

Trusting Your Gut, Keeping Children Safe

In this time of #SavetheChildren and frightening news stories about sex trafficking, keep at the forefront of our minds that most people who sexually abuse and exploit children are family members or loved and trusted people known to the victim and family. Over the years, I have sat with countless parents and grandparents stunned by the betrayal of a loved one, families shattered, and relationships fragmented in ways that will never be the same. Over and over I hear a familiar refrain, "I just can't believe he would do this", "There was nothing, no signs", and "But my child really liked him". After participating in our Protective Caregiver or SAFE Families group, this refrain often takes on another theme. "Now that I think about it there were times I felt something was off." "I see now that my child had some of the symptoms of abuse but I discounted it as typical teenage stuff." Some parents offer more specific accounts, "I just had a gut feeling one night when my husband was on the computer and shut it down quickly. I got on later and images of teen pornography popped up on the screen, but I explained it away. I didn't want to believe that my husband would look at that." These are the lingering thoughts of parents whose child was sexually abused "right in my own house."

In his books "Protecting the Gift" and "The Gift of Fear" Gavin DeBecker speaks of the human tendency to explain away our intuition. He notes that no other species does this. In the animal world, intuition is vital for survival. In human nature, intuition is equally vital in parenting and protecting children. Sleep deprived, we hear the thud of our toddler in the next room and intuitively we awaken and jump out of bed to check on them. That same intuition allows us to sleep soundly beside a snoring spouse or the known creaks of the house. It filters- this is dangerous, this is not. Our intuition learns and adapts to the feedback we provide, and our children learn from our feedback too.

"Hug grandpa." "Give Mrs. Jones a kiss." Statements we might say when a child recoils and reacts shyly to a relative or neighbor. DeBecker explains, this teaches a child to ignore their intuition in favor of pleasing another person. This is a dangerous message. We would never actually say to our child that it is better to be uncomfortable or harmed than to offend someone, but that is the message we send. Though children have some degree of intuition, they don't have the same intuitive abilities as adults, especially mothers. Anyone who has watched their baby pick up literally anything and put it in their mouth, or their 8-year old careen toward the road to retrieve a ball not looking both ways, knows that child intuition needs adult intervention! A child relies on our parent intuition as their defense.

Offenders on the other hand, rely on our trust as their defense. Denial pumps the breaks on our intuition and says hold on, don't get carried away and overreact, there must be a rational explanation for this concern. Denial seeks to undermine our intuition, and we often mislabel it as trust. A parent has an intuition that something isn't right and then attempts to deny it to align with what they believe about their loved one. "Uncle Brian could never do that." Denial serves to protect parents from evidence of an unfathomable reality. Gavin DeBecker explains that we can recognize denial by telltale signs: rationalization, justification, minimization, excuse-making, and refusal. When we respond to our intuition with one of these tactics we should be on high alert. He recommends asking "What am I choosing not to see here?"

As an adult I told my father about being sexually abused by someone close to him. He reacted with the common denial tactics that parents experience. "But you liked him so much and you wanted to spend time with him." "You weren't scared of him." "I thought he just related more to children because of his interests." "He had a childlike spirit and just seemed more comfortable with children than other adults." All of these things were true and served as rationalizations my father told himself about why

this adult spent so much time with me. They were also all signs of an offender. Over time my dad said to me, "It did seem weird at first, how close you were to him, like I just had a feeling there was something not right." He remembered feeling a bit sorry for him due to his social awkwardness. Empathy and compassion are other ways offenders manipulate well-meaning parents out of trusting their gut.

I don't blame my dad for the abuse, I know he blames himself and it is still a painful thing for him to talk about. He is a loving father and we have always had a close bond. I share this story to hopefully prevent another parent from carrying the weight of self-blame and hindsight that he and so many other parents carry. Parents, pay attention to your intuition, and then act on it rather than against it. Educate yourselves on grooming dynamics that offenders use, to understand that offenders groom not just children, but parents too. If you have a friend who is a parent that has experienced this in their family, support them and listen to their experiences. Identifying offenders and holding them accountable is vital. When you are looking to do so, pay the most attention to adults and other children closest to your child: family members, friends, those tasked with educating and coaching our children. Also attend to your intuition regarding other children and teens around your child, (who account for 30% of sexual abuse on other children). Reach out to your local Children's Advocacy Center, such as Julie Valentine Center, National Resources, such as Zero Abuse Project, for recommendations on ways to talk to your child about sexual abuse and have these conversations with them at different developmental stages in childhood. The majority of offenders are close to the child's family or in the child's home, not Hollywood.

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