



# Emotions and Reactions

After a child has experienced sexual assault they can experience a range of emotional and behavioural responses which are often 'out of character' to the child's usual behaviour. Some children on the other hand show no such change in behaviour. Your reactions to your child can make a great deal of difference. What is important after the fact is to help your child express their feelings about the abuse and how they are feeling now in gentle and appropriate ways. It is also very important to maintain existing boundaries, rules, and limitations, as this helps children to feel secure when their world is predictable.

Often children can go about their day happily, and then suddenly feel angry, or anxious or scared for no obvious reason to their parents. You can think about children's traumatic memory in pictures as similar to a heart beat .....^.....^.....^.....

Children can happily go about their day for hours (.....), but then as they remember, feelings such as fear, anger, or sadness can come back (^). But soon again they go back happily to their day (.....). Difficulties arise for them, but they also pass.



As adults we have so many avenues open to us if we are experiencing negative emotions. We can phone a friend and talk, have a glass of wine, decide to contemplate what we are feeling, go for a run, have a long, hot bath and so on. Children however do not have these luxuries. Also young children often do not have the language to express what they are feeling or experiencing in verbal terms. Therefore the way we encourage children to express themselves needs to be in a way that they are comfortable with and that holds meaning to them. Below is a list of ways that can be helpful in communicating with your child about their experiences or behaviours:

## Anger

Anger is one of the most common reactions found in children who have experienced sexual assault.

Children most often act out their anger on non-abusive parents; they are much safer than the abuser, and they are also not likely to go anywhere!

Children can also feel anger if they feel they have tried to tell their parent about the abuse but think they have not been listened to i.e. 'Daddy has a monster living at his house', 'I don't like Uncle Tom', 'Jack plays silly games I don't like'.

It is important to let your child experience these feelings, and to also let them know that it is ok to be angry; they have a right to feel angry. However it is important that these expressions of anger have limits, most importantly:

- It is never ok to hurt themselves
- It is never ok to hurt someone else, and
- It's not ok to damage theirs or other people's property.

Drawing pictures of their angry feelings, drawing angry faces and having them explain how this makes them feel, punching a pillow or making a card-board box with angry pictures on it that they can kick around the back yard are all positive ways children can express their anger without hurting other people.



### Nightmares

Nightmares are very common in children and can be upsetting to both children and their parents. Be interested in what your child is telling you about their dream (and remember how real it used to feel when you were little!).

Reassurances of their safety at bedtime, a quiet time before bed, or reading a bedtime story can all help your child feel more relaxed before sleeping, which all helps to reduce the frequency of nightmares. Also a nightlight, regardless of their age, can help to reduce anxiety after waking from a bad dream.

Having your child draw their bad dream, or act it out with their toys, can help them to process their experience. This also gives your child the opportunity to give the dream a happy ending; the monster can suddenly appear in a tu-tu and be laughed at, a good fairy can sweep in and help protect the child, or the bad man falls in a big mud puddle and starts to cry. Encouraging your child draw a picture of a protector who can help them in their dream and placing this picture over their bed can also help. All these things help to increase your child's sense of control over their world, and over their dreams.



### Feelings

Helping your child to become in touch with their feelings is very important after a traumatic experience. A very gentle way for a child to communicate their feelings is through art. Invite them to draw a picture of how they are feeling when they suddenly become angry or scared or anxious. Be careful not to interpret what they have drawn, but instead ask questions such as "Can you tell me what is happening in your picture?" "You have used the colour yellow a lot, what does that colour mean in your picture? What does that colour feel like in your body?". Thank them for sharing this with you. Draw a picture of your feelings and share this with them.

When you and your child are out walking, find objects together with different textures and talk about how they feel – are they soft, hard, sharp, prickly? Share with your child where in your body you feel these sensations and invite them to do the same.



*"Protecting children against sexual assault"*

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