

Fostering or Adopting Sexually Abused Children, Part 1

***By Sharon Doty, J.D., MHR, Consultant to the VIRTUS® Programs
By Barbara Bonner, Ph.D., Consultant to the VIRTUS® Programs***

Have you adopted children or considered doing so? Or, do you know someone who has? Adoption is a life-giving act of love. Along with this beautiful act of generosity often comes some difficulties. It is important to recognize that many children in the foster system have experienced some type of abuse. Knowing that this is a possibility, and learning how to handle it in a healthy manner, gives you an opportunity to help the child to thrive. Your awareness can help children find healing that they might not otherwise have received without a conscientious adult in their lives.

Becoming parents of a foster or adopted child who has been sexually abused can present some unique, and sometimes troubling, challenges. This is true for any child who suffers maltreatment. Parenting victims of sexual abuse is always challenging. When our biological children are victimized in this way, we can usually see the changes in them. In that case, we are often able to identify problems quickly and seek help for the child when necessary.

For foster and adopted parents, the task can be much more difficult. They do not have a history with the child and so they cannot readily know when behaviors point to problems that need professional intervention. When the abuse occurs before the child comes to live with the foster or adoptive family, the new parents may not even know that behavior has changed or is changing.

The purpose of this article, and another to follow soon, is to provide foster and adoptive parents with some tools for supporting the new child within their family. All the members of the new family need to understand that the child may have some behavior problems that must be managed. There are some things the foster or adoptive parents can do to prepare for the new addition to the family. These steps can help everyone know what is "normal" and what deserves attending to in order to support the child and assist him or her in developing into a sexually healthy, normal adult.

In preparation for being a foster or adoptive parent, it is a good idea to develop an understanding of normal sexual development in children. There are a variety of good resources that help parents understand this process including online articles such as "Understanding Early Sexual Development", and "Is Your Child's Sexual Behavior Normal", published in *Psychology Today*.

Understanding normal sexual development for children at particular ages helps parents and other responsible adults recognize irregular behaviors. Knowing what is "okay" and what is not is crucial to providing what is needed by a child experiencing the consequences of abuse.

As you take custody of a child, there are some actions to take to ensure that you have the necessary information about him or her. If at all possible, insist on historical information that gives you the facts about the child's experiences before coming to your home. Having this information can help you reduce, and sometimes even avoid, highly problematic situations. In addition, this historical information can help parents assess current behavior and determine what is normal for this child and what changes warrant attention.

Along with the history, it is recommended that the child have a developmental evaluation by a qualified medical professional or psychologist. An assessment of the physical, mental, and academic development of the child at the time he or she comes into the family is essential to making sure the situation works for all concerned.

As parents, we can usually see when our child begins to fall behind or faces developmental problems in school. Without the experience of living with and nurturing a child from birth, it is more difficult to see and understand the issues that arise. Taking these steps can help new foster and adoptive parents make the most of the situation and nurture their new family members to healthy, happy lives.

In our next article, we will offer some guidelines for dealing with difficulties arising from a child experiencing sexual abuse—and particularly for foster and adopted children. Knowing what to do when problems arise can be as perplexing as recognizing

Providing a healthy, happy home for any child is a gracious, loving act. Making sure you are prepared to handle the challenges of providing a haven for a child who has been maltreated is the right thing to do for all concerned.

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