SECRET WORTH SHARING
HOW TO TALK ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

By Sophia Luu
The average person has 9,855 conversations a year— that’s a lot of talking!

But rarely do we talk about childhood sexual abuse, even though it affects most people (directly or indirectly).

This is a huge problem because 1 in 5 people have experienced some form of child sexual, emotional or physical abuse. The most common of these is sexual abuse. You definitely know someone who has experienced it, but it’s likely you just don’t know who.

Often, when child sexual abuse is spoken about, it is done insensitively by accident. There is also a very real worry that the person won’t be believed or supported properly, which can be as bad as the abuse itself.

Right now, conversations about child sexual abuse are either avoided or handled insensitively. This means that most conversations about child sexual abuse are happening between the abuser and the person they are abusing, where the abuser is telling them to ‘keep it a secret’.

This book is to help non-abusing adults and teens to have supportive conversations with people who have experienced sexual abuse as a child.

My name is Sophia. I am a survivor of child sexual abuse and author of this book. I have had over 15 years’ experience of navigating life after my abuse, including coming out to my family about it when I was 18 and navigating social services, charities and legal processes.

I have included stories from others victims and survivors, as well as guidance from clinical psychologists, councillors and healthcare professionals.

Please see page 15 for a glossary of common words used in this book, including a distinction between ‘survivors’ and ‘victims’ and ‘coming out’.

Source: Courage Beer Conversations Survey of 3,000 people, 2010
ONS Child Abuse in England and Wales 2019
WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

There are lots of definitions for child sexual abuse and sometimes they can feel intimidating and complicated, but most importantly... believe in yourself!

You are aware of sexual sensations from as young as 2 years old.

If you felt uncomfortable, embarrassed, sick, confused, ashamed or even aroused by the sexual actions of another person and you were under 18, it is likely that you have experienced child sexual abuse.

You do not have to ‘tick a box’ on a list to validate whether you were sexually abused. A feeling is enough.

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Penetrative Contact Abuse:
- Using a body part or object to rape or penetrate a child
- Forcing a child to take part in any penetrative sexual activities

Non-Penetrative Contact Abuse:
- Making a child undress or touch someone else
- Sexual touching of any part of a child’s body, whether they’re clothed or not
- Forcing a child to take part in any non-penetrative sexual activities

Non-Contact Abuse
- Exposing or flashing
- Showing pornography
- Exposing a child to sexual acts
- Making them masturbate
- Forcing a child to make, view or share child abuse images or videos
- Making, viewing or distributing child abuse images or videos
- Forcing a child to take part in sexual activities or conversations online or through a smartphone.
- Sexual activity in front of or in the presence of a child

Sources: Stop it Now. Sources: legislation.gov.uk, NSPCC. Note - UK legislations use the term ‘he’ but anyone of any gender can be an abuser.
**WHAT ARE SOME EMOTIONAL EFFECTS?**

Not everyone reacts in the same way to sexual abuse that they experienced as a child. Here are some common feelings that a lot of abused people experience but are less talked about:

- **Feeling withdrawn from other family members, friends, or adults that they trust because of a secret about the abuse.**
- **Having physical reactions, e.g. physical ticks, to things that remind them of the abuse.**
- **Distracting themselves from memories of the abuse with schoolwork, hobbies or drugs, alcohol and other relationships.**
- **Feeling withdrawn from other family members, friends, or adults that they trust because of a secret about the abuse.**

These feelings may disappear and reappear at different times throughout a victim/survivor’s life. It is important to keep these in mind when having a conversation about child sexual abuse.

**WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TALK ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?**

3/4 of children who have been sexually abused don’t tell someone about it at the time of the abuse. I was one of them, despite coming from a very loving and open family. ‘Planting the seed’ that someone is an abuser is one of the most difficult parts of coming out, despite being one of the first steps. This can be even more difficult if the abuser is someone close to the child, such as a Family member or friend. Two thirds of known cases of abuse are by someone that the victim/survivor knows personally.

Many people think that encouraging the victim to ‘just tell someone’ is the best way to tackle child sexual abuse, but not everyone is equipped to support the person who has been abused and not everyone wants to. Sadly, a lot of charities still go by this messaging and put a lot of responsibility and pressure on the victims/survivors themselves to highlight their abuse to others.

You are about to read three anonymous stories from people with lived experience of child sexual abuse. Each story is about a time when they told someone about their abuse and things didn’t go to plan. They are shared to help you to have more healthy conversations about child sexual abuse. There is no one way to respond to someone coming out to you, but these stories can guide you in how to approach many different circumstances of, and relationships with, abuse.
WISHING FOR ME TO BE SAFE ISN'T ENOUGH

When I first told my parents about my abuse, my dad was really shocked. It didn't cross his mind that this was something that could happen to me.

He told me that he has been sexually abused too, and as a parent he never wanted the same thing to happen to me.

He assumed that I hadn't been abused because I always looked so happy growing up — so the cycle continued.

The sad thing is - he never told me any of this. I wasn't aware of what 'bad' behaviour was because he didn't actively talk to me about it.

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STORY TWO

EVEN THOUGH I AM SUCCESSFUL, I AM STILL STRUGGLING WITH THIS

I graduated from the University of Oxford with a first class degree in Biology. I went on to become a well-known professor.

Outwardly, I was very successful. But inside I was struggling a lot.

I originally started studying so hard to distract myself from the sexual abuse at home.

My abuser was a family member. He still lived with his parents and was unemployed. Because of this, my family sided with him when I came out. They thought that because I was successful, I was fine. It was like being betrayed all over again.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER FROM THIS CONVERSATION:

ALL FORMS OF ABUSE ARE BAD — IT IS NOT A SCALE!

Do not judge the extent of someone else's abuse by the things done to them or their life situation e.g. assuming that someone who was raped will suffer more than someone who was not, or that an unsuccessful person is worthy of more support than a successful person. Remember all forms of abuse are a violation, and can lead to repeat and severe offences.

IT’S NOT A COMPETITION FOR SUPPORT.

Do not use external factors like money, race, status and culture to judge who is worthy of your support. Believe what the person is telling you, even if it is very hard to hear and even if you know the abuser too.

Important things to remember from this conversation:

- All forms of abuse are bad — it is not a scale!
- Do not use external factors like money, race, status and culture to judge who is worthy of your support.
- Believe what the person is telling you, even if it is very hard to hear and even if you know the abuser too.
I MIGHT NOT WANT THE AUTHORITIES INVOLVED

Sometimes, I would secretly Google whether or not I was abused. One day, I created a fake online account to speak anonymously with a charity worker about my abuse.

Straight away, the charity worker told me that if I told them the name of my abuser, they would have to report it straight to the police.

I have had bad experiences with the police before and don't trust them. I was still building up the courage to process what I was feeling and didn't want a legal process which would result in everyone finding out.

I logged off and never told anyone about it again.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER FROM THIS CONVERSATION:

YOU MIGHT BE THE FIRST PERSON THAT IS BEING TOLD ABOUT THE ABUSE. AND THERE IS PROBABLY A REASON WHY.

Be careful about recommending that the person takes legal action or should report to a charity. If they have come out to you, there is likely a reason why and it is because you have been trusted personally. Some people prefer to speak privately to individuals, not members of an authority.

Speak negatively about the action, not the person

Some people who have been abused have very complicated relationships with their abuser, which can include pity, respect and even love. Even if you feel angry or hurt by the abuser's actions, do not take this out on the victim/survivor. Remind them that it isn't their fault.

EVERYONE HAS A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE WITH THE AUTHORITIES.

There are many social aspects which make coming out about sexual abuse harder, especially disabilities, race, cultural background and sexuality. Be mindful of this during the conversation, as not everyone gets the result they want from a legal/police process.

*This is an example of a bad email!
RULES FOR ANY CONVERSATION ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:

1. There is never a 'perfect time' to come out.
   Many people come out long after the abuse has happened, for lots of reasons. Maybe they have suppressed the memory, or maybe they were waiting to find someone they could trust. Whatever the reason, it is not your place to judge or question the timing. The most important thing is that they came out.

2. Do not assume the gender of the abuser.
   Abusers are commonly male, but not always. Women and non-binary people can also be abusers. Assuming that the abuser was a man can make the victim/survivor feel invalidated.

3. Create a comfortable environment and make time.
   Conversations about child sexual abuse can go in unexpected ways. If you only have a certain amount of time, remind the person that you have to leave but that you are happy to talk about one thing in depth now and arrange time to talk later. Make sure your mobile phone is off and you sit away from it to not get distracted.

4. Listen to the details, but don't push for them.
   You do not need to hear the details of the abuse in order to believe the person. However, if the person wishes to share details, you must listen. As hard as it is for you to hear, it was harder for them to experience.

5. Do not use words like 'rare experience' 'abnormal' or 'extraordinary'.
   This situation is much more common than we are led to think. If we call it rare, we imply that not many people can relate.

6. Do not rely on the abused person for support.
   Some people, without even realising, turn to the abused person for advice about their own reactions to what has happened. Make sure you have your own support network so that you do not burden the person you are supposed to help.

7. End the conversation on something lighter and more positive.
   Such as what the person is doing later that day or something they are looking forward to this week.

GLOSSARY

Abuser - in this context, the person who has committed sexual acts on a child. These can be contact or non-contact.

Coming out - in this context, when a victim/survivor tells someone that they have been abused. Can also be called 'disclosing'. "Coming out" is also commonly used in relation to talking about sexuality.

CSA - The abbreviation for Child Sexual Abuse.

Disassociation - Feeling disconnected from your thoughts, body or perception of time. It is a common side effect of trauma.

Grooming - In a child sexual abuse context, grooming is when someone (adult or child) builds an emotional and trusted relationship with a child or young person so that they can manipulate and exploit them for sexual reasons. Physical force is very rarely used.

Known Cases - Accounts of sexual abuse which have been reported. All of the statistics are based on known cases of those who have come out. The real number could be much higher, especially as child sexual abuse is often less reported than other crimes.

Non-abusing adult - Someone over the age of 18 who has not abused a child.

Survivors - Someone who feels that they have overcome the trauma of sexual abuse as a child. Not everyone refers to themselves as a 'survivor', as they did not choose for the abuse to happen to them and have not actively chosen to survive from it.

Victim - Anyone who has experienced any form of sexual abuse as a child.
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AFFECTS ONE IN FIVE OF US. SO SHARE THIS BOOK WITH FOUR OTHERS.

It's very likely that someone you know will need to read this resource and might need to support a child they know. Now that you've read this book, please share it with at least 4 other people. That way you are more likely to reach someone affected by the statistic!

OTHER APPROACHABLE RESOURCES

FOR DISCLOSING/ REPORTING ABUSE:

Not everyone will want to report their abuse to the authorities. There are lots of ways to report, and each situation is different.

The Truth Project: Experiences from other victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. Stories collected are anonymised and used in a report which will be shown the the UK government (https://www.truthproject.org.uk/experiences-shared)

Everyone's Invited: An online platform where victims and survivors of sexual abuse share their experiences. Can be anonymous.

Stop it now helpline: 0808 1000 900 (UK number)
Advice around reporting to authorities, including the police and child protection services. There is also separate support for people who might be abusers and their families.

RESOURCES FOR TALKING WITH CHILDREN

Stop it Now: Harmful Sexual Behaviour Prevention Toolkit: Made by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, this is a guide for talking about sexual relationships with children

Talk PANTS: Children’s campaign by the NSPCC which includes an activity book for guardians and children to talk about Child Sexual Abuse together.