

.....But why didn't I tell?

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Many of us, in response to being told that being abused as children was not our fault, respond with the line, "...But I never told anybody?". We berate ourselves for not being able to tell, and somehow conclude that the fact that we "*didn't tell anyone*" about the abuse, somehow makes us culpable for it.

It doesn't!

As an older teen or adult, it is very easy to look back and think of all the missed opportunities for when we could have broken the silence. But what's very very important to remember, is that when we do this, we are looking back from the perspective of an adult, not from the perspective of a confused and / or frightened child. It's necessary to remind ourselves of why we didn't tell as children, so that we can perhaps have more acceptance, compassion and understanding of our child selves.

There are so many reasons that children feel they are unable to report sexual abuse, and many survivors have more than one reason for keeping it secret. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but here are some of those reasons. Maybe you can identify with one or two of them.

- ***"No one will believe me"***: Abusers very often threaten that if you tell, no one is going to believe you. You then face the risk of looking like you are telling lies, and perhaps even that you will get punished for not telling the truth. After all, children believe that adults believe other adults over children.
- ***Threats of Harm to Others***: Abusers can openly threaten that if you tell, then they are going to punish you by hurting someone you love. It's not unusual for an abuser to threaten that they will, for example, kill the family pet, or hurt a parent or sibling.

This, especially to a young child, is incredibly scary – and can result in believing you are responsible for keeping silent in order to protect others that you care about.

- ***Threats of further harm to yourself:*** Abusers can also threaten even worse punishments for you if you do tell. They can think up punishments that literally freeze survivors into silence.
- ***“It’s my fault”:*** Many abusers “groom” their victims, and over time, they can make you feel that you have been doing something wrong, and that you are guilty of what’s been happening. If this is said often enough to you, then you start to believe it. You may be told that if anyone finds out then you will be sent to a children’s home or a jail for children, and that everyone will think you are x, y, and z. It’s understandable therefore, that many children don’t tell because they are frightened of being blamed for being complicit in the abuse.
- ***Not wanting the abuser to get into trouble:*** As many abusers are close to their child victims i.e. a parent, sibling, family friend, religious leader etc. then sometimes the child doesn’t want the abuser to get into trouble. They can fear the abuser being sent to prison, or being told they are not allowed to see this person again – and obviously if you feel love for that person, then silence often wins through. The idea of being responsible for the break up of their family, in particular, can be too much to bear.
- ***“I don’t know what to say”:*** Obviously a child’s vocabulary, especially when talking about sexual acts, is not as sophisticated as that of an adult. There are very real practical barriers to telling, like not knowing what words to use, or not knowing how to bring it up in conversation. Even many adults struggle to talk about sex, especially when abusive in nature, and so how could you expect yourself as a child to be able to do this. Also, if you are very confused about what exactly has been done to you, it is almost impossible to know how to describe it.
- ***Bribery:*** Some children are bribed in order to keep a secret. For example, the abuser may promise to give you money, or may buy you nice things. These “rewards” can very much confuse your feelings towards the abuser and towards the abuse itself.
- ***“But I liked it”:*** Some survivors keep silent because of things about what’s happening that are deemed “positive”. For example, children who are very deprived of love and affection, may crave the love and affection they feel they are receiving

from their abuser. Some human contact is better than no human contact.

Understandably, sexual stimulation can also result in arousal, and this can be very confusing for a child to disentangle the nice feelings with the bad feelings. It can make a child feel "special" and wanted, possibly for the first time in their life.

- **"I didn't know it was wrong":** Especially if abuse began at a very early age, you may not have even been aware that this wasn't something that didn't happen to everyone. The abuse becomes part of your normal everyday life, and so challenging it wouldn't even occur to you.

"Not telling" does not make you in any way responsible for the abuse that happened to you as a child. If you think about how difficult it is to talk about the abuse as an adult, just ask how you could expect yourself as a child to have been able to do that. For many children, "telling" just doesn't feel like an option.

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