

Military OneSource Podcast — Parental Response to Problematic Sexual Behavior

Child & Youth Advocacy

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today's topic is the parental response to problematic sexual behavior. And as the title suggests, we're going to be getting into pretty frank discussions. So if you've got little ones around, this might be an episode for the earbuds. Let's go ahead and bring in our guests for today. Natalie Gallo is Master Trainer through the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth, and Julia Grimm is an independent trainer and consultant with the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth. Great to have you both with us. Welcome.

Julia Grimm:

Thanks so much, Bruce. We're glad to be here.

Natalie Gallo:

Yeah, thanks for having us.

Bruce Moody:

And Natalie, let's just get started with you. The technical definition. What is problematic sexual behavior in children and youth?

Natalie Gallo:

Yeah, problematic sexual behavior is a behavior that youth or an adolescent initiates that involves private parts or sexual body parts that can cause potential risk of harm to themselves or to others. So this could be something from developmentally expected behavior that maybe

needs some redirection and support around in terms of boundaries, or it could be concerning harmful or potentially illegal behaviors involving private parts.

Bruce Moody:

Thanks, Natalie. Now, Natalie and Julia, each of you jump in as you like. Julia, let's go with you on this one. Same question, different angle. When we talk about problematic sexual behaviors, what do parents normally think?

Julia Grimm:

Yeah, I wonder if parents on average, any average parent off the street, would even begin to think about problematic sexual behaviors. And I think a lot of parents think, well, that maybe wouldn't be my kid or my child would never engage in something like that. But what we know is that these behaviors are actually more prevalent than people realize. National rates of child sexual abuse estimate that anywhere from a quarter to a third of reports of child sexual abuse actually involve the initiation of these behaviors by another child or an adolescent, and that's a lot higher than I think people might realize. And even kids who have lots of protective factors, good support, lots of supervision may find themselves curious or struggling with impulsivity that would result in a problematic sexual behavior like this. So the short answer to your question, Bruce, is I don't know that a lot of parents would think about problematic sexual behaviors. And that's why we're talking about this is because we know that it happens more often, and it's good for everyone to have this information to be protective.

Bruce Moody:

So what are some common reactions among parents when they discovered that their child is involved in problematic sexual behaviors?

Natalie Gallo:

I think to piggyback off of what Julia just said, there's often this feeling of being blindsided. No one expects this to happen in their family. No one really thinks about this as a possibility for happening within their family, and so there's that wave of emotion in terms of confusion, shock, even denial that this happened. Fear, anger, the whole range. And that would make a lot of sense and be really normal for a parent to have when all of a sudden they've gotten information that maybe their child has engaged in a harmful behavior towards somebody else. And just lots of questions. Where did this come from? Has something happened to my kid that made them do this? What does this mean for my kid and their future? Are my other kids safe? What do I do now? There are just tons of questions, tons of feelings that we know are just so common among parents when they realize or find out that their child has been engaging in a problematic sexual behavior.

Bruce Moody:

So are there any false assumptions that parents may have about problematic sexual behavior? And if so, what would they be?

Julia Grimm:

One of the assumptions that caregivers or parents often bring in, when their child has engaged in a problematic sexual behavior, is my child has been sexually abused. That's the only logical place that their brain can go to as to what would've contributed to this behavior. And while that's possible, that's certainly true in some cases, in most cases, that's not the case. More often, we're seeing contributing factors like exposure to sexually explicit material, curiosity, impulsivity, inaccurate beliefs around consent and body boundaries that are being communicated by peer groups. So there are a lot of other things outside of just sexual abuse that could contribute to these behaviors, so that's one of them.

Another is that this somehow means that their child is destined to be a lifelong serial sexual abuser of children. And that is exceedingly rare when we're talking about kids and adolescents who've engaged in problematic sexual behavior. Most of the time, this is a behavioral concern, again, contributed to by curiosity, their own lived experiences, some family dynamics, peer group dynamics that can be changed. It's very flexible, very malleable, and we can change that behavior. And these kids are really at very, very low risk most of the time to have subsequent problematic sexual behaviors or for this to become a lifelong pattern. So those are probably the two biggest concerns or assumptions that we see parents come in with when they learn about problematic sexual behavior having occurred.

Bruce Moody:

So how can parents best support their child if they become involved in an incident?

Natalie Gallo:

That's a big question and there's a lot of different levels and steps in that support process. I think initially, one of the most important things we want parents to know is that the feelings that you're having are normal and valid, and to not judge yourself for having the feelings. Do what you need to do to kind of get yourself to a place of calm as much as you can and communicate to your child that you're going to keep supporting them, as tough as that might be in that moment. Because what we know from the youth that come through treatment or that we have on our youth partnership board, that they say things like having my parents know what happened and still love me was everything because I hated myself for what I did. So those messages of continued support to their youth is one of the most powerful ways that parents can support their children.

And at the same time, it's OK to share that you're upset about the choices that your youth has made. It's OK to let them know that that wasn't OK or how you're feeling along with those messages of support and continued alignment with them. And recognizing that parents may need support themselves. They may need support for their own emotions in this process, an outlet for the stress that they may be experiencing and a space to help them sort of think about their child not just because of that problematic sexual behavior ... helping them create a space for their brain and their emotions to think about all those things that they still do love about their kid and all those great qualities that their kids have outside of this behavior. And ultimately, through best practice therapy and treatment for problematic sexual behavior, being

involved in that youth therapy and being an active participant is going to be just a huge factor in not only supporting that youth but supporting themselves as well.

Bruce Moody:

And I have a question, and I know we've talked about this in previous episodes, but I think it's really important as you're talking about working with the child, the terms that we use. Because this child has engaged in a behavior, but this behavior doesn't fully define the child. Can you just address that in the context of what we've just been discussing?

Natalie Gallo:

Absolutely. I think Julia mentioned this earlier, and like you said in previous podcasts, that when it's a youth or an adolescent who is engaged in this behavior, we really see this as a behavior and not a static quality of this youth. Like Julia mentioned, the risk and the rate of youth growing up to be adults who continue to engage in these behaviors is extremely low, particularly with best practice treatment as low as 2% to 3%. And so recognizing that this is a behavior at its core, and though a tough one to navigate, a tough one to think about, this is still a kid. This is still a kid with a ton of other qualities that's still growing, that's still developing, that has made a choice. And that's very different from a youth who is unchangeable in a way that might really lead to some of that fear from caregivers.

Bruce Moody:

If problematic sexual behavior occurs within a family, how can parents support all the children involved? What is safety and supervision planning and what are some examples of it?

Julia Grimm:

So the first thing that I want to say in answer to that question, Bruce, is when we're talking about a parent who is the parent of both the child who has initiated in or exhibited the problematic sexual behavior and the child who has been impacted by that problematic sexual behavior, that can be an incredibly difficult position for that parent to be in, where they want to love and support and protect all of their children, but they're also feeling some really messy feelings about potentially their child who's engaged in the problematic sexual behavior or the situation on the whole. I've had caregivers say, "It feels like I'm being split in half, trying to be there for both of my children." And so first, I just want to acknowledge and validate what a challenging position that can be. And when we have parents in that position, we first talk about let's establish physical and psychological safety for all of your children.

And examples of this can look like rearranging sleeping arrangements, ensuring that there is somehow line of sight and sound supervision of all the children in the home at the same time. Putting monitoring systems in place in the home, things like using bells on doors to hear when people are coming and going, using baby monitors in the home to maintain that good sight and sound supervision. And in some cases, certainly not all, but in some cases establishing safety might look like the exhibiting child maybe residing with another family member for a temporary period of time while we work to establish a way to safely reunify the family in the future. But

those are some of the things that we talk about first and foremost is establishing psychological and physical safety for everyone involved.

And at the same time, we're helping caregivers hold space for all of their children's emotions. So at the same time that we are encouraging parents to reassure their child who exhibited problematic sexual behavior, "Hey, I'm here for you. I've got you. I'm not going anywhere. We're going to do this together." We're also encouraging them to reassure the impacted sibling, "It's my job to keep you safe. We're going to get your sibling help. Thank you so much for telling me this happened. We're not going to allow this to happen again." And being able to hold space for all of those emotions and all of those messages all at the same time. That's also why it's so critical that parents recognize that, hey, you are as deserving of support in all of this as your kids are. I've often told caregivers, "Listen, your job is to have your kids' back. My job is to have both of yours." Because they are just as important in this process as their children, and they deserve to have the same amount of support as their kids are getting.

Bruce Moody:

What protective factors can help prevent the onset or the continuation of problematic sexual behaviors?

Natalie Gallo:

Yeah, that's a great question, Bruce. I think just like what Julia said, that supervision and oversight, whether it's eyes-on supervision, sound-level supervision, it's going to be a really important factor to ensure that this PSB or problematic sexual behavior may not continue if we know that this has already happened. But also even on the prevention from this happening to begin with, one thing that we will always plug is as much open communication between trusted adults and the youth in the home as possible. We actually did a whole podcast on how we can have these conversations around what's OK, what's appropriate and what's not with youth from the caregiver end. But that open communication is going to be a really critical piece, that supervision and guidance, teaching those healthy boundaries and setting those healthy boundaries in the home, supporting youth and having positive peer interactions, positive peer friendships and offering youth opportunities where they can build self-confidence and excel and succeed in extracurriculars or via academics.

And for those youth that have a hard time managing feelings or problem-solving or controlling impulses, supporting them in developing different coping skills or different strategies to help them manage some of those challenges that they might be experiencing.

Bruce Moody:

So what are some different types of clinical treatment that might be helpful? Is the parent typically involved in the treatment, and if so, how?

Julia Grimm:

Yeah, so clinical treatment ... If the problematic sexual behavior is something that rises to the level of thinking — hey, we need some clinical intervention here, we need to do some therapy around this — then approaches that bolster and increase and enhance all of those protective factors that Natalie just discussed are the kinds of treatments that we use. So we're teaching and promoting healthy decision-making skills. We're helping kids recognize what their feelings are and how to manage those feelings in ways that are safe and productive and not harmful to themselves or others. We're teaching good comprehensive sex education. That might include information around relevant laws and legal consequences so that kids and families can make informed decisions when it comes to sexual behaviors. We are teaching abuse prevention skills, family communication, rule setting, rewards and consequences. And so, while some of the treatment will focus directly on the sexual behavior that occurred, and specifically around topics like sex laws or sex education, much of the treatment really should focus on generalizable decision-making skills that will help in any difficult behavior or problem behavior, sexual or otherwise.

And what research has shown over and over again is whether we're talking about problematic sexual behaviors or whether we're talking about any other old behavior problem that we see in kids, caregivers are critical to change and to maintaining those positive gains in the long run. And so absolutely, caregivers, parents are included in treatment. They're learning all these same skills right alongside their kids, and they're learning how to reinforce these skills at home and at school, and across the environments their children are spending time in. Caregivers are the magic ingredient to positive outcomes for kiddos. We can't do this without them. They're the center of our team and we want them at the table.

Bruce Moody:

Julia and Natalie, I'm so grateful to have you on the podcast again to talk about this topic, and there are other episodes addressing this topic, deeper dives and different aspects of this topic. And we also have a number of links in the program notes for people can get some more information. Let's get some parting words from each of you. Natalie, let's start with you.

Natalie Gallo:

Yeah. If parents or caregivers in any capacity are listening and can walk away with one or two take-home messages, it's I think first and foremost that you're not alone. There's others that have experienced what you're experiencing, and that there's hope, that there's so many things that can be put into place, support that you can access to help you and your family move forward, and that it's OK to ask for your own help because you also deserve support. And I'm sure Julia has some other main take home messages as well.

Julia Grimm:

Yeah, I think the only thing that I would add to that, Natalie, is that your child needs you more than they need anyone else, as a caregiver, as a parent. We've heard from kids over and over again who have completed our treatment program: they don't think they would've been as

successful or even successful at all without the involvement of their parent. So kids need their parents more than they need anyone else. And when as a parent you have your own support network so that you can have that space to feel whatever messy feelings you have and ask whatever messy questions you might have, so then you can show up with confidence and calm and commitment to your child's well-being. I used the words magic ingredient a minute ago, but that's the magic that our kiddos really need to move on from behaviors like this. So I think that's the big take-home message that I would want parents to hear.

Bruce Moody:

And we appreciate this very much. We appreciate all that you do in this very, very important topic and the help you provide to military families. Natalie Gallo is a master trainer through the National Center for the Sexual Behavior of Youth, and Julia Grimm is an independent trainer and consultant for the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth.

And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department, and we want to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. Click on it, send us a note, questions that you might have, comments about this episode or an idea for a future episode. And be sure to go ahead and subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you very much for listening today. Take care. Bye-bye.