

Tell Someone - But Who?

To advise children on how to cope with abuse, a slogan appeared several years ago; “tell someone”. At best, it’s insufficient, and could turn out to be worse than nothing! It makes no distinction between abuse within the family and from elsewhere, it contains no warning of pitfalls, like betrayal, and being ignored, and it offers no suggestions of what to do, next, if no help is given. I realize how attractive slogans are, but when something so important is at stake, such a hollow suggestion, so likely to backfire, really isn’t justified by the gratification of reciting it.

This slogan might not feel so warm and fuzz, but, in many situations, it’s the whole answer: ‘If the abuser is not a parent, tell them; ‘If it’s one parent, tell the other’. The only further discussion is how to deal with parental abuse. “Tell someone” doesn’t even counsel children to tell their parents, first, but my title retains the slogan because I don’t want to throw anything away if it can be used. “Tell Someone” arrived in the public view, D.O.A., but it’s probably so well known, we should salvage the corpse, and try to ‘Frankenstein’ it; shock it to action by with all the overlooked ramifications.

Abusers might be from outside the home or parents. 1} When the parents are abusive, people are reluctant to help the child, for many reasons, but all such considerations can be over-ridden with one simple strategy. 2} When abuse comes from outside the home, the parents’ might have been accidental accomplices and the perpetrators might intimidate the victim.

1) Inhibitions Against Conveying Children’s Accusations Against Parents

When a child needs someone outside the family, to tell about abuse in the home, she might be met with a reaction which seems like indifference, but it’s really self-concern.

A] Almost everyone has children. They don’t want anyone invading that territory, and, to impinge on a right of another, even for the most important reasons, is to encourage meddling in general, on less significant matters. Someone might refuse to act on a child’s plea, merely to reciprocate respect for their own parental prerogatives.

B] To convey an accusation to a third party, is a swan dive into hot water, for someone like a teacher. They make too little to risk job loss and law suits.

C] The person hearing an accusation could assume that the victim has made it up, to get even for something which parents regularly do, and everyone condones, like non-physical discipline. (An accusation to settle a grudge with a parent, is a problem in adolescence, I think, and unusual, at that. I’m focused, here, on those who are too small to escape from the abuse environment, even temporarily, or to conceive of seeking help from outside.)

D] People assume that everyone exaggerates, and that children are the worst, frequently imagining things, outright. The notion that children hallucinate, is a 20th Century invention. How blithely adults assume that children fantasize, is the result of Freud’s statement that 3/4 of his female patients had been sexually molested in childhood. Because his clientele was very wealthy, many in high society must have felt personally accused, and the fact that so many must have deserved it, would hardly have softened their ire. Having spoken heresy, Freud must have realized that it would not be acceptable to just refrain from saying it, again; to say, in effect, ‘oh,

uh-h, never mind'. A simple retraction would have ruined his credibility, and he would have forever been trailed by the question, 'well, then, why did you say it?' He had to explain why he had made the claim, and, unless it was false, his explanation would have to be. Freud's recantation took the form of the "Infantile Fantasy" theory, and ever since, people have been projecting their own need to believe phantasmagorical lies, onto their children!

How the Victim Can Invert Indifference

The problem is, how to force adults to act, in spite of their misgivings. The answer is to counter their fear, by posing another; that is, to reverse adults' natural reticence, so they will feel less embarrassed to act, than not to. A single accusation can easily be squelched by the one who hears it, simply by doing nothing. If that person does not choose to act, the naïve trust which encouraged the child to "tell someone", is disappointed, perhaps discouraging him from ever trying again, but, what if everyone in the child's life, knew about the problem, and knew that everyone else knew? If the teacher knew it – and knew that the child's clergyman and relatives knew, it would be impossible for the any of them, not to do something. They could not very well ignore it, knowing that so many others are aware. They couldn't look each other in the eye, and they would live under the constant threat of being outed as the one who did nothing.

It would be more reliable if everyone who hears the story, can be relied on, to encounter others who have heard it, but many of the adults who a child knows, might never run into the others. If the teacher never sees the clergyman or the uncle never sees the neighbor, they might never feel compelled to act, by an encounter with someone else who has also heard of the problem. Some groupings of adults, interact with others, like relatives and clergy, because several family members might attend the same church, and teachers and neighbors, because teachers interact with neighboring parents, as at PTA meetings. This is still not completely reliable, but adults who fit any one category, mix with the others of their own group; relatives with relatives, teachers with teachers, etc. Victims must tell more than one person in any category of people who are certain to see each other.

The basic idea is for people who have heard of the problem, to know that others whom they will have to encounter, know of it, too. Whenever possible, the child should tell two people at one time. If a victim can't tell two, together, they must tell everyone they confide in, who else they have told and intend to tell. If they don't remember to do so, they can just revisit that first person, to tell him, who else they have told in the meantime.

Once these stratagems have been incorporated into every child's education, and everyone knows it, anyone who hears of abuse, will have to assume that many others have also heard of it, or soon will. They would never know when they might come face to face with someone else who knows. The power of political concerns, held over adults' heads, would be inverted, to encourage, rather than inhibit action. Anyone who fails to act, must worry that every person she encounters in the future, might have heard of the child's dilemma, and know that she has heard of it, too.

Official Support

Many families have no clergymen. Neighbors are likely to spread the scandal, too close to home and to others who don't really have the family's interests at heart. Relatives are mixed bag. Involving them presents another set of problems. (I have a framework of ideas which should

help, but it might be too complicated to hope for consistent results.) Except for teachers, there aren't many choices for the victim, and teachers shouldn't have to shoulder it. Most states and counties must have agencies, dedicated to this problem. They should be accessible, directly by children.

2} Abuse From Outside the Home

Accidentally Abetting Abuse

A] Most people can't talk to their children about sex, at all. How can they talk about abuse? No one wants to broach the topic of sex with their children, long before they otherwise would, by telling them how it might be misused, against them. B] It's hard to tell a child two conflicting things; that certain adults, like teachers, are there to help them, and that they must obey them, but that they might run into one who will try to do something awful to them! C] Many kids are entrusted to baby-sitters and day-care, when they really are too young to be told anything. D] People fail to acknowledge that the problem even exists. Any threat can be reduced by preparation, but the mere discussion of a taboo, is often treated like a violation of it. The unexpected is your worst enemy. Just as in the wild, where predators count on the element of surprise, an abuser must hope that the victim has not been educated to the threat. Failure to warn your child, amounts to giving the perpetrator permission; decking the victim out like a delectable sacrifice, garnished with the allure of his/her naivete. E] Children often assume the blame for abuse, internally. The child may simply be too embarrassed by her own role in the travesty, to tell anyone, especially if a parent is the abuser. Unless you warn children that such a thing might happen, you can't tell them not to put the blame on themselves, until their problem is discovered, and their sense of guilt will delay that discovery.

Threats

As with many hazards, the best solution contains another danger. Abusers often threaten their victims to discourage them from telling, or threaten to hurt or kill whoever the child tells about abuse. The power of that threat can be pre-empted by warning children that such a threat might be made. Of course, that means warning children of the possibility of abuse, itself, but that's necessary, anyway, to give them an edge in resisting. Children must be taught to expect that, and how to handle it. They must ignore the threat and tell the parents. I'm assuming parents don't issue such threats, but step-parents might.

The most important thing for children to remember, is to not tell the offender that they don't believe him! To call his bluff would be a provocation to murder. When it has become standard to warn children, the way I suggest, abusers will know it, and assume that their victims will not keep it to themselves. The loss of their power to threaten a victim, might discourage some predators from trying it, at all, but the increased threat of getting caught, will be an incentive to some offenders, to kill the victim. That incentive should not usually outweigh the factors which already curb any perpetrator's inclination to eliminate the victim. 1} If the abuser is unknown to the child, he would not be too threatened with identification. He must prefer not to draw a higher level of attention, for a greater crime than he is internally compelled to commit. 2} If the abuser is someone to whom the child has been intentionally entrusted, like teachers, babysitters and relatives, the death or disappearance of the child, would immediately place her/him in the spotlight of suspicion. He/she should settle for trying to convince the victim not to talk, some way other than threatening, and just hope that enough time will pass to make prosecution

impractical. Teaching children about the threat of abuse, itself, must be easier than teaching them guile, but they must learn it for the purpose of convincing the abuser that they won't tell.

Primer

It shouldn't be very hard to enable children to protect themselves from abuse or the indifference of adults, to abuse. Here is a summary of the tactics any victim can use, in the order they should be used if the previous one doesn't work.

1) If the parents are not the offenders:

A] Tell them.

B] If your abuser threatens you, promise that you won't tell!!

2) If one of the parents is the offender:

A] Tell the other. (Be prepared for the bad parent to turn on the other. The parent you tell, might become a target of abuse, too, but, at least you have an adult ally.)

B] Outside Help: If you get no help from your other parent, or if you only have one, or if both are guilty (as in the Lizzie Borden case) tell at least two people who are certain to encounter each other. That will usually mean co-workers, like two teachers or clergy. If you can't tell two people at the same time, make sure that everyone you tell, knows who the others are. They will be less embarrassed to help you, than not to.

3) These strategies should not take long to get some help. If the person you tell, does not seem concerned, move right on to the next step. If nothing else works, or if there is no one you can trust — Tell Everyone you see, often, starting with clergy, teachers or any one you have been told to tell.

You notice that the last numbered suggestions are addressed directly to children. I realize that many will need the help, before they are old enough to read it. Obviously, adults must instill the principles in the youngest, but I think I would have grasped this text, by fifth grade. Kids should have it in print, in the home, in certain school rooms, and tucked into some notebook or such, which they carry. These days, the protocol would be loaded by app, of course. They're simple and will cover most cases.

Post Revelation Family Plan

If the abuser is a parent, it seems clear that the home should be broken up, and the child totally separated from the offender, but, as many of you already must know, the other parent will often stay. The financial support he provides might be the reason strict oversight has become one more chore in her daily life.

The question of what to do if both parents fail to protect (whether or not, one of them is the abuser) is more straightforward. They must both be removed from the child's presence. (Fifteen-to-thirty years should do it, in most states.) good behavior notwithstanding. Separating the family like that, is another difficulty for everyone, and it increases the threat of exposing the problem to the whole world, by provoking speculation, but, if both parents are guilty, that's that.

Parental Warnings Are Not Reliable Enough.

No one who wants to abuse a child, is going to warn their victim about how to deal with a culprit. Some children have only one parent in the home. No one has more than two, and one might be intimidated or even abused, herself, or might be an accomplice. Warnings must come from schools and other institutions where abusers are greatly outnumbered by their counterparts. Teachers can be expected to warn children of abuse from all quarters. Even teachers who are inclined to abuse, must educate children to the threat if they are under instruction from the school system to do so. They are also under the gaze of their peers and superiors. Should they fail to advise students, as required, they would face consequences, and even become suspected of abusive intent. I know such warnings are given to children in many places.

Relevant state and county agencies should be accessible, directly by children. (Where they don't exist, they must be established.)

2011 - 12/23/18

Work Dates

2011? - 4/ 23/ 14

7/ 02 - 08/ 15

5/ 27/ 16

4/ 23/ 17

6/23/18

10/24-31/18

12/16,18-23/18