

By-Standing Is A Choice

by Grace Poore

When people first find out about a child being sexually abused they may experience shock. Their world has suddenly turned upside down. Many people initially respond with disbelief, not because they disbelieve the child but because the truth is hard to take. Hence the questions:

- "Are you sure that's what happened?"
- "Could there have been a misunderstanding?"
- "Why would he do something like this?"
- "Did this person know what he was doing, did he realize it was wrong?"
- "Where was the mother of the child?"

These are attempts to find reasonable explanations for what is beyond reason.

Grief is another response to finding out that a child has been sexually abused. A few years ago, at a talk I was giving in Bangalore, India, a woman revealed that several years ago, she had walked in on her cousin molesting her little daughter. She immediately confronted the cousin and chased him from the home. Although her daughter is fine now, the woman never got over the shock and grief of witnessing her daughter being abused and her cousin perpetrating the abuse. She not only continued to grieve over what happened to her daughter but also for herself. Her own sense of safety was violated. She could not go back to things the way they were. Her favorite cousin had compromised the comfortable space of their relationship and threatened the notion of family. The security of her own home had been taken away.

INTERVENTION IS MESSY

Intervening in an incest situation is complicated and messy. For example, a loving uncle who is his sister's greatest ally may be sexually abusing his sister's daughter. An interventionist has to grapple with the inconsistent feelings about the perpetrator because he is both wonderful and heinous. The questions to ask here are: If this uncle

is sexually abusing his niece, isn't he also betraying his sister who he cares for deeply? What does it say about the quality of care a brother feels for his sister if he can abuse her daughter? How does an uncle who loves his niece molest her then force her into secrecy? Part of being an interventionist is to recognize and acknowledge the gray areas that emerge when incest is exposed. But gray areas should not bring to question that there is a victim and a perpetrator.

Most people go through life not expecting to intervene in child sexual abuse (CSA). Even those who were abused as children often do not anticipate that it will happen to their own children because, like most victims, they believe they were the only one with the experience. When we don't expect danger, there is no reason to think about protection.

WHEN DOES SHAME & CHAOS BEGIN?

Many people fear that breaking silence about abuse will create unnecessary chaos and disharmony in the family. They associate disclosure and exposure with disruption not justice. They believe that shame and family dishonor are the outcomes of making the abuse known. For them, endurance in the face of adversity is strength.

However, all child molesters know that what they are doing is wrong. They know this before they carry out the abuse, after the incident, and when they repeat the abuse. They know there will be trouble if they are caught. When they cross the line despite this knowledge, it is they who set in motion the process of family disruption. Shame, dishonor, and disharmony have already occurred because they have abused a child.

BY-STANDER INTERVENTION

Most South Asian women say that people within the community prefer not to know if sexual abuse is happening. If they become aware of it, they prefer avoidance to involvement, denial to intervention.

One immigrant who never had intervention while she was being sexually abused as a child said that she continues to survive on her own but re-lives betrayal each time she talks to family members and is reminded that she is the family black-sheep while her father continues to enjoy a high status in the community.

Another South Asian immigrant talked about intervention that did not go far enough. "My parents must have seen something because they sent my brother away to a boarding school but every time he came back for the holidays, he abused me and it went on for years. If only someone had asked me!"

Even people who do not blame or scapegoat the victims tend to turn away. A few years ago, a 15-year old attempted to molest his five-year old cousin. Family members who found out dismissed it as a “one-time thing.” They had no idea why he did it. Since no touching was involved, they insisted, "No real trouble happened." It was easier for these by-standers to deny the seriousness of the situation and the potential danger than to risk upsetting the parents of the 15-year old. When a 15-year old boy asks a five-year old girl to take off her panties, he is not engaging in harmless play. He has an intention to do something that he knows is wrong, which is why he picked his youngest cousin and waited till no one else was around. In this case he did not touch his victim because she would not take off her panties. But when his family members chose not to talk to him about what he did and why, they abandoned their responsibility to both children. The 15-year old will wait for another opportunity with the same or a different young child. And this time he will go further. Do we hold the by-standers in his life responsible when he enters the next phase of perpetrating? What role-modeling does he get about accountability? What does the five-year old learn from the lack of response to her older cousin's actions? What role-modeling does she get about intervention?

By-standing, like intervention, is the product of socialization and habit. Many South Asians learned to become by-standers when they saw people pretend that nothing was going on when girls were being touched on buses and men were brushing up against

women. They saw that concerned by-standers who confronted offenders were scolded for making a scene.

Psychiatrist, Judith Herman says, "Without a supportive social environment, the bystander usually succumbs to the temptation to look the other way."

When I ask people what they would do if they found out that their child was being sexually abused by someone within the family, most responded: "I'll kill the person who's responsible," "I'll call the cops," "I'll throw him out of the house," "I'll threaten him so he doesn't do it again." However, a larger number of people said, "I don't know what I'll do if it's not a stranger."

Although most people want perpetrators to stop perpetrating they want someone else to deal with it. They want the offender to take responsibility but not be the ones to monitor the situation or the offender. They want to protect the victim but prefer not to be reminded of what happened. They are willing to talk with their children about sexual abuse but only to prevent victims not perpetrators. They reject the possibility that their children could engage in inappropriate sexual behavior or perpetrate abuse. They will not even consider talking to their children about what constitutes abuse or asking their children to come and tell if they have engaged in or have feelings about wanting to do a bad touch.

BE A PRO-ACTIVE PLAYER

Childhood sexual abuse is survivable but the quality of survival depends on the quality of intervention. When victims receive timely, effective and consistent support, the experience of violation and betrayal is placed in a larger context of love, support, and safety. This helps contain and heal the trauma, and it helps prevent future episodes of abuse. Similarly, when perpetrators receive timely, effective and consistent attention, their acts of violation are placed in a larger context of accountability, transparency and

need for rehabilitative education. This could help them change the patterns that lead to abuse and hopefully reduce the potential for repeat perpetration.

When we hear the word, bystander, we think of an onlooker, someone who observes, perhaps an eye-witness, or someone with a peripheral interest in the situation. In fact, people who sense or witness an inappropriate sexual interaction with a child or hear about a child being abused are no longer peripheral to the situation. They become players. As players, they have a choice to act, to change the course of events in the life of a child, a family, and a perpetrator.

START NOW

- Break silences around CSA within the inner sanctum of family. Talk about it happening within inner circles and not just “out there.” Demystify the reasons for such abuse and put a face on perpetrators so they are not monster-strangers. Bring the issue home!
- Gather others in your community and start a group. Find a name that captures the intention of the group – for instance, Allies Against CSA, By-Standers Against CSA, Parents, Guardians and Allies To Stop CSA, etc.
- Create a reading list of useful books and articles on how to help families heal from CSA (some resources are listed in the resource section: www.shaktiproductions.net). Read the materials and discuss them. Adapt them to specific needs of the community.
- Find one or a team of facilitators with different experience and expertise in preventing CSA to guide the group. They can help the group understand how to interpret signs – that someone may be perpetrating, someone may be going through abuse, or someone may be reliving the experience of childhood experiences of abuse. Ideally, these facilitators should help the group identify the universal and culturally specific steps to take in each situation.

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- Learn how to talk about the issue to children in ways that they can comprehend. Put this to practice. Repeat the messages periodically and increase or tailor information as children grow older.
 - Speak about CSA in community, cultural and religious settings without glossing over the reality that victims and perpetrators exist within family, religious and social circles.
 - Hold community and religious leaders accountable when they harbor perpetrators or collude in the abuse by silencing victims or advocating denial. At the same time, make sure to applaud and acknowledge leadership who make appropriate and effective interventions.
 - When abuse has occurred, make sure the victim’s physical, emotional and mental safety is attended to. Find ways to support the family.
 - Always make sure non-offending adults are present when children (other than the victim) are around the abuser, i.e., do not leave any children alone with the perpetrator without other adult supervision.
 - One of the biggest challenges will be how to cope with the knowledge that a trusted individual has done the betrayal while making sure there is effective and consistent help for the perpetrator so the abuse does not recur. Gather information from anonymous hotlines, counselors, support groups, literature.
 - Seek guidance from people and agencies that work with the whole family since everyone is affected by the situation in different ways. These experts can help address the difficulty of negotiating ongoing relationships with family members after the abuse. Family therapists who specialize in CSA can help different family members and close family friends play different roles in the immediate and long-term aftermath of the abuse.
 - Try hard to help families carry out interventions that are also preventions, i.e., steps to address immediate needs and steps to keep the abuse from recurring.
 - Think through actions to clarify motives and goals – what’s the purpose, what are the benefits, who benefits? Thinking through actions also identifies potential barriers to intervention and prevention and ways to overcome them.

There is an African adage, “It takes a village to raise a child.” In fact, it also takes a village to raise a perpetrator – 88 percent of those who seek sexual gratification with a child already have a relationship with the child. Most people who commit the abuse are not strangers. They are one of us, they belong to us. This fact most likely explains why 90 percent of child sexual molestation is not reported. The silence is not only from victims but also families and friends of those who know the perpetrator and are afraid of making a mistake, afraid of causing trouble for the perpetrator, afraid of the implication of getting authorities involved.

When CSA is exposed, people may take sides, emotions can run high, and loyalties are tested. Different configurations of people can be involved, including people with a silent past; people with hidden experiences that bring up buried emotions and memories. Some of these people may have gone through similar abuse themselves as children and not told anyone. Some may be people who stood by in other abuse cases and did nothing. Some may be adults who perpetrated in the past and have never been held accountable. We cannot predict how any of these people will respond to the current situation.

Greater awareness about the complexities of child sexual abuse, less silence about it in our midst, and a better grasp of what appropriate actions to take as by-standers will help us respond effectively. At the end of the day, effective by-stander response should be the goal as it can help those most affected by CSA rewrite the legacy that the abuse imposes.

(Also see “Every Breath You Take” –

http://www.shaktiproductions.net/Every_Breath_You_Take_Article.pdf - by Grace Poore for more perspectives on by-standing in child sexual abuse.)