

BEYOND SILENCE

Hineni – We Are Here – Our Moral Imperative to Respond to Sexual Abuse

by Rabbi Pam Frydman, founding (and former) rabbi of Or Shalom Jewish Community in San Francisco and International Co-Chair of Rabbis for Women of the Wall; and
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What is sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse includes contact, ranging from fondling to intercourse, between an adult and a child of any age or a teenager through age eighteen. Child sexual abuse may also include non-touching acts. The sexual abuse of a child or teenager by an adult is against the law. California Penal code 11165.1 provides relevant definitions.

According to the American Medical Association, child sexual abuse is a **silent epidemic** that is so widespread that each of us probably knows someone who has been abused. **One in four adult women and one in six adult men report having been sexually abused before age eighteen.** These realities are compounded by the fact that most victims do not report their abuse.

What are the effects of child sexual abuse?

Children depend upon adults to help them master the skills of living. Parents, other family members, friends, teachers, clergy, camp counselors and coaches are role models for children. A child's psychological wellbeing depends upon the child's ability to trust their role models to act in their best interest. By trusting such adults, children learn to trust themselves and others. When an adult sexually abuses a child, the child may not experience it as an assault, at least not at first. The child might even find the sexual contact to be interesting or enjoyable.

Eventually, however, children usually recognize that sexual activity with adults is an abuse of their bodies and their wills. A child may feel both violated and betrayed. Child sexual abuse often leads to difficulty later in life, particularly in the forming of meaningful relationships.

An adult who sexually abuses a child is caught in an addictive pattern that brings it own suffering and undermines the adult's enjoyment of normal life. Helping an abuser to break the cycle of abuse helps to protect victims and potential victims from future abuse.

Jewish law forbids child sexual abuse.

The Torah says, "None of you shall come near anyone of his own flesh to uncover nakedness: I am the L-o-r-d." (*Leviticus 18:6*)

Rashi says that anyone who teaches Torah to someone else's child is regarded as if s/he had begotten the child. (*Sanhedrin 19b*)

Taken together, these core Jewish teachings and values forbid child sexual abuse by anyone who is in a teaching, guiding, leading, coaching or other educating role with a child.

What can we do to protect our children?

Approximately ninety percent of the time, the child knows and trusts the person who commits the abuse. Some are family members while others are trusted adults in schools, youth groups, sports teams, religious organizations, and other settings where children live and play.

Help prevent child sexual abuse: Find out what precautions are taken in your child's school, before- and after-care program, sports program, day camp, sleep away camp and other programs during which you are not directly supervising your child. Ask the officials of these programs to increase their awareness of how to prevent and report child abuse.

The Greater Bay Area Child Abuse Prevention Council Coalition has said "Enough Child Sexual Abuse."

Learn about the Bay Area campaign at www.bayareapreventchildabuse.org and the national campaign at <http://www.enoughabuse.org> or contact them at 1-888-904-2272.

Reporting is everyone's responsibility. Call Child Help at 1-800-4-A-CHILD to contact your local Child Protective Services Hotline.

What is our moral imperative?

The Torah says *lo ta'amod al dam reyecha*. Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor. (*Leviticus 19:16*) Maimonides says that anyone who can save another person's life and does not do so is guilty of standing idly by the blood of our neighbor. (*Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Love Your Neighbor and Yourself*)

Let's say there are three people, Person A, Person B and Person C. The Talmud says that if Person A is attacking Person B, then Person C is obligated to stop Person A. This is called the law of the pursuer. If we know that a child is being abused, we are obligated to take action to help prevent further abuse. (*Mishna Sanhedrin 8:7 and Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 73a*). **This teaching applies to all types of abuse, including the abuse of children, teens, adults and the elderly.**

Jewish law forbids defaming another person even if the defamation is completely true. There is one exception, however, and that is when an abuser is putting an abused person in danger. When an abuser puts an abused person, or a potentially abused person, in danger, whether it is in danger of being defrauded or in danger of rape, child molestation or mortal harm, Jewish law requires that we take action to stop the abuse.

Local Contacts for Support Related to Sexual Abuse

Parents Place, a Division of Jewish Family & Children's Services: 415-359-2443

Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley: 408-357-7425

Jewish Family & Children's Services of the East Bay: Rikki Sudikoff 510-704-7475

Bay Area Jewish Healing Center: Rabbi Eric Weiss 415-750-4199

Shalom Bayit: Lisa Kahn Tietz 510-451-SAFE

Greater Bay Area Child Abuse Prevention Council Coalition: 1-888-904-2272

Contact your local Child Protective Services Hotline by calling Child Help: 1-800-4-A-CHILD

Or RAINN, the National Sexual Abuse Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE