

JILL S. LEVENSON & JOHN W. MORIN

CONNECTIONS WORKBOOK



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CONNECTIONS WORKBOOK

Acknowledgments

The *Connections Workbook* is the culmination of years of shaping our work with sexually abusive families into a structured format. As we watched families struggle to change, so did our ideas, theories, and practices. Working daily with the complexities of sexual deviance rarely has brought us to firm conclusions but has always expanded our ways of thinking about the dynamics of sexual violence within families. In this, the first Sage edition of the *Connections Workbook*, we have added a significant amount of new material to the version we self-published several years ago.

This workbook has been inspired by the courage it takes families to survive the trauma of child sexual abuse. It would not have been possible without the contributions of the men, women, and children we've worked with, who bravely faced their problems and shared with us their stories, their pain, their fears, and their hopes. Of course, all names and identifying information have been changed to protect the confidentiality of our clients.

Special thanks to Cory Jewell and Steve Jensen for allowing us to borrow the "journey" created by their mothers in treatment and for their review, support, and encouragement of this project. Thanks also to Cindy Lawlor for her review, suggestions, and reminders about the victim's point of view. We have watched Denise Hunter, our associate, make *Connections* come alive as she has empowered clients to make profound and sometimes unexpected changes in the interests of family healing and child safety. We thank David Wood for believing in our work and encouraging us to pursue professional publication, Terry Hendrix for helping to make it happen, and Nancy Hale for her support as our editor.

We hope the *Connections* program makes a difference for victims of sexual assault, who need their families to come to their rescue.

This project is dedicated to Stephanie, Merissa, Rachel, Chloe, and Adam, who remind us every day how precious childhood truly is.

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CHAPTER 1

Common Feelings of Parents and Partners

Welcome to the *Connections* program. We're glad you're here, but let's be honest: You're probably not. Most people start out at *Connections* wishing they could be anywhere else. That's only natural. They don't know what to expect, and they're afraid they might be misunderstood or judged. They know they will be expected to talk about things that are deeply disturbing, and that may be the last thing they want to do. Most of all, they just wish the sexual abuse that brought them here had never happened.

If you're like many nonoffending parents, you have probably suffered in silence since you found out about the sexual abuse. You may feel as though you have no one to talk to, and you may be convinced that no one can understand how you feel. And you may be right! People who have never experienced sexual abuse in their families have no idea how devastating it can be.

You may feel that you don't need to be involved in this program—after all, it was someone else who committed the abuse. You were probably asked to come here by your social worker, the court, or by your partner. If this program is part of a court order, you may feel that you are being punished. But the *Connections* program is not punishment. It is an opportunity for you to learn more about sexual abuse, your child, your partner, yourself, and about creating a safe home for your family.

You might notice that in this book the pronoun *he* is used to refer to sexual abusers, and *she* is used to refer to you, the nonoffending parent. Although female child abusers do exist (and possibly are more common than we think), the majority of abusers referred to the authorities are men, and the overwhelming majority of individuals referred to programs like *Connections* are women. Likewise, the pronoun *she* is usually used in this book to refer to the

victim, although boys are also victimized by sexual abuse in the home. Please forgive these simplifications we've made for the sake of readability.

What Is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse includes any sexual touching, fondling, oral-genital contact, or rape of a child by an adult. For an adult to expose their genitals in a sexual way or to "peep" at an undressed child in a sexual way is also abuse. For an adult to talk sexually to a child may constitute abuse if the adult is using the child for his own sexual arousal. *Any* kind of sexual activity between an adult and a child under 18 is child abuse. A child may be abused by a parent, relative caretaker, older child, trusted adult friend, teacher, babysitter, youth leader, neighbor, or stranger.

Child sexual abuse is never the child's fault. Even when a child acts in a way that seems sexually provocative to an adult, it is always the adult's responsibility to set limits and teach right from wrong. Even so-called "consensual" sexual activity involving children is abuse. We say "so-called" because the truth is that children (even teenagers) cannot consent to sex, because they do not truly understand the implications or consequences of their decisions. You cannot consent to something you do not fully understand.

Child sexual abuse is not only about sex. Sexual abuse is about taking advantage of a child's innocence, trust, and desire to please. The abuse is not simply in the sexual activity but in the *betrayal*: The more powerful adult exploits the child's trust for his own selfish, hurtful purpose. It is this betrayal of trust that is often most damaging to child victims.

Child sexual abuse ranges from unwanted kissing, exposure, peeping, touching, or fondling to oral sex, penetration, or sodomy. Although some of these behaviors seem worse than others, it is important to remember that to the child, abuse is abuse. You might say, "at least she wasn't penetrated," or "it was only fondling," or "he only touched her breast." It is adults who think of sex as related primarily to intercourse, that kissing or fondling is not "sex." To the child, the real abuse is not the physical touching but *what it means*. It is the manipulation and deceit, the stealing of innocence, the betrayal of the soul that is most damaging.

You will learn later about the many ways in which sexual abuse can change a child's life and leave long-lasting emotional damage.

Why Should I Learn About Child Sexual Abuse?

Because your child needs you to. Children need adults to understand their feelings, to respond to them when they are hurting, and to keep them safe from harm. If your child has been sexually abused, that child needs you to

understand how the abuse has affected his or her life. Your willingness to educate yourself about sexual abuse is a gift to your child—and an essential part of your child's healing.

Your child needs you to understand how to keep him or her safe. You might believe that your partner will never abuse again. You hope, of course, that he won't. But if you rule out the possibility that it could happen, you are actually increasing the risk for your child. If you don't believe abuse could happen, you won't take precautions to prevent it from happening. If you are living with (or plan to live with) a sexual abuser, your commitment to understanding and minimizing the risk in your home is crucial for your child's safety.

My Child Was Sexually Abused by My Partner

When you found out that your partner was being accused of sexually abusing your child, your life changed forever. Most likely, a social worker or police officer knocked on your door, and suddenly everything in your world was turned upside down. The disclosure of sexual abuse creates a crisis of confusion, fear, and overwhelming pain.

At first, you were probably in shock. You couldn't believe what was happening. The allegation was probably totally unexpected. You might have thought at first that your child was mistaken or misunderstood or that the social workers or police had blown things out of proportion. This is a common and understandable reaction. We all react to unexpected happenings with disbelief, especially when they are so painful. Many women report going through the first days or weeks following the disclosure in a daze.

Then, before you even had a chance to get over the initial shock, you may have had more shocks to deal with. If your partner was arrested, you may have had to locate a lawyer, borrow money for bail, or even go to court. These experiences are often humiliating and intimidating. Maybe your children were removed from your home by the state and put into emergency foster care.

Suddenly, everything that was important to you was gone! And no one seemed to be explaining anything to you. Some people seemed to be blaming you. You may have felt that you were being asked to make life-changing decisions without having a chance to think about them. For instance, a social worker might have made you feel you had to choose immediately between your husband and your children or face dire consequences. You might have felt that you were being forced to abandon your husband. You didn't understand your rights. You had no time to plan for the future. Mostly, you were bewildered and terribly hurt.

Later, you probably found that you were extremely angry at your partner. Even if you have decided to stay together and try to work things out, you may find that you continue to be resentful toward him. You may wonder if you can

ever trust him again. You might feel that you are trapped in an unhappy marriage and wonder if you can ever rebuild it. Most couples find that even when they are committed to staying together and working through their problems, at times it seems impossible. The truth is that a sacred trust was betrayed when your partner abused your child. For most couples, working through all of the anger and resentment will be a long, painful road. Eventually, for some couples, acceptance can lead to a new beginning. Other couples will decide that the relationship cannot be rebuilt after all.

Most people have an imaginary line that they draw in their minds. You may have heard women say, for example, "If my husband ever cheated on me, I'd leave him," or "If my husband ever beat me, I'd kick him out." Chances are, if someone had ever asked you, "What would you do if your partner molested your child," your response would have been immediate: "I'd kill him!"

But, suddenly, when confronted with a real accusation of sexual abuse, your previous assumptions have gone out the window. The only way some women can cope with the allegations is to deny them. It may just be too painful to accept that your partner could sexually abuse your child. You convince yourself there must be some kind of mistake. You might even accuse your child of lying. If you felt forced to make decisions about your marriage right away, you might have denied the abuse partly to avoid making these painful decisions.

And so you are left not knowing what to believe, feeling torn between your partner and your child, and overwhelmed by the wrenching changes in your life. Whichever way you turn, there is no way out. If you believe your child, you betray your partner. If you believe your partner, you betray your child. *Suddenly, you have to choose between two of the people you love most in the world, and it hurts.* You are afraid of losing them both.

And nobody seems to realize this! While you are facing your partner's incarceration, the loss of his income, the loss of your relationship, and your painful feelings about the abuse, some people may be accusing you of not protecting your child. They say that you should have known, should have seen, should have prevented it, should have stopped it. They may say you are choosing your partner over the children. You may feel guilty and wonder if you are to blame!

Connections is about making sense of what has happened and understanding the options and choices that lie ahead. *Connections* is about making informed, educated decisions. For families that want to stay together, *Connections* is about learning how that can be done more safely.

My Partner Abused Somebody Else's Child

If your partner abused someone else's child, you may not have dealt with the conflicting feelings some mothers have. You may not have had immediate

concerns about your children's safety, but you still may have had to deal with the consequences of your partner's crime. You probably felt angry, betrayed, and confused. You might have suddenly felt like you were living with a stranger. And, after thinking about it, you might have wondered if he would do something to your own children as well.

Maybe you didn't know your partner at the time of his offense. Maybe you are in a relationship with him now and he told you about his past. You want to believe that his abusive behavior is all behind him, but a little part of you may wonder how well you really know him.

If your partner abused someone else's children and he is living (or planning to live) with you and your children, it is essential for you to understand what led up to his offenses, what his offense patterns are, and what his prevention plan consists of, so you can protect your own children from potential abuse.

But My Partner Said He Didn't Do It

Almost all sexual offenders deny their crimes. Who can blame them? They are afraid of the obvious consequences—going to prison and losing everything. It is human nature to want to avoid punishment, and sex offenders are no different from anyone in that regard. What makes them different is the depth and intensity of their denial. After all, they have a lot to lose.

But most sexual offenders also feel ashamed of their actions. They don't want to admit what they did because they are afraid of losing you. They know that if you believe the accusations, you might want a divorce, might take the children away, might even testify against them. You might hate them. The shame and guilt they feel makes it enormously difficult for them to admit to what they've done. In fact, if your partner admitted to the abuse right away, he is very unusual. It might show that he is brave enough to face up to his problem.

Some sex offenders in treatment say they wanted to stop abusing their victim(s), but they couldn't ask for help. The truth is that although offenders need special treatment to learn to control their behavior, they can't seek that treatment without facing great risks. Because of mandatory child abuse reporting laws (designed to prevent ongoing abuse), if a child sex abuser goes to a therapist for help, the therapist must report the abuse to the child protection agency. The child protection agency then informs the police, and the case is investigated. Because the offender admitted to the therapist that he abused a child, his confession may be used as evidence to convict him and possibly to terminate his parental rights.

So most sex offenders deny their abusive behavior—and *they do it very convincingly*. They are practiced at it, after all. The typical offender has been denying his crimes to others (and maybe to himself) for a long time. The typical child molester has at least several, and maybe many, other victims. While

the recent abuse was occurring, throughout the investigation, during the court proceedings, in prison, and maybe even in treatment, the offender continues to deny his crimes because denial has always protected him from punishment, from shame, and from the scorn of others.

Unfortunately, while the offender is busy denying his crime and protecting himself, the victim is left unsupported, afraid, and alone. Victims might be accused of lying and might feel they can't depend on adults to help. They lose trust in the very people they must depend on—their parents. And you are left wondering . . . because as much as you want to believe he didn't do it, you're not really sure. In the *Connections* program, you are going to come face to face with harsh reality. Be prepared for new surprises and new hurts.

I Hate Him—But I Still Love Him

At a time like this, it's almost too painful to admit. But you wouldn't be here if you didn't still love him. And that's really not so surprising. Until this happened, he was the man in your life—and he still is. You may not be sure that you'll get over this terrible shock or that you'll stay with him. But a part of you wants to. A part of you hopes that somehow this can be dealt with, and that things can be good again.

When other people (including some members of your own family) are questioning your judgment and pressuring you to give up on him, it's important to clarify what you're doing and why. You can start by recognizing that he's still the same person that you fell in love with, and he has the same traits that attracted you to him. Only now, he's much more complicated. You may find yourself wondering if you really do know him. He has a problem—a very serious problem, to be sure, and one you didn't know about before. But do we usually run out the door on everything we have cared about because we encounter a problem—even a very serious one?

The truth is that good people can have bad problems. It used to be that people with drinking problems were seen as nothing but “lushes.” Nowadays, everyone knows that lots of alcoholics and drug addicts get the help they need and change. And once they get their problem under control, guess what? They become our friends and neighbors and coworkers—and partners—and the problem they've struggled with doesn't have to interfere in our relationships with them. We know there's a lot more to them than just their addiction.

Of course, sex offending is much more serious and more damaging to others than drinking or drugging. But everyone with a will to change can change, and there is always much more to a person than just his problem. Your partner is not just his problem. He is your lover, your friend, a hard worker, the person who makes you laugh, the father of your children—and he has a problem. Right now, he's hoping you will remember those other things.

You're going to find that this workbook is full of warnings: He might fool you, he might lie to you, he might reoffend, he's going to still be attracted to children. It's all true. And it's even worse than that: Some child molesters are true "pedophiles," which means their primary sexual attraction is toward children. Such men will always be dangerous and should never be allowed to be around children. These men may be extremely difficult to detect because their entire lifestyle is designed to project a false front. They may appear to be sensible, concerned, and perfectly normal. They can talk apparently sincerely about the harm sexual abuse causes and the importance of treatment. There is no way for you to be certain that your partner is not one of these men. However, you can gain some assurance by having him assessed by a knowledgeable specialist in sex offender evaluation. (The primary source of information on sex offender specialists is the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers [ATSA], www.atsa.com). The sex offender evaluation should always include a review of records (including criminal and child protective service records) and polygraphing. Your *Connections* therapist might also require your partner to be polygraphed.

It is necessary for you to take all the warnings seriously because of the great harm that child sexual abuse causes. But if your partner is not a true pedophile and if he makes a real commitment to treatment, if he sticks with his plan to prevent future abuse, if he takes responsibility for controlling his behavior—with your help and understanding—then, maybe things can be safer. Different, but safer. You will always need to be aware of the potential for abuse caused by your partner's weakness. But loving anyone involves understanding their weaknesses, doesn't it?

We who treat sex offenders know them well. And guess what? Mostly, they're men with the same basic needs as anyone. They don't know how to meet their needs in a healthy way. Most of them are horribly ashamed of what they have done. No one could hate them more than they hate themselves for having this problem.

In the end, you cannot let anyone else decide what's best for you. Make your decisions with your eyes open, but base them on what you feel. And don't be ashamed to be honest about your feelings. If you still love him, tell him, and tell your family and friends. Let them know you need their support to get through this crisis, just as he needs yours.

But What About Me?

You probably have a lot of mixed feelings about this whole thing. Since the disclosure, you have probably felt a bewildering array of feelings: anger, betrayal, fear, rejection, loss of control, guilt, shame, and sadness. You might also feel depressed, anxious, lonely, and numb. You might be in denial. You might even feel some jealousy toward the victim. You might hate the child

welfare workers. At times, you hate your partner; at other times, you might find yourself hating the victim. Most of all, you are very confused.

Many Nonoffending Parents Feel . . .

Anger

Whether or not your partner admits to the allegations, you probably feel angry at him. You might doubt his denial and know that he did do something inappropriate. If you know he really did commit the crime, you certainly have a right to be angry about all the losses you have suffered. At the same time, you might be angry at the victim. You may feel he or she should have told you before telling someone else. Or you may feel that somehow the victim provoked the abuse. Even if you know it wasn't the victim's fault, you may still feel resentful about the abuse and focus this anger on the victim. At times, you have probably been angry at family and friends for not understanding and at the legal system for intruding in your life.

You might be angry at yourself—for not seeing the signs, for not noticing what was happening, for not protecting your child. Most mothers feel angry at themselves, as well as guilty and ashamed, for not being able to protect their child. Remember, you did nothing to cause the abuse. Committing a sex offense is always the choice of the offender alone and is his responsibility alone. But you may realize, as you go through this book, that you ignored the signs of abuse or even chose not to believe your child when he or she tried to tell you what was happening.

Sadness

Because sexual abuse in a family results in painful losses—relationship, emotional, and financial losses—the sadness can be powerful.

Hurt

Most women report feeling hurt by their partner's sexually abusive behavior. They are wounded both by the sexual betrayal and by the partner's callous indifference toward harming the children and family. Some women will be hurt by the way their family and friends respond, rejecting and socially ostracizing their family. Crying is normal behavior at this difficult time.

Loneliness

Many women feel isolated and lonely as they learn how hard it is for others to understand their situation. It isn't easy to talk about sexual abuse, and you may feel you are dealing with it all by yourself.

"My family doesn't talk to me anymore. They don't understand how I can stay married to my husband. We spend holidays alone, they say mean things behind my back, and I have no one to help me."

Numbness

Some women report that in the days and weeks following the disclosure, they just "go through life like a robot." Sometimes, avoiding painful feelings seems the only way to survive.

Rejection

Some women wonder "what's wrong with me? Why did my husband turn to a child?" You might feel that you aren't lovable or sexually desirable. Here is yet another way you can blame yourself, when the truth is that nothing you did caused your partner's behavior.

Betrayal

You probably felt betrayed by your partner, as if he were having an affair. Knowing your partner was sexual with someone else, especially a child, really damages the trust between you. You may also feel like you don't know your partner anymore—that he has betrayed you by hiding something from you, lying to you, turning out to be someone you didn't expect.

"I used to put my husband on a pedestal . . . he was a hard worker and a good father. I looked up to him. Then he molested my niece, and suddenly I felt like I was married to a stranger. Suddenly, our relationship and my whole life seemed like a lie."

Fear

Most partners of abusers are afraid of many things: the outcome of the criminal case and the social services investigation, the financial hardships, the effects of the abuse on their children, the possibility that their children will be abused again. In the beginning, everything is frightening: You've never been through anything like this, and you don't know what to expect.

Loss of Control

Following a disclosure of sexual abuse, everything seems to spin out of control. The world as you've known it is forever changed. You might feel that

you can't trust anyone. You might feel you can't predict what the future will bring. You might feel helpless in dealing with the legal system, helpless to communicate with your partner, or helpless to protect your children.

Guilt

Many women feel guilty about their child's abuse—that they should have known what was happening and done something to prevent it. You might feel you've failed to protect your children.

Shame

Some women describe a sense of shame. Partly, this might have to do with feeling that you failed to protect your child from harm. Partly, it stems from loving someone (your partner) who others see as a bad person. You might feel that your partner's abusive behavior is somehow a reflection on you as a mother, wife, or woman.

Embarrassment

What does it mean that you love a man who sexually abused a child? You might feel this means something is wrong with your ability to judge people or choose a mate. It is very hard to accept that someone you love did bad things. Furthermore, many states now have "public notification" laws that allow authorities to tell your neighbors that a sex offender lives in the community. You might be dealing with the shame and humiliation of having your family problems publicly aired.

You might feel that you can protect your child yourself, without help from outside agencies or therapists. You might know that your child was abused but deny it to others to protect your family and avoid legal consequences. You might be convinced that if all the authorities would just get out of your life, you could handle the problem yourself. The truth is that the problem is the *offender's*, and without the proper help, you cannot protect your child. You cannot control the offender's behavior no matter how hard you try.

Sheri was sexually abused by her father from age 4 on. As an adult, she struggled to hold onto a job, used drugs, and couldn't provide a stable environment for her 10-year-old daughter. So her daughter was being raised by her parents. Because she was afraid that her father might abuse her child, she continued to have sex with him, believing that this would keep him from touching the girl. She later found out that all along, her father was abusing her daughter as well.

Jealousy

Some mothers are horrified to find themselves jealous of their own child. When your husband made your child his romantic partner, he created a rival for his love and attention.

Depression

Depression is not just sadness. Depression is a numbing of feelings that can result from overwhelming loss. Depression can take over your body and interfere with your ability to function in your daily responsibilities. If depression leaves you unable to eat, sleep, work, or care for your children, or if you find yourself sleeping more than usual, overeating, or feeling withdrawn and without any energy, you may want to see a knowledgeable psychotherapist for individual therapy or a psychiatrist. A psychiatrist is a physician who can determine if antidepressant medication would be helpful for you.

Anxiety

Anxiety is not just about feeling a little worried or nervous. Like depression, clinical anxiety can take over your life and leave you feeling unable to function. If you are suffering from repetitive thoughts that you can't get out of your mind or if you find yourself unable to concentrate because of your troubles, a psychiatric exam might be helpful in determining if anti-anxiety medication can help you through this crisis.

Family and Friends Don't Seem to Understand

Family and friends are going through a crisis, too. Of course, you need them during this time more than they need you. But you might find that others can't give you what you need because they are too caught up in their own shock and confusion.

Your family might be angry at you for staying with the abuser. They might refuse to help you or even shut you out of their lives. Maybe they say bad things about your partner, which only adds to your hurt and confusion because you still love him. They might think they know what's best for you and tell you what to do. Or on the other hand, they might minimize the abuse, saying, "it wasn't really that big a deal."

Your partner's family might blame you for deserting him. They might blame your child for telling. Because they love your partner, it may be impossible for them to accept what he has done. Their denial of his offense may be