



# Supporting Your Child When They Have Been Sexually Victimized

When a youth has been sexually victimized, the compassionate, caring, and supportive responses by adults around them (e.g., parents, school staff, child welfare worker, law enforcement) play a key role towards their recovery. Supportive relationships steeped in connection, availability, and patience help youth heal.

This resource helps parents, guardians and other caregivers understand how they can help their child restore a sense of safety.

## Steps for Parents

### Be supportive

Your unconditional love and support during this difficult, distressing time will help your child heal and move forward.

### Build a sense of safety

Reassure your child that they are not alone and you will get through this tough time together. Carefully consider involving people in your child's life who can provide additional support (e.g., family members, school personnel, friends). Children are more resilient in the face of stress when they are supported by caring adults and friends.

### Consult with your health care provider(s)

They will be able to support you and your child, as well as provide referrals for services such as counselling, occupational therapy, art therapy, music therapy, dance therapy, etc. Earlier intervention promotes better resilience in the long run.

### Learn about the impacts of trauma

Work with trauma-informed professionals to learn more about impacts of trauma and supporting your child through their healing.

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## Give messaging of hope

Youth who have experienced trauma can heal — they can regain trust, confidence, and hope. They have the ability to create a new “normal” and function within it. Help your child see the world as manageable, understandable, and meaningful. The stronger the belief that things will become and stay better, the more significant your child’s recovery will be. Hope is not just a feeling — it is the foundation of a chemical reaction in the brain that calms fear and anger and increases resiliency and healing (D. Bowers, 2011).

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## Help rebuild a positive sense of self and sense of control over their environment

When youth are going through a situation like this, they may feel alone and powerless in their ability to control their own lives. In order to restore a sense of control, it is important to include your child in discussions about next steps and in decision making where appropriate.

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### Back to Basics:

- **Establish regular routine.** Clear routines promote consistency, predictability, and reliability that can help your child regain a sense of security and control.
  - **Provide balanced nutrition.** Prepare balanced food options for your child that are low in refined sugar. Balanced nutrition is important for helping their body to regulate.
  - **Provide time for physical activity.** Engage your child in 30 minutes of daily physical activity for direct mental health benefits.
  - **Help manage night sleeping.** Nightmares and generalized fearfulness are common for youth who have experienced victimization. It can be helpful, for example, to leave lights on in their room or to sit with them until they fall asleep.
  - **Ensure your child has time for fun.** Make time for doing fun things that are structured and safe so they have a chance to be a tween/teen.
  - **Help your child stay connected.** Encourage them to stay connected to people who are supportive of them and to activities they enjoy or enjoyed in the past.
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## Be patient and tolerant of moody behaviour such as clinginess, pushing away, and outbursts

Youth who have a trauma response can be flooded by emotions, making it difficult for them to regulate their mood. Let your child know you can handle their big feelings and will stay by their side.

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## Help manage overwhelming emotions

The body is the best intervention tool. We have to settle the body before we can settle the brain. Youth engage when they feel safe and they use it to connect. Playing catch or board games, doing crafts, etc. while you talk can help them regulate and connect. Stay calm and keep the environment low key. Be consistent and help your child understand, express, and tolerate their strong emotions. They will get through it — reassure them that their feelings will pass, the way a storm passes.

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## **Help manage flooding thoughts and feelings**

Help your child see the link between their thoughts and feelings. Assist them in understanding how working on controlling their thinking can help control how they feel. Encourage them to take a break from upsetting thoughts by engaging in an activity they enjoy — perhaps colouring or art, listening to music, watching a show, or being physically active.

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## **Be supportive as your child processes their abuse experience**

You can take an active role in deciding what comes next in their life. Reinforce that this negative experience doesn't define who they are. Explain that healing is a process that takes time; they will have good days and bad days, and you are by their side to help every step of the way.

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## **Advocate for your child**

Be your child's champion and work with professionals to help them recover from trauma. Help others view your child through a trauma-healing lens so their expectations are realistic and their responses are supportive.

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## **Take care of yourself**

To effectively take care of your family, you must take care of yourself. Taking care of a child who has experienced trauma is hard work and it affects the entire family. Seek the supports necessary for the entire family. For example, you may wish to find a counsellor for each family member.