

PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH ABUSED CHILDREN

Treatment of children who have been sexually abused

Child Abuse, whether it is verbal, physical, or sexual is a traumatic event for a child. Abuse may cause significant emotional, physical, and learning problems. Each child reacts very differently to the event and a good evaluation is crucial to determine how the child interpreted the event and repercussions of the abuse on the child.

A number of factors affect how a child perceives the abuse and the effect it will have on them for the long term. First and foremost is the extent of the abuse and the duration the abuse occurred. Also of importance is whether the child was abused by his/herself or the abuse was shared by his/her sibling/s. If the child has witnessed violence in the home of family members or significant others, this will increase their feelings of not reporting the event due to feelings of powerlessness to change their current situation.

Parental or family support is of absolute importance in the recovery process. If family is reassuring and presents therapy in a positive way, the child will be less scared and more apt to want to participate in the therapy process.

Working with children in therapy, the therapist will have several goals for the treatment process.

- 1.) The therapist will convey to your child that they are NOT to blame for what happened to them, no matter what they have been told by the perpetrator.
- 2.) Let the child know that they are the SAME person and they are not “unclean” or “dirty” in any way. This is very common in children who have been sexually abused.
- 3.) Encourage talking about the abuse and working through the child’s feelings of anger, depression, guilt, and any acting out behaviors that they are exhibiting.
- 4.) Letting them know that they are a “good person” and they are not alone in their feelings. There is nothing worse than feeling that you are the only one dealing with a problem. Isolation is terrible.
- 5.) Teaching the child about what abuse is and talking about prevention of abuse in the future. Working through that “victim for life” mentality.

6.) Lastly, teaching them coping mechanisms for the future. In other words, teaching the child how to deal with symptoms of PTSD. Often seen in children who have been abused are nightmares, bedwetting, social withdrawal, avoidance, and constant thoughts of the abuse.

Handling the abuse in therapy is of uttermost importance. We do not want to leave the lasting impression that no one is to be trusted and the expectation that everyone is going to hurt them. Otherwise, the abuse is able to affect all of their relationships in the future.

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