

Part 1

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1. What is sexual abuse _

Kia ora, I'm Liz Riley from Manaaki, which is the mental health and well-being support within Canterbury Primary Schools. Kia ora, my name's Sam McGibbon and I'm a child psychologist. I work with children and adolescents to support them when they've experienced sexual harm. Kia ora, I'm Catherine Gallagher and I am the clinical practice manager at a service in Otatahi called START and we support children, youth and adults who have experienced sexual harm. So, shall we start with an explanation from you both around what is sexual abuse? Well, that's such a good question because I think if we say that question, all of us will go, oh yeah, I know what it is, and we'll probably all think of different things.

And so, also the words that we use, so some people say sexualised harm, some people say sexual abuse, some people say sexualised violence, and again, those things can make people think, well, what is it we're talking about here? I think when all is said and done, a very simple definition is when a child is sexualised by an adult or by someone who is stronger, more powerful than them, and they're put in positions where they aren't capable of giving consent in a free way. And of course, if any child is under 16 or a young person is under 16 in the law, says that they're not able to give consent.

And when we think about definitions, I mean, obviously the law, there's different definitions. There's the law, there's moral definitions, there's religious definitions. There might also be your own family culture because in some of our families, it may well be that, you know,

you think that's bad, look at what happened to me. So, there can be that whole, you know, sense of what's serious versus what's not. And I think one of the difficulties with sexualised harm is that, we tend to either really overreact to it, so the smallest of things can be blown up, and possibly they should be, or quite big behaviours or quite concerning behaviours can in some family systems or, you know, social systems, be kind of downplayed as being kids will be kids.

So, our big sort of message for people is, if you're curious and if you're concerned and there's a flag, check it out, you know, and that's where an agency like ours, and there are many others. You know, around New Zealand, get on the phone, check it out, because two heads, three heads are better than one. And if you're struggling with that question of, is this sexual harm, is this sexualised abuse, then get some support around working out whether that's the case or not. Anything you'd add, Sam? I was just going to talk about online sexual abuse. Absolutely.

Just because it's becoming more and more prevalent, and perhaps something that our generation as parents might not think of, so much, but certainly during all the lockdown periods that we had with COVID, it was a bit of a field day for potential child sex offenders with children on devices, all throughout the day at home, not necessarily being monitored by their parents. So, this is a way that children can be targeted by would-be sex offenders to then go on and offend, either online or offline. So, something to be mindful of as well. And the online thing's interesting too, because it may not be, you know, someone who is a predator.

It may well be another teenager, or it may well be, you know, there's a whole lot of challenges around sexting and people being requested and coerced into sending pictures of themselves. And so, yeah, it can be a real minefield. It can be a real minefield, and certainly we have cases where young people have got, um, cornered into a situation where they've done something little and then being really kind of provoked and feel trapped into doing other things and then find it hard to get out of that situation, where they're asked to do things or asking people to do things that can cause some concern as they feel trapped not to be able to kind of get themselves out of that situation.

And I understand there's actually an upcoming Listening to Families series on this exact topic and on online safety, so that's fantastic, and families should link into that. Great, thank you.

2. How do I tell if my child has been sexually abused_

So as a parent, how would I be able to tell if my child had been sexually abused? Well, I think we touched on a lot of this in our general trauma chat a couple of weeks ago. But we're looking for changes in behaviour, I guess, predominantly. And again, you as the parent are the expert on your child. And if you're tuned in, you will notice. You will notice changes. And again, those changes will be different depending on the age and developmental stage of your child. So often what we can see in children that are younger is what we call regressive behaviours. We might have a four or five year old who was perfectly toilet trained.

And they start wetting or soiling during the day. That can be a sign. I mean, that can be a sign for lots of things. But we do see that. Certainly I see that with a number of my clients if they do have those difficulties. I think another big one that can be a telltale sign is a child suddenly having quite sexualised behaviour. And that is acting in a way or having knowledge that would be really not fitting. And that can be a sign of a danger to their age and stage of development. I think again, younger children may become more clingy, may be sensitive around bath time or around anything that involves touch or their private parts.

They might become clingy if they need to go somewhere to a particular place or with a particular person. It's a hard one though, isn't it? Because as you said, it can be very difficult. That can also be the sign of my dog dying, you know, that I'm distressed and I've got some big feelings and I don't know what to do with them. Or it could be a sign that actually mum's not too happy. So others might notice changes. So I think the good news is there can be some signs. The not so good news is sometimes you won't know. So you can be as tuned in as you like to your child and, in fact, some things can happen that you as the parent might not know about.

And that doesn't mean you're a bad parent. And that's really important to know that the thing about sexualised harm is that it happens in private. And people tend to lie about it. You know, people who are doing the harm lie about it because they don't want anyone to know. And they tend to access young people through relationship. And the people being groomed aren't just the child. It's the family system around the child. So there can be a whole lot of smoke and mirrors around this kind of stuff. And young people tend to lie about it. Well, not lie about it, but let's say it's not lying. But don't worry.

They don't want to talk about it because they don't understand that this was harmful. The person doing it to them might be someone they love. You know, they might actually like aspects of it because if there's someone who doesn't get a lot of attention or has some neglect, then actually the attention that's given through this behaviour, apart from that yucky bit, might actually be quite nice. It's also full of shame and embarrassment. And we might not even have the words to talk about it. So I think that, you know, often when people come in, they see our service, there'll be parents going, we just never knew and they never told us.

And there can be lots of distress, as you can imagine, and concern as to how did we miss it. And I think that a really important thing to hear is you might miss it, but if you're paying attention to your child and you're seeing them being distressed or seeing changes in behaviour, just be in relationship with them. You know, you're talking with them and you're checking it out. You're not stalking them, which can be tempting, but you're just kind of saying, I'm laying those seeds. And, you know, for some people who might be concerned, you might check out, you know, hey, you know, if anything did happen that you're unsettled about, you can talk to me, but you can also talk to, you know, some other people in our world and help the in-person work out who might be safe people for them.

Because there's a lot of people walking around who have been sexually harmed who no one has ever known. And there's some research in New Zealand that says it takes about 16 years for people to tell on average. So that's a lot of people who might tell straight away and a lot of people who might never tell. So if it's 16 years, then we're likely not children anymore. Yes. And we wouldn't be working with them. So the reality is that most children don't disclose. So some pretty clear messaging there that it's apparent, you know, don't do nothing. Yes. Check it out. If you see change, if you're feeling like, hmm, you know, often parents when they now know, they go, ah, if I track back, I can see that things are going to change.

But in the busyness of lives, we often put that down to, oh, they had a fight with their friend at school. Or yes, they didn't want to have that sleepover. But actually, there's never really been somebody who likes sleepovers. So, you know, again, this isn't to beat ourselves up as parents, which of course we will do. But it is to say, be curious, be in relationship with your kids. And just step back. And if you've got a funny feeling, don't ignore it. You know, check it out. Yeah. I think that was really, really important, that point that you said before, Catherine, about, what was that point that you said and I've forgotten?

I make lots of important points. No, that idea that we send that message to our kids, and this is all about having open lines of communication, that nothing is too terrible to talk to me about. Because, of course, Catherine was talking about that shame and that guilt, and I did something wrong. You know, I'm going to get into trouble. That there's, if we can send that message that, no, there's nothing that you can tell me that will stop me loving you. Yeah, that we can't get through. And I'm here. Yeah, and we can do this together. And so sometimes what we notice is that things like keeping yourself safe programs at school or, you know, watching something on television.

If you are curious, you know, those can be opportunities to sort of, you know, that's where disclosures can happen. Or if your child is, if you're watching a program to say, oh, you know, if you were ever worried about that stuff, you know that we just need to find someone for you to talk to. But, and it might be me, but it might not be me. Because for a lot of kids, they go, I don't want to tell mum I'm upset her. I don't want to tell dad because he'll get angry. And that might actually be what happens, not in an inappropriate way, but as parents, we do get upset about this information. But kids can be scared that they're the cause of that.

Yeah. So it doesn't mean as a parent don't have your natural, normal emotion, but it just means that be aware, because there's probably a wee scared kid there who's thinking this is their fault.

3. Responding to a disclosure of abuse

So if your child disclosed that the abuse has come from a family member, what would your advice be? Well, the most important thing is whoever is the person receiving the gift, we often refer to it as a taonga, a gift, of the disclosure, is just to receive it, receive it with love and thank the young person. And if there's tears and there's distress, then that's actually OK. But if you can, just take your deep breaths and just realise that this is a moment, that whatever else happens, that that child will remember who they told and how it was received. I think that it's really important that you get enough information to signal if there's immediate risk.

So you want enough information to know a little bit about what's going on. You don't need to drill into details. You might want to just ask some open-ended questions. Because, again, if it's about that person coming home in half an hour or we're about to go to auntie and uncle's house and actually who they've disclosed about as auntie, then you need to know enough to know how concerned to be. I think it's really important to, if you are upset, to use words around that, to say, hey, I'm really upset by your news, but, sweetheart, that's not about you telling me. It's about just that's a big secret you've had to carry.

So if there are tears, explain them. If there is an angry response, explain it and say, this is not, this is, you are so brave to tell me this. And that's what my upset's about, that you've had to carry the secret as opposed to leaving it unspoken. I think it's also really important to not make promises you can't keep or shouldn't keep. So if the young person says, but don't tell anyone, it's really important we say, hey, actually, this is the secret that I'm, for treasuring, but it's not my secret to keep. So we need to make sure that we get some adults involved who can help us with the secret.

And we can help get you the help you need and make sure that this person who's done the harm is kept safe and other people are safe. So, you know, even though the child might go, oh, I'll never speak to you again. And, you know, I told you that you're the grown-up. It's one of those moments where you pull up your big girl pants and go, actually, I'm a grown-up and you told me for a reason. And I'm

really sorry. And you can be as angry at me as you like. But I wouldn't be doing my job as your mum or your dad if we didn't do something about this to make sure that you're safe. So, I mean, in terms of questioning, again, as I said, keeping those questions broad and open.

Leading questions was, they did that to you, did they? You know, keep away from those kinds of leading questions. But bottom line is, I think we might have talked about last time, you'll probably stuff it up. You'll probably get really upset. You'll probably say the wrong thing. You'll probably, I don't know what you'll do. And that doesn't mean you got it wrong. That just means you get a chance to have a do-over. And kids are pretty resilient. So if you actually catch yourself on, take a deep breath, give your child a big cuddle and say, hey, you know what? Thank you for telling me. I didn't handle that very well.

And can you just, can you tell me again? Because that was on me. So I really am just saying to parents, ultimately, you can't get this wrong if you own your own response. You can't get this wrong if you own your own response. And I think you've touched on this, Catherine, but I'd also say that we want to be believing our children. Yes, absolutely. Because especially if it's happening within family, that's going to cause some huge ramifications, right? And we can see, you know, that families implode over this stuff. But we're thinking about our young person and how we're going to keep them safe.

And one of the most important things we can do if a child is going to be sick, is to keep them safe. And that's one of the most important things we can do if a child is going to be sick. And one of the most important things a child discloses to us is to believe them. It's their truth. And there might be somebody else over here who has an alternative version of the truth, but we need to be believing our children. And there's actually lots of research to say that if children are not believed and don't receive the necessary appropriate support, it can have really significant long-term negative impacts for them.

There's also quite a bit of evidence to say that kids don't tend to make this stuff up. So one of the things that can happen is we go, this news might be so shocking that we might go, this can't be true. But kids don't tend to make this stuff up. So that's the bit when there's a parent or there's someone that you know and you care about having to hold those two realities is that just because you can't believe it, doesn't mean it can't be true. And because, again, children can try to tell people stuff, especially young children, they might not, as Catherine said before, have the words to articulate or even know what it is that's happening to them.

So it can be really hard for them to actually tell an adult. I mean, I've heard of children who might be sort of four, five, and six say, oh, well, such and such is being mean to me. We don't know what that means, but that's their way of trying to tell. Or they might be able to articulate it better, or they might get brushed off by an adult. And often, one in three adults don't believe the first time a child would try and disclose. And that doesn't mean you're a bad person. It just means that in the busyness of life, if your child says, oh, I don't really like going to auntie or aunties or grandmas, you go, oh, look, of course you do.

Go and give them a hug or a cuddle, because if they're sort of hanging back a bit, again, it doesn't make you a bad parent, because this stuff, you know, this stuff is huge. And especially if you've got your own trauma history, we can have some blind spots about boundaries and about those kinds of things, which can make it hard for us to even see this. Or we see it everywhere, and it's hard to kind of differentiate. I mean, I think when you were talking, I was thinking about, for young people, also developmentally, because they believe, and we probably try to reinforce this myth, that we know everything.

There's a rustling in the basket bin, and we're down the other end of the house, mum's going, oi, get your fingers out of there. A child can go, well, wait a minute, if mum knows that I've been stealing a biscuit, how does she not know that my uncle's got his hand down my pants? And so there can be this kind of set, and how come I keep going around there? They must know. So that can be one of the other factors is that young people can think, well, if it's known, and I've sort of, I think I've disclosed by saying that my uncle might be mean to me, I think I've told you, and we keep going around to uncle's place, how do I not think that actually this is kind of OK?

And maybe this is even normal if it's been normal, feels normal, because it's been happening for years.

4. Naughty behaviour or behaviour resulting from trauma_

So how can a parent tell the difference between naughty behavior and behavior that perhaps has been caused by trauma of this kind? Oh that old chestnut!

I think it can be really hard you know to tell the difference and remember you can have traumatized kids who can be a bit naughty and you can have you know kids who might have some other challenges in terms of how there they are in the world and how they do relationships who might also have trauma so and don't panic parents you know I mean I suppose the big thing we're saying is whether they're traumatized or just a normal kid doing life there are some really standard basic parenting principles that are good to keep in mind right I suppose the the key thing when trauma is involved is we want to be aware that their nervous systems are probably pretty revved up and so you may well see behaviors that are about their nervous system trying to problem-solve the intention is not to be

naughty the intention is to probably try and get out of a situation or manage a situation or manage the overwhelm that might go on an interpersonal situation or they get kind of overwhelmed pretty easily so if you're a parent and you're looking at behavior that's not okay I mean I think as we talked probably went on too much about last time but take a deep breath and just try and step back a little bit and look at the context try and understand what the behavior might be trying to get out of that situation.

communicate it might be an in it might be hey I'm noticing that when you're in this situation your big feelings seem to kind of be get too big how can I help you what might be going on or just dropping and running with them to sort of say I'm noticing this you know when you're getting upset what's going on so you know when we see behavior we might not know what's driving it but that parenting with firmness and kindness is going to help you regardless of what's going on.

if there is trauma there though things like you know loud angry voices things like lots of noise and so it's kind of like you might well want to approach that child's life not to wrap them in cotton wool even though that might be really tempting but it's about going what are the stress points for this child and what can we take away that just might just help them decompress a little bit more because their nervous system is going to be revved up just doing life so we want to make sure that there's a little bit more regulation. there for them which means we have to be regulated anything you'd add to that?

yeah I guess I was just kind of saying you've talked to us a little bit that children who have been experiencing chronic sexual abuse they may have been holding all these feelings inside that they haven't been able to express maybe for fear of things getting worse or threat you know there could be threats involved and so when they feel safe and they're no longer having contact with the person who harmed them that might be a time when if the lid opens up a little bit not only does a small amount of anger come out or big big emotions but the lid flies off and oh you've got a volcano on your hands and that's maybe more to do with this old anger that's being pent up and not being able to be expressed and now it is being able to be expressed and we actually talk about healthy anger because it's really important that that does get out because what happens if if that sort of anger and frustration and even sadness is not expressed outside of the body it can turn sort of inward and become quite harmful on the inside where it doesn't get where it's not able to be released and expressed I mean you mentioned about the you know the volcano exploding I think that that can absolutely be the case sometimes we have parents who get really worried that that will be the case if that makes sense or even little people who kind of go I don't want to let myself have feelings because that's what I worry about that it's going to get out of control very easily and be crazy and even if you've spent a long time as Sam was saying holding those feelings in any kind of emotion can feel like it gets out of control and so I might just shut it down or you know my body and brain nervous system finds ways to just kind of you know shut away from it so part of therapy part of mums and the jobs of mums and dads and significant adults is to is to model and talk about actually these emotions aren't dangerous they might be scary but they're not dangerous and so we're here with you kind of to have these feelings and a big part of therapy is about saying how do we help young people actually anybody have these scary emotions in a safe place because they are emotions they're part of our brain having remembered some scary things and our brain bringing it into the present um and helping them process that so it's kind of like that that wound as sam was mentioning last time you know it's sore and healing comes from actually caring and tending to it um and that can hurt um and you are equal to it you're not you're not fragile glass you are equal to it you're really robust and safe um now but it may not always feel like that i think it's so important though isn't it for us as the adults in the child's life we might be parents or caregivers or we might be teachers um that we can be looking at this child through a trauma lens so that we have some understanding that oh that makes sense that they're hypersensitive to threat right now because of what's happened to them and that they might see a face that looks you know neutral or that we might see as being neutral but they might see it as an angry face or or a scary face or yeah the tone of the voice might we might see it as neutral but it might sound like somebody yelling for them so their body alarm system's kind of being switched on and staying on for the moment so that they're just hypersensitive to their environment and they see danger and threat even when it might not be there.

I think from a teaching or for a parenting point of view again that comes back to though the temptation might be to go oh we can't put a boundary in place because if we know it comes from that naughty behavior comes from a kind of a hurt place then wouldn't we be being mean if we kind of boundaried it and you know again we can't reinforce enough that in fact safe boundaries are exactly what a young person well we all need but especially a hurt person because it makes you feel safe. Yeah provides sexual violence was about boundaries being invaded you know and violated so safe boundaries.

Yeah boundaries where in actual fact they know where the line is if they step over the line there's a consistent response they've got adults doing what they say they were going to do all of those sorts of things help a young person regulate and that's the thing they need to get through this so this isn't about saying you know hands off and just let them be that'll actually make them more scared.

5. Let's not talk about this – we should move on

So what would you say to parents who view sexual trauma as something to just move on from and not to actually talk about? Yeah, and I think this happens a lot, this is the reality. I've had parents who have made it to our service but will say, well, and they're getting pressure from other members of their family and this is harm that's happened outside of the family. I was like, well, we're just not sure if

we talk about it, it's going to make it worse. But in reality, and I was just tapping into some research the other day, that said 70% of children will experience significant post-traumatic stress symptoms following sexual abuse.

So they're needing our support. And it is a big number, isn't it? And I think that... I don't work with adults, but I see the number of adults who have experienced child sexual abuse come through our service who haven't had the support as children. And I just think I'm a very big believer of early intervention and the lightest possible touch. And we're not talking about doing years of therapy with young ones. We're just going to do a small piece of work and they can go on and do life. They might get to 13, they might get to their first boyfriend or girlfriend, and then they get a bit wobbly. They can come back.

But being able to plant the seeds and reinforce those messages that you as a parent have sent, including, it was not your fault. And by the way, it's never the child's fault. And you were so brave to speak out. Wow, what amazing strength you have as a young person. And your parents are going to keep you safe now. We're going to make sure that happens. And then these are really powerful messages to help that child feel safe enough to keep being a child and to keep trusting that I can have good relationships. Because what we see is that often, and again, I don't work with adults, but I'm aware that the adults that come to our service do have issues with being able to trust in relationship because of this harm that they've experienced as a child.

Just picking up what you were saying. Before, Sam, about letting the young person know that this was not their fault. So, so important. I suppose one of the challenges can be, though, if the young person or actually anybody who's experienced sexualized harm, if they're sitting with the idea that it's their fault and they've been told it was their fault, maybe about the person that hurt them. Or developmentally, as little people, we tend to go, the world begins and ends at the end of our own nose. So if something horrible happens, it must have something to do with me. That if you can, as a parent, it's really important.

To not jump to, no, no, don't be silly. It's not your fault. Does that make sense? Because we feel really uncomfortable, the young person saying that. And as Sam's saying, accurately, it was never their fault. But we need to spend a moment to validate that that is a feeling they're having. So just take that moment of going, actually, oh, love. You know, you've sat with such a big secret, hey? Oh, that must be such a hard feeling to sit with. Hey, you know it was not your fault. So just that little bit of pausing and validating. That feeling they do have. And then acknowledging with a little bit of the accurate information can be really powerful.

Because if we leave out the bit that they're actually feeling. And just go to the idea that it was not your fault. Then they never get to kind of explore that idea that actually, I probably know that up here. But I feel it was my fault. And if we're not comfortable to kind of acknowledge that part. Then that means there's a whole, I suppose, aspect of their experience that doesn't get explored. I think that's so important, Catherine. Because you can be taught. You can be told stuff. Like you'd have every adult saying it's not your fault. But what you believe in your heart and your core. Like you might believe it logically.

But something inside of you is still wondering. But did I, you know, I got this gift. Or, you know, maybe I enjoyed part of it. I didn't say no. Yeah. And I think that that is a big part of therapy. Is kind of winding that back. And whether, where it's age appropriate. And the child, you know, has the cognitive level to be able to do this work. To actually look at how did this process come about. Like, you know, and look at how, you know, the grooming process actually works. And that helps them to kind of understand. Oh yeah, it is, you know, with hindsight what happened. And I can take steps to keep myself safe.

It was never my fault. But I can do things to keep myself a bit safer. Just going back to your original question. I was sitting with this idea that. Parents, they can go, well, you know, first of all, I need to get them off to therapy. So they're kind of fixed. And as Sam was saying, you know, this tends to be a lifelong course. And that doesn't mean that someone's broken for life. Let me be really clear about that. But it means that for people to dip in and dip out of therapy. Is normal. Being more normal than not. The other response that some parents can have is, you know, let's kind of get them sorted.

But then when they come into therapy. And actually young people. Can feel this themselves. It starts to feel worse. And then they're like, so I want to back up the track and kind of think, well, I want to do that now. And I think it's really important that when people enter into therapy, that idea of understanding what this is about. And actually the Buddhists have this concept, which I really resonate with, which is this difference between clean and dirty pain. And so clean pain is kind of holds that idea that is life's got pain in it. And if you've been hurt and you've got a wound, then that's sore.

And so to actually start to explore this so that we understand the, I suppose, the levels of protection that the brain and body have put on top of us to kind of keep us safe. We sometimes have to kind of unpack those a little bit, which means that we get a bit sore for a bit. Just like when you go to the physio, you know, what we talked about last time. And that makes sense. It doesn't mean that you're getting worse. But but for parents and young people to understand. To understand that that's part of this process. So we almost have to get a little bit worse before we get better. And the dirty pain is this idea that actually if we if we kind of beat ourselves up about pain, if we say, well, I shouldn't be having this pain or there's something wrong with me if I'm in pain or I need to kind of get rid of this pain because I'm not equal to it.

And unfortunately, that's the kind of pain that a bit like stagnant water can kind of hang around. And so we wanting to acknowledge that this pain attached to the work that we're doing. But it's it's kind of necessary pain. And if people are kind of, you know, what's their relationship with it? Because if it's if it's dirty pain, then that can lead to the suffering.

6. Responding when disclosure is a trigger for a parent

And what would be your advice for parents which you must come across from time to time where a disclosure is a trigger for them, for past hurt or abuse? We come across that a lot. We did a straw poll a few years back at start and I think it was 100%. And that does not mean that if you've had sexual harm yourself then you're more likely to have a child to be harmed. Although there can be some increased risks in terms of potentially the value you might place on yourself and the relationships that you might have some blind spots about. But that is again not to say that people have kind of caused this but just that there can be that vulnerability.

So we certainly have parents who have had their own histories and worked very hard to keep the young ones safe and have found themselves in the situation where the young one's been hurt. And maybe in a family situation. Maybe in a situation where the person that harmed them has now hurt their child. Or it could be a whole lot of different dynamics. And again, how long is a piece of string? Some parents take that and go, right, I'm going to make sure my child gets the support that I never got and are in their boots and all. Sometimes too much because it's kind of like almost a I'm needing my child to get the support.

And in fact the child's going, nah, I just want to be eight. Let me alone. So again, it can be a pacing issue with regard to that. Other parents can be like, actually I don't want to even touch this with a barge pole. You know, this hurts too much. And kids pick up on the fact that they can't talk about it. They really pick up on the idea that if mum's skin's crawling and what I'm talking about is making mum's skin crawl even though she might be smiling and saying, you can tell me anything. And that's not mum's fault. You know, that's about maybe mum's or dad's trauma history. So again, trying to be transparent and saying, you don't have to tell the child your trauma.

What you can say is, hey, it's so important you're talking about this stuff and I'm getting help so I can listen and I can be here for you. But maybe there are things that it's best to talk to Sam about and I can kind of come with you to talk to Sam about those things. You know, so it doesn't mean you have to be amazingly calm when you hear this stuff. But you can make sure that your child has the message that this stuff is important to talk about and also getting your own support. So if you are finding yourself being triggered, then yeah, hook back into your own resources and supports. Yeah, I'd really emphasise that point because certainly in my experience, I might be working with a young person, but I'm never working just with a young person.

I'm working with the whole family. And often, as Catherine said, the parent who's bringing the child along has had their own childhood experience of sexual abuse. And they may not have had any support. And this is incredibly triggering. It takes them back to the age that they were when they were sexually harmed, which may coincide with about the same age as their child, strangely enough. And yes, I'd completely agree. And I would say, you know, there's support out there for you too, to the parent. You're absolutely entitled to your own support whenever. You know, it doesn't matter how long ago this happened to you.

Because again, the most important thing, you know, for your child, what they need most is for you to be well, to support them, you know, them on this journey. And they will absolutely pick up if this stuff is too scary to talk to mum about because I get this reaction from mum that, you know, she'll just fall apart if I talk about it. So yeah, absolutely, parents, if this has happened to you, you just absolutely deserve your own support. So for parents, experiencing that trigger of their own trauma, where would you suggest they go for support? Well, we're lucky enough to have an ACC system that for some quirk of fate decided many years ago that they were going to support people who had experienced sexualised harm.

So if you're a New Zealand citizen and you, you know, have experienced sexual violence or you're overseas and on holiday and something happens, or you're an overseas person who happens to have something happen to you when you're in New Zealand, you're eligible for free support. And it's lifelong support if you get cover. And cover is received if there has been clinically significant or kind of harm resulting from that experience. And so if you want to know more about it, the ACC website, you know, is pretty user-friendly or it's getting more user-friendly. And certainly agencies like ours, like START, you can ring up and talk to our social workers and find out all about it.

We also have social work support, as do other agencies. That means that if you're wanting to just say, I've seen something, I've heard something, I'm struggling with something, you don't have to have anything to do with START. But there is support there that you just get on the phone or come in and have a consult and help problem-solve next steps together. Because sometimes we can feel really isolated around this stuff. So yes, for the time being, for the child, for the adult, for the grandparent, there is free support out there. You don't need to have had police involvement or anything like that.

So, yeah, yeah.

7. Managing anger at the time of disclosure

So for a parent who hears for the first time a disclosure of sexual abuse, a very common emotion would be anger. How would you suggest they manage that? I'll take a deep breath, but I think anger is warranted as a really natural, normal feeling and emotion to have, isn't it? I guess, you know, I've heard parents talk about having thoughts of doing all sorts of things to the person who harmed their child, and rightly so. We can have these thoughts, but of course we're not going to act on them. And if we were to share some of that stuff with our child, that could be a really scary thing, like, oh my goodness, mum's going to go out with a shotgun, or dad's going to go and drive this person down.

So we want, it's absolutely normal and appropriate to have anger towards, and all sorts of other feelings, towards this person that has harmed, you know, my child in this way. But we, I guess, the message is we need to try and, certainly when our child's around, to try and keep that a little bit measured, and I think our children would want us to express anger towards them. We're going to use our anger towards the person who harmed them, but in a way that's not going to kind of freak them out. And then you can talk to any number of other people about your emotions and let everything out, and again, we would also always say that if this is something that you're really struggling with, then it's probably worthwhile you gaining, you seeking out your own support.

And as we do, you know, we're all part of this together. And so I think it's important to, I think it's important to have that sort of in your mind, because you're all part of it.

we touched a little bit on the ACC model of care with sensitive claims and the wonderful part about that is that there's also whānau support sessions available so that means that we can have parenting sessions with the parent alone and be touching on it's not their own individual support but certainly around their capacity as a parent we can be supporting on lots of levels including how do I manage these big feelings that I'm having right now towards the person who helped my child and I think the thing to kind of remember is that you know your child knows you so if you're someone who gets a bit gruff and has big reactions you're probably going to do that in this situation and as we were talking about before it's just a matter of you know if you can at all you know take a deep breath and try and turn down the volume a little bit or if you do get really angry make sure you repair make sure you go back to your child and go hey do you know what you know I got really angry there and I'm sorry if I scared you yeah I was just going to say you know I can remember cases where where that response from a dad for example has been massive anger and and the little person has misinterpreted that anger as not towards the person who's offended but towards them so then you know Oh dad's really angry it must be about me because I'm 8 and that's how my brain works it can get a bit like stuff if it's not repaired later and if their day's not able to say hey it wasn't you I was angry about that that she just made me thinking Sami probably going slightly off первый you know sometimes the little people when they're angry you know because they're going to have an angry response to what can have an angry response is sometimes the person they're angry with starts using style to make a about is not the person who did them harm but about the person who was supposed to be keeping them safe.

So we've had situations where the safe parent, the protective parent has kind of been on the receiving end of the child's distress and anger and you know you can see developmentally that the child's gonna probably take that out on the person they feel safest with and but that can be really hard for the parent who didn't know and was trying their very best.

So again you know us trying to support that parent to say hey there's a normal aspect of the child doing this and they're doing this probably because they love and they feel safe with you and let's let you take care of yourself because your proper child just needs to do this for a bit and if you're able to handle it and contain it clearly we're not allowing a child to just lose it and have a good go but do that in a constructive way if possible then that can be really an important thing that helps build the strength of that relationship. you

8. Is the trauma going to be with the child for life_

So for children who have been affected by sexual trauma, is this going to be with them for life, in your experience? No, no. I think, and I would always say to parents, that we all have the ability to heal from whatever happens to us, with any kind of trauma, if we have the right support and scaffolding around us. So I think it's really important to send that message of hope, that this does not need to define you or your child. And there's support out there, there's people who work with us every day that can help. And so what I say is, you know, your child's eight now, and they're going to go on and do this.

And when they get the help that they need now, then there's nothing to say that they can't move on. No. I think it's really important that they go on and achieve life to their full potential, as they would have, should this not have happened. And it can be just like a little blip, you know, a little dark spot on something, you know, on their life, which is a much greater, fuller, more positive experience in that little black dot. I mean, I completely agree with you, Sam. I think that one of the things that can happen, though, and I think you made reference to it before, is that, you know, you can do the life.

The lightest touch, you know, I keep thinking about, you know, a little eight-year-old, and that might mean they go forth and kind of move beyond this experience, but it might also be that they've found a place to put this experience that isn't fully explored. And parents can kind of go, but let's just hang in there and kind of get it all out and kind of talk about it so you're fine. And we're really clear to say, actually, they're doing as much as they can. And so, again, it might be when they hit puberty or something like that, that it comes up again. Or when they have their own child, you know, it might come up again.

That doesn't mean that the work that was done back here didn't work. Or, you know, it means that actually, you know, or when I'm under stress from some other situation. You know, for example, in the Canterbury earthquakes, there was a lot of people who were really affected by the Canterbury earthquakes. And when you look back, actually, there was some trauma history there. And that doesn't mean they weren't necessarily walking around raw prior to the earthquake, but when you put another big... stressor on, then the resources that might have been used to kind of resource them around this earlier trauma might have been stripped away because, you know, they were having to deal with this new thing.

So, again, it doesn't mean that earlier stuff didn't work. It doesn't mean they weren't doing okay. But you might need a bit of extra resourcing and scaffolding if other big things happen or if you're going through a developmental stage that requires you to understand the world a little bit differently. I might hit 13 and go, so that's what happened. You know, whereas at sort of seven or eight, I might have thought, oh, that's a bit gross. Or is it 13 and get the idea that it was actually sexual? And that was what was happening. And, you know, I think that coming back to that fulfilling their potential, it is something that's happened to them.

So there is some pain attached to those memories. And we probably, you know, I don't know what you think, Sam, probably if they think about those memories, there will always be some pain attached to them because it shouldn't have happened. And it was a horrible thing that happened. But I suppose what therapy does and what... what life does alongside that is to go, actually, it's a manageable pain. It's an understandable pain. It's a pain that might mean I need a hug or I need to take a moment and have a cup of tea or I might need to just take a moment, you know, just take care of myself a little bit because it was a serious thing that happened.

And just like a bit of a sprained ankle, if it tweaks, I might go, oh, I just need to rest there for a bit. That doesn't mean you're broken by this. It means it's become part of your rich tapestry. I think that idea of, or certainly in the work that we do, is trying to reduce the level of disturbance associated with the trauma because with the impacts that we're working with, it's really making life hard to, you know, hard to do. But if we can reduce those impacts to a level where somebody can go out and go to school or go to work or have friends. Be able to learn, be able to explore, be curious, all of those things that might have been diminished with the impacts of sexual harm, then they can go about and do life.

So we've reduced the level of disturbance at that point of time in their life. It's almost like you've freed up resources, haven't you? Yes. Because I think we talked about last time about the brain when it's in survival mode, it's really resource greedy. And it says, you know, literally, let's not think about learning. Let's not think about growing. Let's think about survival. And so when you can free up those resources, as Sam's talking about, then energy can get put into those other things, the tasks of being a kid. And often what we see when those resources are freed up or their disturbance level has decreased is space for grief and sadness.

And that can be, that's not something, I guess, it's not trauma processing. It's something else. It's a process in and of itself. But making space for that. Grief or that sadness that, oh, that happened to me, is a really important thing to think about.

9. Learning to trust again

so what advice would you give to parents about learning to trust other adults again because that must take a really big hit yeah with news like this especially if you were groomed you know because again um one of the biggest myths around sexual violence is it's stranger danger you know that that's the white man picking a kid up after school and of course those stories happen horrifically and they hit the news um and so that's the thing we tend to go oh you know let's be worried about it but i think the percentages in the high 90s of most harm happens in relationships um and those relationships are often you know close family um or extended family um and so that idea of going i missed it too and um so you know that that desire to want to protect your child um is really strong and not surprising um and you'll notice a lot of people who work in the work that we do don't tend to like to send their kids to sleepovers you know because there can be that vicarious kind of sense of how safe is the world and and i think we've got to kind of challenge that a little bit isn't it because i think the reality is you know we can't predict what's around the corner um but if we live in that heightened state of fear fear then the world can become i mean the world's a pretty unsafe place anyway let's pop that delusional bubble that we're we're kind of everything's good um but if we live in that heightened state of distress then actually joy gets robbed from other things and other valuable as sam was saying other valuable learning experiences don't get to be had um so i think for parents um you know they might start small you know they might need to take some time um but that's with support to go actually it's okay just to model for the child that it's not appropriate to trust everybody because that's another really important thing people trust me it's like why you know and so actually i might be a very trustworthy person but actually why would you trust me until you know me so teaching your

child but also reminding yourself is what would be the indicators of trust how do we set up really good ways of communicating and maybe it is that there's another adult present or maybe the doors always stay open or maybe sleepovers mean that i know the things there's been happening in my family really well and the sad thing is we can do all this stuff and something might still happen but i suppose the challenge for our families is what for all families is do you live your life on the possibility that things happen or do you go how do we minimize the chance that things happen but also give messages that you can cope with what happens it's a tough one yeah i think certainly in the work with with um children that I do, quite a big part of it is preventative because we know that if a child's been sexually harmed it increases their risk of future revictimisation.

So involving the parent in that work too to kind of, I guess, confirm or to reinforce those messages. What are my early warning signs? And supporting children to really take notice of what's going on inside of their body when they might feel this sort of butterflies in their stomach or just feel that something's not quite right. And so parents can be involved in that work and building your child's, I mean it's not the child's responsibility to keep yourself safe, right? But all of that work can minimise the risk of future revictimisation. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Future risk of harm.

And if the parent can be on board with that, it might help build their confidence that we, you know, we can do things. We can upskill to minimise the risk of future harm. But don't be in a hurry, you know. I mean if it's five years later and you still haven't let your child out of their home, you know, that's the thing about, you know, and I'm saying that kind of a bit jokingly but also not, is that people can go, this has smashed my perception that the world's a safe place, especially if I might have had my own trauma and we want to keep our child really safe. The risk is that can do harm too.

So if you're in that place of going, I don't know how to traverse this whole trust thing or safety thing, get some help. Get some help. But there is, there's support out there. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm.

10. The value of therapy

So how is therapy important and how will it help? Well, the hope is that it will reduce those impacts that we're talking about. That it will, I mean, firstly that it will build a sense of safety and stabilisation for the child and for the family. And then build their understanding around what it was that happened to them and who was responsible for that. And then I guess if the child's ready emotionally or if they're ready developmentally, then we can do some trauma processing work, which can look different depending on what sort of therapy practice. But to help them to actually process what it was that happened to them and thereby reduce the disturbance associated to it.

So that basically means you're helping the brain's natural healing process that's kind of got a bit stuck. And then if they get just enough of that sort of support, then you can see that, oh, they're not having nightmares every night anymore. It might be once a month. And. And they're able to sleep in their own bed and they're back to wanting to go and, you know, play at their friend's house. Then they're really good signals that a good piece of work has been done and maybe they can go off and be a kid for a while and come back again if they need to. And that can be really important where the therapist is working in with the family, because, you know, families are saying, well, wait for the child to signal that they're ready.

And the child's going, well, I'll wait. Until I have to, then you can kind of get into that kind of stuck pattern. So again, after what we're doing is saying, you know, how do we just create a little bit of, you know, the need to be a little bit brave, but in really safe environments. So there's a little like, you know, if I am sleeping in mum's and dad's bed, then actually, how do we just mean that, you know, because the risk is that if we keep help having you sleep in our bed, we're kind of inadvertently giving you the message that your room is unsafe. Or you're unsafe on your own. Or you're unsafe on your own.

So it's that idea of understanding that that's the message their little brain might be telling them. But we also want to give them another message about how they can resource themselves. So it's little bite-sized chunks of bravery and strength required. And that might require you as the therapist to support the parent, to support the child, you know, in terms of who's got your back. And this takes time, you know, and we don't know how long because it's such an individual, unique response. But it may be entirely appropriate for, you know, for your eight-year-old. Or tip B, sleeping in your bed for however, you know, for the first period of time because that's how they can feel safe enough to get to sleep.

And you might all need some sleep, right? Because that's a really big part of healing the body is to have good sleep. So it's case by case and it depends on what feels right for your family. I think the other thing with regard to this particular trauma, you know, we were talking about more general traumas last time. But, you know, this clearly involved, you know, sexualised behaviour. You know, the trauma. The child was sexualised and so we need to kind of also develop an understanding or at least open conversations around a child's sexual development. And often this is the bit that parents go, yes, we know that happened, but we don't want to think about our eight-year-old, I'm going to keep saying eight-year-old, as being a sexual being, you know, because it's like, you know, that kind of just grosses me out and kind of reminds me about what happened.

And so if we just kind of forget that part of them, and we might be kind of. Kind of okay with the idea that there's a nightmare, we might be kind of okay with some other aspects of their behaviour, but the idea that there might be sexual impacts is something that as parents, you know, we're not naturally willing to lean into. I think one of the things that we try and really reinforce is that in reality, sexual development happens when a child's born. You know, we're learning about what touch feels like, we're learning about the beginnings and ends of our bodies, we're learning about, you know, what we have control over, what we have autonomy over, what feels nice, what doesn't feel nice.

So, again, when you've had a harmful sexual experience over time, or even a one-off, that's going to impact that. Now, again, it doesn't mean it's broken, but it means that, you know, we've had parents come in who say, you know, my child masturbates, and, you know, they just shouldn't. But, again, the child's going, well, actually, this kind of helps me deal with the feelings I've got, or actually, I don't know how not to do it, because this is kind of part of what happened to me. Parents, they have to sit there, real uncomfortable thing, that my child now has knowledge about sex and about sexual functioning that I didn't want them to have.

And so, how do we not pathologise that? How do we, you know, in some of the work we're doing, it's about, again, age appropriately, but just talking about, we can't kind of put you back to the stage you were before you had that knowledge. You have that knowledge now, but how do we frame it up in a healthier way, in a way that doesn't make you the demon, or the person that's got this. That's wrong. But try us to put that in a frame that, you know, who can you talk about that with? Or if you do feel like you need to masturbate, I don't know if we're allowed to say that word on television, you know, but where do you do it, and do it privately, and actually, what are some other ways you might want to self-soothe that actually you can do publicly, you know?

There's often, you know, fears that when our child has been hurt, that they might go on to become someone who hurts, you know, sexually harms. And, again, yes, there's evidence to say that sexually... Specialised play, you know, as Sam said at the very beginning, can be one of the symptoms, can be one of the things that comes of this. But there can also be a lot of other things that can cause someone to harm sexually. And so don't panic, you know, you're not going to become, you know, someone who sexually harms. If they do get involved with some harmful sexual behaviour, there's really good interventions there.

And I understand that STOP, you know, talked about that. So if people are concerned, have a look at the excerpt from STOP, because that'll have some really good information. And I'd also suggest if you seek support for your child, the chances of that would be greatly minimised, that they would go on to sexually harm. Because usually it's children who haven't had support, who have had their own sexual abuse, maybe as a really young child. And that has become their way of showing affection, or their way of showing love, or their way of having a sense of control over their environment. So, yeah. It can get a bit mixed up for them.

Yeah, it means to very young children.

11. What is “grooming” _

So can you tell me about the term grooming and what that means in relation to this topic? Well, it's a really important point to understand and I think, you know, it's got a bit of bad press, you know, because obviously it isn't often talked about in association with sexual harm or harm. But if you think about it, probably the first date you went on with your boyfriend, we're all, you know, we groom each other all the time. And that idea of going, how do I make you feel comfortable in my presence? How do I make you feel special? How do I kind of, you know, get to know you? So if we think about grooming per se, you know, it literally is that experience of someone kind of putting down their defences so that you let someone else in.

Now, that's really nice when it's a first date and someone brings you some chocolates and flowers or whatever else it might be. But when it's an adult, for example. And what they're doing with a young person is helping them get down their defences. They are creating a sense of trust and, you know, in that relationship and they are trying to get access to that young person and all of those sorts of things. Then you can see how grooming can set the stage for some concerning behaviour. And I've obviously given examples of nice grooming, if you want a better word. But grooming can also be, you know, violent.

Grooming can also be not nice. So, you know, I think in some situations, young people have been around violence or around being kind of forced into situations. And, you know, in a way, someone who's looking to do harm can sometimes check out who are the kids that actually don't shy away or don't go and tell. So I might say, right, let's go and do this naughty thing. Or certainly, as we were talking before, the online stuff, you know, I might send out, and this is what we know happens, they send out millions of messages and there's one or two kids that might ping back. And that idea of once they've done something a little bit naughty, then the person who's doing the harm has kind of gotten in.

And they've worked out that this young person, for whatever reason, whatever vulnerability, hasn't gone and told a grown-up or hasn't put a barrier down. So grooming can also be not. It's not just roses and chocolates. It can also be angry, you know, angry. It can be violence. It can be aggression. Those kinds of things as well. And it can mean that there is a lot of confusion because if it was the first

bit, you know, the niceness, then I might really care about the person who's harming me. And I might not see it as harm. I might be in love with them. You know, I might see that this is a normal part or a quid pro quo of our relationship and not want them to get drunk.

And I might be in trouble. If it's the latter example of the more aggressive or scary grooming, then in fact, I'm too scared to tell. Yeah. Would you add anything to that? Yeah. I think it can be quite a gradual sort of even quite long sort of drawn out process of grooming because children, I mean, not children, adults who want access to children for purposes of sexual abuse actually put quite a bit of time. They can put quite a bit of time and effort into this. And the first part of the process is, as Catherine talked about, I think building trust, not just in the child, but in the whole family.

And this is where we talk about it's not just the child that gets groomed. Often it's the whole family. It's the parents. And it can be somebody who holds a position of respect in the community and everybody looks up to them or not. But the idea of building trust. So that as a big part of, well, no one would ever suspect, even if that child did speak out, chances are they wouldn't be believed. And it does start very innocently with lots of attention potentially and special gifts or special time or special outings. So, I mean, what child wouldn't kind of like that? And over a process of time, then once that trust is built, then other things start happening.

It might be accidental touch, accidental non-sexual touch, then accidental sexual touch. And then, you know, so slowly those boundaries are violated. And because it's so gradual and insidious, the child, especially if they're younger, gets really confused. And well, what was OK? What wasn't OK? How do I make sense of this? And I really like this person because they give me lollies. So it gets really difficult for a child to make sense of, as you can imagine. And that also makes it difficult for things like courts, because, you know, our justice system is based on this idea of the hue and cry. So if something horrible is happening, we're going to go, stop it, run away, stop, you know, we're going to make a big scream, yell, noise and want to get away from it.

And so when you've got situations where people keep going back to granddads or, you know, keep hanging out with the young person that was kind of an elder in the, you know, a youth leader in the church, people go, oh, well, it can't have been that bad because they keep going back there. But this is some of the things that Sarah was talking about, is it's much more complicated than that. Yeah. Yeah. And ultimately, I think one of the goals of the would-be child sex offender is to kind of coerce the child into thinking that they are a willing participant. And as soon as something little happens, it's like, oh, that was OK.

And then maybe something more. Then the message can be, oh, but we did that other thing, you didn't complain about that, you did it too, it's not just me, and we're both in on this, and this is our little secret. Then that again can be really confusing for a child who starts to think, well, I'm doing this too, so, you know, I must be, you know, I must be open and willing to this. And I'm sure stop. I mean, we've covered this, but, you know, I think when we think about an adult with a child, then you've clearly got, you know, someone who may have all their wits about them doing this stuff. When you've got child, you know, child on child or youth on child, you know, there can be lots of degrees of harmful sexual behaviour.

And yeah, I'm just putting that out there because I think that you potentially have, you know, children acting out sexually with other children and one might well be the person who's leading this behaviour. And that doesn't necessarily always mean that it's well thought out. Sometimes it can be an opportunist situation, but, you know, it's still something that's really concerning and needs to be, you know, addressed if that comes to attention. But again, if this person was someone who was a friend or is a bit cool and I want to stay being their friend, then that pull of the social power to go, well, obviously this is what's required for me to be their friend.

Yeah, I can end up complying with behaviour. That when someone says, why'd you do that? It's like, I don't actually know. Or it could be the adolescent or slightly older child that says, oh, this is normal. Yeah, one's doing this. Yeah. What's the issue? And so then if you really look up to that person, you might think, oh, not feel comfortable, but go along with it.

12. Does sexual abuse impact on a child's sexuality

So can a child's sexuality be affected if they've experienced sexual harm? This is often a really big worry of parents, you know, and actually of clients, you know, am I gay, you know, or if I was harmed by a boy, am I going to be gay, or whatever is the scenario, and I think that, you know, certainly, as we were talking about before, because it's a sexualised crime, then my sexual development may be impacted in terms of my fears about my body, and about, you know, what I feel comfortable exploring, what I'm, you know, I suppose, in a way, enacting through my trauma, and that might lead to concerns and questions and behaviours as I'm working this stuff out.

But as a rule, you know, these things don't make someone's sexuality, you know, that's something that may well predate. You know, this, depending on what you, you know, their sense and their comfort in those things is, but it can certainly lead to a lot of questions and wonderings and concerns. So again, for you to have the kind of relationship with your child, that means whatever question you have, whether it's about that stuff, or, you know, what's the cricket scores on Saturday, you know, it's that actually, that message of whatever questions or worries or concerns you have, we can talk about them.

And often what kids will say is, when they've been sexually harmed is, I feel different. I feel different from other kids, and other kids can tell that I'm different. And so, if they feel different, then they might be saying, well, what feels right for me? So, they start trying on different hats, and that can be around sexuality, it can be around gender or all parts of their identity, so that they can work out what feels right. And so, you may have a child who's been sexually harmed who suddenly says, I'm bisexual, or I'm, you know, I'm a demiboy, or all these different terms that we have today.

I don't quite know what that is. And asexual. And so, for them, they'd had an experience of trauma. And so, they, but we're all so 14. And so, it was kind of like, actually, it's kind of okay. Well, it would be anyway. But that idea of having a label for it said, oh, this is what I am. And you could just see it kind of go, oh, you're a very, very, very, very, very, very, very, this is what I am. And again, that might be what she ends up being forever. But it might also just be a space where they can catch themselves on to go, I don't have to think about that boy stuff for a bit because I'm ace.

13. What is meant by leaning in_

Thank you. Thank you.