

CLOSE TO HOME

DEALING WITH
child abuse





Thank God for life

Looking back, Sam wonders how he survived. As a child, he experienced neglect, emotional mistreatment, and severe beatings that left him bruised in body and spirit. The harshest violence came from his father—all the more damaging because his father was a leader in Sam’s church. Both parents seemed overwhelmed by their lives: caring for their children, giving of themselves to the church, trying to pull together enough money to keep everyone going. That wasn’t an excuse for the abuse, Sam knew. But over the years he learned that his parents’ shortcomings helped explain his tormented childhood.

The combination of physical violence and emotional neglect had made him vulnerable to sexual abuse. As a child, Sam wanted

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attention and warmth, and an older boy in the neighborhood, Joe, offered that. Joe was friendly to kids like Sam. Sam now knows that Joe preyed on him, sensing his weakness and then using him sexually.

It was a tough childhood, but Sam is grateful that he survived and eventually became a healthy, strong adult. The church was an important part of Sam’s healing. As a child, he loved church. He loved hearing about Jesus’ love for children, and he loved to sing. He had one Sunday school teacher who was kind and gentle, and he imagined what it would be like to be her son.

Somehow God kept him alive through the precarious adolescent years when he used drugs and alcohol and sex to dull his pain. The destructive choices piled up until, as a young adult, he became ill, both physically



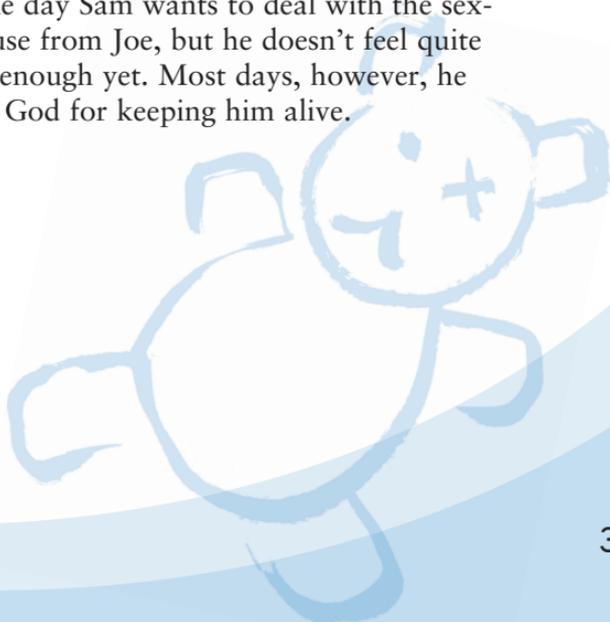


and emotionally. Life seemed too hard to keep going. One night, Sam overdosed—a suicide attempt that landed him in the hospital. His pastor visited him, prayed with him, and promised that the church would walk with him.

The hospitalization gave Sam time to think about his life—about where he was heading and where he wanted to go. He accepted counseling and entered an intensive treatment program. After a year, he had a better grasp on himself and the abuse he had suffered. He met regularly with a small group from church, and they helped him figure out career plans. He completed a degree in social work, and put his hard-earned wisdom to use, helping other kids and other families break free from abusive cycles.

As he grew stronger, he took the difficult step of talking with his parents about the abuse. He learned that they had realized how wrong their actions were. They acknowledged the harm they had done, told him they were sorry, and offered support to him. He felt very fortunate; he knew from his social work training that many abusers do not take that kind of responsibility.

Some day Sam wants to deal with the sexual abuse from Joe, but he doesn't feel quite strong enough yet. Most days, however, he thanks God for keeping him alive.



What is child abuse?

Child abuse is a crime that affects a child's psychological, emotional, physical, and social well-being. Child abuse refers to the mistreatment or neglect that a child or adolescent may experience while in the care of a parent, other relative, guardian, or caregiver. Abuse can take place anywhere, often in the home of the child or the home of someone he or she knows. It occurs in all religious, economic, and ethnic groups. While abuse can be a one-time incident, it usually is a pattern of repeated incidents. Child abuse does great harm to the healthy development and spiritual growth of children.

Forms of child abuse

- **Physical abuse** is any deliberate use of force or restraint that causes bodily harm or risks doing so. It includes beating, hitting, shaking, pushing, choking, biting, burning, kicking, or assaulting a child with a weapon such as a belt or wooden spoon.
- **Sexual abuse** and exploitation means using a child sexually. It includes fondling, inviting a child to touch or be touched sexually, intercourse, forcing a child to view pornographic materials, or involving a child in prostitution or pornography.
- **Neglect** is failing to provide what a child needs for healthy development and well-being. It includes withholding food, clothing, shelter, education, cleanliness, medical care, or protection from harm. Emotional neglect includes failing to provide love, safety, encouragement, and a sense of worth.

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- **Emotional abuse** involves harming a child's emotions or self-esteem. It often occurs with other kinds of abuse. It may include threats, humiliation, isolating the child, or making demands not appropriate for the child's age. It could include threatening to abandon or give away a child, or lying to manipulate the child's sense of reality. Rejecting a child, uttering cruel insults, or calling a child "sinful" or "bad" or "stupid" will harm a child's sense of self-worth.



Duty to report

If we see child abuse happening among family, friends, or strangers, we may be reluctant to "get involved." We may want to respect the parents' authority and the privacy of the home. However, it is wrong to ignore the mistreatment of children. Across Canada and the United States, the law requires that a person who has reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is being abused must report that suspicion to the local child protection agency. Sometimes it is helpful to involve a pastor or teacher when making such a report. If necessary, a report can often be made anonymously.

Child abuse, the Bible, and the Christian story

At the birth of Jesus, God came to us as a helpless infant—a powerful sign of God’s high regard for little ones. The Bible speaks often of God’s compassion for children. Jesus took children in his arms and blessed them. He declared that children are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and warned people not to harm them (Matthew 18:1-11).

Jesus never condoned inflicting pain on children; he showed that they are to be protected and cherished. Jesus’ work centered on healing and saving (Luke 4:18). God’s people continue this ministry of Jesus, especially where vulnerable people are being hurt.

Later in the New Testament, when the apostle Paul asks children to obey parents, he also warns parents not to provoke children to anger and discouragement (Ephesians 6:1-4, Colossians 3:20-21). Abuse has no place in Christian homes; children’s spirits are to be compassionately nurtured, not damaged or destroyed.

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Those who have experienced abuse as children—or are experiencing it as teenagers—need to know that they are not responsible for the treatment they received. Children need guidance from adults, but no child deserves abuse. They need to confront the abuse and find ways to recover from its effects. This may include relearning the way they picture God. Adults who abuse children, as well as the children they abuse, often believe in a harsh God who is just waiting to whip people into line. But the God of the

“Spare the rod and spoil the child”

People who physically abuse children sometimes justify their action by quoting Proverbs 13:24: “Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.” But the “rod” here is not a stick for striking a child. Rather, it is a shepherd’s staff, used to guide sheep away from danger such as sharp rocks or a steep cliff.

Many confuse *discipline* with *punishment*. Punishment focuses on negative consequences and is intended to hurt or shame. Healthy discipline involves teaching and guiding children to take responsibility for their actions. Punishment may produce short-term obedience, but it usually results in fear and hostility. It also makes it more difficult for children to develop an inner moral guide. Changed behavior comes through teaching, practice, coaching, and positive reinforcement.

Bible loves and fiercely protects children and calls abusers to accountability.

The church has a responsibility to offer safety for victims of abuse, listen to their stories, talk about the issue, call abusers to stop the harm, and help all move toward justice, healing, and restoration. The love of the church family is part of the good news of Jesus. For those who are dealing with abuse, a circle of people to offer support and prayer can be an important part of their healing journey.

When early Christians sought rules for living, they were encouraged to cultivate the “fruit of the Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). Such teachings can bring healing and comfort to those who have been abused and guide parents and caregivers in their responses to children.



Steps toward healing

- 1. Tell someone your story.** If you were abused as a child, or if you are a teenager experiencing abuse now, the first step is to tell someone you trust. A pastor, counselor, or caring friend can provide the listening ear you need to let you know that you are not alone and that help is available.
- 2. Take time for healing.** You will need time to build a new sense of your God-given value. You have been hurt; now you need a safe place in which to consider how you have been hurt and what will help you heal. This process takes some patience.
- 3. Recognize the patterns of behavior** that often surface in the life of abuse survivors:
 - They may act like “sheep,” putting themselves in positions where others harm them or take advantage of them.
 - They may become a “wolf” and prey on others, repeating the cycle of abuse.
 - Or they may become a “shepherd,” wanting to look after others, but at the expense of their own needs.
- 4. Care for yourself** from a position of wholeness and strength. Many people are helped by turning to God in prayer and relying on God’s abundant love and healing power. Most of us, however, find that we are better able to build trust in God when we develop safety and trust with one or more of God’s people.

That can be a challenge in instances where the church has not felt like a safe place, or where “good” Christian people have not named and confronted the abuse. You may be angry at God for letting abuse happen to you.

If one of these descriptions fits you, speak to your pastor or another car-



ing person in the church. Don't give up until you find a small circle that can help you gain a new sense of God as a loving Parent.

- 5. Consider counseling.** A skilled counselor can help you understand what happened to you and will help you name and grieve the effects of the abuse, such as the loss of a happy childhood, loss of trust and self-worth, or loss of the relationship with the person who hurt you. In time you may want to talk with the person who abused you to close off the past and free yourself from it. Your counselor or church community can help you with this work.
- 6. Know that the past does not have to control you.** You may be fearful of your own emotions and worry that you will hurt others in your care. Or you may be insecure about how to discipline your children. But new patterns of thought and behavior are possible, and healing is available when you reach out to God and others.

If you are abusing children—or wonder if you are—know that with God's help and the support of faithful friends, you can change. Take immediate steps to stop the abuse now. With the help of your pastor or a crisis center, find a good counselor who will help you explore the patterns of abuse and work to repair relationships you may have damaged. Consider removing yourself from the situation until you can get help.

For further awareness

Websites

www.dovesnest.net

www.preventchildabuse.org

www.cwrp.ca/child-abuse-neglect

www.cdc.gov/features/healthychildren

www.protectchildren.ca

Books for children

Jessie. *Please Tell: A Child's Story about Sexual Abuse*. City Center, MN: Hazelden, 1991.

Moore-Mallinos, Jennifer. *Do You Have a Secret?* Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 2005.

Church communities can take a significant role in correcting abuse by:

- providing a safe place for people to name their experiences with abuse
- believing stories of abuse—to question a child's story of abuse is to revictimize him or her and to risk letting the abuse continue
- walking with individuals and families to bring about accountability and healing
- establishing a "safe congregation" policy to guard against children and youth being abused by church staff and volunteers (see resources listed above)
- teaching and preaching about the wrongness of abuse and about healthy care of children
- explaining to children how they can get help if they are being harmed
- promoting Christian parenting that is respectful and life-giving

Books for adults

Collins, R. Dandridge. *The Trauma Zone: Trusting God for Emotional Healing*. Chicago: Moody, 2007.

Fortune, Marie M. *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005.

Harder, Jeanette. *Let the Children Come: Preparing Faith Communities to End Child Abuse and Neglect*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010.

Heggen, Carolyn Holderread. *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006.

Read, Wendy. *A Conspiracy of Love: Living Through and Beyond Childhood Sexual Abuse*. reprint ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006.

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CLOSE TO HOME

**Local resources for help with
child abuse:**

**For more information on other Close to Home
titles, go to:**

www.mennomedia.org/closetohome



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