

HEADLINERS

Hush little baby

Teenage victims of sexual abuse talk about their experiences.

Child abusers will do anything to cover up their dark secrets. They use blackmail, bribes and threats to stop their young victims, coming forward. But as young journalists from Children's Express report, the power of speaking out stops them in their tracks.

Talking about sexual abuse is never easy. For the victim, it can be an embarrassing, frightening and distressing experience. And for the person they confide in, there is the weight of responsibility on their shoulders. But the message from those who have suffered abuse is simple - talk, no matter what.

Rachel, 19, was abused by an uncle from the age of six. She said her problem was getting anyone to listen. "My uncle knew what affected me and what really hurt. Everybody in the family loved him and thought him perfect, so I felt there was nobody to go to. They were all on his side."

She was only able to tell someone when the situation became desperate. "When I got to 12, I felt dirty, ashamed, embarrassed and guilty. At 14, I just felt completely ashamed. It wasn't until I was 15 when it was, like, 'What if I'm pregnant?' I'd reached the point when I couldn't take it any more so I went to a teacher.

"I believe that from a very young age children need to know how to say no and how to tell. They need to know they shouldn't be scared and that somebody is there for them, that somebody will take them seriously."

Children make up 26 per cent of all rape victims in Britain and there are said to be at least 110,000 adults in this country who have been convicted of sex offences with children.

Yet young people feel little is being done to let them know about the issues. I didn't know what to call what was happening to me until I was 11. I'd never heard anything about sexual abuse," explains Cathy, now 18, who was abused by her stepfather between the ages of six and 13.

Victim

"It was too hard to talk about because it was very taboo. Nobody wanted to hear about it.

Eighteen-year-old Leanne had a similar experience. "When I was really young, my dad said over and over that I wouldn't get pregnant. When I was 12, friends at school talked about things like that and it started eating me that this shouldn't be going on, that other people weren't going through this.

She added: Abuse is a secret issue. It's something people don't want to even think about. You would never want to believe it could happen to your son or daughter or friend.

Sometimes it can take years before the victim can feel safe to speak out. Mandy Swallow, 31, from Batemoor, Sheffield, was abused for years as a youngster by her father but only recently felt strong enough to go to the police. As a result her father was jailed for eight years on eight counts of indecent assault, one count of rape, one count of attempted rape and one count of indecency with a child. She is convinced the only way to combat sexual abuse is to talk.

It's going to be hard for any kid to go through what I did because people turn against you. But come forward. Don't run away," she stressed. Mandy said more support was needed for the victims of abuse. "There are no groups in Sheffield. I'm just hoping that somebody will get a group going. It needs to be out in the open so it might just stop abusers."

All the victims have been sure of one thing - speaking out was the right thing to do because it allowed the healing process to start.

Rebecca added: "You never block out what goes through your head. You're going to feel pain but you can cut your feelings off. If I'm having a really bad day, I call myself as a victim, but eighty per cent of the time, I'm a survivor.

About the team

This article was produced by reporters Sherina Riden, Tara Aston, Shefina Coke, Devina Mcdowell, all 13, Salomey Aino, 19, Rachel Bulford, 18, Oliver Robertson, 17, Natasha Asare, 16, Aminah Carter, 15, and Jiselle Steele, Kierra Box, Carlene Thomas-Bailey and Sinead Kirwan, 14, and Benjamina Avro-Owiriwa, 11. It was published in the [Sheffield Star](#).

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