

PREGNANCY  
BIRTH  
MOTHERING

INFORMATION  
FOR WOMEN

**SURVIVORS**

*of* CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

SPEAKING OUT:

“JUST ACCEPT ME  
FOR IT, KNOW THAT  
IT’S NOT ME IT’S  
WHAT HAPPENED  
TO ME THAT IS  
CAUSING ME TO  
ACT LIKE THIS”

“  
I WAS SCARED  
WASN’T  
TO MAKE HIM  
(SON) HAPPY”

“SEEING MY BABY PROVED  
TO ME HOW INNOCENT  
AND BEAUTIFUL A BABY WAS,  
I WAS LIKE THAT ONCE,  
THAT’S HARD”

“NO I AM NOT  
OVERPROTECTIVE,  
I HAVE AN AWARENESS  
OF THE POSSIBILITY  
(OF ABUSE), AND THAT  
I HAVE DONE ALL I  
CAN TO TEACH THEM  
(CHILDREN) TO TELL”

THAT MY **LOVE**  
GOOD ENOUGH

“THEY ARE  
THE BIGGEST  
JOY IN MY LIFE,  
PURE LOVE,  
UNTAINTED  
BY THE  
ABUSE”

WOMEN'S HEALTH  
STATEWIDE

CONTACT LIST

Women's Health Statewide  
Tel: 8239 9600  
Toll Free (SA): 1800 182 098

Community Health Enfield  
Tel: 8342 8600

Southern Women's Community Health Centre  
Tel: 8384 9555

Adelaide Central Mission  
Tel: 8202 5190

Northern Women's Community Health Centre  
Tel: 8252 3711

Dale Street Women's Health Centre  
Tel: 8444 0700

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downloaded from our web site at  
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"I LOVED THAT I HAD A CHILD GROWING WITHIN MY BODY. I WAS IN A CONSTANT STATE OF AWE AND BLISS OVER THIS FACT. I COULDN'T BELIEVE THAT I WAS INDEED 'NORMAL' AND NOT 'DAMAGED' IN ANY WAY"

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"I WAS CHANGING MY DAUGHTER'S NAPPY AND FOUND MYSELF REMEMBERING THE ABUSE . . . WAS I EVER THIS INNOCENT?"

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### **What is Childhood Sexual Abuse?**

When someone involves a child in any type of sexual activity it is called childhood sexual abuse or csa.

### **Childhood Sexual Abuse is wrong. Why?**

Childhood sexual abuse is wrong because it is an abuse of power and trust by someone over a child. Children and young people have less power than older or bigger people. An abuser takes advantage of having more power. Children are tricked or threatened by abusers into being silent about the abuse. Children fear they will be punished or won't be believed if they tell. Child sexual abuse is illegal!

### **Could it have been my fault?**

No! Children often try to protect themselves from the abuse by hiding, switching off and becoming angry to avoid unsafe situations. Children may try to avoid the abuser, but they often can't. Children are never responsible for the abuse. The abuser is 100% responsible for the abuse.

### **How can Childhood Sexual Abuse affect you as an adult?**

Being sexually abused as a child does not affect all women in the same way. You may experience many effects, a few, or none at all. Some emotional effects can be:

- Blaming yourself for the abuse
- Having strong feelings like guilt, shame, anger, outrage and fear
- Feeling powerless
- Having flashbacks or memories of the abuse
- Fearing you won't be believed
- Having difficulty trusting people
- Thinking you're going crazy
- Feeling like you can't cope
- Self-harm and other self-destructive behaviours like cutting yourself, drug and alcohol over use, over or under eating.
- Depression.

Some physical effects can be:

- Feeling numb
- Having unexplained physical pain like pelvic pain or stomach pain
- Headaches and/or migraines
- Tiredness or physical exhaustion
- Trouble sleeping
- Physical effects of anxiety and/or panic attacks.

These are common responses to the harm you experienced as a child. Just by surviving you have shown a lot of courage and strength.

### **How can Childhood Sexual Abuse affect you when you're pregnant?**

During pregnancy you may:

- Feel like you're not in control of your own body
- Not want to have vaginal examinations
- Not want to attend appointments
- Be concerned about how you will protect your own child from abuse
- Not want to have sexual intimacy
- Be afraid of the birth
- Not want a male doctor.

It is important for you to know that such feelings are common. If you have any concerns there are some things that you can do that might help:

- Talk about it with your doctor or health worker (if you have a trusting relationship with them)
- Ask for a female doctor, if one is not available you have the right to ask for a support person to be with you during any examinations
- Talk to your partner about your concerns with intimacy
- Develop a birth plan with your midwife or health worker to help with your concerns about the birth.

## "I CHOSE A DOCTOR WHO TREATED ME AS A WHOLE PERSON NOT JUST A PREGNANCY . . ."

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"BREASTFEEDING WAS THE BEST. IT FELT SO PROTECTIVE AND NURTURING.  
HAVING THAT PHYSICAL CONTACT WITH MY BABY WAS COMFORTING"

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### How can Childhood Sexual Abuse affect your experience of birth?

You may:

- Have flashbacks to the past abuse during labour or birth
- Feel unsafe in the hospital environment
- Not want to take your clothes off
- Fear that the sexual abuse has damaged you physically in some way and that the doctor or midwife will see this damage
- Fear that you cannot push the baby out
- Fear a vaginal birth
- Not want pain relief
- Not want a male in the room (including your partner)
- Not want to be touched during labour and birth
- Not want vaginal examinations
- Fear of being out of control during the birth or fear of someone else being in control of your body.

It is important for you to know that your feelings are common. If you have some of these feelings or any others it can be helpful to talk to your health worker about them. Some things that may be helpful:

- Have someone you trust with you at all times
- Ask your health worker to explain any procedures in detail before the birth
- Contact your health worker and ask for information and resources to help you learn more about the birthing process
- Ask if there is continuous care from a midwife available at your hospital
- Ask to develop a birth plan.
- Be very clear with your support person about your concerns and needs so they can ensure your wishes are heard
- Ask for access to a birthing centre.

Sometimes it is difficult to be assertive in hospital. It is important to remember that you have rights as a health consumer. For more information on your rights please ask your health worker for a copy of "Your rights and responsibilities" pamphlet.

### How can Childhood Sexual Abuse affect your experience of being a mother?

You may:

- Feel anxious about some of the tests your baby will have just after birth
- Feel anxious about being separated from your baby for even short periods of time
- Feel guilty after the birth if you had mixed feelings about the baby before it was born
- Have concerns about the gender of your baby
- Feel more concerned about the safety of your child
- Want to or not want to breastfeed your baby
- Be afraid of loving your baby for fear of losing them
- Find it difficult to trust others with the health and well being of your baby
- Have been told that people who have been abused go on to abuse others. It is important for you to know that this is very rare.

It is important for you to know that these feelings are experienced by many women. If you have someone safe that you can talk to then you should do this, or you could contact one of the services on the back of this pamphlet. Some things that may be helpful are:

- Asking your health worker about the procedures that may be offered to your baby and time to consider your choices
- Asking to be with your baby while the procedures are done
- Be easy on yourself! You have just experienced a major life change. Take things slowly, ask for help if you need it
- Talk to other people who care for your baby about ways to make sure you feel your child is safe
- Discuss any concerns about breastfeeding with your health worker or seek a second opinion
- If you feel that things are becoming too hard talk to a trained health worker.