

THE BLOG

Beyond *Breaking the Silence*

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by Lyndon Haviland and Teresa C. Younger

Breaking the Silence is a catalytic moment in the emerging movement to end child sexual abuse. We must leverage the momentum of this film and go beyond conversation and into action.

In recent years, child sexual abuse has begun to emerge from the shrouds of secrecy and shame that have allowed it to remain hidden within society. Despite this, stigma remains, fueled by fear, shame and misinformation. Last night, TLC aired *Breaking the Silence*, a documentary addressing the realities of child sexual abuse from the perspective of survivors and two organizations working to end child sexual abuse.

This documentary exposed the harsh realities of child sexual abuse and shared the message that prevention is possible and support and treatment for survivors is available. As longtime advocates, we know this is simply a start and there is no time to lose.

Today, there are 42 million survivors of child sexual abuse in the United States alone, and at a minimum, one in 10 children are sexually abused before the age of 18. Millions of these survivors will live in silence, dealing with the effects of this abuse for the rest of their lives. Until every survivor has the support, care and treatment they need and every child has the chance for a safe and healthy childhood, child sexual abuse will remain a tragedy for our society. We need to shift our cultural norms to ensure that adults who have suffered from child sexual abuse are not stigmatized and that protecting our next generation from sexual abuse is an everyday expectation rather than an effort.

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Every child deserves to be safe, and protecting children from abuse is an adult responsibility.

This will be no easy task. Child sexual abuse is likely the most prevalent health issue faced by our children today, with a serious array of medical and social consequences that can persist into adulthood. Child sexual abuse is nondiscriminatory. It affects every demographic in every community. To address short and long-term consequences of abuse, we must create a national standard for prevention, protection and response, as well as focusing on the availability of treatment and de-stigmatization of survivors. All of us have a role to play to create a world where children are free to thrive.

Prevention begins at home. Ninety percent of sexually abused children are abused by someone they or their family knows. We must learn how to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse. The path to change starts with each one of us and it begins today.

That does not absolve the rest of the community from necessary action. As community leaders, we must refuse to sweep child sexual abuse under the rug and commit to talking about child protection. By promoting discussion and public awareness of abuse and providing ongoing prevention education to all community members and youth serving organizations, communities can greatly decrease the risk of child sexual abuse and help survivors heal.

Our elected officials and policymakers must also take a stand. At the legislative level, we must create a national standard of child protection. Legislators have the unique ability to reach and affect a wide audience-base. Currently, states across the country are creating a range of laws that are both piecemeal and bootstrapped. This disjointed process is creating a disparate and ineffective

system that fails to address child sexual abuse in a comprehensive way. Some require aspects of professional training, child training, mandated reporter training and/or hiring policy but very few display a comprehensive understanding of this issue and most are not funded. While grassroots efforts are admirable and necessary, national change requires national policy. We must have laws that require funded sexual abuse prevention training for all volunteers and professionals that work with youth as well as institutional policies on hiring and background checks. Our children deserve common sense legislation that will protect them.

Breaking the Silence has started a national conversation. Now, it's our responsibility to continue talking about child sexual abuse, prevention and treatment and join the advocates building a movement to end child sexual abuse. Together we can take action to protect children and support survivors today and make our world a safer place for children in the future.

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