

“Why Didn’t You Tell ?”

By: Kathy Downes, Bright Tomorrows Executive Director

I am often asked by community members or individuals coming to Bright Tomorrows questions about children who are repeatedly sexually abused or do not tell about their abuse until much later. People wonder and ask: “Why didn’t you tell? Why didn’t you scream? Why didn’t you stay away?”

These questions come from the misunderstandings and misinformation about sexual abuse that are prevalent in our society. Sexual abuse is almost always perpetrated by someone the child and family knows and trusts. The sexual offender works hard to gain the child and family’s trust, giving special attention and building a strong relationship.

This relationship is a manipulation of the child and the family. As the offender introduces sexual contact or images the child victim is not even aware that there has been a change or that the abuse might be wrong. The child “knows, loves and trusts” this individual. If the child did actually say something, their family would, as expected, discount or disbelieve because they could not imagine such behavior from this family friend/relative.

In child sexual abuse, this behavior by the sexual offender is referred to as “the grooming process.” I often use the metaphor of a frog in boiling water to explain this process.

If a frog was thrown into boiling water it would have the instinct to protect itself and jump out or away from the threat. If that same frog was placed in lukewarm water and the temperature was slowly turned up, its instinct to jump away from the threat is removed because it slowly adjusts to the change in temperature and does not perceive the danger.

It is important that society understand these dynamics of child sexual abuse and not ask child victims of abuse such difficult and damaging questions. These questions cause abuse victims to blame themselves and struggle placing responsibility where it belongs; which is on the person who committed the selfish act.

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