



## keeping kids safe

TEACHING AWARENESS IS THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL PREDATORS. DR JOHN IRVINE LOOKS FURTHER AT THIS ISSUE

**G**emma is 31 now. Her depression and refusal to let him near her led Gemma's husband Geoff to seek out help from a clinical psychologist.

Little by little, out came the story of Gemma's experience with her favourite Uncle Col. He was the most playful and fun of all the adults in her family, but as Gemma grew up from a child to a teenager, she became conscious that their time together in bed was changing and it didn't feel right – Uncle Col was touching her on the breast or grabbing her from behind when she could feel something hard pressing against her, but didn't know what it was.

Gemma never told anyone because the family was close and she was scared it would split them forever. But as she grew older, Gemma realised what had been going on and she felt sick.

She became confused, ashamed, embarrassed and depressed, didn't want to eat and developed an aversion to any male touching her.

Sexual abuse is an insidious, damaging scourge, often suffered in unhealthy silence. When it's not dealt with, the pain it causes can last a lifetime.

Unfortunately, sexual abuse is not rare. According to the 2005 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report, a child is sexually assaulted every 11 minutes in Australia. Figures vary, but it is also estimated that one in every three to four girls will be sexually abused by the age of 16.

The abuse of children can take on many forms: a child being touched on the breasts or genitals, or being touched or kissed in a sexual way, being asked to perform sexual activity on another (older) person, being asked to pose for "sexual" photos, made to watch sexual movies or acts, plus sexual pressure, penetration and more.

When we think of sexual abuse, we generally think of female victims, but that's not always the

case. Statistics show that one in eight males has been sexually abused before the age of 16 and the consequences can be just as severe.

Tim Roy, the author of *Little Tim Big Tim*, was sexually abused by his father from the age of five. He claims that 80 to 90 percent of prison inmates were sexually abused as children – and Tim should know. Because of his own horrific journey, he has studied the statistics and his passion is to one day work with paedophiles in the toughest prisons in each state to try and make them understand the consequences of their actions.

### KNOW YOUR ENEMY

In the past, and with the very best of intentions, authorities have run "stranger danger" programs. The fact is, however, that up to 90 percent of sexual abuse will happen in the home by a family member or relative, or someone else known and trusted by the family.

The reason it goes undetected and unreported is that the perpetrator usually makes the victims swear to a code of silence. The child victim is not game to tell anyone, even Mum, for fear of being blamed, not believed or (as in Gemma's case) for fear of splitting the family. Or they might believe it was their fault or that the offender might go to jail or, or, or – it's very confusing and depressing for the child carrying this secret burden.

Small wonder that the pain often surfaces in strange ways: acting out, as in severe behavioural problems; acting down, as in regression to babyish behaviour; acting in, as in depression, withdrawal; or even acting up, as in premature sexualised attitudes and activity.

Most caring parents probably already feel some anxiety about the behaviours of their children, but we can become hyper-vigilant looking out for signs that may just be normal.

Allow me to address this issue through Renee's

recent correspondence with me. She wrote: *My three-year-old daughter has recently started rubbing herself up against my leg or a chair leg, or using her hand to masturbate. Just eight months ago her father and I separated and she spends every Saturday night and Sunday with him at his place. She wasn't doing any of this before and I'm terrified he's molesting her. I'm so upset about it I can't sleep, and last weekend made an excuse that she was sick so she wouldn't have to go. Her father was so angry with me and accused me of denying him his family contact, but I just don't know what to do.*

The good news for Renee is that there's every possibility that her daughter's masturbation has nothing directly to do with her father's behaviour (or any other adult, for that matter). On the other hand, it's quite likely that being at Dad's could be indirectly triggering masturbatory behaviour.

Little kids who are anxious and upset sometimes self-stimulate to soothe themselves and to reduce anxiety. It is more likely that the separation and the inevitable angst that goes with it are causing Renee's daughter some distress, and her masturbation may be one indication of that stress.

This is obviously a great worry for Renee, and other parents may have similar concerns. Here is what I recommended for this case:

- Talk to your family doctor about the situation. He or she may want to do a non-intrusive physical examination and hopefully give you reassurance. Be guided by that advice.
- Masturbation can be quite common in young children, and parents handle it in different ways. Some will just tell the child to go to their room if they want to play with their private parts, while others will gently take their hand away. Some will treat masturbation as a sign that the child is tired and suggest a bit of a rest on their bed, and others will discourage through getting the child to wear clothing (overalls, for example) that makes masturbation more difficult.

More concerning signs would include some of the following:

- Comments that she doesn't want to visit Dad any more, or questions about vaginas and penises that seem way beyond anything you and she have ever discussed. For older, more verbal children, an odd comment such as, 'Daddy and I played a secret game,' could be a warning sign.
- Odd behaviour, such as being scared of being away from you, a sudden fear of going to Dad's,

running away or uncharacteristic acting out, angry behaviour, feeling sad and being teary, or uncharacteristic attention seeking.

- Physical symptoms such as redness around the vagina, stains on underwear, complaints about discomfort when sitting on or going to the toilet, any soreness around the anal or vaginal area, or even sudden bedwetting or soiling.
- Odd play – this might include sex-focused play with other children, sex games or drawings that are sexually focused.

If Renee's doctor were to agree that her child's behaviour was more likely due to distress rather than abuse, then I'd advise Renee to chat to Dad about the symptoms, see if he has noticed them too, and discuss what they could both do to ease them (maybe not have overnight sleepovers for a while, for example). This way Renee is signalling the problem, rather than accusing anyone and hopefully her daughter's symptoms will disappear. If

they don't, however, then there is all the more reason for Renee to take firmer action.

### FACING THE WORST

If you ever find yourself in the terrible situation where your child has said or somehow disclosed something that could suggest they'd been sexually abused, take this advice from Amanda Robinson, a former police officer with the Sexual Assault Unit and author of *The Silent Crisis*:

- Stay calm. Take deep breaths and collect your thoughts before speaking. Reassure the child that they have done nothing wrong.
- Do not express shock, anger or panic and try to stay in control. Be careful not to say anything that could make the child feel damaged or dirty.
- Actively listen and respond to what the child is saying, and assume they are telling the truth.
- Give positive messages and express love, pride and confidence in them.

## LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

An open discourse about sex and sexual awareness is an important way to protect your child, but it's not always an easy topic to broach. Following are some common questions from parents:

### At what age should I start talking to my children about sexual matters?

Kids should and will be learning about their bodies in the bath, when you're showering, at day-care toilets – everywhere the body is exposed. That's healthy learning. Talk about their sex organs as you would their eyes, ears or any other part of their anatomy. One little boy started the discussion when he found his little sister had "two bottoms" and wondered, 'how can you do wees when you don't have a wee-wee?'. Addressing the questions as they arise is the best and most rapid way children learn, but if a five-year-old hasn't asked anything, I suggest getting hold of one or two books from your library.

### How do I stop my preschooler son from using those four-letter words?

Kids love swear words because they are easy to say and win quick attention. If they

insist on offending, you can use reverse psychology and suggest that although you don't like those words, you're aware that they do. So they can swear as much as they like – from the noise-insulated luxury of their own bedroom. If they come out and start again, apologise for not giving them enough time to get all sworn out and send them back until they get the message. But be sure you're not getting uptight – otherwise they will sense the words' power and will increase their swearing frequency.

### My husband won't talk about sex to our son. I think it's difficult for a boy to hear mum talking about erections and masturbation. What should I do?

Men tend to find it harder to talk about sex because of the way they were socialised. That is changing, however, and there's no evidence that it's better or worse coming from fathers or mothers. It's best from both, but one beats none. I know many a wonderful mum who has taken the issue on with her sons – often with the help of Google for terms or explanations that the kids seek. This brings in a third party (the

- Do not criticise your child or brush aside their comments when they tell you their story.

Faced with suspicion of child sexual abuse, this is what parents should do:

- Seek out appropriate medical attention – from your family doctor or paediatrician.
- If so advised, notify the police who will in turn advise you of your next step.
- Meanwhile, do not allow the child any further contact with the suspected offender.
- Respect the child's right to privacy – take them to a private place where they can relate the story, and be careful not to discuss the incident in front of the child or other people.
- Look for support and advice from professionals. Bravehearts, a leading child protection advocacy group, offers help for survivors and counselling for children. Parents can also get sound advice and direction from Lifeline, Kids Help Line, Parent Line and Child Abuse Prevention Service.

Here are some things you *do not* do:

- Ask leading questions – this can ruin the truth as children are so easily influenced.
- Deny the child's feelings.
- Try to be the investigator.
- Become emotional in front of the child.
- Deny or ignore the problem.
- Confront the offender yourself.

### PROTECTION STARTS EARLY

The best ways to protect your child from sexual abuse are to have a close, loving relationship so they feel trusting enough to tell you all the little things that may be on their mind, and for you to teach them protective behaviour.

For instance, we're very calm about teaching children not to run across roads, play with knives, and so on – telling them about how special their body is and what type of touch is not allowed can be just as practical. It doesn't frighten kids any

more than road rules frighten them of getting in the car, or cutlery rules make a child fearful of using forks, knives and spoons.

The message I'm trying to convey is that early education and easy communication in the home can do much to help the family feel secure or nip problems in the bud should they occur. Remember, 90 percent of what children pick up from parents is not in what we say, but from our tone and body language – if we're anxious, then kids soon pick up on that and it drops their confidence.

As a general rule, solicited complaints following heavy adult questioning (or putting words in their mouth) are less reliable and quite dangerous as kids are so suggestible. However, unsolicited comments from children about sexual matters should be taken very seriously. As the psychologist Erik Erikson said, 'The most deadly of all possible sins is mutilation of a child's spirit.' ●

*Dr Irvine is a regular expert on Channel 10's 9am.*

### JOIN OUR PARENTING FORUM

Do you have a story you'd like to share? Log onto [mychildmagazine.com.au](http://mychildmagazine.com.au) and join our forum on child sexual abuse.

### RESOURCES FURTHER READING

- *Little Tim Big Tim* by Tim Roy (JoJo Publishing, \$24.95).
- *The Silent Crisis* by Amanda Alexandria Robinson (Silversky, \$24.95). Available from [thesilentcrisis.com](http://thesilentcrisis.com).
- *Everyone's Got A Bottom* by Tess Rowley and Jodi Edwards (FPQ, \$16). Produced by Family Planning Queensland, call 07 3250 0240 for stockists or visit [fpq.com.au](http://fpq.com.au).

### USEFUL CONTACTS

- **Lifeline** 131 114
- **Kids Help Line** 1800 551 800
- **Parent Line** 1300 301 300
- **Child Abuse Prevention Service** 1800 688 009
- **bravehearts.org.au** This registered charity runs the White Balloon campaign and has developed an Interactive CD-Rom to educate kids on how to feel safe. *Ditto's Keep Safe Adventure* is a fun, educational tool for four- to eight-year-olds. Visit [ditto.com.au](http://ditto.com.au).