

Getting Back On Track: When Your Child Has Been Sexually Assaulted
A group work programme promoting children's resilience through promoting parents' resilience and strengths

Nicki Wickham, Group Work Coordinator
Jessie Ly, Senior Social Worker
Child Protection Unit
Sydney Children's Hospital

The Child Protection Unit is a specialist service at Sydney Children's Hospital, which provides a combination of medical and psychosocial assessments and therapy to children and young people up to the age of 16, and their non-offending family members, where there are confirmed incidents of sexual and physical abuse

Getting Back On Track was developed by the group work coordinator at the Child Protection Unit as a response to the perceived need of parents to feel supported to enable them to cope with the abuse of their child and to help their children deal better with abuse related issues.

Impact of disclosure

A child's disclosure of sexual abuse generates a crisis not only for the child but also for other family members, particularly non-offending parents. "Mothers and fathers whose children have been sexually abused find themselves faced with a crisis which often threatens to overwhelm them." (Humphreys,1995). The literature on child sexual abuse talks about the extreme disruption to normal family life of a disclosure and the need for a support network for parents, particularly in the case of abuse or assault by a family member. Non-offending parents are likely to suffer a significant level of distress following disclosure, including panic, numbness, shock, denial and anger as well as symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder and depression.

Parents who are experiencing high levels of distress have been noted to be less supportive of their children and to have more difficulty in following through with interventions to help the child. Following this through, one could postulate that parents who are provided with services designed to increase their coping abilities and their own sense of being supported are likely to be better placed to help their children cope with abuse-related distress.

Elliot and Carnes noted in their literature search in 2001, that parents often reported that they did not receive the type or level of support that they felt they needed following the sexual abuse of their child. They have reported lack of help during the initial crisis after disclosure, services being difficult to access and time limited, lack of communication with services and inadequate assistance with managing the child's distress

The literature also suggests that children's emotional and behavioural adjustment following abuse is associated with the reactions and support they receive from their parents, that parental support is the best predictor of resiliency in sexually abused girls (Spacarelli and Kim, 1995), and that children with supportive caregivers generally exhibit fewer symptoms of distress after abuse.

During individual and family counselling at the Child Protection Unit (CPU), parents have raised the following concerns:

- Difficulties in the relationship between mother or parents and child.
- Difficult communication between parents and their children
- And more specifically, uncertainty about how and when to talk about the abuse with their children.
- Anger
- Uncertainty about the court process and possible outcomes –some of the most common questions asked are: will he get away with it, why is the justice system on his side, why do we feel as if we're the ones on trial?
- Issues around punishment of the perpetrator - how can any sentence be adequate, what if he doesn't go to jail, will we be safe?
- Not knowing what the long-term impact of abuse is likely to be on their children, and fearing the worst.
- Guilt about not having been able to prevent the occurrence of abuse.
- Loss of trust – in people, in themselves and especially in their ability to protect their children.
- Generally the impact of the abuse on their children and especially not knowing whether depressed, withdrawn or angry behaviour of their child is normal or abuse related

It is difficult for parents to assess what is due to sexual assault and what is normal age related behaviour, particularly for those whose children are adolescents. They tend to attribute any perceived behavioural or emotional difficulties to the abuse at a time that is frequently very turbulent for children, saying things like: "she depends on her boyfriend too much. Seems to need someone", "She withdraws sometimes, is chatty sometimes, is quite self centred". The mothers who made these statements believe that these behaviours can be attributed to the fact of abuse. Parents of a child with no history of sexual abuse may, however, be far more likely to see them as "normal" adolescent behaviour. The group context provides an opportunity for parents to discuss these issues, make comparisons and normalise some of their recent parenting experiences.

Overcoming the impact of sexual assault is not a linear process. There appears to be a pendulum effect. Frequently parents speak of this sense of moving on but then swinging back which may be triggered by a range of factors. A function of the group is to assist members to accept this as a normal part of a normal process of dealing with abnormal events.

Description of group

Getting Back on Track, the group for parents of children referred to CPU, was developed as a response to the perceived need of parents to feel supported to enable them both to cope with the abuse of their child and to help them to help their children deal better with abuse related issues.

The group was set up as a closed group:

- To establish a clear beginning and end, thereby acknowledging from the start that it is a part of the process of recovery.
- To help establish a safe, predictable environment in which a sense of trust could develop
- To enable relationships to develop within the limited time frame of the group.
- To enable each session to build on previous sessions, giving a sense of structure, continuity and movement forwards.

The group has 2 facilitators and a general format over 6 sessions. However each group is different, depending on the needs and wishes of that particular group of parents. Throughout the programme parents are given copies of relevant literature and also copies of any work done during the group sessions

Session 1: Introductions

The first session gives parents a chance to begin telling the story of the abuse of their child, and to hear those of other parents. They often talk about the need to do this rather than spending time on formal introductions

Session 2: Impact of disclosure

In this session the focus is on how the child's disclosure affects the entire family, themselves and their lives.

Session 3: Myths of sexual abuse; perpetrator tactics

Group members are helped to begin challenging myths and stereotypes around child sexual abuse. Part of the discussion is about grooming behaviours or the "web of deceit" which perpetrators spin around their chosen victims.

They also begin to discuss the difficulties of understanding and managing children's' behaviours after sexual assault

Session 4: "The system"

This session looks at the impact of the process post disclosure – particularly examining legal and medical systems and the link between these and emotional issues

Session 5: Impact of sexual assault on the children

The first 4 sessions focus primarily on the parents and their issues. At this point the focus returns to the children. Although the children are of different ages and the abuse of varying type and frequency the issues raised by all parents are frequently similar.

Session 6: Saying good bye – final session

Group members identify their own and each other's strengths, and complete an evaluation form.

Follow up session after a month gives parents the opportunity to come back together, talk about any concerns that have arisen since the end of group and share achievements.

Evaluation

The evaluations indicate that mutual support, networking and the opportunity to discuss significant issues in a safe environment are the keys to the group process being seen as useful by participants. While the issues raised by abuse are not necessarily resolved, being listened to and understood by each other and the group leaders is vital.

More specifically, they value:

- feeling listened to and understood;
- being able to share their experiences and express feelings openly and honestly;
- giving and receiving advice and support;
- sharing knowledge about the impact of sexual assault on children and families as well as regarding the process, which may be put in place after a disclosure of abuse.

The feedback of most parents is that they would recommend the group to other parents finding themselves in similar situations.

Strengths

As part of this presentation, a number of parents who have completed the group programme were interviewed. What came out of these interviews was the courage parents show when faced with one of the hardest challenges possible in life, and their ability to keep on going.

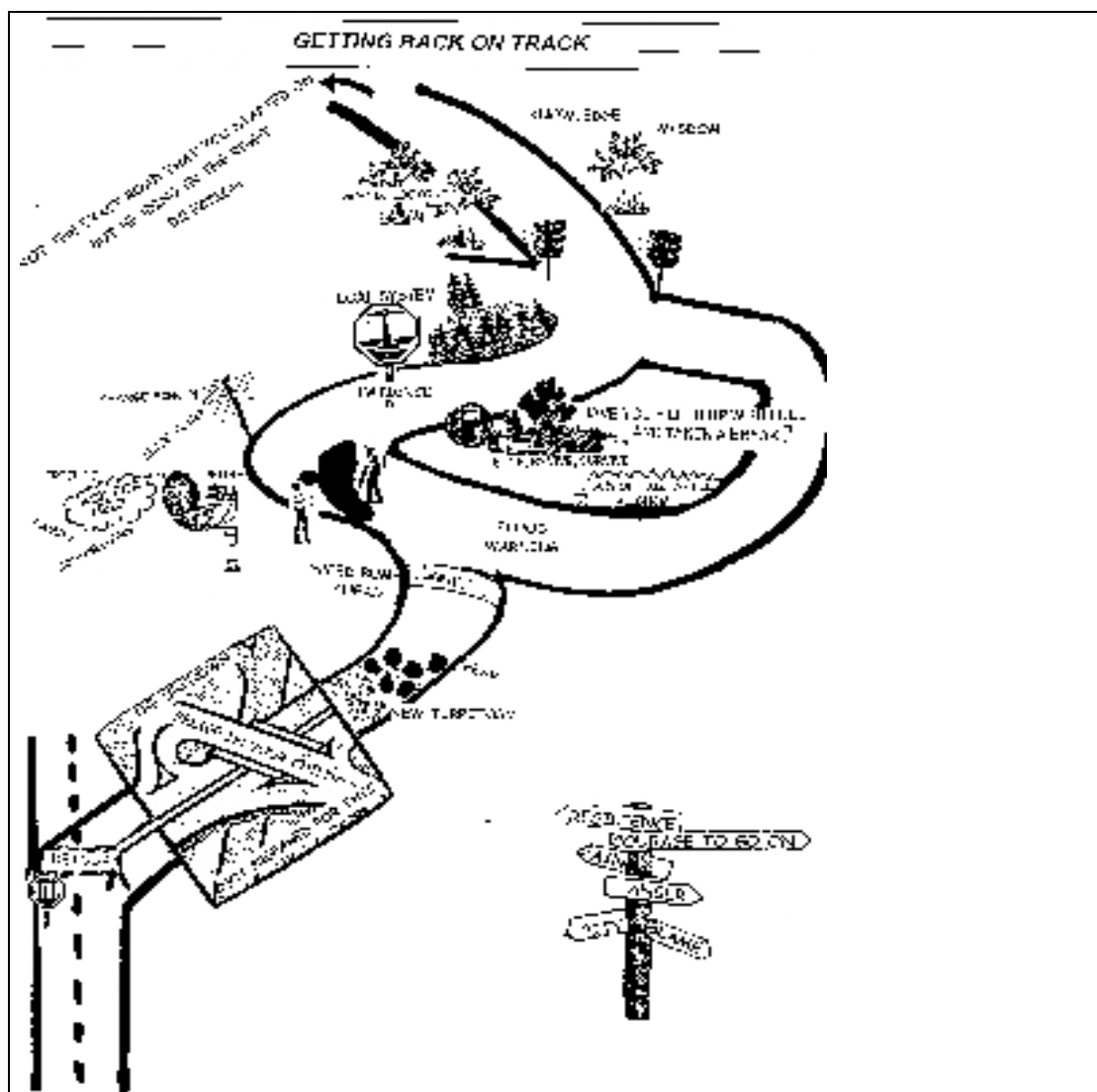
Parents are firm in their belief that they must be strong in order to help their children (both the abused child and siblings) through the repercussions of the abuse. They speak in terms of having to survive, being strong and determined, to "fight on even though I crumble at times", being able to be there for their children, providing support, responding to their needs and knowing that they have managed the situation in what they see as "the right way". They are unanimous in stating that the most important thing for them is to be able to support their children, saying things such as "it's not something I can fix. Just being there and reassuring her, letting her know I can listen, give affection" and "She sees me acting on things, willing to talk about it, knows I'll be open and honest and will fight for her"

When asked specifically about their strengths parents have mentioned the following:

- Patience – which they certainly need as they navigate the system

- Determination – “will not give up”, “will fight for the best result”, need a “sink or swim” attitude
- Acceptance that it had happened
- An ability to look forward and see that things will get better.
- A strong will
- Independence
- Belief in God and family.
- Good communication
- Being protective – at an appropriate level for the child’s age
- Developing their knowledge and understanding about CSA
- Maintaining a normal lifestyle and routine
- Commitment to stopping the cycle of abuse
- Maintaining a sense of humour
- Self care – an ability to look after themselves

Parents see their relationships with friends and family as giving them strength as well as being able to acknowledge their inner strength and coping mechanisms.



Members of the first group ran put this map together as an indication of their journey to overcoming the impact of child sexual abuse. It encompasses some of the challenges and ways of overcoming them or even at times benefiting them, eg in the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom. They described huge potholes, fear of the unknown, needing to change their plans, their expectations of what lay ahead, and their direction. They needed to find strength, resilience and the courage to go on. They needed to find new resources, to ask for help and to take time out for rest, recreation and the opportunity to revive.

In other words, the group had helped them to navigate their way through some of the systems, emotions and other challenges associated with child sexual abuse and while not heading on exactly the same road they had started on they were again heading in the right direction.

REFERENCES

Humphreys C (1995) Counselling and support issues for mothers and fathers of sexually abused children, *Australian Social work*, 48, 4, 13 - 19

Elliot A and Carnes C. (2001) Reactions of Nonoffending Parents to the sexual Abuse of their Child: A Review of the Literature. *Child Maltreatment*, 6, 4, 314-331, Sage Publications

Spacarelli S and Kim S (1995) Resilience criteria and factors associated with resilience in sexually abused girls. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 19, 1171-1182.

Tuckman, B. & Jensen, M. (1977) Stages of Small Group Development Revisited, *Group and Organizational Studies*, 2, 419 - 427