

Speaking to parents about your SEXUAL ABUSE EXPERIENCE



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

“When I told my mother about my abuse experience that took place when I was seven, she resorted to blaming me instead of confronting the abuser. She hit me more often because I had started bedwetting again and failed to realise the correlation,” says Tabassum Sifat*.

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In high school, I discovered the necessity of boundaries—a lesson learnt not from a textbook but from an unsettling experience. Like many teenagers, I went to coaching classes, sat at the front of the class, and was eager to absorb the wisdom imparted by my teachers. Yet, one teacher’s gaze lingered too long, his hands found excuses to graze mine, and his jokes veered into uncomfortable territory. I was paralysed by guilt, convinced that I might somehow be at fault. Rather than confide in my parents, I withdrew from the coaching altogether, unnerved by his insistence that I attend extra sessions alone—a proposition that sent chills down my spine.

It took a year, perhaps two before I mustered the courage to tell my mother, thanks to the support of friends who had urged me to speak out. When I finally did, her first question was why hadn’t I told her sooner. I found myself struggling to articulate the knot of guilt that had lodged itself in my chest, a burden so heavy that the fear of blame seemed easier to bear than the truth.

According to a survey done in 2022 in collaboration with INCIDIN Bangladesh and the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), about 55 percent of the total surveyed children in Bangladesh reported experiencing sexual violence at home, 52.7 percent of the respondents claimed they were unaware of being sexually harassed at the time, while 61.7 percent indicated they did not disclose it to anybody out of embarrassment and fear of their parents and guardians. The fact that these young victims, who bear no responsibility for the abuse, must carry the burden in silence is deeply troubling. It is the responsibility of the parents to give their kids an environment of safety where they can talk about anything without the fear of judgement.

When Jyoti Ahsan*, a student at Dhaka University, confided in her mother about an incident of sexual harassment, she found herself in a situation that only deepened the wound. She says, “My mother was enraged; when I told her about the complaint, she treated me terribly. She didn’t even talk to me properly and said some very hurtful things. At such a bad time when I needed my mother the most, I did not get her support at all. Instead, her words and behaviour made me depressed. I felt so alone.”

When children muster the courage to confront abuse, they often find that their parents fall short of providing the safety and reassurance they so desperately need. This may also create a negative precedent for other victims.

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place when I was seven, she resorted to blaming me instead of confronting the abuser. She hit me more often because I had started bedwetting again and failed to realise the correlation,” says Tabassum Sifat*, a former student of Dhaka University.

Not only was she being physically abused, but she was forced to attend family gatherings regardless of the abuser’s presence ever since she was a child because her mother didn’t want to let her father or other relatives know.

She spoke in detail about her experience and how her parents responded to her complaints. “When I finally told my father back in college, he didn’t do anything and focused on blaming my mother, and physically abused my siblings and I,” added Tabassum.

It is extremely important for parents to respond in a healthy manner as the effects of sexual abuse manifest through a wide range of symptoms, including fear, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and various externalising and internalising behaviour problems, such as inappropriate sexual behaviours.

Sumaiya Jahan*, 16, currently a student, candidly spoke about her experience, “I talked to my mother about it, and I remember completely breaking down into tears while telling her. If I want to describe her reaction, she was beyond shocked and could not handle her tears. She hugged me and let me finish what I had to say and kept telling me it was alright and nothing happened. I think she was unprepared for this and did not know how to respond.”

Parents are rarely prepared for such sensitive situations and often respond in a way that makes processing the emotions for the victim an even more arduous task. Sumaiya further added that her mother informed her father, but he did not talk to her about it in depth.

Speaking to the respondents, a pattern was observed: parents often fail to respond in a way that could help the child. When a child discloses sexual abuse, some parents may react negatively due to shock, denial, and overwhelming guilt, which can lead to defensive or dismissive responses.

Cultural stigma and fear of social or legal consequences may also drive parents to downplay the abuse, fearing judgement or ostracism. Additionally, some lack the emotional tools to process such traumatic news, resulting in confusion or anger. If the abuser is a trusted figure, parents may struggle with disbelief, further complicating their response.

Mostak Ahamed Imran, lecturer and child play therapist at BRAC University’s Institute of Educational Development, says, “Parents must first focus on their emotional intelligence because, in most cases, they are unsure of how to respond in these sensitive circumstances. To communicate effectively, they must understand the developmental stage of their children. Speaking with a child will differ from speaking with a teenager, whose maturity must be taken into account. In order to make their kids feel safe and secure, parents must tell their children that they will be supported. To help their children feel more comfortable talking about their experiences, parents could speak about their own experiences.”

Mostak Ahamed discusses adopting a more proactive stance to shield kids from sexual abuse and harassment. He counsels parents to foster a trusting atmosphere in their homes. If children feel that their parents do not trust them, they might not speak about their experiences with them.

Giving children privacy and discussing sensitive situations can help them create healthy boundaries, which can prevent sexual abuse and harassment. He states, “The child is never to blame; it is not their fault, so parents have the task of not making their children feel guilty. If they fail, counselling can help. The victims can also benefit from support groups.”

The emotional well-being of children who have experienced sexual abuse hinges significantly on their parents’ responses. Parental reactions often exacerbate the trauma, leaving children lonely and unsupported. To prevent this, parents must make their homes a place of trust and safety. Effective communication, reassurance, and professional support are essential to helping victims process their experiences in a healthy way and move towards healing.