

Sarah's Story

by Beth Copeland



April 5, 1984. I had gone to pick up my four-year-old daughter, Sarah, at the preschool she attended in Chicago.

As Sarah came down the stairs from the second-floor classroom, I observed the janitor, who was standing at the foot of the stairs, reach out his hand to tickle her. Sarah pulled away from him and cried, "No! Leave me alone! Don't touch me!"

After we went home, I asked her why she was upset with the janitor.

"I don't like it when he tickles me."

"Where does he tickle you?"

"My arms, my legs ..."

"Does he tickle you anywhere else?"

Sarah nodded and pointed between her legs.

"You mean he tickles your tummy?"

"No, Mommy." She shook her head. "My vagina."

"Don't you mean your tummy?"

"No. My vagina. I *mean* my vagina."

I remember telling Sarah that I believed her. But the last thing I wanted to believe was that she had been sexually abused. How could it have happened? Where were the teachers? Why hadn't anyone protected her?

The first step I took was a big mistake, but at the time it seemed like a reasonable response. I called the school and reported what Sarah had told me. The director met with me and tried to convince me that my daughter was lying. Children her age confuse their body parts, the director said. Maybe Sarah had been "flooded" with too much sexual abuse prevention information. Maybe she was trying to get attention because we had a new baby. I sat in the director's office and sobbed. I didn't want to believe my daughter had been abused, but I didn't believe she was capable of making up a story like that, either.

I called the child abuse hotline.

Later, two police detectives came to our house to interview Sarah. She sat on her father's lap while they questioned her, telling them the same thing she had told me. The police asked me to bring Sarah to the police station the next day for a formal interview.

At the police station, Sarah and I sat on a wooden bench in an interrogation room. We could hear a man in a cell down the hall yelling and banging his fists on the door. Finally, three men came into the room: the detective who had talked to Sarah at our house, a lawyer from the State's Attorney's office, and a therapist. The therapist showed Sarah a coloring book with pictures of cartoon animals in various stages of dress and

undress. He turned to a page with a picture of a bear and a rabbit. Handing her a crayon, he asked her to draw a line from the bear's body part to the rabbit's body part it had touched. Sarah drew a line from the bear's hand to the rabbit's crotch. I felt sick to my stomach as I watched her draw another line from the bear's crotch to the rabbit's crotch.

As soon as we got home, the phone rang. A caseworker from the Department of Children and Family Services wanted to interview Sarah. "We were at the police station all morning," I said. "She's tired. Can't this wait until tomorrow?"

"No, I'm required to respond within a certain time frame. I need to interview her today."

That afternoon two caseworkers came to our house. Again, Sarah described being molested by the janitor.

Four days later, Sarah told me about an incident when teachers took suggestive pictures of her at school. I called the police and DCFS to report the new disclosure. By that time, police, prosecutors, and caseworkers were interviewing other children who attended the preschool. Of about 80 children who were interviewed, 20 reported being sexually abused. Investigators told me to bring Sarah to a church in our community where the interviews were being conducted. A therapist took Sarah into a room and spoke with her privately for several minutes.

Sarah, who is now 28 years old, remembers what it was like to be repeatedly questioned. "This terrible secret became a story I had to tell adults I had met five minutes prior to sitting down with them. Think about how hard it is for adults to tell each other something personal and traumatic. Imagine how a little kid feels."

Three days later, a police detective and a prosecutor came to our house to question Sarah. As soon as they came inside, Sarah ran to the dining room and crouched in a small space between the china cabinet and the wall. The detective sat cross-legged on the floor and asked if he could talk to her. She reluctantly agreed and told him the same thing she had told the therapist several days before.

"The abuse was only part of the battle," Sarah says now. "The other part was describing and reliving every detail over and over to the police, lawyers, and therapists. I was a little four-year-old girl facing adults who were scribbling my story on notepads and analyzing everything I said."

About a week later, investigators asked me to bring Sarah to the main court building in Chicago. At the time I didn't know why they needed to interview her again. Later, I learned that a grand jury was questioning teachers about their involvement in widespread abuse at the school. While the grand jury questioned staff, investigators were simultaneously questioning several children. Sarah and I had to go through a metal detector, and a guard demanded that I hand over a brown paper bag. I opened the bag to show that it contained only a peanut butter sandwich, raisins, and apple slices, but the guard would not allow me to bring it into the building.

Sarah and I waited a long time while investigators questioned other children. The waiting area was a storage room with a copying machine. Two other families were there, and since there weren't enough chairs for all of us, Sarah sat on my lap. She became restless and hungry, but I had nothing to feed her because the guard had confiscated her lunch.

We waited and waited. Finally, Sarah was ushered into a conference room where she sat in an adult-sized chair at a long table. "I felt like I was being put on trial," Sarah

recalls. “I remember them saying, ‘Are you sure that really happened, or are you confusing that with a dream or a movie you saw?’ It was extremely frustrating to me because I knew that it really happened. I was telling the truth.”

This is a short list of the interviews Sarah endured. As one of three children deemed “court worthy,” she was questioned numerous times before the case against the janitor went to trial. (I hate the term “court worthy.” *All* children are court worthy; it’s the courts that are not worthy of the children.)

When our case went to trial, Sarah was scheduled to testify, but the prosecutors called an older witness, a seven-year-old girl. (The janitor chose a bench trial, so we didn’t have a jury.) Even though the little girl got down on the floor to demonstrate positions in which the janitor had sexually assaulted her, the judge ruled that there was “reasonable doubt” and found the defendant “not guilty.”

Sarah’s story serves as an example of why the work of the CAC is so important. Because of the CAC, children no longer have to endure the secondary victimization Sarah suffered. Instead of having to tell a traumatic story repeatedly, a child can come to the CAC and disclose once to a multidisciplinary team of professionals trained to conduct victim-sensitive interviews. Instead of being questioned at a police station, a child is interviewed in a bright, child-friendly room by one team member while others observe behind a two-way mirror. Families wait in a cheerful playroom with comfortable seating and toys. “An interview setting can be very scary and unsettling for a child,” Sarah says. “We need to make them feel comfortable so they can tell their stories freely.”

Children now have a place where their voices are heard and they can begin to heal.

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Seven Steps to Protecting Our Children

Step 1. Learn the facts. Understand the risks. Realities—not trust—should influence your decisions regarding children.

Step 2. Minimize opportunity. If you eliminate or reduce one-adult/one-child situations, you'll dramatically lower the risk of sexual abuse for children.

Step 3. Talk about it. Children often keep abuse a secret, but talking openly about it can break down barriers.

Step 4. Stay alert. Don't expect obvious signs when a child is being sexually abused.

Step 5. Make a plan. Learn where to go, whom to call, how to react.

Step 6. Act on suspicions. The future well-being of a child is at stake.

Step 7. Get involved. Volunteer and financially support organizations that fight the tragedy of child sexual abuse.

How You Can Help

- Volunteer.
- Lend a hand to a family in need.
- Take time to become a friend to a child in your neighborhood.
- Encourage parents you know.
- Help yourself, as a parent, by getting all the information and support available.
- Learn more about preventing child abuse by attending a class.
- Support agencies and activities that support children.
- Donate to child abuse prevention programs.
- Report suspected child abuse by calling your local Department of Social Services or 911.