

Handout C
Page 1 of 2

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ACCOMMODATION SYNDROME

Summit describes five categories of this syndrome, two of which define basic childhood vulnerability and three are sequentially contingent on sexual assault. The purpose of this model is to outline why children of intrafamilial abuse might be reluctant to report. Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome is not present in all abused children and should not be used to “diagnose” abuse.

STAGE	OVERVIEW	EXAMPLE
Secrecy	Child typically does not tell. Threats from the abuser can instill belief in child that no one will believe him/her. The secrecy is the source of fear and the promise of safety. The secret takes on magical, monstrous proportions for the child.	“This is our secret; nobody else will understand.” “Don’t tell your mother. She will hate me, hate you, kill me, send you away, send me away.” “It will break up the family and you’ll end up in a foster home if you tell.” “If you tell, I won’t love you. I’ll kill you. I’ll kill your dog.”
Helplessness	In our society children are told to be obedient and affectionate with adults entrusted with their care. Children are warned to stay away from strangers, but most sexual abuse to children is perpetrated by trusted adults. The fact that the perpetrator is a trusted adult only increases the imbalance of power and helplessness of the child.	Victim will not cry out or say “no” to adult (e.g., Child will “play possum” and feign sleep during abuse). Dependent children are helpless to resist or complain.

From “The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome,” by R.C. Summit, 1983, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 7, pp. 177-193.

Handout C
Page 2 of 2

STAGE	OVERVIEW	EXAMPLE
<p>Entrapment & Accommodation</p>	<p>If the child did not seek or receive intervention, he/she perceives that there is no other option but to learn to accept the abuse and survive. Child believes he/she provoked the encounter and if he/she is "good" then family and home can be preserved. In this abusive role reversal, the child is given the power to destroy the family by telling and the responsibility to keep the family together through secrecy and submission.</p>	<p>"It's a good thing I have you to love me; otherwise I'd have to turn to your little sister." "If your mother ever found out, it would kill her." "If I couldn't count on you, I'd have to hang out in bars and look for other women."</p> <p>Child can develop appropriate or pathological defenses: overachiever, delinquent, suicidal, runaway, hypersexual.</p>
<p>Delayed, Unconvincing Disclosure</p>	<p>Disclosure can be delayed until adolescence when child challenges parent's authority. This often occurs during a family fight and disclosure is made with the child seeking understanding at the very time he/she is least likely to find it.</p>	<p>Authorities confronted with a history of rebellion by the child tend to identify with the problems the parents face with trying to deal with child's problematic behaviors. "Oh, she just made up that story because she is mad at me for trying to discipline her."</p>
<p>Retraction</p>	<p>Child's greatest fears have become a reality due to the disclosure. Child bears the responsibility of preserving or destroying the family: Bad choice = tell truth; good choice = recant and restore lie to save family. Unless there is special support for the child and intervention to force responsibility onto the abuser, the child will retract complaint.</p>	<p>"Why do you insist on telling those awful stories on your father? If you send him to prison, we won't be a family anymore and we'll end up on welfare." Child: "I've been really bad for years. I got mad at Dad when he hit me and told me I could not see my boyfriend any more. I made up that story to try to get even with him."</p>