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Protecting Our Children

Melissa Ponce-Rodas

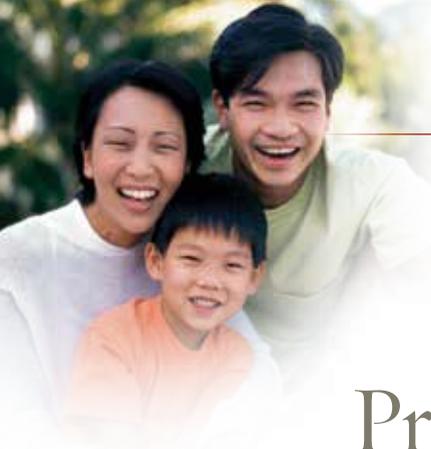
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Protecting Our Children

BY MELISSA PONCE-RODAS

We are in a battle for the safety and security of our children and families. Recent studies report that one in five girls and one in 20 boys are victims of sexual abuse. God is calling us to action. I recently received this message from an old friend: “I’ve been battling depression and PTSD for over six years. I am constantly struggling. My brother sexually abused me when I was 10 years old.” I cried; I could not think.

He had made himself vulnerable, and needed me to respond, so I thanked him for trusting me enough to share, said I was so sorry this had happened to him, and asked if he was getting professional help. When he replied, he sent 38 short messages. He was in therapy, he was on medication, but he was still struggling. It had “hit him” when he was 30 and helping a little girl who confessed her own abuse to him, telling him he was the only one she had told. Why did he share? I had believed him and created a safe space, so now he was telling me everything. He quit his job shortly after this experience, and then explained why to his mother. “She only half believed me, so I’ve never mentioned it to her again.” His own mother re-victimized him; he was alone. Again, I cried.

Sexual abuse is an underreported, taboo subject that is often ignored, which contributes to its continued occurrence in our homes, schools, churches and communities. Parents need to talk to kids, teaching them about their bodies, privacy and security. Assure them that, if anything happens, we will listen to them, believe them, protect them and defend them. Abusers often tell victims that the abuse is a secret, and that bad things will happen if they tell anyone. Encourage children not to keep secrets, and remind them you will help them if they are threatened.



The Seventh-day Adventist church in North America has acknowledged this risk and taken a great first step towards prevention. We now screen and train everyone who works with our children. Unfortunately, prevention cannot stop abuse from ever occurring, so we need to know how to intervene. If a child or adult tells us they’ve been abused, we need to assume they are telling the truth. Abuse is rarely fabricated. It takes much courage and strength to share and deal with the shame and stigma abuse creates. Then, we need to act. Only trained professionals should intervene, so we must contact the police, a doctor, a therapist, a social worker or another specialist who is trained to talk to kids or adults about what has happened.

Our God never sanctions abuse, but rather seeks healing for the afflicted and desires all of us to help. *The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me”* (Matthew 25:40). Survivors can overcome and heal, but the road to recovery is a long one and better traversed with a friend. Resources can be found at the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, <http://www.nsvrc.org/>, which can link you to local resources.

Melissa Ponce-Rodas is an assistant professor of Psychology at Andrews University. She and her husband, Segundo, have twin boys, Samuel and Jonathan. Her research and advocacy revolves around the intersections of religion and domestic violence.