

SEXUAL ABUSE

NO CHILD'S SECRET SHOULD BE A DARK ONE...

BY CHANDREA SEREBRO



THE GROOMING PROCESS

Every time I go out, it takes the better part of an hour to get ready, between my toilette, my hair and makeup and finding something to wear. It's what we all do. We care for our appearance, we prepare ourselves to look our best. The dictionary describes it as 'grooming', but ever since I met with Jacqui Chesler, social worker at the Chevrah Kadisha Community Social Services (CSS), the term has taken on an altogether more sinister meaning.

In the context of abuse-services, the *grooming* process is the initial phase in which a sexual predator snags **his** victim and readies them, as well as himself, for the abuse that is to follow. Through this grooming process, a relationship of trust, admiration, and even love is formed. "Most **sexual abusers** are either family members or someone known or close to the family. Some perpetrators will place

themselves in occupations where they have regular access to children, identifying those they perceive to be more vulnerable. They prey on the child's weaknesses, diminishing their inhibitions, 'grooming' them for what is to come. With a well-honed ability to identify and exploit children's vulnerabilities, the perpetrator begins by offering them friendship, love and trust, the relationship starting out as an innocuous one, him gaining the trust and confidence of both the child and the family. Once the relationship deepens, they start playing with the child's emotions, breaking down their defences."

The emotional bond established through grooming leads to physical contact, says Chesler – seemingly innocent **hugs**, tickling or 'accidental' touching. It becomes a **game** of emotional seduction, with the child being made to believe they are

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special, and the perpetrator then begins exerting his influence over the child by way of threats, guilt, blame, and blackmail. He introduces the idea that it is their **secret**, a special bond only they share, further striking at their existing vulnerabilities. "Predators use the grooming process to break down a child's defences and increase the child's acceptance of touch, desensitising the child, weakening their inhibitions, which ultimately leads to more overt actions, the predator's objective from the start."

PHOTOGRAPH: BIGSTOCKPHOTO

SIGNS OF ABUSE

Just because a child shows some of these signs, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are being sexually abused, stresses Chesler. Know your child, be aware, and rather be safe than sorry.

- Age-inappropriate sexual knowledge or explicit drawings
- Seductive behaviour
- Personality changes, such as a change in eating habits
- Watch for symptoms such as withdrawal, depression, suicidal thoughts, unusual awareness of body-image
- Reluctance to go to/leave school, withdrawal from usual social activities
- Unexplained injuries
- Double-dressing (layering of clothing)
- Changes in concentration patterns
- Hyper-vigilance
- Onset of bedwetting or soiling once toilet trained
- Recurrent urinary tract infections

'His' masculine pronouns are used in describing the perpetrator here, because the majority of sexual offenders are male. This in no way, however, implies that women are never guilty of sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse as love? Ever wonder how a parent can hurt their own child? Can't comprehend how people who devote their days to looking after children could ever sexually abuse them? As scary as that sounds, it's the harsh reality. That and the findings that 85% of abusers are known to the family, someone trusted and even loved by them, admired, and looked up to by the child.

Hugs. What every mother looks forward to every day as the best part of her day. That warm and sometimes squishy embrace from your child, which in one arm's length tells you how loved you are, and tells the child how safe you make him feel. No child should stop hugging their mom. No mom should fail to notice that their once warm and loving, carefree young child has stopped hugging her.

Games. Like Ludo or Snakes and Ladders, or even the cool ones that your older sister lets you play on her iPad once in a blue moon. Chess, even though it takes forever and you find it boring, which you would never dare tell your dad because he loves the thinking behind it. No child should be part of the game that is played to gain their trust and love, a game that becomes a game of 'don't tell...or else'.

Secrets. Like the fairy who lives at the bottom of the garden and who dances for you in the sunlight when no one else is around. Or the four-leaf clover you found and keep with you wherever you go. Or the party that you are throwing for your sister that is a surprise, except to granny, grandpa and your two friends who live next door whom you told. No child's secret should be dark or scary. >



IT HAPPENS TO US TOO...

The first sentiment that goes through most of our minds when the dark words 'sexual abuse' come up is that it doesn't happen. Not in our community. And this may even be understandable, because it is a topic too horrific for most of us to bear. Sadly, unless G-d forbid, we are directly or even indirectly affected by it, we aid the silence that blankets all of these issues in our community, a silence that allows it to continue unabated.

Bronya Shaffer, noted lecturer and columnist for Chabad.org and Askmoses.com, known internationally for her involvement in spreading awareness on this and other family issues, had the proverbial can of worms opened for her, and has since been an advocate for education and awareness in the Jewish community. "I'm not a professional, a psychologist or a therapist. And I have to confess that I was one of those people who, for most of my adult life, went around saying that this, and so many other things, is just not a part of the Jewish community. Until I started teaching kallahs (brides). Then for the first time a woman I was teaching disclosed to me her experience of years-long molestation. A tiny crack formed in the way that I saw the world, even though my immediate thought was to wonder how something as horrific as this could be true. But soon another woman told

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me her story, and then another, and this turned out to be my introduction to sexual abuse. My eyes had been opened to the reality. I was shocked."

Rabbi Abraham Twerski, says Shaffer, talked about how for many decades there were so many issues that Jews considered issues that were 'out there', which didn't happen to them. Drug abuse, alcoholism, domestic violence, child molestation. "We as a broad community always believed that things like this do not happen in the Jewish community. It doesn't form part of our value system, so it doesn't exist." But, she says, those whose lives are affected by it know that it does. The frum alcoholic always thought he was the only one, because we don't 'do' excess. The

WHAT IS SEXUAL ABUSE?

Many people think that sexual abuse means the literal interpretation of this term (alone) – but any sexually explicit behaviour is too, says Dvori Blumenau, educational psychologist. Showing a child nude or explicit pictures, spying on them dressing, touching and fondling – all constitute sexual abuse, because one is exposing the child to things their brains are not yet ready to process, which cause life-long repercussions.

battered wife never told anybody what she was going through, ashamed because this doesn't happen to Jewish families. And it is the same for sexual abuse. "Since it is never talked about anywhere or by anyone, there is no vocabulary for it, no way the victims can express it. And, out of ignorance, people in turn respond with disbelief or blame when someone does try and come forward." But it certainly does happen.

"It is lucky that I recognised then that what these women had confided in me was true. The things they were telling me could never be made up, but I realised then that it was all too common for them to feel that they could not tell anyone because no one would believe them. Or, that having told someone, after many years of silence, even their own mothers about their molesting uncles, they were simply not believed. And I knew then that this was the very reason that a shift in mindset was needed. I wanted to spread awareness, educate people... not the world, but just starting with my community."

So Shaffer started a one-woman crusade to change her community, beginning with an invitation to a world expert on the subject, Dr David Pelcovitz, to speak to the principals of the Crown Heights community over tea at her dining room table. "In my personal capacity, I knew it

was important to dispel the nervousness of the leadership who worried about talking about such issues in public. The start of a dialogue was all that was needed. Dr Pelcovitz met with every principal of every institution in Crown Heights, and every rov. In a short time the community was holding workshops and talks and campaigns on the matter, and the ball gathered momentum from there. Soon, virtually the entire community came round.

"Infinitely worse than child molestation is for the child to watch it being covered up after they have broken the silence, denying the child credibility or recourse against the molester. It is a complete lack of trust," which is why, she says, we all need to be in the know about how to respond, as parents, teachers, professionals and relatives, and particularly as community leaders. "Three out of four children who have been molested, with proper treatment and support, go on to

live happy, normal, wholesome lives. So there is optimism, but this is fully dependant on the environment we create. It cannot happen in an environment punctuated with the three S's – shame, secrecy and silence. That is what we have to do away with."

And since Shaffer visited, the lid has been taken off the topic here in SA – she spoke

at a parenting session at Sinai Indaba, at five parent group workshops on protection/detection/response, with the social workers at the Chev, kallah teachers, rabbonim, privately with the Chief Rabbi and on ChaiFM. So, Johannesburg joins the ranks of those communities where sexual abuse is no longer unmentionable. This means, of course, that lives will literally be saved!

JUST ONE SAD STORY...

Lisa* was a well-adjusted, happy eight-year-old girl who came from a good home in Pretoria. She was a successful student, had many friends, was well-liked and always helped wherever she could. One ordinary day, she went to school and stayed late to help her teacher. The Lisa that everyone knew never came home again...

“HER MOTHER NOTICED IMMEDIATELY THAT SOMETHING WAS WRONG, AND TRIED TALKING TO HER, BUT LISA REFUSED TO OPEN UP.”

Helping her teacher, who stepped out of the classroom, Lisa was asked by her teacher's husband to help him move some >

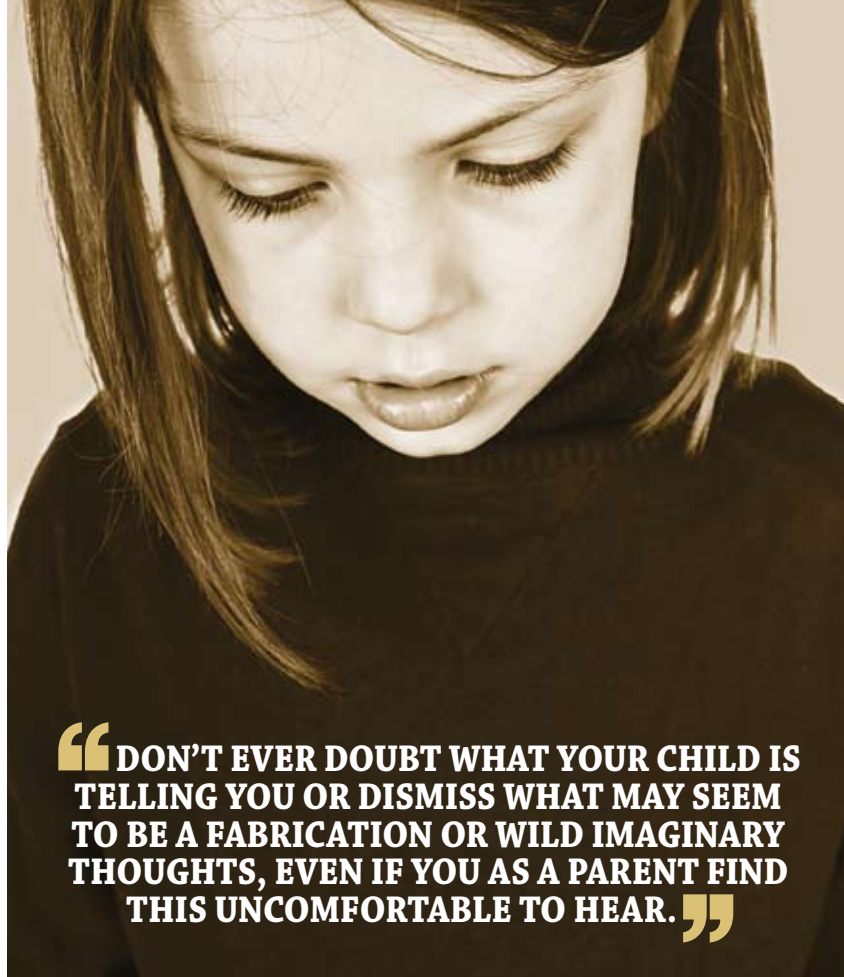
boxes in the adjacent storeroom. Once there, he pulled a knife on her and threatened her father's life if she ever told anyone about what was to follow...

Her mother noticed immediately that something was wrong, and tried talking to her, but Lisa refused to open up. From that day forward, she became a different person. Her school work suffered, she rebelled and became difficult to manage. Every meaningful relationship in her life began to sever, and her life went downhill in every way. At 18, with borderline personality disorder, she was in an out of mental hospitals, and the next 12 years of her life went by in a haze. Until, at 30 years old, she walked into the offices of a therapist who specialises in counselling victims of sexual abuse. This was the turning point in her life.

What is going on in the brain?

People tend to think that something that happens in the past belongs in the past... and that people should get over it and move on, including experiences of sexual abuse. Why revisit sad or tragic experiences? Why dwell on negativity? But what is going on in the brain? Dvori Blumenau, educational psychologist specialising in child abuse and trauma, explains:

"The brain is sculpted by our experiences. Already from the time the baby is in the uterus, the brainstem (responsible for sensations and survival) starts to develop. Later, during early and middle childhood, the limbic system (responsible for processing and retaining emotional experiences) develops. Both these parts of the brain are viewed as primitive and unsophisticated. During adolescence, the cortex (the outer part of the brain, which is responsible for rational thinking, reflecting, and problem-solving) develops. Our experiences shape all three parts. With every new experience, new brain cells (neurons) connect to one another, creating a 'pathway'. The strength of this pathway depends on the number of repetitions of a particular experience. However, trauma, which is a hugely impactful experience, has the power to create a strong pathway with



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no need for repetitions. When trauma takes place during childhood, where there is no cortex to allow for reflecting on the experience, those maladaptive pathways resulting from trauma get locked into the primitive parts of the brain, but they are very much alive, causing ongoing havoc to the victim. It is only when the trauma is dealt with, that

new, adaptive connections can be created, allowing for integration of the incident into the larger circuits of the brain. This could give the child/adult a healthier perspective regarding the experience, and hopefully some healing, as in Lisa's case.”

** Name has been changed*

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The family environment is the primary learning space for the child, and that puts the onus on the parents and caregivers to ensure that children are taught age-appropriately across the spectrum of development particularly when it comes to relationships and the birds and the bees. It is vital that children know exactly what is appropriate in any given environment, and are equipped with the tools to be aware of those around them as well as personal boundaries – and that if it feels uncomfortable when someone crosses these boundaries it is okay to speak out. Talk to your child; make sure they can talk to you. Be actively involved in their lives; know who their friends are and where they spend their leisure time. Above all, don't ever doubt what your child is telling you or dismiss what may seem to be a fabrication or wild imaginary thoughts, even if you as a parent find this uncomfortable to hear.

Confidential assistance is available from:

Chevrah Kadisha Community Social Services 011 532-9616

24-hour helpline 011 321-0505

Childline 0800 055555 