

## Why Do Sexually Assaulted Child Victims Feel Such Shame?

Childrenz Haven, the Child Advocacy Center of Polk County, is interviewing a four-year-old little girl. She describes being sexually assaulted by her babysitter, a fourteen-year-old boy. The little girl sits in her chair, hitting her face with the palm of her hand, and saying “bad, bad, bad”. She has learned shame. At four. For a crime committed by a fourteen-year-old boy she knew and trusted, she is feeling guilt and shame. “Bad, bad, bad.”

A friend of mine was molested when she was nine by her fifteen-year-old brother. She is now in her sixties. She still feels the shame. She tells me that back when her fiancé asked her to marry him, when she was twenty three years old, she had to tell him first about what her brother did to her. She was sure he would call off the engagement once he knew. She, too, was filled with shame.

Not too long ago a teenage boy in Houston was sodomized by two other boys and left for dead because he had flirted with the sister of one of the boys. The victim went through massive amounts of surgery to help heal his body. But nothing could heal his shame. He ended his life by jumping off a cruise ship into the sea. Before his death he explained that he could not live with the shame. Everyone knew what had been done to him.

On the other hand, two teenage girls in California were kidnapped and repeatedly raped by a man. They escaped and were able to help corner the man who then killed himself. Although local law allowed the girls to keep their identities unknown, the girls wanted to speak out, they wanted people to know who they were. They had done nothing wrong, they explained. That seems to be the strange and terrible outcome of these abuses of children. The child victims tend to take the blame and the shame, as if they did something wrong.

In her 2012 book, *Miss America by Day*, Marilyn Van Derbur describes the day she finally told Larry, the love of her life, that her father repeatedly sexually abused her for thirteen years. She did not want to tell Larry. She was forced to tell him by her minister/counselor. She describes how she could not look at Larry.

I have never felt uglier or more unworthy in my entire life than I felt at that moment...I hadn't been this moral upright ethical teenager with whom he had fallen in love. I was a bad, bad, bad person unworthy of anyone. (Van Derbur, *Miss America by Day*, p. 111).

She describes how she finally uttered the words “daddy” and “bedroom” with her head down in pure shame. She describes how she dreaded looking up into Larry's eyes because she knew what she would see: “Disgust. Disdain. Horror. Revulsion.” (Id.) As it turned out, she looked up and into Larry's eyes and found the opposite: “only love, compassion and acceptance.” (Id.)

Also in *Miss America by Day*, Marilyn Van Derbur dedicates Chapter 24 to this topic. Entitled “Why Don't Children Tell?” she recounts stories of famous people who kept their stories of being molested hidden until they were very old. For example, Carlos

Santana, the Grammy winning guitarist, “was taken over the border from Tijuana, Mexico, by an American called “Cowboy.” For two years, Cowboy bought him presents and molested him several times a week.” Carlos was 48 before he began to reveal this long-buried secret. (Van Derbur, *Miss America by Day*, p 429 quoting Shapiro, *Back on Top*, p. 206-207).

Van Derbur finishes the chapter with these words:

Most children will stay shamed and silent until millions of us tell four or five loved ones or friends that we, too, were sexually assaulted as children. Only then will America begin to understand how pervasive childhood violations are, how assaults have devastated our lives and why we hold onto the secrets for as long as we do. (Van Derbur, *Miss America by Day*, pp.434-435.)

The interesting next chapter of the book is entitled “Is it Safe to Tell?” In that chapter Marilyn Van Derbur gives very interesting statistics: When a child chooses to tell a parent about the abuse, before the child turns 18, the parents have the following reactions (some parents experience more than one reaction):

42% are angry with the child

49% blame the child

50% ignored the disclosure

30% became hysterical

(Van Derbur, *Miss America by Day*, p. 435).

Childrenz Haven is the Child Advocacy Center of Polk County. Our goal is to create a neutral child-friendly environment where children can be interviewed and seek counseling. These are children who may have been the victims of sexual and/or physical abuse. We then follow up with a team of experts in law enforcement, prosecution, CPS and medical personnel to insure that no child victim falls through the cracks. Ultimately, one of the goals of the Child Advocacy Centers of Texas is to make it as normal to disclose sexual abuse as it is to talk about breast cancer. Twenty years ago, no one talked about breast cancer and now we “run marathons” in support of the cure. This is our hope for the sexual abuse of children because as long as we keep it hidden, as long as we continue to make it taboo to talk about, that’s how long we will live under a veil of shame.

If you want to help in this cause, please support us. You can go to our website at [www.childrenzhaven.org](http://www.childrenzhaven.org) or you can send a check by mail at 602 East Church Street Box 13 Livingston, Texas 77351.