

Two ways to treat child victims

By Connie Valentine

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Question: What do war veterans and child sexual abuse victims have in common?

Answer: Both possess extraordinary courage and usually have post-traumatic stress symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, fears and phobias.

Question: How are war veterans and child sexual abuse victims different?

Answer: No one accuses war veterans of fabricating their experiences. They are appropriately diagnosed and treated for post traumatic stress disorder. This facilitates their healing.

On the other hand, child sex abuse victims are often disbelieved. As adults, they are rarely asked about childhood sex abuse by professionals and are usually diagnosed with everything except post-traumatic stress disorder. This impedes their healing.

The Incest Survivors Speakers Bureau and California Protective Parents Associations commemorated National Child Abuse Prevention Month, National Sexual Assault Awareness Month and Crime Victims Rights week during our 16th annual Northern California Child Sexual Abuse Awareness conference, "Whistleblower Children: What Happens When Children Report Sexual Abuse," on April 9-10.

Children and adults who blow the whistle on sexually abusive relatives often are attacked by their family members and institutions that are supposed to protect them.

Our conference keynote speaker, former child sexual abuse prosecutor Robin Sax, is a powerful voice for supporting sexual abuse victims, protecting children from sexual abuse, and holding perpetrators accountable.

Her presentation was followed by two panels that compared and contrasted the treatment of child sexual abuse victims in criminal and family courts.

-- In family court, the child is considered property to be divided. Shockingly, children are often placed with their identified sex-abusive parents.

-- In criminal court, the same child is a victim witness to be protected and to testify at a criminal prosecution of the perpetrator.

-- In one court, the perpetrator receives custody; in the other court, the perpetrator is put into custody.

The family court panel consisted of Nina Salarno from Crime Victims United; Tiffany Susz from the Yolo County District Attorney's Office; Jim Provenza from the Yolo County Board of Supervisors; Tony Tanke, Yolo County's appellate attorney; Jean Jordan from the California District Attorneys Association; and Kathleen Russell from Center for Judicial Excellence.

They seemed appalled at the testimony of five women whose children had been placed in the custody of their identified sexual molesters by family courts after multiple reports by the children. The professionals associated with those family courts stoutly refused to believe the

children's disclosures and other evidence presented, and recommended the children be placed with the accused perpetrators.

Family court judges implemented the recommendations and then placed the mothers, who posed no danger to the children, on supervised visitation. It was clear that some family courts are dangerous places for sexually abused children. (Fortunately, we do not find this happening in Yolo County.) The panel made many excellent recommendations for ways to improve the situation.

In contrast, the criminal court panel consisted of the Yolo County Multi-Disciplinary Interview Team, a model program that focuses on child safety and perpetrator accountability.

We would like to publicly thank District Attorney Jeff Reisig and Assistant District Attorney Jonathan Raven for allowing Cameron Handley and the MDIT to present at the conference. We asked the panel to describe a typical child sexual abuse case in which a parent is the accused perpetrator from the beginning report to the completion of the case. The panel members were caring and professional. The description of the orderly, effective process was heartening.

The presentation was extremely well-received. Several audience members remarked that it was refreshing and hopeful to hear about such a well-organized response to the difficult issue of child sexual abuse and to realize that many cases are successfully prosecuted as a result.

It is clear the team has worked carefully to ensure that children who have been sexually abused are not required to endure multiple interviews. Having a trained and skilled child interviewer and a clear criminal justice process has been a huge improvement for children in Yolo County.

We are most grateful and want to acknowledge the Yolo County District Attorney's Office and the MDIT's very positive impact on the rights of these small sexually abused crime victims.

We hope to see California's family courts also become safe places for sexually abused children in the future.

— Connie Valentine of Davis was the conference coordinator.