child understand what happened in an empowering way, which can create good self-esteem. I wish I could guarantee you that once therapy is over everything will be perfectly fine. But the fact is, like with any trauma, issues can occasionally resurface. With your continued understanding and support, however, children can develop through these setbacks and become healthy, happy adults.

# A MESSAGE FROM

## WRITTEN BY A MOTHER OF A 6 YEAR-OLD GIRL:

I remember feeling absolutely overwhelmed and enraged, along with disbelief and lots of guilt, that I could have somehow prevented the abuse. Turning to a therapist and working through the issues helped my children heal and helped me to become a stronger person and parent.

## WRITTEN BY THE MOTHER OF AN 8 YEAR-OLD BOY ABUSED BY A TEACHER:

When I heard the horrific news that my son was molested, I experienced a series of emotions and symptoms, both emotional and physical. I felt scared, shocked, numb, hyper, angry, guilt-ridden, and alone. I went in and out of denial, and I had difficulty falling asleep.

The things that helped me get through this ordeal were my faith in Hashem, Tefillah, optimism, tons of patience with myself, and laughter. I found that my positive emotional state directly affected my son and helped him become more secure than before.

With the past behind us now, we are doing well. My son and I are happy, secure, calm, and self confident. As with any loss, we never totally forget the pain but we don't allow it to torment us. We continue our daily functioning, and we are enjoying life to the fullest extent..

We would like to take this opportunity to thank our therapist from the bottom of our hearts for her professionalism and friendliness all the way through.

# PARENTS TO PARENTS:

## WRITTEN BY THE MOTHER OF AN 11 YEAR-OLD BOY WHO WAS ABUSED IN DAY CARE:

I am the mother of a child who, at the age of two-years-old, attended a gan where he, along with many other children, experienced both physical and sexual abuse. The abuse continued throughout the entire school year. A whole year later, when speculations of abuse became known in the community, and many parents came forward reporting the abuse to the police, my child told me about what happened to him. Now that the child is ten-years-old, and the traumatic events are long gone, there is something that I'd like to share with other people who might be going through a similar situation.

First, we don't have the option to choose which trials we will face in life. Every person is presented with different challenges, tailor made for him, and this is not something that we can choose. We all want to protect our children, but the reality is that something like this can happen no matter how vigilant and involved we are.

Second, a challenge is an opportunity to grow. Nobody would ever in a million years choose for his or her child to be hurt, but once it happens, it needs to be viewed as a chance to help and focus on that child.

There are things that I learned along this journey, about myself, my husband and my child, that would never have been revealed, if not for the experience we had. Under the guidance of a professional and experienced therapist, we were able to work together to help my son recover from the trauma and to build his inner world to be healthy and strong.

By listening to him, believing him, and helping him to understand his experiences and his emotions, we were able to support him and support his healing. We healed as well. The years go on, and the pain of the experience fades, but it never completely goes away. It will remain always, but hopefully, only as a glitch on the path of a wonderful life full of positive and beautiful things and not as a frame through which we view his life forever.

## WRITTEN BY A FATHER OF 2 GIRLS WHO WERE SEXUALLY ABUSED BY HIS FATHER, THEIR GRANDFATHER:

My story is something that I thought only happened to other people, certainly not to me and my family. The feelings I felt, the tears that I cried, and the decisions I needed to make should not be things normal people need to deal with. But as I have learned, these things are all too common.

My parents live in Netanya. My family often visits and spends Shabbos with them. During one of these Shabbos visits, my wife called me into our bedroom on Shabbos afternoon. Our daughters, ages nine and 13, were waiting there. My wife closed the door and said, “Your daughters have something to tell you.”

I had no training or preparation to deal with what I was about to hear. But, Baruch H-shem, I reacted in a calm and level-headed way.

My younger daughter spoke first. She said, “Yesterday, Sabba called me into his office and asked me if I liked massages.” She proceeded to describe how her grandfather, my father, had sexually abused her.

Although I was numb with shock, I wanted to know more and verify that this was really true. I asked her if there were more details. At that point, her older sister took over and recounted a similar story that had happened to her as well over Shabbos.

My daughters had both been unsure about what to do after their experiences. Could it be that their loving grandfather, whom they had known and trusted their whole lives, was a molester? Was it really molestation? Or was it just a big mistake? They were confused, scared, and feeling alone. Eventually, my younger daughter confided in her older sister and asked, “Does Sabba ever touch you in a weird way?” When the answer was “yes”, they both knew that something was really wrong, and then told my wife the story.

At first my wife didn't believe them. Maybe they misinterpreted the whole thing. But just to be safe, she told them both to stick with her at all times. At one point though, she went to the bathroom, and while there, my father called my younger daughter into his office again. After touching her and massaging her, he warned her not to tell anyone. When my wife came out of the bathroom and found my younger daughter crying, she realized the story was real. At that point, she called me in.

After hearing all these details, I hugged both my daughters and told them, “You are both holy and pure and have done nothing wrong at all. Your Sabba has a big problem. Sometimes older people start doing strange things and don't realize it. But don't worry,

we will protect you and make sure this never happens again.”

The rest of Shabbos was stressful to say the least. We kept up a facade of enjoying ourselves and being friendly, but inside we were scared and devastated. We knew already then that the lovely family life we had so much enjoyed would never be again. Once we were home, my wife and I rehashed the situation. My father was 70-years-old. Perhaps he was going senile? But then again, he was clearly lucid when he warned my daughter not to tell anyone, wasn't he?

Should we just stay away from my parents and never visit them again? Would my daughters need to see a therapist? Was my father a serial molester and a menace to society? And what about my poor mom? Had she known about him all these years? What would happen if I were to confront them? Would they get divorced? Would my father commit suicide? Maybe he would kill my mother first and then commit suicide? My mind raced on and on. I was a total mess – I couldn't eat, sleep, or think clearly. I had no idea what to do or whom to talk to. I anonymously called the Magen hotline. I told them what had happened to my daughters. When he asked me who the perpetrator was, I broke down and sobbed out the words “my father”. He was very supportive and encouraging, and trust me I needed every bit of support and encouragement I could get.

My love and loyalty were split between my father and my daughters. The pain I felt, the sadness I felt, the incredible loss I felt, were unbearable. I was completely conflicted. I had visions of my father being humiliated by a public arrest and court case. I imagined him, a kind 70-year-old man, being roughed up in jail. I imagined my mother crying and crying and never stopping to cry about the tragedy that had happened in our family.

After consulting with our Rav, and researching our options, it was clear that our daughters would need to be seen by a therapist. They would need treatment as soon as possible, and it would need to be done in a way in which they would not feel they were at fault. Otherwise, we would be literally risking our daughters' overall well-being.

In short, if we wanted the best for our daughters, we would have to report the molestation. We would have to work within the system. But we would also have to do everything to ensure that my father, who despite what he had done, would be treated as fairly as possible. I didn't want some crazy court to turn my father into an “example”. I just wanted to get my daughters help, and I also wanted my father to get help.

While our story is still in play, so far it has worked out better than I imagined it ever would. While we still feel a lot of pain, especially at family events, which are huge logistical challenges, my daughters are getting the support they need and my father, who admitted his wrongdoings, requested and is now getting proper treatment, under the supervision of the social services. My wife and I can sleep at night knowing that we did the right thing for everyone involved.

## WRITTEN BY THE MOTHER OF AN 11-YEAR-OLD BOY WHO WAS ABUSED BY A TEACHER:

We are abuse survivors in my family. My son was the real victim, but the family was deeply hurt and overwhelmed with fiery emotion and anger at the perpetrator. Despite the rage, we had to rally around my son with unconditional love and support to help him embark on his healing process and reintegrate into his young life. We talked a lot, fought as well, but always worked together to be his solid backbone.

The moment I heard the news of the abuse is forever locked in my mind. The world slowed down, and every movement felt labored, like I was underwater or swallowing thick, choking air. I wasn't with my son, and my only desire was to hold him, tightly. It would still be a few hours until I would see him, and it was truly the hardest few hours of the whole experience.

When I finally got home and handed him a treat, he squinted at me and asked what it was for. I collapsed next to him on the couch, looked deeply into his pure, innocent eyes, choked back tears, and told him it was for a special boy who had a big secret that he wouldn't have to hide anymore. I told him I knew about the secret and the bad man in his school. He looked up at me with wide eyes and open mouth, and asked how did I know and who told me? I knew then that the story was true. I breathed for the first time in hours.

At that moment, I knew the worst was over, even though I had no idea what the future would hold. I tried not to ask him too many questions. I just ached to make him feel safe and protected, something I had not been able to do until then.

This was three years ago. Our healing process is behind us. We talk openly about what happened and occasionally my son asks about the perpetrator. Recently he asked if he could see a picture of him. Thankfully, I don't have one.

My son is strong and wise today, yet young and innocent, with many questions. The most important thing I did at that time was to believe in and trust my son, with unconditional respect for and acceptance of his feelings, experience, fears, and needs. My son is still working on restoring cautious trust and belief in male authority figures. But he fully trusts his parents and siblings and knows that wherever he goes or whatever situation he is in, he is loved, supported, and never alone. For that, it has all been a gift.



## **About the Author**

**Helise Pollack** has been a therapist and child advocate for over 25 years. She worked as a social worker in various public service agencies including The Social Welfare Office, as a Social Welfare Officer; The National Council for the Child; and Hadassah Hospital, as a member of a team working with children at risk, in addition to her other responsibilities.

Helise worked as a psychotherapist with survivors of sexual abuse and perpetrators in the Bet Shemesh Mental Health Clinic and Meital, an agency providing treatment for individuals and families affected by sexual abuse.

For the past ten years, Helise has been in private practice working primarily with childhood sexual abuse. She is a consultant to various educational institutions as well as an advisor to Magen, a child protection organization created to address child abuse issues in the community through education and family support and guidance.

# **Resources:**

## **Merkaz Hagana**

### **The Center for Child Protection**

**Open Sunday-Thursday, Hours 8:00 - 16:00**

**Available for consultation by phone. Meetings by appointment only.**

**Jerusalem: Tel: 02- 6448844**

**Tel Hashomer: Tel: 03 -5353590**

**Beer Sheba: Tel: 08 -6442804**

**Haifa: Tel: 04- 6042024**

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## **The National Council for the Child**

**An Independent non governmental organization,  
advocating for children's rights and well-being.**

**Available for consultation and to receive reports of abuse.**

**Tel: 02- 6780606**

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## **ELI**

### **The Child Protection Organization**

**Available to receive reports of abuse  
as well as provide therapy in specific locations.**

**Tel: 03- 609 1920 Hotline: 1- 800 -223 -966**

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## **Magen**

### **The Bet Shemesh Child Protection Agency**

**A non-profit organization**

**Accepts inquiries from beyond Bet Shemesh.**

**Magen is willing to help replicate their community-based  
child protection model in other communities.**

**Tel: 02 -9999678**



