

**Helping to Navigate  
Their Worst Nightmare:  
Working with the Non-Offending  
Caregiver**

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*Adapted from Angela Scott and Susanne Walters*

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**Gang Rape of Liberian Child**

- 8 year old female child gang raped by neighborhood boys
- Her immigrant parents deny that there has been an assault on their daughter, despite police reports that the boys had confessed and the child has disclosed
- Child is removed from the home due to non-support

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**Culture of Denial?**

- Many felt that this Liberian family's denial of their daughter's assault was cultural.
- Really, though, was their reaction any different than that of American parents?

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**What is the Worst Thing that Could Happen to Your Child?**

- As child abuse professionals, what is the worst thing that could happen to your children?
- Now imagine that this “worst thing” was perpetrated by
  - Someone you know
  - Someone you trusted
  - Someone you allowed into your child’s life
  - Someone who was loved and trusted by your child

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Being a Non-Offending Parent

**WHAT ARE COMMON RESPONSES TO ABUSE DISCLOSURES?**

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**Common Responses to Abuse Disclosures**

- Numbness
- Distancing
- Disbelief
  - Similar to a parent who has lost a child to death
    - Myer, M.H. *A New Look at Mothers of Incest Victims*.
- Minimization
- Denial
  - Not merely a failure to believe that “this” happened, but a disbelief of the child, especially where the abuser denies the offenses

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### Responses to Abuse Disclosures

- The majority of mothers believe their children and take action to protect them.
  - Pentello & Zuravin
- Unanswered:
  - How long does it take to believe the child?
  - What convinces the NOP that the child is telling the truth?
  - If there was a period of disbelief, what happened during that time?

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### Responses to Abuse Disclosures

- Factors that predict belief and *protection* by mothers
  - Mother’s age at the birth of her first child
  - Type of relationship between mother and offender
  - Knowledge of the abuse before the child protection investigation
  - Whether the child exhibits sexualized behavior

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### Responses to Abuse Disclosures

**Guilt and Shame**

- It was my fault!
- Why didn’t I see the signs?
- Why didn’t my child tell me?

**Confusion and Doubt**

- How will I cope with the loss of
  - My partner
  - Income
  - Residence
  - Friends
  - Family
- Especially significant where the abuser is the breadwinner and controls much of the home life

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### Responses to Abuse Disclosures

- Sexual inadequacy or rejection
  - Did this happen because I wasn't enough for him?
- Repulsion to the offender
  - Including sexual repulsion
- Jealousy
  - Mother may feel jealous of the sexual "relationship" with the child

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### Responses to Abuse Disclosures

- NOP may feel hurt and betrayal, *not* just by the offender but also by the
  - Other relatives
    - Particularly the in-laws (offender's family)
  - The child
    - Why didn't you tell me?
  - Friends
    - Some may side with the offender
  - The person who disclosed abuse to the police
    - Why didn't you tell me?

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### Responses to Abuse Disclosures

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anger               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Towards abuser</li> <li>– Towards everyone</li> <li>– Towards the system                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Including the prosecutor, police, child protection</li> </ul> </li> <li>– Towards the child</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hatred               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– NOP may hate the offender and anyone else involved in the abuser</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Revenge               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– May want to get even or "avenge" the loss of child's innocence</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
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What Do You Need To Know

**QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN WORKING WITH THE NON-OFFENDING PARENT**

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**Questions to Ask When Working with the NOP**

- When possible, inquire about the NOP’s experiences with victimization
  - If the NOP was a child victim, and has never received counseling, abuse and self-coping (rather than using functional and system resources) are the norm
  - If the NOP disclosed abuse *as a child*, how was the disclosure and the child received?
  - Did the NOP ever receive meaningful counseling?

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**Questions to Ask When Working with the NOP**

- What kind of relationship does the caregiver have with the child?
- Are friends and family supportive?
- Did the caregiver suspect abuse prior to the disclosure?
  - Had the child made disclosures on which the NOP didn’t act or worked to suppress?

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### Questions to Ask When Working with the NOP

- How does the NOP’s culture affect the disclosure of abuse?
- What impact do the NOP’s religious beliefs / community have on the NOP’s ability to process and recover?
- How does the NOP cope with stress in general?

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The Ugly Reality

### **THE NON-SUPPORTIVE CAREGIVER**

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### Non-Supportive Caregivers

- Is this a non-supportive caregiver?
  - Need to identify non-support as soon as possible
  - If attempts to convince the caregiver fail (or the caregiver vacillates), removal needs to be seriously considered
  - Leaving the child in a non-supportive environment
    - Can cause significant emotional harm
    - Substantially increases the likelihood of recantation
    - May put the child at risk for more abuse

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### Factors The Influence a Lack of Support

- Cognitive Issues
  - Negative attitude about the child or the child’s behavior
  - Inaccurate knowledge or inappropriate expectations for child’s developmental level
    - Feelings may have started long before the abuse disclosure

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### Factors The Influence a Lack of Support

- Cycle of Abuse
  - If the non-offending parent was abused as a child, abuse may be viewed as normal
  - The NOP may also be physically or sexually abusive or neglectful towards the child
  - Is the primary abuser also abusive to the NOP?

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### Factors The Influence a Lack of Support

- Mental Health Issues / Addictions
  - If the caregiver is abusing drugs / alcohol, or has untreated, undiagnosed, or unmanaged mental health issues, the NOP may not be able to deal with the situation.
  - Choosing to disbelieve the child may be the easiest way to cope.

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Repairing the Damage  
**HELPING THE NON-OFFENDING  
PARENT TO COPE**

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**Helping the NOP Cope**

- Explaining the dynamics of abuse
  - Understanding why a child would hide the abuse or would not tell the NOP
  - Understanding delays in disclosure
  - Understanding offender manipulation

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**Helping the NOP Cope**

- Explaining sexual abuse
  - The abuser doesn't molest because he can't find adult satisfaction
  - He / She has chosen to molest / abuse a child for complicated reasons
    - Power and control
    - Attraction to vulnerability
    - Taking out the offender's own pain on a child

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### Helping the NOP Cope

- Need to ease the family through the transition
  - Connect the NOP to financial support and community support
  - Be willing to listen and to talk the NOP through decisions that he / she now has to make (decisions that the abuser used to make)
  - Point them to paths of independence and remind them that they can do this
    - Their child's safety and their future relationship with their child depends on it!

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### Helping the NOP Cope

- Help the NOP to deal with the anger
  - Don't make promises that you can't keep
    - "This will be over soon"
    - "You're child won't have to testify"
  - Remind the NOP that the child can sense anger
    - Children find ways to make it their fault – Dr. Phil ☺
  - Focus the anger:
    - This is the abuser's choice. Every last bit of this it his / her fault. The abuser is now forcing all of this process.

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### Helping the NOP Cope

- Revenge
  - Remind the NOP that being victimized is not a legal excuse for revenge
    - Threats must be taken seriously
    - May result in threats to harm self
  - Make the NOP aware that attempts to gain revenge will hurt the child's case
    - What will the defense attorney do with this?

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### Helping the NOP Cope

- Focus on the things that the NOP *can* control
  - She cannot control the court system
    - But she can control her behavior within it
  - She cannot control the child’s responses
    - But she can control the way that she loves and supports the child
  - She cannot control the offender
    - But she can demand accountability and compliance

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### Helping the NOP Cope

- Studies suggest that parents who receive less social or environmental support are more distressed and less supportive of their children. Theoretically, if we offer parents services designed to increase their coping skills, they will be better able to help their children.
  - Elliot & Carnes, p. 324

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### Helping the NOP to Cope

- Connect them with
  - Someone *supportive and “in the know”* to talk to
  - Someone to discuss their own sexual abuse with

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### Helping the NOP to Cope

- “Gentle” reminders
  - Aiding the offender is criminal
    - Accomplice after the fact
    - Obstruction of justice
    - Endangering a child
  - You will regret non-support
    - And undoing the damage of disbelief of your child is difficult
  - You have a lot to lose by siding with the abuser
    - Child protection expects support.
    - Prosecution expects that you will be supportive of your child and tell the truth. Always.

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Now It's *Your* Turn

### **ANSWERING QUESTIONS FROM THE NON-OFFENDING PARENT**

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### Answering Questions from the NOP

- Fundamental Principles:
  - “The telephone”
  - The NOP is likely in crisis, so patience is key!
    - You will repeat yourself!
  - What you say will likely be repeated
    - Possibly to defense counsel or the defendant!
  - Make sure that the NOP can tell you “I don't understand” and that you know how to break complex concepts into digestible concepts

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### Answering Questions from the NOP

- Common questions:
  - What types of behaviors should I look for in my child?
  - But my child doesn't want to go to counseling . . .
  - Will my child have to testify?
  - Should I talk with my child about what happened?
  - Why do I feel . . .

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### Answering Questions from the NOP

- Common questions:
  - Whose fault was this?
    - Why did he / she do this?
  - Why is my child angry with me?
  - How will the abuse affect my child in the future?
  - Will this cause sexual problems for my child?
    - Will my child become a molester or an abuser?

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### Answering Questions from the NOP

- Common questions:
  - Will this effect the other children?
    - Did he hurt the other kids?
    - Should I let her see the other kids . . . She is their mother?
  - How do I build trust again within my family?
  - Am I going to lose my kids?
    - How long will CPS be involved?
  - How can I keep this from happening again?

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Your Team

**WORKING WITH THE NON-OFFENDING CAREGIVER IN THE PRE-TRIAL PERIOD**

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**Pre-Trial Advice**

- Take the time to explain the system
  - Consider written materials
    - Defining common terms
    - Directions to courthouse, parking, offices
    - MAKE SURE IT'S NEUTRAL!
  - Use the multi-disciplinary team
    - Advocates
    - Police / detectives
    - Prosecutors
    - Child Protection
    - Therapists

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**Extremely Candid Pre-trial Advice from a Former Child Abuse Prosecutor**

- There are things that you can do that will interfere with a just result and could make your child unsafe:
  - Venting on social networking sites. It's admissible. Stay off Facebook. You're not clever or subtle and a jury will hate it.
  - Do not discuss case details or your child's disclosures with unprivileged persons. They may become witnesses against you. I've seen close friends turn on each other on the stand.
  - Get counseling. You need someone to talk with who is legally obligated to keep your confidences. Getting counseling doesn't make you crazy. Not getting counseling will.

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### Extremely Candid Pre-trial Advice from a Former Child Abuse Prosecutor

- There are things that you can do that will interfere with a just result and could make your child unsafe:
  - Don't grill your child. You're not a trained child interviewer. Your child knows what you're doing. If you think something is suspicious, call the police or your prosecutor.
  - The defense attorney isn't your friend. The defense attorney has one job: to get the defendant off. It's not his / her job to make the defendant "better" or to put your family back together. It's not his job to be nice to your child. The defense attorney will take family secrets and exploit them to get his client off. It is not his job to protect your privacy.

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### Extremely Candid Pre-trial Advice from a Former Child Abuse Prosecutor

- There are things that you can do that will interfere with a just result and could make your child unsafe:
  - I can offer you some privacy and protection but you have to be honest with me. I can't prevent a jury from hearing it if I don't know about it. And don't think the defendant won't tell your secret to the attorney. He will. And they will use it against you unless you tell me.
  - Don't violate court orders. Judges help those who follow orders. If you question whether something violates a court order, don't do it – at least until you've spoken to the prosecutor.
  - Don't assume that child protection orders and criminal court orders are the same thing.
  - Ensure that any counseling your child receives is from a professional, not some lay minister, a friend of the family, or anyone with ties to the abuser.

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### Pre-trial Advice

- Remind the NOP that the child *needs to hear* certain things from him / her:
  - It is not your fault
  - I will try to protect you
  - I trust you
  - I believe you

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### Guilty or Not Guilty . . .

- Children who feel loved and supported by their mother or other non-offending caregiver throughout the process will recover from the trauma more quickly.

– Kendall-Tackett, Meyer Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993, p. 172.

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### Research Materials

- Elliott, Anne & Carnes, Connie. *Reactions of Non-Offending Parents to the Sexual Abuse of Their Child: A Review of the Literature.* Child Maltreatment Vol. 6, No. 4. Nov. 2001. Pp. 314-329.
- Deblinger, Ester; Stauffer, Lori & Steer, Robert. *Comparative Efficacies of Supportive and Cognitive Behavioral Group Therapies for Young Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused and Their Nonoffending Mothers.* Child Maltreatment Vol. 6, No. 4. Nov. 2001. Pp. 332-343.
- Pintello, Denise & Zuravin, Susan. *Intrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse: Predictors of Post-Disclosure Maternal Belief and Protective Action.* Child Maltreatment Vol. 6, No. 4. Nov. 2001. Pp. 344-352.
- Leifer, Myra; Kilban, Teresa; & Grossman, Gail. *A Three-Generational Study Comparing the Families of Supportive and Unsupportive Mothers of Sexually Abused Children.* Child Maltreatment Vol. 6, No. 4. Nov. 2001. Pp. 353-364.

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