

Protecting our Children / Precious to God

Tammy: I was reading a magazine and I noticed this letter in it. I wonder what you would say to this mother. She wrote: 'I'm confused, and upset and angry. We went to our home village for a festival. When we came back my daughter told me that her uncle tried to touch and abuse her. She's only 6 years old, and since then she has been very quiet, but sometimes she cries and gets angry about little things. What should I do? How can I help her?'

Carol: Hello. Today we are going to talk about something very important; protecting children from abuse. We hope you'll stay with us for Women of Hope today. I'm Carol.

Tammy: Hi, I'm Tammy, and Fran, our counselor, is with us today. Fran this letter makes me angry and sad at the same time. What she would say to that mother whose little girl was sexually abused by a relative.

Fran: Hello, it's good to be with you again. That's a sad letter, isn't it? Many children are sexually abused, and that makes me angry; it makes God angry too. Every child deserves to be protected from this. Let's talk about how a mother could help a child who has been molested, and I'll also talk about how we can protect our children and prepare them to defend themselves.

Tammy: That would be really good. It's better to stop it ever happening at all!

Fran: I understand this mother must feel great pain. Of course she's angry, and maybe she feels she should have been able to stop this happening.

Carol: And a family member did it, so she also feels betrayed, and scared he might do it to other children in the family. If she tells, it will cause trouble in the family. It must be awful for her!

Fran: I'd want to tell this mother that she's done well; her daughter felt safe enough to come and tell her what happened. Often children don't tell, because the abuser says they will get into trouble. And the mother *believed* her story- that's really important.

The child needs to know that this was not her fault. It is always the adult's job to treat children properly! This was a trusted member of the family. He betrayed the girl, and the whole family. So Mother, tell your girl that it was very wrong of her uncle to touch her in bad ways. She needs to feel you can protect her. Tell her you won't let Uncle be alone with her again. But try to keep calm and not make a big fuss in front of the child or she might feel bad that the family is fighting. The child might have been hurt in her private parts- if she has any pain, or bleeding, or infection, take her to a doctor or health center. She might need some medicine.

Carol: Fran, would you confront the uncle? What if he says he didn't touch her?

Fran: This gets very difficult. I would tell my husband first, and ask him to come with me to tell the man what the child has said. Young children don't usually make up stories like that because they don't know about it. You can probably tell if he's guilty by how he responds.

What else should you do? Do you know the laws where you live? In some countries you must tell the police, who try to find out if it's true. How does your community deal with things like this? I'm

sad to say that often it is hidden and the abuser is able to go on hurting other children. It might be very embarrassing to report it, but the most important thing is to make sure your children, and other children, are safe.

Tammy: If my child was abused, I think I would tell others in the family who have children, that there may be danger. It's better to risk falsely accusing a man than risk other children being abused.

Fran: Sexual abuse can mean several things. It can be touching or sex, or making the child touch the abuser, or it might be showing the child dirty pictures or talking dirty. Abuse is all about exciting the more powerful person. They don't care that they scare and damage the child. And by the way, women as well as men can be abusers, and boys as well as girls can be abused.

Children often change the way they act if they've been abused. Sometimes they act younger than they are, and start wetting or soiling their bed, and crying a lot or hurting themselves. Sometimes they start eating a lot, or else they won't eat their food. Sometimes they wake up during the night or have trouble getting to sleep. , And sometimes they get very angry, or they start to be very afraid and draw back from people. Their school work might get worse. Every child is different, but there are usually some changes. Parents need to show love and understanding, and make extra efforts to make sure the child knows she is important, that she is loved, and she is safe. It will take some time, so be patient. If this isn't enough, find a counselor or another adult who can help her to talk about her feelings and be able to feel safe.

Tammy: You're with Women of Hope. Fran's been talking about how to help a child who has been sexually abused. Now let's talk about how to protect your child so it doesn't happen. You need to understand that sexual abuse can happen in every community, even in your family, so be very careful about leaving your child alone with an adult, unless you absolutely trust that adult. However, we can't be with our children all the time, and we can't always know who is a safe person, so how can we prepare our children to protect themselves?

Fran: Remember, the person most likely to abuse your children is someone they know. A person who wants to abuse children looks for a child who trusts him, and who can be bullied into staying quiet about what happened. So a child who is confident and knows what is right and wrong is less likely to be chosen by an abuser.

Tammy: But some children are shy and timid- how can we help them?

Fran: It's most important to build up their confidence. Always listen to your quiet children, give them time to explain things, and pay attention to their worries. Abusers choose children who want someone to notice them, to say nice things about them and to love them. *You* can build up your child's confidence by praising them. Give them a chance to try new things, and encourage their efforts by what you say.. If you treat a child with love and respect, she will understand that she is someone who deserves to be loved and respected,, and she'll feel strong and confident inside. We usually tell children to respect older people, but it's important to also tell them that if something happens that they don't think is right, they can say no, and they can tell you about it.

Parents need to talk to their children about sexual matters. I think the best way is to answer the questions that a child asks, in a way they can understand, so that they understand more and more

as they get older. A child needs to understand their own body and how babies are made, before they reach puberty.

Carol: It's more than just information about their bodies, though, isn't it? They need to know what wrong and harmful behavior is.

Fran: That's right, Carol. We can explain to our child that God made their body, and every part of it is good, but some parts of their body are private, not for others to look at or touch till they are grown up and married.

Tammy: I like that- good but private! What parts would *you* say are private? Different cultures have different ideas about how much of the body is private. You might say to a child that at least the parts usually covered by their underwear or swimsuit are private.

Fran: Yes, and tell them that the only times that someone can touch these parts are if a child needs help- like in the bathroom, and at the doctor's clinic, where they would have a family member with them.

You should also teach children the proper names for their private body parts. They could then tell their parents properly if someone tried to touch them there.

Tell your child that if an adult asks her to touch him in the wrong way, or if an adult touches her in her private parts then she must run away, or call out, and she must tell you if this happens. It doesn't matter who the adult is, or what they say, the child should tell their mother or father or another adult they trust. Tell them they won't get into trouble, but you'll be proud of them and help them.

Carol: I was thinking, Fran that we don't want to make our children frightened of every adult. We could explain that most people are kind and will help them, but they need to know these things just in case something happens. We should encourage our children to talk about how they are feeling .We want them to know that they are special and valuable. If you and your child can talk about anything at all, and they know they can tell you anything, that will help them to be confident.

Fran: Yes, confident to say No to what is wrong or bad for them. We want them to grow up strong enough to make good decisions, don't we?

Tammy: We've been talking about how to protect our children from abuse. It's a difficult topic, isn't it, but we women need to think about it.

Fran: You know, when Jesus Christ lived on earth long ago he had some strong words to say about people who harm children. Today I'd like to share some of Jesus' teaching about children with you. My husband Bill has just come in, and I'll ask him to read the words of Jesus from God's word the Bible. (Matt 18)

Fran: Jesus was talking to his followers one day, and they asked him 'Who is the greatest person in God's kingdom?' Jesus called a small child into their circle. He said:

Bill: 'Whoever makes himself humble and has simple faith like this child is the greatest in God's kingdom. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name, is welcoming me. But if you make it hard for them, taking advantage, and causing them to go the wrong way in life- well, you'd be better off if you were dropped into the sea with a great millstone tied to your neck! The world will be judged for giving such trouble to these young believers in me. Hard times are certain to come, but you'll suffer if you make it worse for them.'

Fran: Jesus wants us to welcome and care for children, and make it easy for them to grow up knowing and doing the right things.

Carol: Those were fierce words about being dropped in the sea with a rock around your neck! You wouldn't get a second chance, would you?! I guess Jesus meant that it's a very serious crime in God's eyes to set an innocent trusting child on the wrong path in life. How do *you* think we could do that?

Tammy: If we give a *bad example*, we show children the wrong way to live. If we tell lies, or are violent or greedy, they'll think those things are ok, and copy us. Children learn most about life by copying their families. They copy what we do not what we say!

Fran: So that's a big responsibility, isn't it? Show your child the right way to live, and they'll always remember it. We can encourage them too, by praising them when they choose the right way.

Some adults do even worse things. They actually teach children to attack others, or steal, or do other bad things. And adults can teach wrong beliefs to children. For example, children naturally welcome other children of any race, but some adults teach them to hate or fear other groups or countries, and that sets them on the wrong path too.

Tammy: Or we could tempt them, by leaving around things they might want to steal...

Carol: ...or giving children alcohol to drink. I've heard about drug pushers hanging around schools, giving drugs to children to get them addicted, so they will do anything the drug sellers say. Isn't that a wicked thing to do! It can ruin their lives. And others force young people to be prostitutes and ruin their lives that way.

Fran: Yes, those are terrible things, and Jesus said adults who do these things will be punished. Let's hear from Bill about what Jesus said next.

Bill: If your hand or your foot gets in the way of following God, you'd be better to chop it off!...If your eye causes you to sin, you'd be better to pull it out!

Fran: So now he's talking about protecting *yourself* from doing wrong. Do you think he really wants us to cut off our hands and feet, or pull out our eyes, to avoid being tempted?

Carol: No! I don't think so, or we'd all have no hands! Jesus often talked in this very strong, colorful way to help us to picture what he meant. I think he means we should do all we can to get away from what will lead us into sin and away from God.

Fran: What are the things that really tempt you? Is it alcohol - well, don't have it in the house, don't go where it is served unless there is someone to keep you strong, and don't go into a bar.

Tammy: Perhaps if you often spend money foolishly, or gamble, you could get your husband or wife to lock up the money, and only have as much as you really need in your purse, so you won't be able to waste money.

Carol: Whatever our weakness is, we should admit it to God and ourselves, so we can keep ourselves safe from that temptation. What is your biggest temptation? It's important to admit! You can say; 'I have a problem with drinking, or stealing, or gossip', or whatever it is. I think it's helpful to tell someone we really trust about our weakness, and to agree that we will go to them and to tell them if we've done it again. They can help to keep us strong. At least, we shouldn't make it easy to do the wrong thing. In the Bible it says 'Don't even think about how you could please those sinful desires.' (Rom 13:14) Actively plan to do what is right.

Fran: Here on Women of Hope we've been hearing how Jesus taught about protecting children, and ourselves, from taking the wrong path in life. Then Jesus told a little story. Let's listen to it.

Bill: What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, won't the owner leave the 99 behind and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, he is happier about that one sheep than about the 99 who did not wander off. In the same way, your Father in heaven doesn't want any of these little ones to be lost.

Fran: In those days a hundred sheep was quite a lot. But every sheep was important to the shepherd, and he would know each one. Often the shepherd would give names to his sheep and they would all recognize his voice (John 10:3). So if one went off on the wrong path, the shepherd wouldn't rest until he had found his lost sheep. So why do *you* think Jesus told this story?

Carol: I think Jesus wanted his followers to understand how precious each person is to God. I noticed that Jesus called God 'your *Father* in heaven'. So if we turn away from God it's not like a businessman losing part of his stock- it's more like a Father losing his child. God really cares about each person, and especially each child. He doesn't ever want us to be hurt, or led on the wrong path, or be far from him. If you feel you're like that sheep, remember that God is calling for you, and you can call out to him to save you.

Fran: I was thinking that Jesus was just like that shepherd- and he once called himself the good shepherd, didn't he (John 10:14)? He said he came to earth from heaven to 'search for and save those who were lost' (Luke 19:10). He even gave his life to save you and me. He loves you so much, you are so precious to him, and he wants you to know him and be part of his family forever.

Tammy: I hope we've all learned more today about how to protect our children- from bad people, yes, but also how to protect them from spiritual danger. And I hope you know that you are God's precious child and he wants to keep you safe too. Thank you Fran and Bill.

Carol: Let's get together again soon!

Tammy: If you'd like to contact us we'd love to hear from you... You can write to us in care of this station or at TWR Women of Hope. Our email address is TWRWomenofHope@twr.org.

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