

HELPING SEXUALLY ABUSED KIDS

By Dan Allender

Allegations of sexual and physical abuse are common in our culture. As a youth worker, it's a daunting challenge to intervene in an abusive situation. And false accusations of abuse have ruined reputations and destroyed lives. So how do you move with courage when you suspect one of your teenagers is a victim? A few common-sense guidelines:

1 Address the data, not the cause. Look for the following behaviors, common in kids who've been abused:

- Recent and radical changes in personality;
- Binge drinking, drug abuse, and promiscuity;
- A significant drop in grades or a shift in friendships; and
- Self-destructive behavior.

Once you've collected the data, avoid directly asking the young person what's going on: "Have you been sexually abused?" If a young person believes you want to hear a particular "cause" underlying their problem, it's possible she'll confirm your suggestion. It's crucial to first paint her a picture of the negative changes you've observed.


For example, Mark said: "Sharice, you know I'm concerned. Three months ago, I began to notice small changes in you. You were late to youth group. You seemed to care less about your appearance. Then you grew more and more depressed, moody, and closed to interaction. There's no way I can 'get' you to talk, but I'm not willing to drop this issue until you slam the door in my face."

2 Focus on your relationship, not the young person's reluctance to talk. Teenagers who are afraid to talk are unlikely to open up simply because you want them to. They expect you to ask, so they've already planned a "defense." It's better to take a different route—talk about the status of your relationship. Mark said: "Sharice, I've known you

fairly well for five years. We've had good times and bad times. Remember when I stupidly embarrassed you at that campfire service? I do. I know I've meant something to you during a few hard times as well. But I wonder if our relationship is strong enough for you to let me be part of your life? If it's not, then I'd like to build a better relationship."

3 Invite the young person to talk about her change in behavior, not the cause. If she's open enough to talk about your relationship, then you've set a context to ask her to talk about her behavior change. When you focus on irrefutable data, you're challenging her to admit something is wrong—radical changes mean something is going on. Once you both acknowledge the data, ask when the "change" began—focus on the timeline.

Mark asked: "Sharice, do you agree there's been a radical change in your life in the last three months?" Sharice: "Yeah, but I don't know why." Mark: "From what we talked about, you know me to be a trustworthy friend, even though I know I've failed you before. Do you want to talk about what occurred three months or so ago?" Sharice: "Yeah, but a lot has happened that I can't tell you about—I could get into a lot of trouble."

4 Offer the protection and hope your church has promised to abuse victims. I would never minister in a church that didn't have a written policy on dealing with abuse—sexual, emotional, physical, or spousal. The policy ought to cover how to handle reporting to the church leadership, the civil authorities, and relevant helping agencies. How will the claim be investigated? How will the person be protected and honored during the period of exposure? What will be the safety net to ascertain truthfulness or possible false accusation? These are crucial issues. Mark told Sharice: "I know you feel caught and hopeless. Let me tell you what'll happen if you tell me about a significant problem." 

Sharice's face was heavy with sorrow. She stared at the floor when she spoke, and her words trailed off into oblivion at the end of each sentence. Her eyes invited no entry into her soul. She was normally a happy kid, and the changes in her behavior left Mark, her youth leader, confused and deeply concerned.

He called her at home, but she was curt and quiet. When she agreed to meet him for breakfast, he knew it was probably his only shot to help her. She was withdrawing more and more from her friends. And she missed most youth group activities. Something awful was turning a bright, engaging, friendly young girl into a moody, irritable, withdrawn teenager. Mark wondered if Sharice's erratic behavior was due to normal adolescent ups and downs. Or was it something more sinister—like sexual abuse?

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