

**Promoting Healthy Sexuality
After Sexual Abuse**

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[The following article is dedicated to a friend and colleague Jan Hindman, who enriched the field of sexuality and trauma treatment before her untimely death in 2007]

I need to make you uncomfortable for a bit, but it is for your own good and the good of the sexually abused child you are trying to raise. I say this because I need to talk about S..E..X., the most difficult topic for nearly everyone to talk about. But the problem is that we have to talk about it if we want to raise a sexually healthy child. Why human sexuality is so difficult to talk about in polite company is a topic for another day, but our starting place is that most of us would rather face any other issue than sexual issues with our children.

If you have a sexually abused child in your home that you are trying to parent, then you have a challenge on your hands that not even the experts have been willing to directly address—how does a parent promote healthy sexuality for a child who has already had sexual experience in the form of abuse? If you have attempted to find some good books on the topic, which you probably haven't, you found that there are none. Yes, you heard me correctly; there are many good books on most every topic related to sexuality except how the help a child develop a healthy view of sexuality after the very unfortunate experience of sexual abuse. In part this is an oversight, but even more so this lack of resources for parents is symbolic of our collective cultural neurosis that the less said about sex the better (unless the task involves advertising).

I want to begin our discussion with a quote from my friend Jan Hindman who wrote in her last book, "Of course we love our children. We teach them what they need to know. But when it comes to sex, we do nothing and hope the Sex Fairy will zap them in the crotch when they walk down the aisle to get married and magically, they will turn into sexually healthy adults" (Hindman, 2006). This quote sums it up pretty well for our culture. We avoid sex education because it might encourage children to act in sexual ways. We put off talking to our children about sex, "until they are old enough to handle it," meaning when the child is seventeen and has learned all they needed to know from other sources such as peers or the media (both excellent sources of healthy sexual information, right?).

The principle barrier to our culture helping children to become sexuality healthy is that we deny the fact that children are sexual beings. We have body parts that perform a myriad of functions, but it is only the sexual body parts of our children that we hope will lie dormant in the dark recesses of their bodies only to awaken with enthusiasm on their wedding night. Enough said about how messed up our culture and most of us are regarding sexuality, we need to change the focus to discuss how we can help sexually abused children have a chance at a life that moves sex from a curse to a blessing.

I have started our discussion this way because we cannot give to a child what we do not possess ourselves. If we want to raise a sexually healthy child we need to have some measure of healthy sexuality ourselves. If we want our children to have some comfort with the topic of sex then we must model comfort. Alright, you may have to fake it a little. But seriously, we need to start the

process by looking inward at ourselves. Consider the following questions and how you would rate yourself:

1. Do I live in a way to acknowledge that I am a sexual being?
2. Am I comfortable with my own sexuality?
3. Do I value and respect this important part of who I am?
4. Am I aware of the important part my sexuality plays in forming who I am?
5. Do I act in harmony with my sexual beliefs?
6. Am I respectful of the above in others?

As you read further, you will see that respect will be a cornerstone of our journey. Few of us are statements of full health so we all have to start where we are. However, we need to realize that with the difficult road ahead we need to first acknowledge, respect and value our own sexuality if we are to impart healthy sexuality with our child. Here are a few general suggestions from the Advocates for Youth when it comes to addressing sex with all children:

- Examine your own beliefs and values before teaching a child.
- Assert your own personal privacy boundaries; decline to discuss private sexual behavior with the child.
- Use accurate language for body parts and functions.
- Discuss sexuality at times that work best for connecting with your child.
- Clarify relationships and how people are related to others.
- Use photos, pictures, and visual materials.
- Use teachable moments that come up in daily life.
- Be honest in answering questions.
- Value the child's feelings and experience.
- Offer praise and support.
- Repeat information over time as needed.
- Take advantage of available resources.

One of the ways we discourage rather than promote healthy sexuality in children is to deny their sexual interest and curiosity. Take a moment and ask yourself the following question--since my child is a sexual being what are the ways he or she can appropriately express this sexuality? We all know many ways children can be sexually inappropriate, but are there appropriate sexual expressions in your home? If there are none, like most families, then you fit right into the prevailing culture, but your child will remain confused about sexual thoughts, feelings and behavior both internally and with others they encounter. Remember that most sexually abused children have a heightened interest and sensitivity to sex, even if you don't hear about it you can trust that there is a lot going on inside the child's biggest sex organ—the brain.

Promoting healthy sexuality is more than a two week plan of action and hoping your job is done. Sexuality will come into play at every developmental age of the child. The older the child gets the more complex it becomes, and the more vulnerable you will have to be to model being an “ask-able parent.” This meaning someone the child knows he or she can go to for answers to their questions and receive support for their confused feelings. The child will know you can be approached because of the many times you approach them first on this topic (I know this is not

your favorite discussion topic, so to get some practice give your mother-in-law a call and have a sexual conversation, or if you prefer then call a friend).

So armed with as much internal comfort as we can muster and ready to take the next step, where do we go from here? I would suggest relying on some suggestions from Jan Hindman's book There is No Sex Fairy To Protect Our Children From Becoming Sexual Abusers (Hindman, 2006) or what she calls the Ten Commandments of raising sexually respectful children:

- I. Start young to teach biology as well as respect.
- II. Communicate--Children are learning from many sources, they need to learn from you.
- III. Teach logic--rules, robbery, and rescue. Everything in life has rules that need to be followed. Do not let someone take something precious from you against your will, and remember to always ask for help when you need it.
- IV. Don't keep children from the world--teach children healthy information and critical thinking.
- V. Teach gender equality and the meaning of consent.
- VI. Sexual respect goes beyond biology and nature. Respect is not automatically learned.
- VII. People don't end up bad if bad things are done to them. Teach resiliency and personal responsibility.
- VIII. Teach delaying gratification and self-esteem.
- IX. Teach RESPECT—the vulnerability of others, healthy guilt, restitution, the feelings of others, and anti-bullying.
- X. Teach touching and tenderness through your modeling at all ages.

As you are probably aware, sexual abuse can distort a child's interest and curiosity. Although not all interest in sex is a sign of pathology, in the same way not all interest in sex is normal and natural. Therefore you as the parent must distinguish between healthy and unhealthy interests along with thoughts, feelings and sexual behavior. Fortunately there are some resources in this area. One is my own measure called the Inappropriate Sexual Behavior Scale, which can be found in my book Raising Children Who Refuse To Be Raised (Ziegler, 2000). Another resource is the booklet Understanding Children's Sexual Behaviors (Cavanaugh Johnson, 2004). Both resources can help you distinguish from a wide range of healthy and unhealthy sexual themes in children.

Example of unhealthy themes that point to concern are the following: preoccupation with sex, sex play with much younger children, precocious knowledge beyond the child's age, unusual sexual interests, drive to act out sexually, sex play that has a negative impact on other children, seeing others as sex objects, violating the rights and boundaries of others, adult-like sexual activity, directing sexual behavior toward adults, sexual activity with animals, the use of sex to hurt others, bribery, threats, force to engage other children in sex play (Cavanaugh Johnson, 2004).

Now that your blood pressure was raised by the above list, some suggestions to handling sexual behavior may help calm you down. The following are eight general principles for working with sexual behavior in all children:

1. Remove the aura of sex and consider it as behavior, nothing more/nothing less.

2. Work on being more comfortable talking about sexual issues.
3. See the child and not just the behavior.
4. Translate the meaning to the child of the sexual behavior, some sexual behavior is about attention not about sex.
5. Consult with a partner, we often need a reality check when dealing with sexual behavior.
6. Don't minimize and don't catastrophize.
7. Don't expect children not to be sexually curious at every age.
8. Be sure to replace every problematic behavior with an alternative appropriate behavior.

Raising the sexually abused child can make your job even more difficult than the child who has not been abused. Sexual abuse often causes children to view sex as bad and yet they are attracted to it. When adults view sexual themes as bad, this reinforces the problem. The answer to this dilemma is to transform sex into something positive. Remember the goal is to promote healthy sexual interest, not stamp out all sexual interest.

Perhaps the most that can be done on this topic in a brief way is to provide a road map for the journey. There will undoubtedly be some twists and turns along the way and a few surprises as well. Here are some final practical suggestions to help guide you on this complex journey toward healthy sexuality for your child (and for you as well).

- ☀ Go over rules of touching, space, and consent.
- ☀ For young children use the language of playing games, "We don't play the penis touching game in our home."
- ☀ Teach the child that our bodies are like our other important possessions, we care for them and protect them.
- ☀ In teaching the child to be safe, he or she has already found the dangers, help the child learn how to determine the good from the bad.
- ☀ Teach critical thinking, "In the story I just told you who was right and who was wrong?"
- ☀ Talk to the child about the dangers in the world and how to avoid them, don't pretend they are not there.
- ☀ Explain to the child the people and places to avoid and why. Don't teach fear, explain the hazards.
- ☀ Your home must be an environment of respect in all areas.
- ☀ Respect starts with people and objects then moves to sexuality.
- ☀ You must specifically teach respecting boundaries to children who have had their private space violated.

- ☀ Help children separate who they are from what was done to them.
- ☀ Realize that many abused children have negative views of self and the future, you need to help them alter these views.
- ☀ Teach children how to bounce back from adversity not only with sexual abuse but with all challenges in life.
- ☀ Point out when the child overcomes difficult challenges and reinforce these small successes.
- ☀ Responsibility must be specifically taught, it does not come naturally.
- ☀ Sexuality is an extension of many aspects of life--respect, caring, intimacy, equality, and consideration.
- ☀ Reframe the meaning of touch to include caring and loving touch.
- ☀ Touch must be a communication of a positive message, not exploitation and abuse.

This has been a considerable amount of information in a few short pages and there is obviously a great deal more that could be said. There is no quick and easy way to handle one of the most difficult aspects of the world's most difficult job—parenting a healthy child, particularly when the child has been traumatized. Becoming overly stressed will work against you, so do your best to relax and take it one step at a time. The beauty of parenting is that there is little you can do wrong that can't be fixed with time and effort. There is no way to avoid the fact that parents must be the message they want their children to understand and internalize—teaching is fundamentally about modeling. However, you are not expected to be an expert at either parenting the traumatized child or helping sexually abused children develop healthy sexuality. In fact, there are no experts at this very challenging task, we are all early explorers of a complex and uncharted terrain. Along the way make sure you take advantage of your personal support system and do not be reluctant to ask for help and some directions from time to time. And good luck on your pioneering journey, both you and your child will gain from your efforts.

Advocates for Youth. Sex Education for Physically, Emotionally, and Mentally Challenged Youth. www.advocatesforyouth.org.

Cavanaugh Johnson, T. (2004). Understanding Children's Sexual Behaviors. What's Natural and Healthy. San Diego: Family Violence and Sexual Assault Institute.

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