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CHRISTIAN COMMENTARY FOR CAREGIVERS | Sexual Abuse



Children often piece together lessons from life, and it is hard for parents or caregivers to know what “lessons” have been learned. Sometimes after a child experiences, or is exposed to, sexual abuse, there are things to unlearn or relearn. Thankfully, we have the opportunity to share much comfort and demonstrate healthy love in many different ways.

Children can be especially receptive to comforts adults might overlook. For example, it can be a huge relief to learn the world is not the way it is supposed to be, and that grown-ups do not really make all the rules! Particularly when a child has been wronged, or seen loved ones wronged, a child needs the assurance that right and wrong are much more than “do this” and “don’t do that”; some things truly are not acceptable.

Here are some brief biblical teachings you can introduce, little by little and as opportunity permits, that might comfort your child:

- Jesus is God and the Son of God. He became a person too — even with a body — so He can understand and save us.
- God doesn’t need to touch us to show us He loves us. We see God’s love in Jesus. God uses the words of the Bible and simple things like water and bread to reach us.
- Sometimes people can make us feel bad or dirty, but God cleans us inside and out in Baptism. God uses His Word to clean us from any guilt or shame.
- God made us, and He doesn’t want anyone to wrong us!
- God created bodies to receive His gifts, not to hurt or confuse people.
- Everyone can be selfish, but Jesus never is. Jesus gave Himself up for us on the cross, and then He rose from the dead so He can still take care of us.
- What people do is important — it can help or hurt others — but Jesus has already done everything we need to be loved by God! He wants us to keep hearing God’s Word so we keep receiving faith.

- It is OK to love someone even if you have to stay away or be very, very careful. It’s also OK to pray to God *for* anyone or *against* anything bad.
- God shows us in the Bible that He isn’t scared of anything. Jesus loves us so much that He hurts when we hurt.

Sometimes grown-ups use words before children understand them. Your child may not understand the differences between “sin,” “sinner” or “sinned against.” Still, we can remind ourselves and our children, “No one is perfect, but at *those times* someone *else* was wrong.”

Forgiveness is also a term that sometimes needs to be taught, as well as shown. And it can be tricky! Forgiveness is also a difficult concept for some, but forgiveness never overlooks or belittles sin. Just the opposite, if “it was nothing,” then there is no reason for forgiveness.

When we forgive others, we say, “There is something bigger than you and what you did.” Although our wounds and other consequences may remain, forgiveness lets us look up from the bad to see Jesus with both His unconditional love and His unflinching rejection of sin and sinning against others.

Sometimes a child (or another sinned-against individual) blames him- or herself. The child longs for forgiveness even though the child wasn’t wrong. It can be very helpful to consider that, really, we confess in order to get what follows. Sinners confess to receive forgiveness, and the sinned against may confess to receive the hope and assurance that come from both our loved ones and Him who loves the world in this way: that He sent His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Children are still forming an understanding of safety. You may talk about safety plans in cases of storms and fires. Consider making safety plans for other scenarios too.

- 1) *Where are safe places?*
- 2) *Who can you ask to help you get somewhere safe?*
- 3) *How can we find each other if we get split up?*
- 4) *What password can we use if another grown-up needs to get you?*

Both sex and abuse can be difficult to talk about, especially with the young, but it can also be affirming to a child to know that their troubles are not imaginary. One needn't use explicit language to teach these ideas:

- ***No one should force you to be touched or to touch.***
- ***You don't need to share your body.***
- ***Some touching is only for people who are married to each other.***
- ***It is a very serious thing to ask others to share their bodies with you.***

Bodies can be confusing. They can respond differently than a person wants them to, and some things — like sexuality — can seem so much bigger than other physical things, like eating and drinking or listening. Still, we can affirm the good things our bodies allow, like receiving God's gifts (i.e., food, drink, His Word, etc.) and being with people we love.

Also, because so much affection is expressed physically, sometimes survivors can be confused about love and different ways to express love. Dr. Gary Chapman has become famous for suggesting five ways to give or receive love that he calls "love languages." These include quality time together, words of affirmation, acts of service, giving/receiving gifts and physical touch. At any given moment, what type of expression might your child most easily receive? You can also ask:

- ***What are some different ways we can show our love to each other?***
- ***How do you think so-and-so receives love?***
- ***Do you know that I love you when I...?***

A child may learn that his or her body gets attention, even if it isn't always good attention. Consider asking:

- ***Does everyone feel safe with the same types of touching?***
- ***What helps us know what kinds of touching belong only in marriage?***
- ***Who might touch you in order to help you? (Even with medical or religious personnel, another person should always be present to ensure a safe environment.)***

Physical (and emotional) triggers can remain for a long time. Did an abuser first do something to make a child smile, like tickle or offer a certain treat? Perhaps offer a special toy or ice cream to gain alone time? Did an abuser smell a certain way? Did abuse happen at certain times (over a holiday, at bedtime, etc.)? Watch to see if something in particular makes a child sad, angry, frightened or moody.

To help children talk about emotions, you can ask, "What are some feeling words?" Even saying random emotional terms can encourage children to use them when they need them. You can also introduce new words too, silly or serious as needed.

Children need to learn that love continues even through anger and disappointment, and that sometimes we feel conflicting ways at the same time — and that's OK! You can periodically share, "I sure am feeling a lot right now! I feel both x and y! But I sure am glad to have you in my life. I love you very much."

As children grow, they can have uncertainties and resentment toward bodies. They may be scared by their natural lack of self-control. They may fear that bodies only get hurt or hurt others. They may even come to think that bodies are only meant to be used.

- 1) **Encourage that Jesus has a body and soul, and He cares for us in body and soul. There is a big world we can explore with our bodies, minds and feelings, and Jesus is preparing a place for us where sin will never reach us again.**
- 2) **Affirm good things bodies allow, like exploration through our senses; the company of others; and even basic abilities to receive, laugh, play, enjoy a meal or pet, etc.**
- 3) **Allow and encourage boundaries. For example, if it is safe, let a child walk away angry. Let a child say "No" if the child needs to.**
- 4) **Emphasize that bodies can give us hints to what we need. Dehydration and low-blood sugar, for example, can make moodiness and anger worse. Lack of sleep affects focus and memory.**
- 5) **Suggest ways we can work with our own bodies to calm down and practice patience: go for a walk or a run, get some sunshine, close your eyes in a quiet spot when feeling overwhelmed, etc.**

God shows His love for us in gentle ways, with His Spirit-filled Word; with water, bread and wine; and with the various helpers in our lives. May He bless you and your loved ones. May He be gracious to you and make the face of Jesus, and the message of the Gospel, to shine upon you.