

# Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: New Language for Parents and Children

by Howard S. King with Jan Hindman, MS, LPC

Preventing the sexual abuse of children is both easy and yet complicated.

It is complicated in that how parents convey sexual information to their children reflects, among other things, parental and cultural attitudes, the life experience of parents, and the kind of information they are sharing.

On the other hand, there is a wonderful and direct way to begin the process of sharing. That way is as simple as a book that parents and children can read together. The name of this book is

## A VERY TOUCHING BOOK

The author of the book is Jan Hindman, and the illustrator is Tom Novak.

Jan Hindman, MS, LPC, has studied and researched the problem of sexual abuse for the past 26 years, working with both sexual abuse victims and sexual offenders. Jan is a pioneer in the field of sexual abuse, serving on several national task forces regarding sexual exploitation and victimization. She has served on the Advisory Board for the National Resource Center on Child Sexual Abuse. She is the past president of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers. Jan Hindman believes that through positive resources such as "A Very Touching Book", the national tragedy of sexual victimization can be eradicated.

I met Jan at a program, which addressed the problem of sexual abuse of children and its impact on their later life. I was so impressed with "A Very Touching Book" that I wanted to share its wonderfully illustrated insights with physician and parent visitors to this site.

The following article has three components.

Let me begin with an early quote from Jan's book.

"... There are many ways that people can touch each other and feel good.

Maybe while you are reading this, you should touch another person by holding their hand or sitting on their lap, just so we know how good people-touching can be. Give them a big smile too ... just to get the feeling started ..."

but later, "...The third kind of touching is the hardest to understand because we have so many different kinds of feelings about it ... both good and bad ..."

The remainder of the article contains the introduction, only, of the book. But within the introduction, you'll note questions of mine (HSK) about issues Jan raises and her replies (JH). I hope her introduction and comments will motivate you to think about the most comfortable way for you to share such information. You might consider obtaining your own copy of her book and sharing its contents with your children, if you're parents, and your pediatric patients, if you're a health professional.

Some might read this article and point out that some issues are not addressed, and they would be right. For example, we have bypassed the possibility that a child would attempt to "tell" a parent/caregiver who, for whatever reason, fails to respond. Certainly, in those situations, we need to help that child discover other adults who can be trusted to respond. In addition, pediatricians need to try to understand why the parent wasn't able to respond and learn how to help families where abuse has occurred.

Jan Hindman's point, with which I agree, is that if we can improve communication between child and parent, we'll have come a long way in reducing the vulnerability of the child to "secret touching." That is the basic message of "A Very Touching Book."

As Jan has pointed out, "sex offenders could not do what they do if parents talked to their children about sexuality. Communication is key." If we could really accomplish that, sexual abuse prevention would

become more likely.

## A VERY TOUCHING BOOK &ndash; AN INTRODUCTION

As a society, we abhor the idea of children being sexual.

HSK &ndash; Jan, why are we that way?

JH &ndash; Because parents have well-intentioned ideas that sexual information can be postponed until they're ready to give that information. The thought that sex education being out of their control is abhorrent to them. They want to believe that childhood is this idyllic time of life when children are protected from sexual thoughts, feelings and ideas. Nothing could be further from the truth. Children receive sexual messages every day and in every way.

When parents believe that they can raise children who know nothing about sex, they're not only &ldquo;wrong,&rdquo; they're placing their children in danger. Sex offenders look for children whose parents believe that they, and they alone will determine when to give their children &ldquo;sex education.&rdquo; By the time parents believe their children are &ldquo;ready,&rdquo; sex offenders often have children sealed into secrecy.

Wanting our children innocent, we provide them with extremely negative messages about sexuality, and we push them away from appropriate and positive information.

HSK &ndash; Why do we do that?

JH &ndash; We're barely a century past &ldquo;Victorian England&rdquo; when any sexual idea or action was viewed as obscene. We still have churches that state that sexual activities between a man and a woman should only be for procreation. We have families and churches that teach that masturbation is a sin and in some cases may lead to homosexuality or mental derangement.

When schools state they teach sex education, the curriculum usually

includes such topics as date rape, AIDS, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and birth control. For them, any type of sex education is usually about the negative side. It is easier to talk about the outcome of risky or bad sex than it is to talk about the good part.

I also think that parents prefer to use the negative approach because they hope that if sex is feared or shameful, children may avoid it. The sad reality is that when children only learn the negative and they realize that their parents believe sex is shameful, they do sexual things in a secret way. Unfortunately, they begin to tell themselves that they're bad for doing the sexual things.

Such children spend much of their lives regretting sexual decisions they made, primarily because they did things without any guidance and then they entered an adult world that attaches shame and guilt to sex. The most normal of sexual activities among children can become a source of great trauma for children, often throughout a lifetime.

I remember a wonderful woman who said to me, "When I was sexually abused, all the professional people told me it was wrong, it was bad, and it was a crime. Then they indirectly expected me to have a good time doing this same thing when I was an adult!" She taught me a valuable lesson about the treacherous lessons of negativity.

Being emotionally barefoot regarding sexuality, we teach critical or silly words about genitalia, and we make children fearful of normal sexual curiosity.

HSK – What do you mean by "emotionally barefoot"?

JH – That phrase pertains to the fear and apprehension parents feel about educating their children. They don't have trepidation about teaching their children to become Baptists or Catholics but when it comes to sex, they feel ill equipped and frightened. Furthermore, many parents didn't get good sex education, themselves, and this only enhances the feelings of fear. There is a fear of children making sexual mistakes or being sexually abused and thus, the emotionally barefoot term.

HSK – Why do we use silly words about genitalia?

JH - Since parents can't deny their children have "sexual equipment" and since parents want their children to be ignorant, they give silly names for genitalia in the hope that children won't be curious, that they won't be interested and god forbid, that they won't touch themselves.

It is rarely the "big talk" or the presentation of the Kotex pamphlet that gives children information about sex. It is the subtleties, the little things that are left out or included that make the difference. When children hear silly words for their body parts, yet anatomically correct terms for elbows, noses and ears, they conclude, "my parents either don't know about sex or they lie to me." Usually children don't challenge their parents when they learn the right words about their genitalia, they just check their parents off as being unreliable and they decide they'll educate themselves.

Through our Purple Faces, we teach children that we are uncomfortable and irritated with their sexual questions. From a very early age, children learn shame and embarrassment about sexual issues.

HSK – Why do you use that term, "Purple Faces"?

JH – I was trying to come up with a term that was funny but familiar to parents. I also wanted something that parents could use to engage their children in a discussion, since most of sex education, if it occurs at all, is through a lecture modality. A child will ask a simple question such as "Where did I come from?"

Parents usually get so flustered with any discussion that they either shut things down, or they give a lecture. I hoped the "Purple Face" funny stuff would help parents relax and get on the same level with their children.

I have always been convinced that one of the smartest things parents can do with their children about sex, is to get very stupid. Kids like to "help" their parents, and parents who need help with their purple faces will have a wonderful opportunity to communicate with their children.

As we are troubled by the thought that our children might be sexual, we become absolutely devastated by the thought that our children might be sexually abused. We feel so angry and upset about sexual molestation that our prevention efforts tend to reflect our hostility.

We use words such as bad to describe sexual contact, making children feel badly about the entire subject. When abusers are presented as evil, and when they face harsh consequences for their crime, children become frightened and suspicious. We rarely give children any positive information that might create a sense of self-protection. Children learn fear and apprehension from typical prevention efforts, rather than safety and security.

HSK – Why don't we give children positive information about sex so they can protect themselves?

JH – To be quite blunt, I don't think very many adults feel positive about sex. This is interesting because sex is a big commodity in our culture, able to sell almost anything. Sex is like a currency, however, I think there is a difference in selling "sex" and "sexiness." Our society flourishes sexiness, yet the sex act or giving each other pleasure in the most intimate of ways, is as forbidden as snow in the desert. Parents don't want their children to be sexual, so they make their children fear (thus the hostility) sex, yet these same parents will often be encouraging their children to be sexy, which is very different and very confusing to children.

If we just look at advertising, we clearly see that everyone wants children to be sexy, even little boys with their macho toys and fearless friends. We push children into being sexy, but we want no part of their knowing the destination to where we're pushing them.

The hostility part comes from our fear of children being either sexual or being sexually abused. Even though positive protection (teaching children about their genitalia and sexuality is as important as their bicycles) would work, parents are more comfortable with the hostility and the fear. Sadly, the message is "Don't be sexual, but here, I will help you be sexy."

In spite of our best intentions, our negative approach to child sexuality and sexual abuse prevention actually helps sex offenders abuse our precious children. Child abusers are aware of the embarrassment and discomfort that exists between children and adults regarding sexual issues.

They actively use this negative atmosphere to their advantage. Recognizing that children feel shameful and uncomfortable about sexuality, sex offenders correctly conclude that communication with adults will be resisted and avoided by children. Sexual privacy with the child is assured.

Most abusers establish a relationship with children, making it easy to manipulate, bribe, and coerce them into feeling like partners, rather than sexual victims. The child feels as if he/she has done something wrong and forbidden. The child feels guilty. The offender has enveloped the child in the sexual conspiracy, and the child must retreat to secrecy. In spite of our revulsion to sexual abuse, in spite of how much we care about children, we have inadvertently made our children more vulnerable and easier to sexually abuse.

HSK &ndash; Suppose parents had traumatic experiences themselves and share with the pediatrician their discomfort in talking to their children about sexual abuse prevention.

JH &ndash; It is the parents without histories of trauma that usually have the highest level of resistance about educating their children. It is usually victims of trauma that put out the extra effort to be alert, yet they often feel ill equipped to help.

If I were a pediatrician, I&rsquo;d honor any parent who acknowledges their own tragedy and wants to protect their children. They should recognize that most parents don&rsquo;t want to talk to their children and don&rsquo;t feel a need. So, they are ahead of the game for having their concerns.

On the other hand, they need to recognize that children have the ability to read or perceive the non-verbal comfort level of their parents. If the parent can become desensitized through seeing a therapist or attending a parent-training program, that would be advisable before they begin talking to their children about these issues.

But if that is something the parent can&rsquo;t do, advise them to use humor, start with the purple face stuff and let their children lead. Encourage these parents to understand the brilliance of being a bit stupid and let their children teach them something about the concepts in the touching book.

A positive approach to sexual abuse prevention

A positive approach to sexual abuse prevention is the solution to this dilemma. We cannot begin to prevent or detect sexual abuse without first opening positive communication with children with children about sexual issues.

A Very Touching Book

establishes a warm and positive foundation for sexuality before the issues of prevention and detection are addressed. Whether in a home, school, police station, social agency, church or treatment center, adults who read this book to a child will teach positive ideas about sexuality, and they will begin the communication process.

Through the use of humor, A Very Touching Book encourages children and adults to hold, cuddle, laugh, care, share and most importantly TALK. Like no other approach, giggles and laughter pervade this book &ndash; not for the purpose of discounting or minimizing the subject, but to bring children and adults together with warmth and

tenderness. Through humor, fear and embarrassment fade, and communication begins.

A different term for sexual abuse

Rather than using a negative or fearful term, A Very Touching Book refers to sexual abuse as secret touching. This term is explained in a way that creates a positive attitude toward adult sexuality, encouraging the privacy and uniqueness of our bodies as children.

A different way, for children, to view adult sexuality

Children from toddlers to teenagers, learn to take pride in avoiding sexual contact while they are children because adult sexuality is viewed as something special &ndash; something to be valued. Like no other prevention approach A Very Touching Book gives children a reason to protect themselves.

The role of secrets

The concept of secret touching also sets up a framework that allows children to judge whether contact with adults is appropriate or inappropriate, depending upon the issues of secrets. Rather than teaching children to be fearful of any physical contact with adults, A Very Touching Book teaches children to assess each situation according to the secrecy involved. This avoids giving a negative connotation to sexuality, to genitalia, to the child. Affection and tenderness with adults can be encouraged, because children are given a way to protect themselves.

A natural solution

Most importantly, the idea of secret touching provides a natural solution to the problem by encouraging children to TELL about an unwanted sexual contact. By using this unique approach to the secret problem, we encourage our children to turn to us so that we can help them.

Through fear and embarrassment, children turn away from us to be

abused and damaged. Through positive communication, sexual abuse can be detected and prevented.

This book is for big people who care about little people.

How people can secure copies of this book  
(The price  
is \$ 11.95 plus 15% for shipping/handling charge. It can be paid for by  
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