

Rise is a magazine by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 8, FALL 2007

BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Recovering from Sexual Abuse

While few children nationwide enter foster care solely because of sexual abuse, it affects many families that are involved in the child welfare system. When parents have been sexually abused themselves, it can be even more painful to confront their children's experiences and help them heal. This issue focuses on how parents can help their children recover and break a cycle of abuse in their families.



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True Stories by Teens

Facing the Truth

When my daughter told me she was sexually abused, I listened.

BY ROSITA PAGAN

(Names have been changed.)

January 16, 1998 was a cold night. I was in my living room talking with my teenage daughter, Lyzette, when Alicia, who was 5, came out of her bedroom and told me, "Mommy, I'm tired."

"OK, go to bed, sweetie," I said.

"No, Mommy," she said, "I'm tired of being Daddy's wife."

That instant I felt numb, shocked. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Alicia repeated herself and I started to cry. Lyzette, her face full of tears, said, "I was afraid that someday he would try something with her."

How Could I Not Have Seen?

Lyzette and I had been through this before, when Alicia was just 3 months old. Lyzette had come to me and

told me that, my husband had gone into her room and felt her legs up while I slept. That day, I told him that he had two choices—he could walk out the door, or fly out the window.

I believed Alicia's father had targeted Lyzette because she was not his daughter; so I didn't think he was a threat to Alicia, his biological child. Still, I wouldn't let Alicia's father see her. He went to court and filed a petition for custody. I told my lawyer what Alicia's father had done to Lyzette, but he didn't bring it up, and I didn't tell the judge myself because I didn't want to start a huge fight in court. I feared that might hurt my case. The judge ordered me to allow Alicia to visit him on weekends.

Haunted by My Past

When Alicia confronted me with the truth, I wished I'd told the judge what had happened to Lyzette. I felt so conflicted and guilty. I didn't know

what to do to help my daughters so I just hugged them both. It wouldn't ease the pain but I wanted to let them know that I'd always be there for them.

That night, I couldn't sleep. All that ran through my mind was, "How could he?" I felt worthless as a mother. I believed I should have seen the signs, especially because my uncle raped me when I was about 6 years old. (I didn't know then that people who've been abused themselves often don't recognize the signs of abuse in their children.)

The pain I felt being raped as a child came back to me when I thought about what my daughter had been through. I knew I didn't want to respond the way my mother did—she didn't believe me. Being raped haunted me for a long time.

I had thought the distrust and fear

that I'd felt from being raped was behind me. But my fears came back when Alicia told me she was molested. I thought, "Is this ever going to end? Will it just go on from generation to generation?"

Although I felt despair that night, I knew that I had to do whatever Alicia and Lyzette needed me to do to help them heal. I wouldn't do what my mother did. I was determined to stop that cycle.

Strange Behaviors

After Alicia told me she'd been abused, I noticed that she began to act strangely. When she was playing alone, she would lay down her stuffed animals, get on top of them and start humping them like a man would make love to a woman. That freaked me out. I didn't know then that it is common for girls who've been sexually abused to "act out" like that.

I decided I needed a beer, so I took one and then another. That night I must have drunk six or eight beers. I felt good for the first time in months. The beer made me forget feeling down.

'What Good Am I?'

The next day when Alicia came home from school, I drank while watching her. As the months passed my drinking got heavier and heavier, to the point that I couldn't function without having a beer first. I began to think it didn't matter if I was drunk or sober. I hadn't been able to protect my children, and I couldn't help them to recover, so what good was I?

About a year later, the foster care system took my children from me.

It's a long story what happened when my children got taken away. The nightmare of sexual abuse had turned into a worse nightmare—the night-



ILLUSTRATION BY RUDA TILLET

Deficit Disorder (ADD) and treated her for that.

Finally, Proper Care

When my children moved to a second foster home, the mother understood the signs. She asked me, "Has Alicia ever been molested?"

"Yes," I said. "Why are you asking me this question?"

"Because Alicia does some sexual things that are strange for a girl her age," she told me. But she didn't know how to handle her behavior, either. Whenever she saw Alicia touching herself, she would tell Alicia to stand in a corner for a long time.

Neither of the first two therapists

that Alicia saw were able to help her at all, but I was sure someone could. Once my girls came home I went to the Northside Center in Harlem and explained to the intake person that Alicia was molested and had ADD.

The social worker who did an evaluation told me Alicia didn't have ADD, she was just dealing with the trauma of being abused. Finally, she began to get the proper care.

Alicia was seen by a social worker, Susan, who took the time to earn Alicia's trust. That helped Alicia open up and speak about the abuse. Alicia felt comfortable with Susan. She looked forward to seeing her every Friday. She would tell me, "Mom, today I'm going to visit Susan and we

I felt worthless as a mother. I hadn't been able to protect my children, and I couldn't help them to recover, so what good was I?

Alicia also started to touch herself. One night when she was in the bath, I noticed that she was very quiet. I went to check up on her and saw her touching her private area. I screamed and she got scared.

"What are you doing?" I said. I didn't mean to embarrass her, but I couldn't believe that a 5 year old was capable of masturbating.

Alicia told me, "What the lady does on TV." I wondered, "Was he having her watch porn?" I felt that if Alicia's father was present I would have strangled him with my bare hands.

After I finished bathing her, I got a knot in my throat and an eerie feeling. I sat in the living room, thinking, "Why is this happening? Why does she have to go through this?" I started crying.

mare of being absolutely unable to protect my kids.

Finally I was sent to detox and to rehab upstate. Once I'd been sober for a month or so, I started feeling better about myself and began to believe I could get my life back on track. I told myself, "I have to get my family back. I'm not worthless. I can accomplish things if I make an effort."

Therapists Who Didn't Help

The first foster mother had the girls for one year, but during that time, no one told her that Alicia had been sexually abused. The foster mother couldn't handle Alicia's sexual acting out. She was a religious person and she couldn't believe that a little girl would act that way.

The caseworker took Alicia to therapy, but she didn't tell the therapist about the abuse, either. The doctor diagnosed Alicia with Attention

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are going to talk and play. I like Susan a lot.”

Trust and Understanding

At every session, Susan would give me a note explaining Alicia’s progress, and twice a month we would meet as a family. In her notes, Susan would explain what she asked Alicia and how Alicia responded. Susan asked her, “Why do you feel you have to touch yourself?”

“Because sometimes it feels good.”

“What if you don’t touch yourself? How do you feel?”

“I feel bored.”

One practical thing Susan suggested was that I keep Alicia occupied by asking her to do chores, reminding her to read a book, or giving her questions to answer. Susan also suggested that we could grow closer if I just made conversation with Alicia. I started to ask her, “Did you make any friends today? How was school? What did you eat for lunch?”

A Little Girl Again

She also suggested that, because touching herself was something Alicia felt she had to do, I shouldn’t leave her alone for long periods of time, including when she showered. Over time, she thought Alicia’s impulse to touch herself would calm down and that she would be able to return to being a little girl. That way she could safely explore her sexuality once she got older.

Those eight months Alicia went to Northside helped her cope with her feelings. She stopped the sexual behaviors and she learned not to be afraid to talk to me, regardless of the topic. Now she even asks me questions about sex at times, and I explain the answers to her without feeling upset about the past.

We Both Had to Heal

Alicia’s therapy helped me feel more at ease. The sexual abuse seemed to be having less of an impact on her day by day. It seemed like my whole family was finally beginning to recover.

Today, I feel like my family is not as marked by the abuse or by fear. I am proud of myself and my daughters. We broke the cycle of denial in my family. I faced what my daughters went through, and I faced my own past, too.

My daughter needed therapy and I needed rehab to make me love myself again and help me deal with negative feelings like shame, betrayal and worthlessness. But I believe that today my daughters and I are better off because we didn’t hide. We were strong enough to face the truth.

Family Secrets

Sexual abuse is common but often hidden.

While few children enter foster care solely because of sexual abuse, studies suggest that foster youth are twice as likely as other children to have experienced sexual abuse, whether at home or since entering the system. Lisa Lubell, director of the Child Sexual Abuse Education, Evaluation and Treatment Project at Lawyers for Children, talks about why.

The number of children in foster care who have been sexually abused is very high. There are many reasons for that. But basically, children whose parents are unable to care for them, or who are not living with their biological family, are vulnerable to being preyed upon.

Alone and Afraid

In biological homes where there’s neglect, the parents may not be too focused on the child because they’re so involved in their own struggles, whether it’s with mental illness, substance abuse or sometimes just survival. A parent’s lack of focus on the child, or lack of connection, can make the child more vulnerable to sexual abuse, because an abuser sees that the child is not protected. The parents may also not pick up the signs that something is wrong.

Older kids sometimes come into care because of acting out behaviors that their parents can’t handle, and underlying those behaviors is sexual abuse that the kids haven’t told their parents about. Common behaviors are running away, and symptoms of trauma that look like acting out, such as suicidal behaviors, self-cutting, aggression, fire setting, sexual behaviors (such as excessive masturbation or sexual play in younger children, or having many partners in older children) that are considered too advanced for their age or unacceptable to a parent.

Usually the abuse was by a relative or someone who lives in the home—abuse is most commonly committed by people the kids know—and the kids have a real fear of disclosing the abuse to their parent. Kids fear that their parent’s loyalty will be to person who abused them, or they feel ashamed, or they’ve gotten a silent message from their parent not to talk about this kind of thing. They also fear the consequences to the rest of the family if they were to tell, and they feel they need to protect their family. But their behaviors show the abuse.

Kids can also be abused in their foster homes, where they become accessible to a variety of

adults—including group home staff, or older children in the home—who sometimes will take advantage of a kid who they think is powerless. Many times children in foster care really do feel powerless and isolated, so they don’t speak up. Some are so desperate for connection and relationship that sexual abuse seems to give them the attention and nurturance they crave, even though it is actually abusive. It’s a tragic consequence of the system that doesn’t make them safer.

Teen girls in care also are particularly vulnerable to getting into relationships with older men or getting drawn into prostitution or other kinds of sexual exploitation. That can happen because early sexual abuse puts them at risk of developing sexually inappropriate relationships, and also because in care they may live in environments, like group homes or residential centers, where it seems that girls are really preyed upon by older males.

Once in care, kids with sexual abuse histories also are more likely to be moved from placement to placement, because foster parents and caseworkers often misinterpret behaviors that are the result of the trauma, and become punitive towards kids for behaviors that the kids may not have control over.

A Family History

Finally, many birth parents of children in foster care have experienced sexual abuse in their own lives. That can be an underlying reason why birth parents might get depressed or turn to drugs.

When parents have never opened up about their abuse, or weren’t believed if they did, they learn a pattern of not allowing themselves to believe that it happened and could happen again. They also learn a pattern of protecting the family from the system or from looking bad, instead of responding to the needs of the child.

Sexual abuse is devastating, and has painful, traumatic effects on children and their families. It can seem too painful and shameful to believe. So it’s natural to react by saying, “This can’t be happening,” and shut down against believing it, even when you know the truth. As difficult as it can be to support a child when she comes forward, it’s so important for parents to validate a child’s experience, report the abuse to a professional and help the child recover.

'I'm Glad You Told Me'

How to help your child (and yourself) recover from sexual abuse.

Karen D'Angelo, a clinical psychologist at the Institute for Trauma and Resilience at the New York University Child Study Center, explains how parents can help their children recover from sexual abuse, and how parents and kids can stay safe physically and emotionally.

Q: What are signs that a child may have been sexually abused?

A: Any sudden changes in behavior can be signs of trauma: suddenly having trouble in school, sleeping less or more, appetite changes, and mood changes such as being sad or angry more, wanting to be around people more or less.

Specific to sexual abuse are some physical symptoms—any discomfort or itching in the genital area, not wanting to change clothes in front of certain people, being uncomfortable with nudity, or not wanting to be around a particular person.

If you notice your child spending a lot of time alone with one person, or that someone is seeking them out, it's appropriate to be concerned. Think carefully before leaving child alone with one adult. For childcare, seek out group situations if possible. If a relationship is at all unsettling to you, go with your instincts and be careful.

Q: How can parents help a child feel comfortable speaking up about abuse?

A: There are many reasons why children feel they have to keep the abuse a secret. They may fear they'll be blamed or not believed. They may have a relationship with the abuser and care about that person and not want him or her to be punished. The abuser may also threaten or encourage a child not to tell, so they might be afraid of what could happen if they do.



ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLINA ZANIBENICO

Q: How can a parent help a child recover?

A: It's really important for the parent to provide a supportive atmosphere and to remind the child that they're safe. Listen to your child, talk to her, and help your child go about her daily life. It's important to keep up structure and routine, including school. Sometimes when there's been a trauma and a family is stressed, routines get lost, but children really need structure. Parents naturally want to protect their child even more, and it's a fine balance. You want to show your child you will keep them safe, but also that they don't have to be afraid all of the time.

Some children show sexually inappropriate behaviors. Children who are abused or raped also may have difficulty with maintaining appropriate boundaries because

their own boundaries were violated. They may not know how to say no. Parents can talk with their children, including teenagers, about what is appropriate and inappropriate sexually.

At times, young people can become promiscuous because they have trouble saying no or maintaining their boundaries. We don't want to blame them, but empower them to make their own decisions about their bodies and help them improve their self-esteem.

It's important for parents to realize their child will feel better and their life is not ruined. Children are resilient and most go on to have normal lives.

Q: When should parents seek help for their children?

A: Many times, it's helpful to seek counseling. Parents can find out about resources from school person-

A therapist is helpful, but a supportive parent is the child's best resource.

In general, it's always good to talk to your children about their daily activities, feelings, concerns and problems. You want to create an environment where kids can talk to their parents. As a preventive measure, it's good to tell your children, 'If someone ever touches you or makes you feel uncomfortable, talk to me right away.' That helps children feel their parent would be open to hearing what's happened and will be supportive.

Q: What's a positive way to react if your child tells you they were sexually abused?

A: The most important thing is to

believe what your child tells you and reassure them it's not their fault. Praise your child for telling you, saying, "You've done the right thing, and I will take steps to keep you safe from now on." Report the abuse and make sure the abuser no longer has contact with the child.

When you're talking to the child about what happened, stay as calm as possible. That doesn't mean you shouldn't express sadness or pain, but children are very sensitive about not wanting to upset their parents, and they may stop talking when they think the parent can't handle it.

A Responsibility to Report

What to do if your child reveals sexual abuse.

nel, a doctor, a religious organization, or friends and family. If you see the symptoms described earlier persisting for more than a few weeks, it's time to get help.

When a child is in therapy, it's always good for the parent to be involved. Therapists may see the child individually at times, and with the parent at other times. A therapist is helpful, but a supportive parent is the child's best resource. One of the best things a therapist can do is empower the parents to take care of their child. A parent may feel similar emotions to their child: anger, guilt, sadness, or they may blame themselves. A therapist can help both the parent and child.

There are specific therapies that target the trauma itself and have been shown to be effective. The specific techniques may vary, but trauma-focused therapy involves helping the child to talk about what happened, providing support, and teaching coping skills, not only related to the abuse but to all stress. Children and parents can learn to relax, regulate their emotions, and cope with negative feelings—not avoid negative feelings, but express them without interfering in their ability to function and do well.

Q: How can it affect a parent if she has her own history of sexual abuse?

A: When parents have also been victims of sexual abuse, it can be difficult to separate their own feelings about their abuse from their child's feelings. It might help them understand what their child is going through. However, it might also bring up painful feelings.

Parents who are struggling with their own feelings might want to seek their own counseling to help them get back to a place where they can be the parent. Sometimes the best thing a parent can do for their child is make sure they themselves are OK and supported.



ILLUSTRATION BY ODESSA STRAUB

A caseworker will look for proof that the parent took action to prevent the abuser from being in contact with the child.

Stacey Platt, the associate director of the Loyola Child Law Center in Chicago, explains how a parent whose child has been sexually abused can protect the child and protect the family from a child welfare investigation:

The law doesn't offer a formula for how a parent should respond if a child says she was sexually abused by someone in the family or in the home. But there are general standards for child neglect or failure to protect a child from harm. These are suggestions for how to respond.

No Further Contact

The first step is ensuring that your child is protected from future sexual abuse by preventing the abuser from having access to your child. One way to do that is to go to the police to have the person arrested.

Another is to seek an order of protection that bars that person from your home, either through the criminal system or through the civil courts.

Let's say a mother finds out that her live-in boyfriend has sexually abused her daughter. She could put him out of the house and get an order of protection against him. Some might say she should also try to have him arrested. If a caseworker is called in, the most important thing she'll look for is proof that the parent took action to prevent the abuser from being in contact with the child.

The parent's action would definitely have to be more forceful than saying, "I don't want you to come here," or, "From now on I'll just make sure that I'm here too." That

would put your child in danger of removal. If a child has been abused by someone, even letting the child see that person can be considered harmful.

Physical and Mental Health Care

The second step is taking specific steps to take care of the child's needs arising from the sexual abuse. That would include taking child to the doctor for a medical check up in case there's an STD or any physical harm. Failing to take a child for a medical examination could be seen as neglect.

You also would probably want to take your child to a mental health provider that specializes in trauma or sexual abuse and get an assessment. I don't think every child who has been molested needs to be in therapy, but if your child is telling you about the abuse, they may need help dealing with what happened, not only from you but also from a professional.

Not taking these steps could lead to an investigation or removal. When you take your child to a doctor, mental health professional, or the police, they may call the abuse hotline, since they're mandated reporters.

Even if you don't believe, you can get into difficulty if you don't believe what your child says. Whether or not the abuse happened, not believing your child can create a lot of problems. Caseworkers tend to be very judgmental about that and failing to take the follow up steps could lead to removal.

Caseworkers make good decision—sand bad decisions. But if you can show that you're protecting your child from future trauma, and helping your child heal physically and mentally, that's what's reasonably required of you.

There and Back

One painful day ripped my family apart. Fifteen years later, we're coming together again.

BY BEVANJAE KELLEY

When my daughter was 12, she was kidnapped and sexually assaulted. She went through the trauma of being raped and left to die. This had a devastating impact on her life and mine. She is only now, 15 years later, beginning to heal.

It happened one morning when I left home early to go to a job interview and my children, Pilar and Maurice, were late getting ready for school. Maurice missed the bus and Pilar decided to walk him to his school, which was in a problem neighborhood.

After she dropped him off, she headed back toward her school. Two young men approached her and took her to an abandoned house where they tied her up and assaulted her and left her there alone. She was there for eight hours until the owner happened to come by and find her.

'We Found Your Daughter'

I found out that she was missing at about 11 a.m. The school called because Pilar did not show up. I became frantic. I immediately called the police to file a missing person report.

They started looking for my daughter. Hours went by and felt like forever. Detectives kept questioning my mother and me. I felt so guilty for not being home that morning. I told myself, "This would never have happened if I did not have to leave so early. I'm a bad mother."

Finally I received a call from the police. "We found your daughter. She is OK. Please meet us at the emergency room." When my sister and I arrived at the hospital, I was allowed to be with my daughter for the examination. I tried my hardest to be reassuring, telling her, "Everything will be all right," stroking her hair, kissing her and telling her that she would never be alone.



We went to therapy as a family, and I tried to be supportive, but I was overwhelmed by what happened to my daughter. I was disgusted with myself and depressed.

We went to therapy as a family, moved out of that neighborhood, and my husband and I tried to be supportive, but because my husband and I were not getting along and I was overwhelmed by what happened to my daughter, I was disgusted with myself and depressed. Looking back, I wish I could've been more affectionate and patient with my daughter. I wish I'd been stronger for her and that I could've reached out to her more.

Getting raped affected Pilar in so many ways. My daughter had nightmares, she began bedwetting and she became depressed. Her grades dropped dramatically and by the time she entered high school her interests turned to trying to fit in with a peer group that had also had bad experiences. They were loud,

obnoxious and disrespectful, speaking whatever came to their minds. I think my daughter valued their friendship because she could express her pain around them.

My daughter also became rebellious and sexually active with any guy that would give her attention. I learned through therapy that being raped might make someone either afraid of intimacy or promiscuous. I don't know why, but she became promiscuous.

Upset and Confused

When my husband and I would speak to her, my daughter said that she liked the roughneck look and the boys with the thug attitudes, and that they were not boring like her father and I, who were too straight. She told me I was a Miss Goody Two Shoes.

When we tried to protect her by putting her on punishment—no telephone, no company, must be in the house by 9 p.m.—she would still do whatever she wanted, playing hooky or even running away for months.

In my head, I knew that these behaviors were the symptoms of what had happened to her. But in my heart, I felt angry at my daughter because she would not even try to give the therapy a chance. Instead of exploring what happened, she just told me that what happened to her was my fault. Her father would point some blame my way, too.

As my helplessness and guilt turned into bitterness and anger, I questioned my love for my child, my beautiful daughter.

My daughter was only 17 when she had her daughter, Cyre. The first year, Pilar lived with us. While she was not necessarily doting, she was caring and tried her best.

Then, one year later, my husband died following a long illness. We were all in pain and feeling vulnerable. My daughter had been the apple of her father's eye. I believe she was the

most devastated when he died.

Not a Whole Person

A year after that, Pilar gave birth to Ayanna and moved out with her daughters. For a long time already she'd been drinking and smoking weed, but once she moved, it started to affect her parenting. She began leaving her children with strangers and not coming back to pick them up for a few days. Or she'd smoke weed and drink until she passed out in a deep sleep, unaware of what her children were doing. Once when I was there, Cyre was hungry and I saw her go to eat the cat food.

I felt angry, scared and ashamed. I thought of myself as a caring and nurturing mother, but somehow I failed my daughter. How could I have raised a daughter who would neglect her child? I blamed myself for her behavior.

I tried to empathize. I knew that Pilar wasn't a whole person. She was still grieving from her injuries and the death of her father. But even when I tried to help, Pilar took my actions as criticism, a personal assault, like I was the enemy in a war between us.

The City Stepped In

When she rejected me, she made me feel like I meant nothing to her, like I was a nobody in the street. I felt so frustrated and sad. All I wanted was for her to snap out of it!

Since I couldn't seem to help her, over the next few months I began stay away from my daughter more and more. I traveled a lot, visiting my siblings and mother, dealing with my own grief, and focusing on my son.

Then one night I received a call from my daughter, crying. "They took my kids, Ma! I don't know where they took them!"

"Who?"

"ACS and the police."

When ACS (New York City's child welfare system) came into her life, Pilar and I talked about what to do. Eventually, my daughter agreed to let the judge terminate her parental rights and I adopted her two children. We discussed that she would still be in their lives and that she could get herself together and take them back.

When they came into my care, Cyre was almost 4 and Ayanna was 14 months. Now they're 11 and 8. I can't believe I've had them 7 years.

It was not easy for me to become a parent again. It's exhausting, physically and emotionally.

I thought of myself as a caring and nurturing mother, but somehow I failed my daughter. How could I have raised a daughter who would neglect her child?

Even so, I embraced her children as my daughters. I put Cyre into pre-K, potty trained Ayanna and weaned her from the bottle. From the beginning, Ayanna had a warm, affectionate, happy disposition. Cyre, on the other hand, acted stubborn and angry and threw tantrums. Cyre had lived with her mother for longer, and she missed her more.

Bizarre Behavior

At the time I took her daughters, I think Pilar was relieved. She was definitely very overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for her two small girls. But I think that my daughter also felt ashamed and alone when she lost her kids. The first few years that my granddaughters lived with

me, Pilar had very little contact with the girls and me. She would talk to them on the phone and make a plan to see them, but would not keep her word.

I found out later that she had formed a close relationship with the family of her new boyfriend, and that she eventually had two more girls with him. It was very hard for me when I didn't know where Pilar was or how she was doing. I don't think she knew how to handle our relationship either.

One day when she visited I noticed she'd put on weight, but she didn't tell me she was pregnant. The next time she came, she put a baby carrier down in the living room and asked me, "Do you think you'll like your new granddaughter?" I was very angry at Pilar for how she was treat-

ing her daughters and me. That time in our lives felt very strange and out of control.

Looking back on my relationship with my daughter is hard for me. It's easier for me to focus on our lives now, because things are finally getting better for her and me.

After she spent a short time in jail in 2001, Pilar became serious about turning her life around. She said that she never wanted to be locked up ever again, and since then she has truly grown as a woman and parent. She finished a training program that helped her get her life together. Since then she has been working and has

moved into an apartment of her own

Forgiving Myself

With the two daughters she has at home, she makes sure they get to school on time, do all their homework, go to bed on time, and respect their peers as well as adults. She makes them her priority. It gives me great pride to know that my daughter has come a long way in the last three years. I feel that we are getting over most of the hurdles. We are more loving toward each other and respectful.

It helps that, through years of individual and family therapy, I have been able to give myself permission to forgive myself for not being able to heal my daughter. I think my daughter has forgiven me, too.

We Are Family

I've also changed my style of parenting with Pilar's daughters. I have been more patient and I show my affection more by hugging and praising my granddaughters. I'm proud of how I've changed, and I think Pilar is proud of me, too.

Every weekend now Pilar either visits the girls at my home, or the girls stay with her. Having more contact with their mother means so much to them, especially Cyre. The visits and therapy have helped Cyre become less aggressive and worrisome. She even laughs a little more.

There are some things that I will never know or understand about my daughter, but I'm so glad that she has reached out to me again. She is asking my advice, and she recently became engaged and asked me to be part of planning her wedding reception. I gladly accepted.

Although I don't know what the future holds for us, my daughter and I know that we are family.

Child Protection

Working with foster parents to keep your child safe.

Many times children do not reveal that they've been sexually abused until months or years later. If children are in care when they open up about what happened to them, ideally the birth parents and foster parents can work together to support the child, says Mary Boncher, chief psychologist at New York Foundling Hospital. Here she explains how:



ILLUSTRATION BY SHANELL ALLISON

It's so important for both parents and foster parents to receive proper training and support, because they are the primary people who can help a child. Caregivers can do three things to help a child: learn about your child's trauma; know that children can heal with your help; and be involved. Often it's the foster parent who brings the child to treatment and learns from the therapist how to support the child. But parents should talk with their agency about how they can be involved.

Connecting Is a Challenge

Parents and foster parents face challenges learning to work together. Foster parents may wonder, "Why didn't this parent protect this child?"

The birth parent may feel guilt and shame that can show itself as anger.

A lot of discussion needs to happen for parents and foster parents to work together. But what we see is that, when caregivers can work together effectively, they experience a tremendous relief and even joy.

Learning About Trauma

A therapist should help parents and foster parents understand the impact of trauma. Besides the sexual abuse, children in foster care often have experienced multiple other traumas, including the trauma of being separated from their parent. What we know is that multiple traumas over time can impact the brain, changing

the child's behavior in ways the child cannot control.

Some children who have experienced trauma may get angry and aggressive very quickly, or go through mood swings from a very young age. Upsetting feelings can be triggered by small things—a laugh or smell—that remind the child of the abuse.

Most parents and foster parents believe, "If I can give this child love, that is all the child needs to heal." But sexual abuse can lead a child to reject the people who care about her. Children who have been sexually abused may have had the abuse disguised as love. Loving gestures may set off a child's fear or anger that abuse will occur again.

Sharing Techniques

A child's patterns can be altered, but it takes a lot of work. For instance, caregivers can learn to notice early cues that a child is responding to abuse memories, like tension in the child's body or an expression on his face, and help that child relax and think through what is happening in

the present. With younger children, we teach them to stiffen up like a dry noodle and relax like a wet noodle.

One of the most upsetting behaviors for many caregivers is that children who have been sexually abused sometimes masturbate inappropriately. Our automatic response to say, "No, stop doing that," is necessary but not enough. Maybe that helps the child feel calmer in a difficult situation. So we need to find out, "What other coping skills can we begin to teach this child?"

Teaching the child the words that express their feelings is one coping skill. A caregiver can say, "If you're feeling badly, you can tell me in words how you're feeling."

If the birth parent is not going to therapy with the child, the foster parent and therapist need to help the birth parent learn what sets the child off and what helps the child relax. That way, the birth parent can use the techniques that work for their child.

Into the Fire

When children are abused in care.

When a child is sexually abused in foster care, parents can feel helpless and betrayed. Leslie Heimov, policy director at The Children's Law Center of Los Angeles, explains how parents can protect their children even if they're apart.

Q: What is the impact on children and families when sexual abuse occurs in the foster care system?

A: When a child enters the foster care system, they may have already had their trust violated by their family of origin. Now they are put in a situation intended to protect them and they are failed again. That can lead

children to be extremely reluctant to trust, and this can impact a child in every aspect of his life. When a child doesn't trust adults, it can be hard to function in school. When a child doesn't trust peers, it can be hard to make friends. But some kids are amazingly resilient, and some rise up and become strong.

When a child is sexually abused in care, the parent will understandably be extremely angry. They will think, "My child was better off with me. Maybe I didn't have the best home, but I wasn't sexually abusing my child." Parents can also feel guilty, because they can think, "If I was

not in that first situation, my child wouldn't have been exposed to this second situation."

Q: What can parents do to try to keep their child safe in foster care?

A: No one has a crystal ball, but the more contact you have with your child the better. Being really involved in your child's life shows that your child is protected and gives you the opportunity to see any warning signs. Encourage your child to feel comfortable talking about anything bothering them, and try to develop strong and positive relationships with the foster parent. Say your child says, "I like

my foster home, but sometimes my foster mother's nephew comes over and gives me the creeps." If you have a good relationship with the foster parent, you can share that information with her. Even while your child is in care, you still have a role as a strong and caring advocate for your child.

And of course you should report any warning signs of sexual abuse to your own attorney, to your child's attorney, to the social worker, to the caregiver, to the therapist, or to anyone else involved with your child.

I Thought I'd Healed

Flashbacks are haunting me again.

BY ANONYMOUS

(Names have been changed.)

It's been six years since the judge granted me an order of protection from my father, but any reminder of his presence still alarms me and memories of the abuse he put me through haunt me.

Recently, after about a year of dating my boyfriend, Kevin, I began to have frightening reminders of the sexual abuse I experienced as a child. Sometimes I get nightmares and wake up in cold sweat in the middle of the night, or get flashbacks when I'm in the shower or when I'm rubbing lotion against my skin.

Painful Memories

I remember one dreary evening waking up to the heavy scent of tobacco (my father was a smoker) though no one was in the house at the time. I felt his presence nearby. My skin began to crawl and horrible feelings of my father depriving me of my childhood tormented me all over again. I cried, holding my underwear tightly against my skin.

Since the flashbacks started, I've been uncomfortable having sex with my boyfriend, even though my boyfriend is not abusive toward me. I've started to feel as if I wasn't even in the room, or like I was a doll being rocked back and forth in a cradle while my boyfriend had sex with me. I wanted to tell Kevin, or stop having sex with him, but I was afraid he wouldn't understand.

Protecting Myself

I was shocked these feelings were coming back. After all, I'd had boyfriends before. I thought I had healed from abuse.

When I became a teenager, memories of the abuse led me to grow protective of my body. I hated getting attention from men. When shopping for clothes, I made sure that nothing

I bought was too revealing. I kept myself covered up to avoid any boys from piercing their eyes at me. I would be the only fool wearing a black denim jacket while roasting in 90 degree weather.

A Healing Love

When I was 14 I met my first boyfriend, Jonathan. I couldn't seem to help the fluttery feelings I got around him. I was afraid of another man taking advantage of me, but felt lured closer and closer.

Luckily, he was an absolute gentleman and made me feel like a princess. He would always treat me and take me out on dates. He never rushed me in to kissing him or having sex. He sensed that I felt a bit uncomfortable around him and that was OK with him. He was understanding and gave me time to adjust. For once, I had a sense of control and that felt good.

I used to fear and hate all men. Now I am learning that some men can be trusted.

Confused Once Again

But now, at 18, after two sexual partners and three breakups, my feelings of fear and detachment have come back. Once again, I feel like a victim, taunted by my past. I hate that I feel this way.

The flashbacks grew stronger as Kevin and I began having conflicts



I wasn't sure what was going on with me. I had no grip. I'd lost the control I had longed for. And what had happened to my values and my self-esteem?

Trying to Rebuild

After two years, he announced that he wanted "a break." As much as I'd often longed for the same thing, I was furious and desperate.

about control, because for a long time, I held all of the power in our relationship. I was so fearful of losing control that I was willing to fight for my advantage. When I yelled at Kevin, I was yelling at him and my father—any man who tried to manipulate and make a fool out of me. Soon we were arguing non-stop.

Deep down we were both trying to prove something to one another. Kevin was also in foster care, abandoned by his mother, and our relationship probably raised fears in him, too, that neither one of us could understand.

Hiding from My Feelings

When I didn't feel in control of our relationship, I didn't feel comfortable having sex. But I didn't tell Kevin because I didn't want him to feel uneasy and worried around me, or to feel like I was accusing him of abusing me. Besides, I wasn't even sure that I understood what I was feeling. I just wanted our relationship to feel the way it used to.

Trying to hide how I felt, I sometimes ended up drinking to make it easier for me to not feel ashamed of doing things I didn't want to do. Then, after a while, I started to feel like I didn't care anymore about how I felt. I found myself saying, "All that matters is that Kevin loves me."

Eventually, though, we decided to try to work things out, by taking things a bit more slowly. We both want to rebuild our trust in each other and stop fighting for control.

I'm trying hard to separate the past from the present. Kevin isn't my father. Though we argue, Kevin does not intend to harm me.

Lately Kevin and I have been doing a lot of talking and hanging out and going to the movies. We've found lots of other activities to do together rather than have sex. I enjoy the time we're spending together because we're learning more new things about one another; learning each other's likes and dislikes, and I don't have to feel so much pressure to have sex. I would like our relationship to remain this way until I feel ready for sex.

A Slow Recovery

I am aware that it may be a long time until I can recover from the abuse I went through. But I can also see how far I've come. I used to fear and hate all men. Now I am learning that some men, including Kevin, can be trusted.

Now I have to stop taking out my anger on Kevin, and I have to try not to control him. I hope he can do the same for me.

'I'm Sorry'

A sex offender tells his story.

BY ANONYMOUS

When I was a child, I was sexually abused by my father. I wanted his love and companionship, I just didn't want the touching. But I didn't want to lose the relationship I had with him either, so I didn't tell him to stop.

Instead, I found another way to escape. When I was being abused, I would feel myself floating up to the ceiling. It let me go out of my body and detach my emotions.

Scared to Be Found Out

I was an adult with a family of my own when I found I was fantasizing a lot about having sexual contact. But the more I thought about sex, the person became not a person, but more of an idea, just a thing to touch.

I was married and I had 8 children, 5 girls and 3 boys. My children have told me that at the time I was hostile and aggressive and angry all the time. Even though there were some good times, I created an environment that was a nightmare, a terror, and they dreaded me coming home.

'This Is Wrong'

Then I began to sexually abuse my children and two of my daughters' girlfriends, who were around 14 or 15.

I would look in their bedroom at night to check to see if they were in bed, like I had since they were little girls, and then I'd fondle them. I would tell myself, "This is certainly something I don't want to do. I won't ever do it again."



ILLUSTRATION BY PABLO GUERRERO

Then I would start thinking about touching again, and I would get aroused. I realized I had a problem, but part of me just shut down and denied it. I was very scared that if I was found out I would lose my position and my family, that I would have to admit what I had done wrong to the ones I had abused.

I Admitted My Guilt

Then one of my daughters went to her godfather and told him what had been happening. He said, "I've known Nick a long time and I don't believe he would do that. But if it's true, let's go talk to him about it." My daughter said she wanted to deal with it herself. But he said he would only give her a short time. Otherwise, his conscience and his manhood mandated that he go talk to me.

Eventually he asked me, "Nick, have you been sexually molesting your daughters?" And I said, "What are

you talking about?" He said, "Nick, I'm sorry to have to ask you this as a friend. Have you been sexually molesting your daughters?" And I said, "Yes, I have."

On the Brink

It was shocking to me and it was shocking to him. We were both afraid of what might happen, that there might be a violent blow up. I suggested I call my wife and let her know what had happened, and tell her it was my fault and not the children's fault.

After that, he was supportive, understanding, firm. He didn't know if I might commit suicide. That was something I thought about myself. I thought it might be

the best thing if that's what it took to make the world safe. All of my family pleaded with me and they said that whatever I had done, it would be far worse if I killed myself, because then they would have to deal with that too.

family," and I went to jail.

When I went to jail, I was shocked. There were about 100 people in my wing, and about 85 out of 100 admitted to me that they had been involved in child sexual abuse. Some were very motivated to change, very aware; some were still in denial; and some didn't think what they did was wrong. Those were the people who really horrified me.

I did want to change, and for me group therapy helped. Talking about what happened was like coming back alive again, becoming a real person rather than a fake. I was alive rather than dead and dying. I was filled with hope rather than a nightmare. I couldn't correct what had happened in the past, but I could set guidelines to prevent it in the future.

'Something Is Wrong'

First, I had to deal with the fact that I had been abused myself. The hardest thing to accept is that it really did happen. You want to say, "No, no, no." But I couldn't heal till I had accepted that I had experienced it.

If I had to say one thing to a victim, I would say, 'I'm so sorry for what I did. Me, I did it. It's not your fault. I was the one who was wrong.'

Imprisoned

We went to family therapy and then I turned myself into the D.A. [a government prosecutor]. I said, "Here I am," and he said, "You should go talk to a lawyer." And I said, "I won't do that. I won't put myself up against my

Then I needed to deal with what I had done. By sharing our stories in group therapy, we saw patterns to watch out for. For instance, if I'm in a cycle and I'm depressed and angry, and then I start drinking and drugging, and then I start fantasizing, I have to stop myself, or pick up the phone

Taking Responsibility

Why people sexually abuse and how they can stop.

BY ANONYMOUS

and call my therapist, or call a friend, and say, "Something is wrong."

Living Honestly

Some of my children opted not to talk to me, and some were prevented by a restraining order. Still, I was grateful that four out of eight of them have made contact with me since that time. They've told me that they're glad I'm living honestly, they're glad I'm in therapy.

I've done some public speaking now about being a sexual abuser and they're very supportive of that work. I think they would have been filled with hatred if I had not been honest and open.

They've been to therapy too. One of them, like me, made the decision to talk openly with other people about the abuse.

When my father abused me, part of me hated him and wanted revenge, and part of me loved him. The fact that I felt love for him was incomprehensible to me.

When I confronted him about the abuse, he refused to talk about it, so I had to find other ways of coming to terms with it. I had to realize that he was the person who was sick and troubled and that I didn't do anything wrong as a child. It was important to get rid of that guilt that I participated in it, even unwillingly, that I had my body react, even if I couldn't control it.

'I'm Sorry'

If I had to say one thing to a victim, I would say, "I'm so sorry for what I did. Me, I did it. It's not your fault. I was the one who was wrong. Don't attack yourself. Attack what I did. I know I can never make it up to you, but I'm going to show you that I'm trying to change."

And I would say, "You need to get help for yourself, not from me, but get help. If I had gotten help earlier, I don't think I would have done as much abuse as I did."

The author shared his story through Stop It Now!, which runs the sexual abuse helpline 1-888-PREVENT.

Being a victim of sexual abuse was traumatic, and for years, I hated the world for what my father did to me. I couldn't understand how he or anyone could brutally abuse a child.

Over time, I grew curious about what would drive someone to sexually abuse. Though nothing could justify sexually abusing a child, I wanted at least to understand what leads people like my father to abuse, and how abusers can get help. I hoped understanding would bring me closure.

So I interviewed Terry DeCrescenzo, the executive director of GLASS, an organization that works with teens who've "engaged in sexually inappropriate conduct," including sexually abusing children.

Q: What are some reasons why people become sex offenders?

A: Well, people behave that way for a number of reasons. The first is that, if they themselves were abused sexually when they were younger, they might end up offending because they begin to think that that's the way people are supposed to behave.

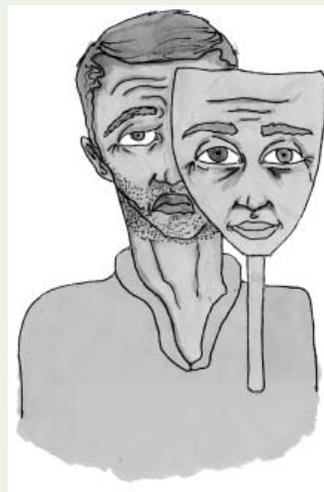
Others may know better but go ahead anyway and behave the way they have been treated because they have a feeling of wanting to get even by doing it to someone else.

Sometimes it's simply because of opportunity—they're in a certain place at a certain time, they become sexually aroused, and they don't have the maturity to refrain from the behavior.

For some, mental illness drives them, some because of drug abuse.

Q: Is it true that offenders were usually sexually abused themselves?

A: Well, it's true that many, if not most, abusers were themselves sexually abused. But that does not mean that a history of abuse makes you likely to abuse sexually. If that was true, then our coun-



try would be over run with sexual abusers, especially women. But it's not. Most people who were sexually abused do not go on to abuse others.

Q: What steps can sex offenders take to recover?

A: Anyone who's sexually abused or thought about sexually abusing someone else needs therapy. There's a standard model of treatment that I have seen work.

The first step is to help the offender accept responsibility. If

they used coercion, intimidation, physical violence, or threats of violence to overwhelm a younger, weaker person, that's abuse.

They begin the path to recovery only when they fully accept the abuse was 100% their fault. Not 98% not 99% but 100%. They are the ones who could've and should've made better choices. That's what it starts with. Accepting responsibility is very difficult and challenging.

The second step is victim empathy. The offender has to empathize with the victim at a feeling level. That means not just realizing that they victimized someone, but really feeling the enormity of what they've done and how the person suffered psychologically, emotionally and physically. They need to feel that it's a very, very traumatic experience for someone to be sexually abused.

"Restorative justice," if possible, allows the victim to safely and directly confront the offender. That's not always possible, because when given the opportunity to confront the offender in a restorative, safe environment, many victims will decline because they feel so traumatized. Also, that can only happen if the offender fully admits his responsibility for the abuse. But if the victim can safely confront the offender, it tends to be very healing. Offenders can articulate sorrow and regret, and demonstrate their own ability to understand the tremendous harm they did.

ABOUT **Rise**

Rise is a magazine by and for parents who have been involved with the child welfare system. Its mission is to provide parents with true stories about the system's role in families' lives and information that will help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Stories in this issue were written by participants in a writing group at the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), an advocacy and self-help program that teaches parents about their rights. For more information about CWOP,

call (212) 348-3000. Other stories were written by teen staff at *Represent*, a magazine by and for youth in foster care.

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Breaking a Painful Pattern

BY MILAGROS SANCHEZ

When I came to my mother at 9 years old and told her that the babysitter's husband was molesting me, she chose to ignore me and kept leaving me at the babysitter's house for two years. I was devastated that she didn't believe me. As the years went by, I felt that I hated my mother and was determined to make her life miserable. She reacted to my behavior with physical abuse.

Eventually, when I was 12, she sent me to a group home where I was molested once again by a male counselor. My mother never once came to visit me. I felt very alone, angry and abandoned. I grew up, but the depression I'd felt since my childhood did not leave me.

The Little Girl Inside

When I was 21 years old, the pain of my childhood came back to haunt me. I was struggling as a mother and I found out my husband was using heroin. Then I gave birth to a premature baby who died after 15 days. I got very depressed.

I started going to therapy and revealed a lot of deep, dark secrets. Talking about the molestation, and my mother's reaction, was overwhelming. With my past coming up so strong, the thoughts in my head were not about being a parent to my

child. Instead, I felt just like that little girl inside me who never healed.

I could not handle the pain I was feeling and I took refuge in drugs. Crack gave me a sense of security, of time freezing so I didn't have to think, cry and feel all alone. Slowly but surely I lost everything: my job, my apartment and my sons.

'I'm Sorry, I Love You'

Finally I went to treatment, where I learned how to love myself and express myself. I started talking about my feelings, even to my mother.

My mom was very closed at the beginning. There was a lot of shouting and screaming, but one day she said to me, "I know I have not been the best person or mother to you. But I'm sorry for not being there for you. I love you."

We made it a point to forgive each other. By talking to her about her childhood, I found out that there was a pattern of silence and physical abuse in every generation of my family. I told myself, "I will make it my business to change that pattern when I get my life together."

Today I have a good relationship with my boys. We share our thoughts and feelings, whether good or bad. At times, things get hectic, but we pull through.

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