

***Open Letter to Parents  
Regarding Childhood Sexual Abuse***



Dear Friend,

You have likely seen the recent stories about horrible sexual abuse of children and subsequent cover ups at Penn State University. You also have likely done all you can to avoid the question of “what about my child?” It is a horrible nightmare to contemplate, and it is human nature to avoid confronting something that could be so painful. Please resist the urge to put this issue aside!

**This issue is not new. It is a quiet epidemic in our country that affects one in four girls and one in six boys before the age of 18. This issue also is not “someone else’s problem.” Childhood sexual abuse ravages families across all demographics. Your child is not safe unless you make your child safe, and I want to suggest some things you can do to help.**

**Ways to Safeguard Your Child:**

A wonderful program called “Darkness2Light” suggests a number of steps you can utilize to prevent, recognize, and react to the issue of childhood sexual abuse:

**1. Learn the Facts and Understand the Risks.**

- Childhood sexual abuse thrives in an atmosphere of denial and fear.
- Sexual abuse of children happens in all communities, across all demographics.
- Yes, it can happen to your child.

**2. Minimize Opportunities for Abuse.**

- Abuse happens mostly when children and adults are in one-on-one situations.
- 93% of abusers are family members, close friends, or other close, trusted individuals.
- Background checks should be done in all organizations for all who deal with children.

**3. Talk openly about Childhood Sexual Abuse.**

- Make sure your children know that they can trust you and that secrets are different from surprises. A birthday surprise for Mommy is different than keeping a secret with Uncle Charlie.
- Have “good touch-bad touch” conversations and reminders regularly.
- Talk with your child from a young age about the body and which parts are for them alone.
- Talk among other adults – put them on notice for awareness.

**4. Stay Alert!**

- If you sense something might be wrong, do not ignore it.
- Follow up on your instincts and pursue your suspicions.
- Look for some of the signs of childhood sexual abuse: excessive bedwetting, anger, withdrawal, rebellion, genital discomfort, sexual knowledge/talk/play above their age-awareness level, reluctance to go to a certain adult’s home, self-harm.

## 5. Make a Plan.

- Know how you will react so you don't over-react in front of your child – that can be even more frightening for him and make him feel blame/guilt when he should not.
- Decide beforehand what you should do if you suspect your child is abused – calling law enforcement, child protection services, etc.
- Have resources in mind to give to others going through childhood sexual abuse.

## 6. Get Involved.

- Make sure your youth leagues, church groups, and schools all do background checks.
- Work to be sure your state enacts legislation that protects children and punishes abusers.
- Make sure places you frequent with your children are “kid safe” – keeping them out in the open and not alone with adults.

### **When You Suspect Your Child May Be Suffering:**

It is easy to talk to those who are simply protecting their children from what might happen. However, if you already suspect your child may have been sexually abused, what is your next step?

***First of all, understand that 75% of all children who reveal that they have been sexually abused do so by accident!***

This is so important to know because it informs the basic premise that you must talk to your child in certain ways if you suspect he may have been sexually abused. Even children we are 100% sure have been abused will often do all they can to avoid revealing their abuse. Why? Threats from the abuser, “promises” to keep a “secret,” fear that they will be in trouble, the mistaken belief that the abuse is “my fault.” So many reasons inform a child’s determination to keep the pain bottled up inside.

***Your role is to ask open-ended questions in a comfortable environment.*** Create an ongoing atmosphere of trust and understanding and encouragement. A child who suddenly does not want to visit a certain location (church, school, a relative’s home) should not be reprimanded for being “obstinate.” This can be a clue that a child has been molested. Ask questions that allow the child to comfortably talk about the situation: “What makes you uncomfortable about being there?” “Tell me some of the things you do while you are there?” “What kinds of games do you play?” Questions that do not suggest or lead, but that allow open conversation.

***Be sure to ask questions 4-5 different ways in various settings over the course of time.*** Initially, children will deny or re-direct the questioning – avoiding the truth. They know something about the situation is wrong, and will feel guilty about it despite the fact that it is not their fault. Give them multiple chances to answer questions *without creating a “grilling” environment.* Talk while playing ball, after reading in the evening, while relaxing in an enjoyable setting.

***More than anything else keep at it! If you sense that something is amiss, do not stifle your gut instinct.***

### **What to Do If Your Child Reveals Sexual Abuse:**

If you come to that horrifying place where your child reveals sexual abuse, whether intentionally or inadvertently, what are your most important steps?

***First, and most importantly, tell your child how much you love him and how proud you are of him for revealing his pain!*** Your child has lived with a pain and fear that is destroying him from the inside out. More than anything else, he needs to know that you are with him and you love him. This can be done in a variety of ways, depending on the age of the child. There is no substitute for saying “I love you and I am with you.” It cannot be said too often or in too many different ways. Say it and show it!

**Next, let your child know it is not his fault.** He feels guilty and at fault; he even fears punishment. Allay those fears as soon as possible and as regularly as possible. Let him know you are his advocate. Whether directly from the perpetrator or indirectly from the child's sense of "wrongness" about the situation, he feels guilty and worries that he is in trouble. Do all you can to alleviate these thoughts, but do not react in anger or frustration if they continue.

**Finally, call a professional for help!** If you do not know who to call, contact a resource in your area or nationally who can help. The Heath Evans Foundation provides free counseling in Palm Beach County, FL and in Greater New Orleans, LA, but we also have contacts with counselors and networks around the country that can help you find an experienced, licensed professional who is trained to help you and your child. **Time alone will not heal your child's wounds. He needs professional help and needs it as soon as possible.** In fact, you too will benefit from talking to a counselor about the situation.

Consider the analogy of a physical wound. If your child receives a deep cut while playing in the yard, you will immediately take him to a doctor. The doctor will clean, disinfect, and stitch the wound. Your child will have a scar, but he will heal and the impact will be small. However, if you simply wash the cut with water and put a rag on it to stop the bleeding, the wound will fester. There will be infection, fever, and profound ramifications. When you do finally see a doctor, the doctor will do everything possible to clean the wound, stitch it, and fight the infection with antibiotics. Your child may eventually heal, but the scar will be much more profound and the damage to your child will be more severe. Recovery from childhood sexual abuse is much the same. The sooner the victim receives professional help, the quicker and more thorough the recovery.

Contact us if you have any questions – [info@heathevans.org](mailto:info@heathevans.org).

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