

# Accountability Family Session

## **Therapeutic Reparation for Youth with Problematic Sexual Behavior Part 3 of 5**

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In cases of sexual abuse between young members of the same family, I recommend an accountability family session. This type of session IS NOT intended for families in which an adult sexually abuses a child. However, if there is sibling sexual abuse, boundaries have been violated and family messages are often confusing. The accountability family session eliminates secrecy and ambivalence and ultimately helps both children feel safe and supported. This session is especially helpful if the children involved in the sexual behaviors/abuse are living in the same home or plan to be reunited in the future. The following information are guidelines for most families. Please use good judgement and obtain consultation if you are trying to decide if this type of family session would be helpful.

### *Who is involved and when*

The accountability family session includes all adult and child/adolescent family members who are aware of the sexual abuse and occurs during Phase I of treatment or *as soon as appropriate as determined by the therapists*. If the child who was abused is not ready or not interested in this type of family session, it does not happen. Their emotional needs are the first priority. This session may take place prior to full disclosure of the abuse by either child and would ideally happen before reunification if the children were separated. The session is conducted by a therapist who is comfortable with family dynamics and can be directive in family sessions. All parties must prepare for the session separately in individual therapy sessions; the caregivers, the child who initiated the sexual misbehavior and the child who was abused. Ideally, all the therapists involved with the family can attend and watch for body language, flashbacks or other hidden messages in the family.

### *What to Say*

Caregivers should write their thoughts down to make it easier in the accountability session to stay focused and respond in a helpful way. I believe it is important for each caregiver involved to make a statement consistent with their personality and beliefs. It will not be helpful to a child for their caregiver to say something that is inauthentic. It does not have to be long or detailed, but children benefit from hearing similar but separate messages from their caregivers. So, in front of both children involved in the sexual misbehavior, in the same session, the caregivers each say in their own words:

- a. They believe the sexual abuse is true and they believe the child with problematic sexual behavior is accountable for making a wrong choice. They will love and support this child and make sure this child is offered the best type of treatment and legal support available.
- b. They are glad that the child who was abused has disclosed their account of the sexual problem/event to the authorities and that this child has done nothing wrong. They will love and support this child and make sure they are offered the best type of treatment available. In addition, they will help them feel safe by providing the required amounts of supervision.
- c. They will do all they can to participate in treatment and to make sure the family heals and that no one is ever sexually abused again.

*Who else is responsible?*

Occasionally, the caregivers are also partially responsible for the inappropriate behavior and will need to take responsibility and write letters of accountability to the youth involved. This was discussed in Part 2, Helping a Youth Take Accountability. This family session, which is deliberately focused on sending positive messages to both children at the same time, may not be the right time or place to discuss another person's responsibility.

*The Letter Alternative*

If the abused child is not ready to be in the same room with the sibling who abused them, writing a letter is a good alternative. In this letter, all the same things listed above would be expressed by the caregivers. I generally recommend one letter from each caregiver, but messages for all children are included in the same letter. Please be mindful if you think someone might find this letter and use it as a weapon to humiliate another member of the family. The best thing about a letter is that neither child can question or misremember the intent of the caregivers or the messages of accountability and hope.

*If Done Well*

The therapist in charge of the accountability session will openly address the dynamics that are displayed during this session. Children may ask questions if needed or indicate their feelings about hearing these messages in a formal and concrete way. The therapist then acknowledges the strengths in the family and re-instills visions of hope, healing and possible reunification in the future. It is not uncommon for things to happen in the session that were not anticipated. It is important that the adults and children process their feelings about this session later in individual therapy. It may be necessary to have more than one session to successfully convey the messages of accountability. In order to be absolutely sure that this session remains positive, please review the caregiver's notes or letters BEFORE they are shared with the

children. If a caregiver makes an unhelpful statement or deflects accountability off of the youth with PSB, the family therapist must be prepared to reframe and address the issue in front of everyone. If done well, this type of family session encourages a feeling of emotional safety for everyone and hopefully, treatment will proceed faster and smoother.

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 2 Helping Youth take Accountability
- Part 4 Caregiver Letter of Praise and Support
- Part 5 Apology Letters
- Part 6 Reparation Projects

**Sources:**

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2. A Collaborative Approach For Family Reconciliation And Reunification With Youth Who Have Caused Sexual Harm by Joann Schladale MS LMFT  
<http://resourcesforresolvingviolence.com/publication3.pdf>
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>