

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:

WHAT IS MY ROLE AS A PARENT?

INTRODUCTION

A lot of parents in Nigeria hear the term 'Child Sexual Abuse' (CSA) and their immediate reaction is "God forbid", "It is not my portion" or "That cannot happen to me". The truth is that a lot of adults who have had no personal encounter with CSA find it hard to believe just how widespread it is. Many adults are unwilling to accept that these abominations happen, and that a very large number of children in this country are being abused every day. One problem with this reluctance to accept what is going on is that solutions cannot be successfully implemented until we admit that there is actually a problem.

A child's parents are meant to be the first line of defence against any harm that may come that child's way. Children need to be able to have conversations with their parents about anything and the bond that should exist between parent and child is an opportunity for parents to equip their kids to face the challenges they will meet in the world. Unfortunately, many parents do not see this as an opportunity to be a part of shaping their children's values and perspectives.

As a society we owe it to the children to come together to ensure that this scourge does not escalate to epidemic proportions.

WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Some of the definitions did not seem to be wide enough, while some seem to leave too much room for doubt or argument as to what constitutes CSA (CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE). However, a "straight to the point" and "easy to understand" definition which covers every conceivable means by which CSA (CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE):

The definition says:

"Child Sexual Abuse is the involvement of a child in ANY sexual activity."

It is noteworthy to state the few reasons why they chose to define it this way:

1. Under Nigerian law, a child (*a person under 18 years old*- s277 Child Rights Act 2003) cannot give consent to sexual intercourse (s31 Child Rights Act 2003). As a result of this law, any adult having sex with anyone under 18 years old is committing statutory rape. In other words, even if the child said yes and agreed to have sex with the person, that person would still be committing rape because that person under 18 does not have the legal authority to consent to intercourse. It is therefore the responsibility of the adult to ensure no sexual activity with a child occurs.
2. It is an offence in Nigeria to sexually exploit a child in anyway whatsoever (s32 CRA- CHILD RIGHTS ACT 2003). "Sexual exploitation" is an act or acts carried out through the non-consensual abuse or exploitation of the sexuality of another person (in this case, a child) for the purpose of sexual gratification, financial gain, personal benefit or advantage, or any other non-legitimate purpose.
3. Research has shown that even when the sexual activity does not involve physical contact, the effect on the child can still be long lasting and very far reaching. Examples of this are, exposing a child to adult nudity or pornographic material, talking to a child in a sexually explicit way, grooming a child for future sexual activity.

WHAT SIGNS DO I LOOK OUT FOR?

Although there is no foolproof method of identifying a sexual predator, but there are signs that may give a clue of the person's motive. Certain behaviours have been shown to be indicators that an individual is a predator and should be taken seriously and investigated further.

Below are a few prevailing signs which help indicate a sexual predator.

ACTIONS OF A FAMILY MEMBER WHO IS AN ADULT

1. Touching a child inappropriately (even when the child does not seem to welcome or want this attention).
2. Attempts by one parent to alienate their child from the other parent.
3. Presence of an overprotective or volatile relationship between the child and one of their parents/family members.
4. Reluctance by the child to be alone with one of their parents/family members.
5. Encouraging the keeping of secrets from the child's parent or other parent.

ACTIONS OF A FAMILY MEMBER WHO IS A SIBLING OR ANOTHER CHILD

1. The sibling behaving like they are in an intimate relationship.
2. Reluctance by the child to be alone with a sibling.
3. Embarrassment by siblings if they are found alone together.
4. Encouraging the keeping of secrets from the child's parent or other parent.

ACTIONS OF A SCHOOL STAFF MEMBER, COACH, OTHER CAREGIVER

1. Touching a child inappropriately (even when the child does not seem to welcome or want this attention).
2. Bringing up sexual material or personal disclosures into conversations with a student(s).
3. Using sexual names like 'bae', 'sexy', 'my wife/husband', even jokingly.
4. Having inappropriate social boundaries e.g., telling the potential victims about their own personal problems.
5. Obvious or inappropriate preferential treatment of the student(s) (making them feel special).
6. Undermining the child's reputation (so the child won't be believed if the child decides to report).

SOME INDICATORS OF AN ABUSED CHILD

1. You see a child who is usually tidy and smartly dressed and that child is wearing torn, stained or bloodied clothing or underclothing
2. You see a child who looks like they are in pain, or scratching/touching their genital

area

3. You see a child having difficulty walking or sitting
4. You notice pregnancy in an adolescent
5. You notice that a child who is usually bubbly and outgoing suddenly becomes withdrawn and starts keeping to themselves
6. You notice anxiety or depression in a child
7. You notice mood swings in a child
8. You notice that a child seems distracted
9. You notice a child displaying seductive behaviour
10. You notice poor self-esteem, self-devaluation in a child
11. You notice a sudden lack of confidence in a child

SOME OF THE EFFECTS OF CSA ON CHILDREN ARE:

1. Unusual interest in all things of a sexual nature
2. Sleep problems or nightmares
3. Depression or withdrawal from friends or family
4. Seductiveness
5. Statements that their bodies are dirty or damaged, or fear that there is something wrong with them in the genital area
6. Refusal to go to school
7. Delinquency/conduct problems
8. Secretiveness
9. Extreme fear or anxiety
10. Substance use / abuse
11. Suicidal behaviour
12. Guilt
13. Shame
14. Eating disorders
15. Emotional Repression
16. Denial

HOW CAN I HELP TO PREVENT THIS?

The simplest way to help prevent CSA from happening is for open lines of communication to exist with the children. If they are able to talk freely with parents, teachers and other

caring adults in their lives, it will be easy for them to reveal some of the advances that would lead to grooming or sexual experiences if left unchecked.

Open communication also helps engage the children in a way that makes it easy for them to learn how to look out for predators and a child who is aware of their environment in this way will likely be avoided by a predator who will usually be looking for a child who is unaware of what they may be trying to do.

SPECIFIC STEPS PARENTS CAN TAKE INCLUDE:

1. As early as possible, parents should teach their children the name of the genitals, just as they are learning names of other body parts. This helps them learn that although those parts are private, they are not too private to talk about them when necessary.
2. Parents should teach their children what parts of the body are private, and that no one has the right to touch their bodies except the parts that are not private and if it's ok by the child. The children should also be taught to respect the right to privacy of other people. One very effective strategy that can be used to communicate with children is by using resources that have been specifically designed for that purpose.
3. Teach children often, and from an early age, that there are no secrets between children and their parents and they should feel comfortable talking with their parents about anything good or bad, fun or sad, easy or difficult.
4. Teach the children to be aware of adults who offer them special gifts or toys, or adults who want to take them to a "special outing" or "special event".
5. Create an environment in the home where children feel comfortable discussing age appropriate sexual topics.
6. If your child tries to disclose any sexual abuse to you, listen carefully and take them seriously.
7. Support your child and let the child know that whatever happened was not their fault and that he or she is not responsible for the abuse.
8. Take the child to the hospital for a medical examination to be sure
9. The child's physical health is not affected.
10. Seek professional counselling and therapy.

There are a couple of NGOs that would be willing to take up a matter like this. They will put pressure on law enforcement to ensure the matter is pursued to a logical conclusion. They would also be interested in the physical and mental well-being of the child and may liaise with the relevant government/private organizations to make arrangements in that respect.

The Ecclesia Embassy Pastoral Care team can be contacted for information on as to how to get in touch with the relevant NGOs and agencies to handle matters of this nature.