



**A handbook for  
caregivers of  
sexually abused  
children**

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## Help for Families of Abuse Victims

Police (emergencies) .....	911
Athens County Child Advocacy Center.....	(740) 566-4847
Athens County Children Services .....	(740) 592-3061
Athens County Victim Assistance Program.....	(740) 592-3212
My Sister's Place.....	(740) 593-3402 (800) 443-3402
Tri-County Mental Health and Counseling.....	(740) 592-3091 24-hour crisis services...(740) 593-3344 or...(888) 475-8484
Domestic Violence Unit @	
Athens County Sheriff.....	(740) 593-6633
Athens Police Department.....	(740) 592-3315
Southeastern Ohio Legal Services .....	(740) 594-3558
Athens County Court-Appointed Special Advocate and Guardian Ad-Litem Program.....	(740) 592-3255
Glouster Police Department .....	(740) 767-3768
Jacksonville/Trimble Police Department.....	(740) 767-2448
Nelsonville Police Department.....	(740) 753-1736
O'Bleness Memorial Hospital .....	(740) 593-5551

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## **Welcome to the Athens County Child Advocacy Center**

Your child is here because of concerns about possible abuse. Our goals are to:

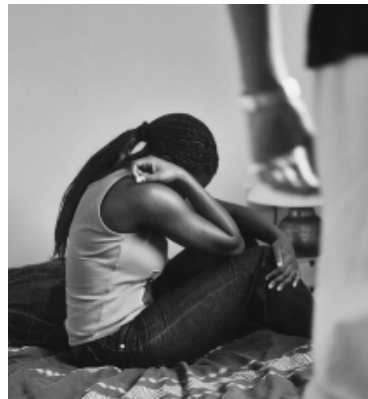
- Do the best job possible in finding out what happened
- Work with the legal system to help the child
- Help you understand the child protective and legal systems
- Help make the process as comfortable as possible for you
- Help your children and family begin to heal.

We hope this handbook will help you understand more about child sexual abuse. We also hope it will help you understand the system we use to respond to a report of abuse. Please call us at Athens County Child Advocacy Center at 591-8886 if you have questions.

## What is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual Abuse occurs when a person forces a child to have any form of sexual contact or makes a child perform sexual acts. Sexual abuse may involve touching private parts (clothed or unclothed), penetration using an object, forced sexual acts between children, or making the child view, read or participate in pornography. These acts are abuse even when offenders say they were gentle and did not hurt the child.

Sexual abuse is also known as molestation and exploitation. Sexual molestation does not always mean sexual intercourse. Sometimes older children molest younger or smaller children. Sexual acts between children become molestation when one child uses coercion, force, or violence to get the other child to do the acts. Young molesters should be reported to social service agencies so they can receive help.



Sexual molestation is overwhelming to children, especially when an adult is involved. Most children are taught to trust adults. They tend to believe what adults tell them is true rather than to rely on their own feelings. This works against them in two ways. If the molester tells them that what is being done is OK, they may doubt their own feelings that it is not. If a parents' initial

reaction when they hear the child's molestation report is "This can't be true!", the child may wonder if his or her own feelings are mistaken. Children almost never tell about abuse "to create problems." More often, they fear that telling will make people angry at them.

**It is extremely difficult for children to report abuse.**

## How parents sometimes feel when abuse has been reported

When abuse is reported, parents sometimes feel as if they are on a roller coaster of emotions. This is normal. The report can affect your life in many ways, and it takes time to adjust. Following are some of the common thoughts and feelings parents have. You may feel one or more of these, or you may move from one to another.

1. **Denial.** Your first reaction may be to not believe or accept the possibility that it really happened. Or you may believe it happened, but that no real harm was done. Parents often experience denial because it is too overwhelming to accept that the abuse occurred and that there will be after-effects. For some people, it takes time to overcome denial and face the realities of abuse.



- 2 **Anger.** At times, you may feel angry at yourself for not protecting the child. You may feel angry at the perpetrator for what he/she did. You may even feel angry at the child. Be honest about your feelings and share them with a trusted person or group.

3. **Helplessness.** You probably do not know what to expect and feel that things are out of your control. Some parents may fear that their children will be taken away. Try to stay aware of how cases proceed through the system in which you are involved.

**4. Lack of assertiveness.** You may feel invisible and think there is nothing you can do to help the situation get better. We will help you learn what you can do to change the situation and take appropriate action.

**5. Shock, numbness, repulsion.** You may have memories of being abused as a child, which may lead to shock, numbness and repulsion for the new situation you find yourself in. If so, you may need to seek therapy for yourself to recover from the abuse.

**6. Guilt, self-blame.** You may feel it is all your fault. But the offender is responsible for the abuse, not you. The best thing you can do now is support your child and learn all you can about how to make things better. Reading this handbook is a good first step.

**7. Hurt and betrayal.** It is normal to feel hurt for the loss of your child's innocence. You also may have lost a spouse or partner if that person was the offender. You may even have lost friends. It is very important to take time to grieve for these losses.

**8. Concern about money.** You may be worried about finances because of lost income. An advocate or social worker from Children Services or Job and Family Services will work with you to assist you.

**9. Fear of violence.** In homes where violence is common, you may fear the offender will try to harm you or your children. If so, call My Sister's Place, the domestic violence shelter, at 592-3402.

**10. Fear of drug or alcohol abuse.** You may be afraid that you or the offender will abuse drugs or alcohol because of the stress, or that one of you may have a relapse to an old addiction. If you need help, call Health Recovery Services at 592-6720.

## **The grooming process: steps the abuser takes to set up children**

Some parents wonder how it is possible for their children to be abused. Offenders use many tactics to gain access to children. These include:

**1. Seeking out an approachable child:** Abusers usually pick children who are easy to get to (relatives, friends and neighbors). They may also seek children who have emotional needs for friendship and attention.

**2. Establishing relationship with the child:** Abusers often seek ways to build trust and friendship with children. They may spend time playing with them, volunteer for child care duty, become their "buddy," or buy them candy or presents.

**3. Breaking down the child's resistance to touch:** Abusers may find ways to touch children a lot. As a result, the children are often confused when the touch becomes sexual. The abusers may play games with a lot of physical contact, like wrestling, and they may tickle children and sneak sexual touches.

**4. Finding ways to isolate a child:** Abusers find excuses to be alone with children so they can molest them. For example, they may babysit, invite them to sleep over, or take them camping.

**5. Blaming the child and keeping the secret:** Abusers try to make the children feel responsible so they won't tell. They use statements like these:

- "You know you like the way I touch you."
- "If you tell, people will think you are bad."
- "If you tell our 'special secret,' I will go to jail."
- "If you tell your mother, she won't love you anymore."
- "No one will believe you."

## Signs sometimes shown by abused children

Children may have some of the following symptoms as a result of abuse:

- Nausea/upset stomach
- Change in appetite
- Crying
- Nightmares
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Anger and mood changes
- Withdrawal from others
- Avoidance of school/friends
- Self-mutilation
- Substance abuse
- Clinging to parents
- Aggressiveness
- Rebelliousness
- Change in school performance
- Fears and phobias
- Lying
- Attention-seeking
- Sexually inappropriate behavior
- Running away
- Pregnancy or sexually-transmitted infections

The Athens CAC and other community agencies offer services to help your child overcome the effects of trauma. Children react differently depending on age, extent of abuse, support from others and their relationship with the offender.



**The single most important factor affecting the child's recovery is the level of support from the parent(s) or caregiver.** It is this simple. If you do everything you can to support your child, the chances of recovery are much greater. If you feel torn between loyalty to your child and loyalty to the offender, the Athens CAC has services available to help you sort it out.

## How to act toward your child

Provide safety, love and support. Let them know it is okay to cry or be mad. Make sure your child understands it is not his or her fault. Don't coach or pressure your child to talk about things.

### Some things you can say that will really help your child:

- I believe you.
- I know it's not your fault.
- I'm glad I know about it.
- I'm sorry this happened to you.
- I will take care of you.
- I'm not sure what will happen next.
- Nothing about YOU made this happen. It has happened to other children, too.
- You don't need to take care of me.
- I am upset, but not with you.
- I'm angry at the person who did this.
- I'm sad. You may see me cry. That's all right. I will be able to take care of you. I'm not mad at you.
- I don't know why he/she did it. He/she has a problem.
- You can still love someone but hate what they did to you.



## Some things you can do

- Return to a normal routine as soon as possible.
- See that your child receives therapy as soon as possible. Trying to sweep the problem under the rug usually causes more problems because it will not go away.
- Find help for yourself. You don't have to do it all yourself. Contact the Athens CAC for assistance.
- Teach your child the rules of personal safety. Tell them what to do if someone tries to touch them in an uncomfortable way.
- Be careful not to question your child about the abuse. If you do, you can jeopardize the case in court against your child's abuser. Specially trained professionals at the Children's Center will interview your child to obtain the necessary information without harming the case or further traumatizing him/her. If your child wants to talk about it, listen supportively, but do not probe.
- Keep your child away from the person suspected of the abuse. This is to protect you, that person and the child.
- Avoid discussing the case with other victims or their families.
- Never coach or advise your child on how to act or what to say to professionals or investigators. This could seriously damage the case.
- Avoid the suspect.
- Your child may need an extra sense of physical security. Stay close, and assure your child you will keep him/her safe.
- Remember to give attention to your other children.

## Facts about the investigation

Following are the basic steps to an investigation of child sexual abuse:

1. Someone reports suspicion of abuse to authorities, either law enforcement or Athens County Children Services (ACCS).
2. Interviews with the child are conducted, usually at the Child Advocacy Center. Interviews are conducted by specially-trained forensic interviewers, with the participation of local law enforcement, and, if



deemed necessary, a representative of the Athens County Prosecutor's Office.

3. Medical exams are conducted, if necessary.
4. Law Enforcement and ACCS will continue the investigation, which will include an interview with the alleged offender, if possible.
5. A team of professionals will meet to discuss the case and decide how to manage it. The team consists of medical professionals, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, social workers and mental health professionals. Meeting participants agree to abide by the Athens County CAC's confidentiality agreement to keep all information from meetings private.
6. The case may be referred to the Prosecuting Attorney and/or Juvenile or Criminal Court, or another plan may be made for managing the case.

## **Facts about the interview**

At times, you may be asked to wait while your child is being questioned. Being left out of some of the proceedings can make you feel as if you are not very important to the process or to your child. Please be assured that you are very important. In fact, you may be the key to understanding what has happened. Many interviewers, however, prefer that the parents not be present during the interview because they believe that more accurate information can be obtained if you are not there. In your presence, your child may be unwilling to tell important details because he/she wants to spare you from hearing them. And sometimes parents can't control their emotions at what they hear, or they may place pressure on the child to tell in a way that can complicate the legal process.

Most interviewers will take the time to make sure your child is comfortable without you. This means letting your child see you with the interviewer and making sure that your child knows where you will be during the interview. It should be made clear to the child that you are available, if necessary.

## Working with the system

The system is responsible for protecting children and holding offenders accountable. The more information and cooperation you give to the team of professionals working in the system, the better job they can do on the case.

Support people are available to help you. If a Family Advocate is assigned to your case, she will be empathetic and familiar with child sexual abuse and the legal system, and she is available to help at any time. A Victim Assistance designee (from the Prosecutor's Office) is also available to keep you informed about the status of the case (court dates, etc.), help you work through the legal system, and aid you in obtaining financial assistance, if you are eligible.

Here are some basic tips for working with professionals in the system:

- Be calm and reassuring to your child. Don't coach your child on what to say. It is important for the story to come out in your child's words and in your child's own time.
- When you are asked for information, try to provide as many facts as you can. Cases are built on the four W's: who, what, when and where. Don't try to guess if you don't know the answer to a question— it is much better to say you don't know.
- On the other hand, your feelings are important. Feelings are valuable in giving investigators insight, so tell how you feel and why you feel that way. Although only facts are allowed in court, feelings can help give investigators ideas for how to proceed.

- Always be honest, even though the truth may not seem favorable to yourself or others. In the long run, you will be much better off.
- Try not to overreact. It is a difficult time and emotions are probably running high. Losing control can hurt the case and over-shadow the needs of the innocent victim, your child.
- Cooperate. You will probably feel as if investigators are prying into your personal life, but this is necessary and vital to the case and to your child's welfare. The sooner the facts come out, the sooner the case can be resolved and you can return to a more normal life.
- You may feel that investigators do not care because they avoid showing emotions. In fact, investigators do care, and part of that caring involves remaining objective and calm in the face of extremely emotional situations.
- Love, support and protect your child at all costs. If the alleged offender is a significant person to you, it can be very difficult to balance your feelings for him with the need to protect your child. Remember that your child has only you to make healthy, protective decisions.



## Your team of professionals

In Athens County, we are fortunate to have a highly trained team of professionals which meets every month to respond to child abuse reports. The roles of the team members are described below.

***The Prosecutor :*** The prosecutor leads the team and has the final decision as to whether charges will be filed. Consideration is given to many factors which will affect the likelihood of success in court. Some of the factors considered are: age and maturity of the child, the child's ability to testify, whether or not the suspect has confessed, presence of medical evidence, and whether or not there are other witnesses.



***The Victim Assistance Advocate :***

The Victim Assistance Program, a division of the Prosecutor's Office, coordinates court preparation, helps victims and their families understand the legal process, and provides other valuable services to victims and their families.

***The Law Enforcement Officer :***

The Athens County CAC team includes investigators from all local law enforcement agencies. They interview children, non-offending parents, suspects and other witnesses, and gather evidence from the scene of the alleged event.

***The Case Worker :*** The role of Athens County Children Services (ACCS) is to help protect your child. The ACCS case workers conduct interviews and develop safety plans. They may refer you and/or your child to counseling.

## Your team of professionals

### *The Sexual Assault Physician/Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner*

**(SANE)** : Nurses and physicians working with the team have years of experience in examining children for possible abuse. The exam for sexual abuse involves a regular check-up with magnification of the genitalia. Magnification is done with an instrument called a culposcope, which is a big magnifying glass with a good light source. If the child is having discharge or other symptoms, cultures may be obtained by swabbing the genitalia with a Q-tip. This exam should not be traumatic or painful, and most children are able to re-main calm. Remember, however, an exam may not indicate if the child has been abused. Eighty

percent of all children who have been abused have normal exams, even with a history of penetration, so the team does not rely on these alone to prove abuse. One definite advantage is that it allows the doctor to assure the child that his/her body is OK.



**The Therapist** : Mental health professionals (therapists) on the team help decide how the abuse has affected the child and family and what can be done to assist them in healing from the experience. Therapists also help in the investigation by

**The Special Advocate** : The Court-Appointed Special Advocate may be involved in the process if he/she is already assigned to the child. This person is a trained professional whose role is to help the child.

## The Legal System

It is difficult to predict what will happen for you and your child after a report of abuse has been made and an interview has been conducted.

If the offender is a family member and there are continued concerns of the child's safety a case may be opened through a Juvenile Court filing, typically from the prosecutor representing Children Services. This type of case is a civil case alleging abuse, neglect, and/or dependency. Juvenile Court is concerned primarily with the safety of your child and may focus on issues such as working a treatment plan with Children Services, counseling, custody, and visitation.

Regardless of whether the offender is a family member of the child victim, the case may ultimately enter the Criminal Court system, when an actual criminal charge is filed. Decisions in the civil system and criminal system do not depend on one another. The Criminal Court system is concerned with the guilt or innocence of the accused and often uses a trial to decide guilt. All persons charged with a crime are considered innocent until proven guilty in a criminal court.

Following the interview with you and/or your child, the law enforcement officer will continue investigating the case. This may include speaking with other witnesses, obtaining items for evidence, and obtaining medical records. This investigation often takes a number of weeks.

Once the officer has completed his/her investigation and there is evidence to proceed, the case is submitted to the Athens Co. Prosecutor's Office. The prosecutor will review the case and may ask for additional tasks to be completed by the law enforcement officer (often additional records or witness statements). The prosecutor will determine if the case is sufficient to be prosecuted.

Once the prosecutor has reviewed the investigation case and plans to proceed with prosecution, the case is presented to a Grand Jury. The Grand Jury meets two times a month to review felony cases.

The Grand Jury is a secret proceeding and is only attended by jury members, the prosecuting attorney, and subpoenaed witnesses. The Grand Jury decides whether to indict the case, formally charging the person with a crime. The Grand Jury will determine whether to arrest the person by warrant or issue a summons to the person notifying them of the charge(s) and of an arraignment hearing date.

The Athens County Prosecutor's Office administers the Athens County Victim Assistance Program (VAP) and an advocate from VAP will be assigned to you and your case. At your request, an advocate will assist you in understanding the criminal justice system. VAP provides a variety of services which will be explained to you and will assist you in accessing appropriate services. The VAP advocate will also serve as your liaison to the Prosecutor's office and the assistant prosecutor assigned to your case.

Following an arraignment hearing for the Defendant (person charged with the crime), you will receive a letter from VAP notifying



you of the next hearing dates, the Defendant's bond, and some of VAP's services and how you may access them. Please feel free to contact the VAP office at any time, even before the case is presented to the Prosecutor's Office, with any questions or concerns. If the accused person is a juvenile

(under age 18), law enforcement may file a delinquency charge in Juvenile Court. Upon this filing the Athens County Victim Assistance Program will send a letter to you advising you of the status of the case.

The criminal justice process often moves at a very slow pace. Emotional wounds may be reopened by the various proceedings, which often take place over a period of a year or longer. Court dates are often continued (delayed) numerous times. This happens for a variety of reasons, but is often quite frustrating. Please try to be patient and remember that people are working to gain the best outcome for you, your child, and the community.

## The Legal System

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In Athens County, we are taking the following measures to improve the legal system's response to child abuse:

- Professionals are trained annually on a variety of topics regarding child abuse
- The number of times a child must tell about the abuse is reduced
- Community agencies involved are coordinating services and responses
- We have sponsored legislation to provide more protection for child victims, both in and out of the courtroom. We will continue to support any new legislation that improves the system

If there is to be a legal proceeding in which your child must testify, your Victim Assistance advocate will prepare your child for testimony. The advocate will meet with you and your child in the courtroom so your child may know what to expect on the trial date. Preparing your child for the trial and courtroom set up will allow him/her to know what to expect and may ease his/her fears, which may include:

- Seeing the abuser again
- Not wanting to testify
- Wondering where you will be

The legal system is complex, confusing, and often very frustrating for crime victims and their families. You can make the process easier for your child by working with, and not against, the authorities. The criminal justice system may be able to protect your child from future unsupervised contact with the offender. Pursuing prosecution of an offender is a service to the community, as many offenders have multiple victims, though they may not have been "caught" abusing each victim. Treatment for offenders is often more successful when an offender is "forced" through the legal system to participate in treatment programs. The legal system is often a powerful way to hold the offender accountable for what (s)he has done.

## Limits of the legal system

Always remember that the well-being of your child should be your objective. Don't lose yourself in the legal system, because it is only one step in the process, and it is not essential to your child's recovery. The best advice is to enter the legal system without expectations, because the more you expect from the system, the harder the experience is likely to be.

Another thing to remember: Day after day, therapists who talk with adult survivors of child sexual abuse hear them say, "My parents didn't do anything about it." However, your child will never say that if you do everything you can to help him/her understand that you will not tolerate abuse. This is very important.



Celebrate when it is over. No matter what the outcome, conviction or not, tell the child it is over. You and the child did your best, worked hard and put in a lot of time. Celebrate a job well done.

## **How to tell your child about the legal outcome**

It is best to be honest and direct with your child. How much you explain depends on your child's age and what he/she can understand. The most important thing is let the child know that you are proud of him/her for being brave.

When the case is completed, you may feel let down or have a period of depression. It happens to most parents, even if it is a positive experience. If your child hears you express disappointment in the outcome, your child may think you are disappointed in him/her. Instead, find a supportive friend with whom you can share your feelings and frustration.

Remember, you have done your best in trying to prevent further abuse and hold the offender responsible for what he/she did. Even the case was dropped, this is a major accomplishment.

### **Some things you can say to your child if the alleged offender is not held legally accountable**

- Just because they didn't find \_\_\_\_\_ guilty, that doesn't mean they didn't believe you. It's just that they have to follow the court's rules.
- You may be wondering how someone can do something wrong or against the law and not be punished. It doesn't make sense to me, either.
- It doesn't matter what the court process did. What matters is that you did what you needed to do—you told.
- You are safe. You have been very brave.

## What to say to others

One challenge your family will face will be what to say to others about the abuse. Your child may feel embarrassed and/or responsible. If there is no publicity or public awareness, you can decide whom you will tell. Let your child know with which relatives or friends you will be discussing it and let your child have some choice about who is told.

Sometimes an extended family member is the first person to learn of the abuse. You may feel hurt that someone knew before you. However, understand that your child may have been trying to protect your feelings by telling someone else. Your



child may have felt that person could tell you in a less upsetting way than he or she could.

If you are especially close to your family, you will probably want to talk with them about your child's abuse and how it has affected the family. It is important to keep in mind how these relatives usually react to stressful

situations. Their reactions may include hysteria, horror, obvious distress, sincere concern, embarrassment, disgust, disinterest or unnecessary questioning for intimate details. If you know they will react in a negative way, you may not want to share the information with them unless it becomes necessary. It is important to maintain your child's sense of privacy. On the other hand, be careful not to make it a dirty secret, as this could cause more shame in your child.

**Reference: When Your Child Has Been Molested,  
by Kathryn B. Hagans & Joyce Case**

## Comments you can expect from others about the abuse

"What exactly did he do to your child?"

"Are you sure your child didn't make it up?"

"Why didn't you know it was happening?"

"If it were my child, I'd just move away."

"Your poor child must be feeling really guilty."

Remember, you don't owe anyone an explanation. "I'd rather not talk about it" is an acceptable response. Or simply say, "It's been a very difficult time for all of us." "I appreciate your concern" is another response you might want to use. Or it may be easier to just nod as an acknowledgment of what someone says.

Keep in mind that most people have very little knowledge about sexual abuse. For example, in response to the comment about your child feeling guilty, you could say that children always feel unnecessary guilt in these cases until they are assured that they are not responsible in any way for what happened. As a parent, you might also be experiencing some guilt, and as a result, you may feel defensive, in that case, a good response is, "Parents do their best, but we're only human."

Adults are the people most likely to say something to your child. You may want to tell your child that if someone says, "I'm sorry about what happened to you," he/she should respond with a simple, "Thank you." Let your child know that he/she doesn't have to respond to any comments or questions. He or she could say "My mom and/or dad told me not to talk about it now". If other children comment or tease, your child might say, "It could happen to anyone, including you."

**Reference: When Your Child Has Been Molested,**

**by Kathryn B. Hagans & Joyce Case**

## Taking care of yourself

You are going through a very difficult time, and you probably feel pressured from many directions. Although you are trying to take care of a lot of other people, you also need to take care of yourself. Your well-being is very important, so you need to find time to do something just for you and plan to do it regularly. This may be difficult to do, but it is in the best interest of you and your child.

Scheduling your own time and space will help you gain or regain a sense of your own identity. Take the time to nurture yourself. Here is a plan that may work for you:

**Step 1:** Schedule your self-care time (exact time, date and place) on your calendar.

**Step 2:** Decide what you'll do.

**Step 3:** Tell anyone who needs to know that you will be gone for the time you've set. Explain that this is your personal time and that you'll be back later.

**Step 4:** Take care of details, such as finding child care, arranging transportation, etc.

**Step 5:** Enjoy yourself!

Some suggested activities: Take a walk, have lunch with a friend, go to the movies, go out to dinner, join an exercise class, take a drive, and last, but equally important, join a support group.



## What to expect afterward

It is recommended that children who have been sexually abused receive mental health counseling. If you decide not to pursue counseling, you should be attentive for the following issues which might arise in your child after he/she has been sexually abused, even if he/she seems “fine” after the abuse:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Depression or mood swings
- Eating disorders
- Sleep disorders
- Anxiety disorders
- Participation in unsafe sexual activities or inappropriately sexualized behavior. Those who have been abused as children have an increased risk of becoming abusers themselves when they reach adulthood. Constant supervision and vigilance by adults is essential to preventing further child abuse.

## Reading list for caregivers

*(all items available at the Athens Public Library)*

- Adams, Caren and Fay, Jennifer: Helping Your Child Recover From Sexual Abuse
- Feuereisen, Patti Invisible Girls: The Truth About Sexual Abuse--A Book for Teen Girls, Young Women, and Everyone Who Cares About Them
- Kehoe, Patricia: Something Happened and I'm Scared to Tell: A Book for Young Victims of Abuse
- Loiselle, Mindy B. and Wright, Leslie Bailey: Shining Through: Pulling It Together After Sexual Abuse
- Mather, Cynthia L.: How Long Does It Hurt: A Guide to Recovering from Incest and Sexual Abuse for Teenagers, Their Friends, and Their Families
- Sanderson, Christiane: The Seduction of Children: Empowering Parents and Teachers to Protect Children from Child Sexual Abuse
- Stone, Robin: No Secrets No Lies: How Black Families Can Heal from Sexual Abuse

## Notes



**Athens, Ohio 45701**  
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**This handbook developed from materials by the  
National Children's Advocacy Center  
Huntsville, Alabama**