

## The ripple effect

Molestation is a wide-reaching violation, one that often significantly harms not just the child victim, but the family as well, particularly when the abuser is a family member or close friend (as is the reality in 90% of abuse cases). The impact on family members and close relationships can last for years and affect future relationships as well.

### Non-offending family members:

The discovery of molestation is often shocking, confusing, and terrifying, and can result in chaos and upheaval for all of those involved. Non-offending parents often suffer greatly and are even traumatized when discovering that their child has been abused. They often don't understand much about this type of abuse until it happens, don't know who to trust and what advice to listen to, and are usually afraid for the implications on the child and the entire family. The feelings, fears and reactions may feel out of control, embarrassing, or conflicting, but they are completely legitimate and understandable. Specifically, families often contend:

- Intense feelings of shock, helplessness, betrayal, panic, embarrassment
- Disbelief and confusion - who is telling the truth? What actually happened?
- Anger and rage
  - o Rage towards the abuser for the breach of trust, the harm they caused to the victim, and the disruption they caused to the family
  - o Anger towards the child for not preventing the abuse or disclosing it earlier, and for disrupting their lives
  - o Anger towards other family members for their role or perceived role in the abuse, discovery of abuse, reactions, and intervention approach
- Tremendous fear
  - o Of the future of the victim
  - o Of the future of the abuser
  - o Of people finding out
  - o Of the implications on the family image
  - o Of the potential for *shidduchim* for the victim and their siblings
  - o Of being thrown out of the community
- Secondary trauma (PTSD)
- Total confusion about what, how and why it happened, and about what to do about it (often compounded by the contradictory advice of others)
- Uncertainty about reporting and the impact it may have on the child or the family
- Guilt and self-blame for not being able to protect their child
- Being blamed by others for allowing the abuse to happen
- Social isolation as a result of the abuse and how it was handled

- Conflict and divide – pressure to take sides, divided loyalties between victim and abuser
- Strain over how to deal with the abuser (put him in jail and throw away the key or protect him because we have to love every Jew).
- Tensions between family differing opinions about justice, loyalty, responsibility, forgiveness, etc.
- Financial hardships – especially if there is a financial dependence on the abuser
- Ostracism from the community
- Loss of the ability to trust one's self, family members, the abuser, and those that protected the abuser
- Investment of tremendous time, resources, strength, and support to help a child heal. Parent has to become a case manager – dealing with mental health services, child protection and law enforcement
- Neglect of other family relationships (couple, other children) because of an overwhelming focus on the victim
- Becoming overprotective of their children, severely restricting activities
- Poor family functioning and loss of family cohesion
- Marital dysfunction (including divorce/separation/conflicts)

Abuse is painful, ugly, and messy, and there is unfortunately no easy way to deal with it. However, with the proper **professional** care and guidance **and a good support system**, families can address the abuse in a proper and healthy way, ensure the victim gets proper care and work through the very painful experience. Non-offending parents and other family members are the most important resource that victims have.

### Impact on future marital relationships

Molestation can have a serious long term impact; the damage does not end when the abuse stops, especially if untreated. Abuse can impact a victim's emotional, physical, behavioral, educational/vocational, and relational functioning, which can significantly challenge the building and maintenance of a healthy marriage. Specifically, many victims often contend the following issues in their marital relationships:

- Internal chaos leading to a 'crisis mode' type of functioning, which hinders the ability to establish a healthy, stable, predictable home
- Difficulty with trust, A cornerstone of marriage and healthy relationships
- Difficulty with openness and emotional intimacy
  - o Inability to share the history of abuse with their spouse because of shame
- Fear of and difficulty with physical closeness and intimacy
  - o Dissociation, emotional distance
  - o Disgust, anger or guilt
  - o Flashbacks or painful memories
  - o Emotional stress and pain related to *taharat hamishpacha* and the *mikva*
  - o Inability to be physically close

- Intrusive or disturbing thoughts and images
- Difficulty setting safe boundaries
- Mental health challenges (e.g. sadness, social isolation, depression, anxiety, addictions, personality disorders, eating disorders, suicidal behavior, etc.) which can make creating a healthy trusting relationship difficult
- Frequent crisis (e.g. job challenges, financial setbacks, health and medical challenges)

It is important to know that despite the painful challenges, with proper individual and couples guidance and counseling (for both the victim and their spouse), relationships can improve greatly, and couples can go on to understand and support each other, and build healthy and strong relationships.

### **Impact on future generations**

Unless properly treated, molestation can impact not only the victim, their families, and their spouses, but can also affect their ability to parent, and thus the lives of their future children. Parents who have been victims of molestation as children may have greater difficulties in parenthood; pregnancy, childbirth and parenting can be a catalyst for triggering the trauma and lead to great emotional distress. Children born to victims of molestation are more likely to deal with the following challenges<sup>1</sup>:

- Lack of clear and healthy boundaries
- Being unsupervised or left in the care of unsafe adults
- Being abused themselves by their abused parent or by other abusers who seek vulnerable children
- More harsh punishments
- A disconnected, detached, and/or depressive parent
- Being overprotected
- A parent who is fearful of touching them in any healthy way (out of fear of being an abuser)
- Their own depression and withdrawal
- Adjustment difficulties
- Aggression and acting out

