How do children cope with sexual abuse?
If you are being sexually abused as a child you have to develop coping strategies in order to survive. Jenni Whitehead explores some of the coping strategies described by adult survivors in order to survive child sexual abuse the child has to find a way of coping. Children do this in many different ways. Some coping strategies are fairly common, most survivors developing them to some degree; for other children their method of coping is unique to them. It is difficult for children to describe their method but we can draw on the accounts of adult survivors to understand the child.

Minimising
Minimising means reducing an event to something that can be coped with: ‘It wasn’t that bad’, ‘It didn’t affect me’, ‘He was OK mostly’, ‘It could have been worse, I didn’t die or anything’. The child coping with sexual abuse may attempt to minimise the act of abuse or the effect it had on them. “There is a risk that for some children minimising can cause them to start to identify with the person that abused them.

“For some children this may work. However, there is a risk that for some children minimising can cause them to start to identify with the person that abused them. In a very small minority of cases minimisation to the point of identifying with the aggressor may cause the child to go on to develop a sense of entitlement - a belief that they can use the same power as the aggressor on others. Children who are minimising may tell us only half of the story or tone it all down. They are not lying, they are making the situation small enough to cope with.

Rationalising
Rationalising is a way of explaining away the abuse. Making excuses for the abuser is a way of coping with the fact that this person could do such a thing: ‘He was drunk, so probably didn’t know what he was doing’; the question ‘what could have happened to this poor person to cause them to resort to this’. In this way the child tries to shift the blame for the abuse away from the abuser.

For some children rationalising means blaming themselves: ‘It must be something about me that allowed him to do this.’ The ability to understand why a person abused you is dependent on the explanation given. Some perpetrators will feed the child messages in order to pass the blame over onto the child: ‘You’re so sexy I can’t help myself.’ If that’s the only explanation that is given the message to the child is, ‘It’s your fault for being so sexy.’

Rationalising is a way of trying to forgive the abuser as a way of suppressing the child’s often angry feelings, which themselves can be frightening.

Denial
Denial is pretending what is happening isn’t and that what happened didn’t. Denying the abuse is sometimes used as a strategy to avoid telling anyone about the abuse. Telling runs the risk of not being believed and for many children the idea of not being believed especially by your main carer is just too painful to contemplate. Denial is a strong feature of sexual abuse and is often the first reaction of even the non-abusing parent, so children have good reason to use denial as a coping mechanism.
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“In some cases the child may be able to disclose the abuse but deny that it had any effect on them. This is another coping mechanism that has its own risks. Denial may lead a small minority of children to develop a belief that abuse is not so bad and that therefore if they were to do the same to others it would not have a harmful effect.

Disassociation
Disassociation is a very common coping strategy. The child develops the ability to mentally leave the abusive event as it is happening. The journey they make is inside their heads, to try to find a safe place. In this way the child survives the abuse by feeling nothing. This is a very useful strategy for children; however, once this method of coping becomes a pattern it will click in at other times when anything occurs that causes stress or that reminds them in any way of the abusive event. Not so useful in sex education classes.

Splitting
The term ‘splitting’ is used clinically to describe the tendency to view people or events as either all good or as all bad. This way of coping allows the child to hold opposite un-integrated views.

For example, the child who separates the father whom she depends on for affection and protection from the father who sexually abuses her. The image of the ‘good father’ is kept in tack; however, the child is likely to see themselves as the ‘all bad’ child to balance the situation and justify the behaviour of the ‘all good’ father. Splitting also describes a normal developmental task where the very young toddler begins to integrate the good and bad within their parent. The toddler years, as most of us know, can be very difficult to manage and it is often within this time that the toddler discovers that their parent can get cross with them. They discover the good and the bad in the same person and have to re-integrate these two aspects of their parent.

Splitting can also be used to describe the feeling a child has when they separate their consciousness from their body described above (disassociation).

Creating chaos
Children sometimes develop a coping mechanism that is about creating chaos. Creating chaos forces people to take notice, to drop what they are doing and to run to the apparent emergency. For some children this is a way of drawing the attention that they need. Often, however, the attention is negative so the child loses out again. Sexually abused children are often attention-needing. I am using the word ‘needing’ as opposed to ‘seeking’ deliberately to make the point that if a child is in need of attention sometimes the only way they can make someone hear is by creating a mess. Creating chaos can also serve another purpose: it can divert people away from the real problem. For some children creating tension and chaos can feed a type of addiction to intensity and drama; however, feeding this habit is costly and tends to be used as a way of avoiding issues.

Blocking it out
Young people may use a variety of substances as a way of blocking out memories of abuse. Drinking and drug use may block out feelings and memories but the effect is shortlived, so there is a high risk that the young person develops an addiction.
Disappearing
Sexual abuse survivors often develop a knack of ‘disappearing’. ‘Fading’ or ‘spacing out’ are also terms to describe this effect. I used to work with a girl and you could almost see her shutters come down. Physically they are present but actually they have gone inside their heads.

“One of the adult survivors I worked with described to me how she would spend up to a third of her waking day ‘invisible’. She also noted that she was pretty sure that when she was in this state other people stopped seeing her. This of course is another way of escaping, of disassociating, of avoiding having to deal with the real world.

Supervigilance
Many abused children live in a state of constant supervigilance, alert to any possible threat or attack. Always needing to sit near the door on the edge of the seat. Always ready to run. Or alternatively superalert to the needs of others, constantly trying to anticipate the other person’s mood and actions.

Being constantly busy
Keeping busy is another way of coping – just not stopping until tiredness takes over.

There are, of course, good and difficult effects of both supervigilance and keeping busy. On the one hand these coping mechanisms have served in some way to keep the child safe, on the other they are very tiring and children constantly in one of these states may simply run out of steam and suffer actual physical and psychological exhaustion.

Running away
All four of my children have at some time run away! For them it meant a trip to the end of the road or garden, a bit of a sulk and then a return for a cuddle. Sexually abused children may also run away but they are doing something very different from my children. They are actually running away! How scary is that! I have known children as young as 11 run away and manage to get themselves quite some distance. We always need to ask the question, ‘What are they running away from?’

Fantasy
Fantasising that your family is fantastically caring or that you have special powers, or that you are about to be swept off by a rich aunt who lives in a far-off country are all ways of coping with harsh realities. I remember working with a little boy who convinced himself that he would, at any moment, be swept away to Canada by his grandparents who lived there. The problem was he pretended to know everything about Canada having told the lie that he had already visited them. His information about Canada was so inaccurate I ended up buying him a huge book about Canada so he could at least get some of his facts right!

Lying
Many children who are sexually abused are taught by the abuser to tell lies: to cover up behaviour and to make excuses. Some children become so used to telling lies it’s almost second nature. I worked with a group of adult survivors that included one young woman who told the group very proudly about how many degrees she had. Now apart from the fact that she was only 22 it soon became apparent that she had great difficulty reading and writing.
“Many children who are sexually abused are taught by the abuser to tell lies... Some children become so used to telling lies it's almost second nature. “The problem with lying is twofold: one, children aren’t very good at it and two, people start just seeing them as liars and if they try to tell about the abuse people may think that they are lying. One of the most difficult cases I dealt with fell on the fact that a child’s teacher told the court that she frequently fantasised and told lies. Well yes, she did, but not about the abuse.

**Are coping mechanisms helpful?**

Yes and no. They are the child’s way of getting through, of surviving. Some demand a high level of skill and some of the skills developed can mean that as an adult the person is well suited to a particular job. For instance, the supervigilant child may grow into an adult who is very perceptive adult and may be well suited to work in an emergency service.

Some strategies stop being helpful in adulthood. The other day I met the father of a child I had worked with a long time ago. The child had been sexually abused by his cousin. His daughter at seven became electively mute and carried this way of coping right through school. She had been through practically every specialist service in the city to no avail. She is now 19 and Dad stopped me in the street to tell me that she has taken up dancing. I was amazed, but even more so when he told me that she travels once a week from Bradford to London for a particular dance class, stays in a hotel overnight and travels back the next day. By herself! I had to ask, ‘What happened to the muteness?’ Dad smiled, ‘I think she got bored with it and last year she just started talking.’

**Author details**

*Jenni Whitehead has worked with and on behalf of children and young people for over 30 years; she is presently employed by Education Bradford as their Lead Officer Child Protection.*