

# Helping a Youth Take Accountability

## **Therapeutic Reparation for Problematic Sexual Behavior Part 2 of 6**

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Clarification has historically been the term used for this part of the treatment process for youth. It was a concept borrowed from the treatment of adults who cause sexual harm. I have chosen to use the term “Accountability” which is more appropriate for young people. It is recommended to use good judgment if the word “apology” is used so the need for forgiveness is not implied. Other terminology appropriate for youth and teens to explain this process in treatment is “accepting wrongdoing”, “taking responsibility”, “disclosure” or “narrative of the problematic sexual behavior”. Sometimes the term “apology” holds a special meaning in the family, either positive or negative. Was it forced among the siblings when they were younger, were they punished for not apologizing, are religious beliefs attached to confessing sins? etc. The youth and family should determine which word they would like to use to describe this phase of treatment. In addition, we must remember that children and youth are not likely to recall details of the abusive events in the same way and the goal is not so much to “clarify” and give details of the abusive events, as it is to take responsibility and make amends for the harmful behavior.

### *The Purpose*

The youth who caused the harm must take (mostly) full responsibility for their behavior and understand that sexual behavior is harmful to other child(ren). The motivators for the youth with PSB to complete this process of accountability is so they can move forward with reparation and ultimately reduce the unhealthy shame (not the guilt) that is likely to be felt when facing a wrong doing. Empathy is only part of the puzzle. The amount of empathy a youth is capable of is dependent on their moral/cognitive/social/emotional development. This development will happen at different ages for different children. The caregivers of the youth must also accept that the youth is responsible for their illegal behavior and not make excuses for the child’s or teen’s choices. As I heard Keven Creeden say, it is not necessary for a youth to admit to every single sexually abusive act in order to have successful treatment. The process of treatment is the same whether the youth commits one act or twenty.

### *It’s a Process*

The youth who caused sexual harm completes the accountability phase of treatment when they can describe at least one of the events of the abuse in detail to their therapist. There should be a semi-coherent narrative of the abusive events that are reasonably similar between the youth

who was sexually abused and the youth with PSB. The two accounts should be “in the same ball park”. This can be determined by coordination between the two therapists involved or in comparison to the forensic evaluations or police records. This must be done in order to assure accountability to the facts of the abuse. Even more accountability can happen if the two therapists help answer questions from the child who was abused, by sending letters back and forth, processing them in individual therapy or having joint sessions. This step may take several months and be an ongoing process during treatment. All therapeutic decisions for written or physical contact are based on the emotional needs of the child who was abused and what will help them feel emotionally and physically safe.

### *It's a really long process*

There are many, many reasons why a youth had inappropriate sexual behavior in the first place; I refer to these as “vulnerability factors”. After knowing the facts of the abuse, the therapist can help the youth with PSB understand their thoughts and feelings associated with the sexual behavior. This often leads to discussions of triggers or other vulnerability factors that are all part of the puzzle. Eventually, there will be a hypothesized theory on “why” the abuse occurred, involving at least several vulnerability factors. This theory is verified with caregiver’s input and other family members reaction is included in order to create a “family narrative”. Cognitive distortions of both the youth with PSB and the caregivers are discussed. Most often denial and justifications are believed in order for the client and their family to avoid feeling shame. Caregivers may need extra help from their own therapist at this point in order to manage their own thoughts and feelings. Don’t focus too much on figuring out all the reasons “why”; while at the same time, know enough to make sure vulnerability factors are mitigated in order to provide safety in the future. Focus of creating a “new normal” in the family. Please use balance and be mindful when discussing triggering events. The goal is to understand the problem, while placing the right amount of blame on the right person or event, not too much and not too little. For example, instead of saying, “Joey only did this to his sister since it was done to him”, rephrase the statement with “being sexually abused might be one of the reasons why Joey chose to sexually abuse his sister, and now our family is going to change some things....”

### *Who else is responsible?*

Occasionally, the caregivers are also partially responsible for the inappropriate sexual behavior and will need to take responsibility and write letters of accountability to the youth involved. For example, if they did not provide adequate supervision, or they knew the youth had problems with their sexual behavior and did not seek treatment earlier. No matter which factors are involved in the dynamics of the abuse, the youth with PSB still made a choice to act out sexually with another youth and they are still responsible for that part of the equation.

Once the caregivers have discussed their role in the problem and the siblings' point of view is discussed, a "family narrative" can be developed and perhaps written down. The details of the abuse are not included in the family narrative, but all family members must be able to make sense of what has happened and have a clear understanding of the family story. And, just for the record, I believe that the child who was compliant or coerced (tricked, threatened, too young, too trusting, etc) into the sexual behavior is never responsible.

*Don't forget the positive*

The detailed narrative must include hope. This is best stated with resiliency factors of both the youth and the family. Remember, attending treatment is a strength, admitting a problem is a strength and the desire to move forward is a strength. All things the client and family can be proud of.

Additional resources and articles that are intended to accompany this article available on [www.sheryloverby.com](http://www.sheryloverby.com)

- Part 1 Understanding Reparation
- Part 3 Accountability Family Session
- Part 4 Caregiver Letter of Praise and Support
- Part 5 Apology Letters
- Part 6 The Reparation Project

**Sources:**

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3. [NCSBY website, section on reunification. http://www.ncsby.org/content/reunification](http://www.ncsby.org/content/reunification)
4. OU Health and Sciences Center, CBT PSB training, helping caregivers write letters of support and encouragement, Carrie Swisher and Jane Silvosky.
5. Considering Family Reconnection and Reunification after Child Sexual Abuse: A Road Map for Advocates and Service Providers. <https://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications-guides/considering-family-reconnection-and-reunification-after-child>