

## **Heart To Heart**

### **An Innovative Approach to Preventing Child Sexual Abuse**

*Still today I have problems with this terrible thing which has happened to me ...I was abused when I was and, believe me, I'm 17 years old today and I still carry the memory, hurt, and guilt with me*

*My father would lay against me and push and groan. Sometimes he grabbed me and wouldn't let me breathe until I stopped trying to get away.*

*I was so scared that I used to sleep in my clothes every night. Sometimes I still do since I'm used to it.*

These are the disturbing comments of three teenage mothers, all of whom were sexually abused as children (Musick 1993). As several participants in Ounce of Prevention Fund programs for teenage parents began to disclose such stories, Ounce professionals began to ask significant questions:

How extensive is the experience of child sexual abuse? Is there a link between childhood sexual abuse and childbearing in the teen years? How can we protect today's children from sexual abuse?

This paper discusses those questions and the actions that the Ounce is taking in response to them.

First, child sexual abuse is a substantial national problem. A nationwide assessment by the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse found 1 million substantiated child abuse cases in 1993. Fifteen percent of these, approximately 150,000 cases, involved sexual abuse (McCurdy and Daro 1994). Responding to 12,314 reports of child sexual abuse in fiscal year 1993, investigators from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services found credible evidence of abuse in 5,277 cases. In 4,167 of those 5,277 cases the victim was female. In 3,929 cases the perpetrator was male. More than one-half of sexually abused Illinois children in 1993 were younger than ten years of age. Onequarter were younger than six years (IDCFS 1994). Research findings on the extent of child sexual abuse vary, in part because different researchers apply different definitions to context, age, and episode. But all research indicates substantial numbers of people are abused as children. Laumann et. al (1994) found that about 12 percent of men and 17 percent of women were sexually touched by adults before reaching the age of 13 years.

Second, there certainly seems to be a link between the experience of childhood sexual abuse and childbearing in adolescence. A majority of adolescent mothers in two surveys reported that they had been sexually abused as children.

Finally, can abuse be prevented? Yes, we believe so. We must teach adolescent mothers how to protect their children from sexual abuse. We must also educate the community in which the young mother and her children live. This helps create a caring network of involved adults aware of and concerned about sexual abuse. By producing this paper that discusses childhood sexual abuse and the steps we are taking to combat it, we hope to speed the development of such a caring network nationwide.

## **The Evidence of Sexual Abuse Among Teen Mothers**

In 1986, the Ounce, with the help of survey professionals in Illinois and across the U.S., designed a questionnaire to investigate child sexual abuse. The survey was one of the first inquiries into the prevalence of child sexual abuse among teen mothers. The results were startling. Approximately 61 percent of the 445 Illinois teen mothers who took part in the survey reported that they had been forced to have an unwanted sexual experience at some time in their lives. Their mean age at the time of the first forced experience was eleven and one-half years (Gershenson et al. 1989). A subsequent study conducted in Washington state confirmed these results. Sixty-two percent of a sample of 535 teen mothers reported an involuntary sexual experience prior to becoming pregnant. Such experiences included rape, contact molestation, or noncontact molestation such as being made to look at someone naked. More than half of the Washington state sample reported unwanted physical contact. Over 40 percent of the women reported being raped. The average age when girls were first abused was about nine years (Boyer and Fine 1992).

The Ounce found that 46 percent of abusers were at least ten years older than their victims. The wide gap between the ages of victims and their abusers suggests the girls' powerlessness to protect themselves. In contrast to strongly-held perceptions that lurking strangers are the primary perpetrators of sexual abuse, these studies found that more than half of the girls were abused by men they knew well—the very people they should have been able to rely on as protectors and nurturers. For example, the Ounce study found that more than one-quarter of the victims were abused by male family members—fathers, grandfathers, brothers, uncles, and others. Only a small number reported that they were abused by strangers. Fathers, grandfathers, brothers, and uncles accounted for almost 38 percent of 1993 Illinois sexual abuse cases (IDCFS 1994). Childhood sexual abuse knows no racial or social boundaries. All population groups report high levels of abuse. The data from Washington show that abuse is more common among whites than among other racial groups (Boyer and Fine 1992).

For many reasons, most young victims of abuse do not come forward with their experiences (Summit 1983). Some are too young to know that what had occurred was wrong. A child's inability to understand fully the experience of sexual abuse contributes to both public and private silence on this topic. A second factor is cultural conditioning. In America's multicultural society many cultures exist. In some of these cultures, those in which men play a dominant role and women a submissive one, girls can acquire the skewed notion that, in healthy relationships, men have a disproportionate share of the decision-making power. Girls who are taught this attitude acquire a distorted view of the dynamics of a healthy relationship. Regarding domination by a male partner as normal, they are more likely targets of sexual predation and may not fully realize that their exploitation is unhealthy and destructive.

Two other reasons victims keep quiet about abuse are fear and guilt. Some girls are ashamed of their victimization, particularly if they had suspected what they were doing might be wrong or if they derived some emotional comfort or physical pleasure from the sexual activity (Musick 1993). Others are silenced by fear of reprisals from the perpetrators. When girls do have the courage and capacity to speak out, they are often greeted with stony disbelief by family members and by society at large. The very enormity of the problem of childhood sexual abuse contributes to society's unwillingness to confront it and to believe victims' painful accounts of their experiences. For many, it is easier to discount the prevalence of sexual abuse than to come to terms with its far-reaching implications.

## **The Effects of Abuse on Female Adolescent Sexuality**

Childhood sexual abuse can have profoundly damaging effects on its victims and create lasting trauma (Briere and Runtz 1988). A growing body of research indicates that, among other detrimental outcomes, sexual abuse thwarts normal adolescent developmental processes and thus has an impact on early sexual development (Musick 1993; Boyer and Fine 1992). One of the primary developmental goals of adolescence is to move away from exclusive reliance on one's family and toward adult goals and relationships. This is a difficult process in the best of circumstances. But girls who have experienced traumatic sexual contact are particularly psychologically vulnerable and often have unmet emotional needs and distorted conceptions about what does and does not constitute a healthy relationship. Together, these factors set the stage for precocious and compulsive sexual behavior (Musick 1993).

Because girls are often abused at the hands of a beloved relative or other caretaker, they may learn to confuse sex with love. Adolescent girls who have been sexually abused are significantly more likely than their peers to engage in voluntary sexual intercourse. They hold more sexually permissive attitudes and are younger at first intercourse than adolescents who have not experienced such abuse (Polit, White, and Morton 1990). Other studies have found that sexually abused girls are more sexually active and engage in a wider range of sexual activities (Musick 1993; Laumann et al. 1994). Abused girls are also less likely to use contraceptives than their nonabused peers (Boyer and Fine 1992).

The relationship between sexual abuse and early initiation of voluntary sexual activity is suggested by this poignant comment from a teen parent:

*I learned about sex from my dad. I never had a chance for my first time with my boyfriend. Who knows, maybe I [would have] wanted to wait until I got married. But no, I never got to have that chance. I don't even remember the first time ....I feel it ruined my life.*

Of course, in addition to the increased risk of teen pregnancy stemming from early voluntary sexual activity, sexual abuse can lead directly to pregnancy by the perpetrator. In one survey, nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of the respondents who had been sexually abused reported becoming pregnant by the perpetrator (Ruch-Ross, Stucki, and Musick 1990). Also, it is not uncommon for abused girls to purposely become pregnant by a boyfriend as a conscious strategy to escape an abusive home (Boyer and Fine 1992).

Abused girls are at high risk for further sexual exploitation and abuse by men. These girls learn ways of thinking about men and sex that make them particularly vulnerable to repeat victimization. Coerced sexual experiences teach girls patterns of passivity in relation to men, what clinicians call "learned helplessness." As Musick (1993) describes "...the invasion of [a girl's] body makes her feel powerless. Repeated violation of personal boundaries is a kind of brainwashing. It saps the will, destroys self-efficacy and leads to a perception of self as victim." Socialized into passive victim roles, often from the earliest ages, these girls are prone to continue playing such roles in their subsequent relationships with men.

## **The Effects of Sexual Abuse on the Capacity to Learn**

The trauma resulting from childhood sexual abuse has consequences beyond sexual behavior. The emotional energy required to suppress severe trauma such as sexual abuse

can require nearly all of a child's psychological resources. This constant drain on emotional energy interferes with the ability to focus and concentrate (Conte and Schuerman 1987) and disrupts cognitive development. It is not surprising that children who carry such heavy emotional burdens are hindered in their capacity to learn and to perform effectively in school. In fact, school-age children who had been sexually abused have been found to have shorter attention spans and more difficulty concentrating on tasks (Johnston 1979; Shaw and Meier 1983). Sexual abuse can serve to lower adolescents' self-confidence (Boyer and Fine 1992), further undermining academic potential.

### **The Role of Poverty**

These effects of sexual abuse are exacerbated for girls living in poverty. Unlike their more privileged peers, poor girls often lack the social supports that would provide a lifeline out of despair and early pregnancy. A more affluent teen with concentration problems in school is more likely to have the resources to pay for psychological therapy or counseling to address this problem. An initial focus on school difficulties may eventually lead a therapist to the underlying experience of abuse. A poor teenager may miss the chance to address this difficulty. She may simply drop out of school instead. Thus, in the absence of effective interventions, the consequences of abuse for poor adolescents are often lifelong in nature, locking them into an intergenerational cycle of early childbearing, poverty, and welfare dependence.

### **The Cycle Continues**

In the same ways that learned helplessness and feelings of powerlessness affect teens relationships with men and often lead to repeat victimization, these phenomena inhibit teen mothers' capacities to protect their children and themselves from abuse. When asked what they thought they could do to protect their children from sexual abuse many teen parents had fatalistic views of their ability to prevent such occurrences (Musick 1993):

*I don't know any ways to protect my children because it can happen anywhere.*

*Ain't nothing I can do.*

### **Heart to Heart: Breaking the Pattern**

The Ounce developed the Heart to Heart program to teach teen mothers how they can protect their children from sexual abuse. Heart to Heart is a model child sexual abuse prevention program designed and implemented by the Ounce with funding from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Heart to Heart builds on participants' inherent strengths and reinforces their desires to be effective and nurturing parents. The primary goals of the Heart to Heart program are to strengthen adolescent parents' ability to protect themselves and their children from sexual abuse by:

- Increasing parents' knowledge of child development, and the ways in which sexual abuse can interfere with normal development
- Promoting positive parenting skills
- Helping teen parents draw on local community resources for continued support and information relating to sexual abuse and its prevention
- Heart to Heart now includes twelve group sessions, each of which is two-to-three hours

long. In these sessions parents learn:

- Why it is important for the parent to be their children's primary sex educator
- How to teach children the difference between a harmful secret and an appropriate confidence
- How to select child care providers
- How to take positive actions to protect oneself and one's children
- Why it is vital that parents believe children who tell of sexual abuse
- How to recognize the early indicators of sexual abuse in young children
- What to do if they suspect that their children are being abused

The sessions are facilitated by trained volunteers—often former teen parents themselves—who teach under the close supervision of social workers. The volunteer facilitators model appropriate behavior and reinforce the positive parenting skills exhibited by participants. Heart to Heart also teaches parents that, if they were themselves abused in childhood, this can influence their lives and affect their parenting. Through knowledge and skillbuilding, Heart to Heart promotes healthy parent/child relationships and encourages participants to take greater control of their lives. The program's success is augmented by innovative components that enable participants to share their stories, build support networks, and draw on community resources. Several of these components are summarized below.

**Journal writing.** Journal writing has been an integral component of Heart to Heart since the program's inception. By writing down their thoughts and observations, participants are able to chronicle their own learning and growth. Journal writing provides a vehicle for teens to express openly, often for the first time, their feelings about their own childhood experiences, and how these experiences color their adult lives. Importantly, as participants read their journal entries they are afforded the opportunity to engage in self-reflection, promoting positive attitudinal and behavioral changes. Journal writing also promotes literacy skills.

**Heartmates.** Each participant identifies trusted relatives and/or friends—called Heartmates—who pledge to support the teen parent and children following the completion of the Heart to Heart program. This program component helps to ensure that the learning and support that take place during the program are ongoing. Heartmates provide a built-in network of support. They provide encouragement, answer questions, and are positive influences in young parents' lives. If parents cannot identify a suitable Heartmate, a community volunteer or other mentor is found for them.

**Community project.** At each program site, participants select, design, and help to implement a project to enhance the community's knowledge of and responsiveness to child sexual abuse. Projects may be geared toward preventing sexual abuse, promoting increased reporting of abuse, or helping to destigmatize abuse for those who have been victimized. Bringing these projects to fruition is an empowering experience for teen parents, enhancing their sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence.

Heart to Heart is a component of the DCFS Parents Too Soon (PTS) program, administered by the Ounce, which provides comprehensive services to meet the specialized needs of low-income adolescent parents and their children. Heart to Heart sessions are conducted within already established, long-term informational and peer support groups in Ounce PTS programs.

The Ounce designed and implemented the first Heart to Heart curriculum from 1987 to 1990 at several longestablished PTS program sites. Since then, we have twice modified and strengthened the curriculum. New sessions have been developed; existing components have been enhanced; and the program has been expanded to additional sites. Each revision was based on rigorous evaluation of the program's effectiveness. In 1994, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect awarded the Ounce a three-year grant to further enhance and expand the program.

While Heart to Heart is a prevention and education program, not a counseling or treatment program, it does create a setting for candid discussion of sexual abuse. This can help alleviate the shame that may have prevented victims from discussing their histories of abuse. The program shares some of the same development-fostering aims as therapy. To ensure that abused participants receive necessary professional help, a clinician participates in key Heart to Heart sessions and is available to provide individual counseling or referral.

Other Parents Too Soon program features include home visits designed to promote the healthy development of teen parents and their children, peer groups, child care, counseling, and supportive services for keeping parents in school. The program enhances parent/child relationships, improves developmental outcomes for children, and promotes families' economic independence. Ounce PTS programs are based on the premise that adolescents and their children are best served within the context of their own culture and community.

## **Conclusion**

Sexual abuse of children is far from rare. The early experience of sexual abuse can promote interrelated and destructive adolescent behaviors and can contribute to failure in school, substance abuse, premature sexual activity, and teenage parenthood. The scars of early sexually abusive experiences often rob young people of their capacity to shape a productive future. The children of teen mothers are themselves at risk of sexual abuse, creating an intergenerational cycle of tragedy.

The Ounce of Prevention Fund's experience with the Heart to Heart program has important implications for how programs for teen mothers can break the intergenerational cycle of sexual abuse. Effective interventions demonstrate that young mothers can regain control over their destinies and move toward selfsufficiency for themselves and their children.

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