

Project Harmony Responds to Recent Sexual Abuse Allegations

The last few months have brought a steady stream of attention on alleged sexual assault, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse from the highest positions in journalism, politics, entertainment and athletic organizations. Headlines range from:

Sexual Harassment Allegations Continue In The Entertainment Industry

Storm of sexual harassment claims engulfs Capitol Hill

Other women saying, 'Me, Too'

For many, surprise, shock, disbelief, and denial are common responses to such allegations. Especially if we are just hearing about it for the first time. Especially when some allegations happened so long ago – incidents dating back to childhood. Each new allegation should open our eyes to the insidious nature of sexual abuse and the natural tendency to deny it. Ultimately, however, are we as a society covering it up at the expense of those most vulnerable?

What we fail to realize is sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual assault – these are not just stories that have happened in the past. These are not just stories of high profile, powerful icons. These are stories that are happening today and every day. These are the stories I hear every day. These are the stories Project Harmony responds to every day. These are the stories Child Advocacy Centers (CAC) across the country respond to every day. For the 350,000 children helped by CACs this past year – these stories are their reality.

Despite our daily exposure to the issue, admitting it and talking about it is difficult. It is easier to think of this as a problem that only affects others, and certainly does not exist in our community. The truth is, it is happening right here in Omaha, Nebraska, and it is happening every day.

The statistics are startling. One out of 10 children is sexually abused before their 18th birthday. More upsetting, more than 90% of sexually abused children are abused by someone they know or love. In the past year alone, Project Harmony served over 2,750 children – spanning all racial, gender, age and socioeconomic differences.

Clearly, it is wrong to think of this as an epidemic that only exists in certain professions or geographic areas. These statistics are not confined to a certain population. These are the statistics impacting each one of us, including our very own children. There are 42 million survivors of sexual abuse in the United States, and it is time we heard their stories.

Survivors tend to question themselves, “Who will believe you?” “Will you be retaliated against?” “What will happen to your family/friends?” Unfortunately, all of these fears continue to be realities today. Treating sexual abuse as taboo only compounds survivors’ self-inflicted shame and humiliation. Instead,

we need to create a culture that removes the shame and silence surrounding abuse. Social movements such as #MeToo and #IWill break those barriers and provide strength and support for victims and survivors. These movements also challenge all of us to stop denying and covering up sexual abuse.

The media, specifically social media, have been great catalysts for those coming forward. We have seen first-hand how contagious courage can be. And yet, most of us continue to be surprised with each new story. I'm not. Every day I see the courage of children coming forward to share their story and every day I witness the power of their resilience.

The cycle of sexual abuse does not have to continue. Together, we can end it. END IT. But to do this – to really do this – we need to take action.

Let us use this steady stream of attention and the collective power of our voices to speak loudly and create a world in which we want to raise our children. Now is not the time to point fingers and cast blame, nor is it the time to turn a blind eye and hope it never impacts you.

We all have to have a stake in ending sexual abuse in our communities. We are all accountable. We are the ones who need to stand-up and say, "Enough!" Let us each commit to ending child sexual abuse so that we no longer need to deny, cover up, or be surprised – let's make sexual abuse a thing of the past.

We must follow *The 5 Steps to Protecting Our Children*.

- **Learn the facts.** The facts about child abuse can be staggering, but understanding the risks children face can help you better protect them.
- **Minimize opportunity.** More than 80% of child sexual abuse incidents occur when children are in isolated, one-on-one situations with adults or other youth. Make sure interactions can be observed and interrupted. Ask for protective best practices in schools and organizations that serve your children, including background checks and a code of conduct for staff and volunteers.
- **Talk about it.** Open conversations with children about body safety and boundaries is one of the best defenses against child sexual abuse. Talk with children when they are young, and use proper names for body parts. Tell children what parts of the body others should not touch. Use examples with situations and people in their lives. Teach children that they have the right to tell any person "NO" to unwanted or uncomfortable touch.
- **Recognize the signs.** Signs are often there, but you have to know what you're looking for - signs can be physical, emotional or behavioral.
- **React responsibly.** Be prepared to react calmly and responsibly if a child discloses abuse to you, or if you suspect or see that boundaries have been violated. If you suspect a child has been abused or neglected, call 1-800-652-1999 (CPS Hotline) in Nebraska or local law enforcement. In Iowa, call 1-800-362-2178 (DHS Hotline) or local law enforcement.

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ABOUT PROJECT HARMONY

Project Harmony is a nonprofit, community-based organization in Omaha, Nebraska, that has served more than 39,000 children during the past 22 years by providing a child friendly environment in which specially-trained professionals work together to assess, investigate, and resolve child abuse cases. In a nationally unique model, Project Harmony has one centralized location that co-houses with Omaha Police Department Child Victim/Sexual Assault Unit and Domestic Violence Unit, Nebraska Health & Human Services/Child Protection Service Initial Assessment and Child Abuse Hotline, Lutheran Family Services and Child Saving Institute. Project Harmony exists to protect and support children, collaborate with professionals and engage the community to end child abuse and neglect.