

# INCEST ... IT'S TIME TO TALK ABOUT IT.

Judith Golden

*Conseillère pour enfants molestés, l'auteure rapporte qu'une femme sur dix est une victime de l'inceste. L'inceste comprend tous les actes d'abus sexuels, commis par un adulte qui abuse de son pouvoir. L'enfant ne peut jamais consentir aux actes parce qu'elle n'a ni l'information nécessaire, ni la force physique, ou psychologique, pour résister. La victime de l'inceste croit qu'elle est la seule à être ainsi molestée et devient aliénée. Les conséquences pour son développement à venir peuvent être traumatiques. Puisque presque 85 p. 100 des molestations sont perpétrées par des personnes connues de l'enfant, il est important qu'ils sachent qu'aucun adulte n'a le droit de toucher leur corps "là où il est couvert d'un maillot de bain" (pour employer les mots d'une mère). Le soutien est essentiel: nous ne devons pas ignorer ce que les enfants nous disent. Nous devons par-dessus tout leur apprendre à faire confiance à leurs sentiments et à dire "non". L'abus sexuel ne peut pas être oublié, mais il peut être résolu. Il est donc important de continuer à parler de l'inceste.*

"It was always important that Joan try and be a good girl. She never wanted to cause any more problems for her mother and father than they already had. They argued a lot and were frequently angry at each other. Sometimes the anger would spill over to Joan and they would discipline her, unfairly. Joan knew that they would love her if she were obedient. She tried to please them and help out in the family. She was quite proud of being responsible enough to help with her two younger sisters.

"Joan was eight the first evening her father came to her bedroom. He sat by her bed and talked gently to her, praising her for her efforts in the family and telling her how happy he was with her. As he talked to her, he stroked her arm. Joan was very pleased to have this attention from Father and, when he hugged her very hard and close, could feel that he was trembling. She also felt a lot of emotion that she didn't understand. After that

evening, Father often came to her room and began doing some strange things. He would kiss her on the mouth and he began touching her body all over. Joan became an incest victim.

"Over the years, the sexual part of the relationship became more complex. Joan found herself looking forward to Father's nightly visits but also feeling disturbed by them. She knew they were wrong because they couldn't be talked about. She also learned that she couldn't say no. Father always knew how to get her to consent. Once when she was really tired and said no, Father didn't talk to her for three days. She also wanted to talk to Mother about sex but somehow felt it was impossible. After the onset of Father's attention to her, however, there seemed to be a more relaxed feeling in the house and fewer quarrels.

"By the time she was fourteen, the incest was continuing three times a week. There had never been intercourse. By now, Joan knew that she could get pregnant if there was intercourse. She was firm in not allowing this to happen and Father accepted it. The incest stopped when Joan, so burdened by conflicts, put a lock on her bedroom door. She never told anyone and didn't discuss it with her father. As a matter of fact, she was twenty-five before she was hospitalized for severe depression, and that is when the facts emerged."

The most startling statistic on incest is that one in ten women is an incest victim. When we talk about incest, we include acts that are sexually abusive and exploitative, perpetrated by an adult, parent-like figure who abuses his parental power with a child. The child can never consent to the acts, really, because she does not have information about the nature of the acts that are being committed. She also does not have the physical or psychological power to resist the manipulations of the offender. The perpetrator almost always knows that what he is doing is wrong. He puts his own needs above the healthy development of his child. Most children are powerless in this

situation. They do not wish, like Joan, to upset their family, and they do not have a strong enough sense of themselves and their own rights to say no to something that they are uncomfortable with. They are caught in a confusing situation where someone they love and trust is involving them in an activity that they feel is wrong and from which they cannot escape. How do they make sense later in life about trusting a loved one?

Incest is a form of sexual violence, committed toward women when they are children, that can have traumatic consequences for future development. However, there is a bright side to this picture now. Incest has come out of the closet. We are now talking about it; there are articles written about sexual abuse; information on the long-term effects is available; there are TV shows about it; and there have been movies and plays produced for high-school and primary-school children. Instead of hiding this side of our sexuality, we are discussing it in public and taking it out of the private sphere. Help is being made available in the form of crisis support groups for kids of all ages and their parents as well as for incest survivors. Longer-term therapy groups are also being held.

What is the effect of this information explosion? One incest father that I worked with, who had started to abuse his daughter when she was thirteen, said that the material he read on the subject provoked him to stop the incest, and he began to give all sorts of behavioural cues to his family that something was wrong. Such information could have helped Joan to say no and to get help in the form of telling someone what had gone on. Or it might have given her the ability to say no firmly and trust her feelings when the incest first started. Taking the mystery and mystique away from a hidden activity brings it into the range of normalcy.

One of the most difficult aspects of incest is its accompanying alienation for the victim, who often believes that she is the only one who

is being sexually abused. One survivor said that, as a young girl, she would go to school and listen to her friends and hope that they would talk about their fathers in the same way that she knew hers. They never did and of course incest wasn't talked about on the school curriculum; so she was kept a prisoner of the silence that used to surround incest. I once did a training session on incest for a group of high-school teachers. One teacher said he could speak only as a parent who did not want incest as part of the school curriculum. He did not want his daughter to know about such sexual evils. I applaud parents who want to protect their children but not parents who do not give their children basic survival information.

What is important in helping women to survive sexual abuse? First we must talk about prevention. Parents are often very vigilant in helping their children to discuss that aspect of sexual abuse involving strangers. We caution children to stay away from strangers and not to accept candy from them. But 85 per cent of sexual abuse is committed by people who are known to the child. We are reluctant to warn children about people who know them and may even love them. It is important survival information to tell kids that people who are caring for them may decide that they want to touch the kids' bodies or have the kids touch their bodies, even though they know it isn't a good thing to do. One mother told her daughter that no adult should touch her anywhere on her body that was covered by a bathing suit, and vice versa. To be more frank, we can tell children that no adult has a right to put his hands down their panties. . . that no adult touches their breasts or genitals.

We must also support children when they resist the physical advances of a family member or friend. How can we help them to say no to dangerous physical approaches if we fail to give them the reassurance that, when Auntie goes to kiss them, it is O.K. to say no? Are we sometimes more wor-

ried about the grownup's feelings and not the child's? In addition, children often tell us stories about adults that sound impossible. We often dismiss them because it is too difficult to pay attention to those details that are disturbing. How does this feel to a child who might be worried about not being believed by a parent if she tells her about sexual violence? Above all, we must teach children to trust their feelings. If their feelings tell them that a particular physical touch makes them uncomfortable, then they don't need any other reason to say no.

If the child has been a victim of some sexual violence, it is imperative that she can talk about it. In being able to talk about it, she can be helped. The family can be helped. The next generation can be helped. It is only in an atmosphere in which she will be believed that the child will come to the parent. We need to teach children that secrets between them and adults that can never be shared are not to be kept. Secrets between children are different, and secrets that are surprises are also different.

In talking about the sexual abuse, the child is relieved of the responsibility that she might have caused the incest or, in Joan's case, that she didn't say no. It is important for any incest victim to know that she was not responsible for what happened. In being free to talk and get help, the incest victim can be relieved of the impact of the guilt that she feels and can learn to trust adults again. She can express the anger so that it is not turned inward and not put into active hatred of men and women. And as we talk about what has happened, the survivor learns to feel good about herself and raise

her self-esteem. In some cases before discussing the incest, the family is estranged, and this too can be relieved as all members of the family bring their secrets out into the open and support each other.

It is important that any victim of sexual abuse feel that there are people with whom she can share what has happened and who will not only be supportive but do not condemn her for what happened to her. In addition, we must be clear about our own feelings toward the perpetrator and the mother. If we condemn them without seeing their humanness, then we cannot effectively help anyone with this problem.

Joan was lucky. She found herself at a hospital that referred her to a therapist, who worked with her intensively for over a year. At the same time she went to a group for incest survivors who helped support her and helped her to feel less alienated and isolated. They also helped her to think about confronting her father with what he had done. In short, Joan was helped to gain the power back that she lost when she tried to be a good girl at her own expense in order to help other people.

Sexual abuse, like other life traumas, cannot be forgotten. However, it can be resolved so that the emotional impact can be integrated into the totality of a woman's definition of self. Let's keep talking about incest. It can only be helpful!

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## THE BEST KEPT SECRET

*The Best Kept Secret* is a story about incest. The movie takes place within twenty-four hours. It highlights the desperation of an incest victim, Lisa, almost sixteen years old, as she ends the incestuous relationship with her father that has been ongoing for six years. His restrictiveness and his jealousy of her relationship with her boyfriend becomes intolerable. Lisa must "blow the whistle." She discloses her terrible secret to Mother. With characteristic indecisiveness, Mother chooses to believe Father and deny support and protection to Lisa. The film ends with Lisa's defiant words as she faces Father. . . "never again."

The film is available in Canada from Mobius International, 175 King Street East, Toronto, Ontario M5A 1J4; (416) 862-0255. In the United States, contact Mobius International, Box 315, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey 07417; (201) 891-8240.

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