



## **Tip Sheet on Teen Survivors and Parents/Guardians**

For many rural advocates, supporting teens is some of the most intimidating and confusing work they do. To support teen sexual violence survivors, advocates have to be able to work with and support their non-offending parents/guardians, as well as navigate different systems. It's a lot to manage. However, it's also true that rural advocates are creative and compassionate and can grow their skills to provide this important service. The tools and ideas presented here will help rural advocates welcome parents/guardians into advocacy services for themselves and navigate the boundaries necessary to provide empowering advocacy to the whole family.

Teens receive support from many different people and systems. Parents, guardians, extended family, teachers, neighbors, community groups, faith leaders, and friends all play important roles in the lives of teenagers. We know that teens harness support in many different areas of their lives, but parents/guardians play a particularly important and legal role. Often parents/guardians are gatekeepers of information and transportation. It is this reality that makes it necessary for advocacy programs to navigate parental involvement in the lives of teen sexual violence survivors. Therefore, this paper will give special attention to the relationship between teens and parents/guardians.

### **Educating Our Communities**

Providing outreach and awareness to our rural community members is a valuable way to provide education to parents/guardians about sexual violence. As we speak with service providers and community members, we don't know who is a parent/guardian of a teen. Every presentation, speaking engagement, educational session, and training is an opportunity to speak directly to the support systems of teens and provide education about trauma and healing.

Providing training about sexual violence in a variety of spaces and settings creates more educated, dedicated, and supportive members of our rural communities. When we form relationships with volunteers, board members, and passionate community members, they in turn are able to educate the community and refer friends and family for services. Sharing information about the long- and short-term symptoms of trauma can help parents/guardians better understand sexual violence and support their teen. Having a nuanced understanding of trauma can change parental anger, frustration, and disappointment to empathy, attention, and care. Keep parents/guardians in mind as you continue to attend events and create outreach materials.

Educational outreach to parents/guardians will increase the chances that a teen will come in for services. However, even if the teen never seeks services, parents/guardians will know where they can get services for themselves as they continue to support their child. The information we give parents/guardians filters down to teens and it changes how parents engage with their family and community. Whether or not we directly speak to every survivor in our rural communities, we can improve the support survivors receive from the community.



### **Navigating Parental Responses**

For teens who want their parents/guardians involved, this presents a powerful and potentially difficult path for our programs to navigate. Parents and family members are navigating their own intense feelings after a disclosure of sexual violence. It is normal for parents/guardians to feel guilt, anger, sorrow, shock, fear, confusion, discomfort, and loss of control. Just like survivors, parents/guardians will cope with their feelings in a variety of ways. Your program

may work with parents/guardians who desperately want to control every moment of advocacy the teen receives as a way of coping with the loss of control they feel. Your program may also work with parents/guardians who avoid setting foot in the building as a way of coping with the guilt they feel of not protecting their child. Our role is not to judge how parents/guardians cope, but instead to offer our healing services and tools to help them support their child.

Protective and loving parents/guardians don't always know how to act in trauma-informed ways. However, when we welcome parents/guardians into services for themselves, we can model a trauma-informed approach in all of our interactions. When parents/guardians have an outlet for their anger and discomfort they will be more present and able to support their teen. Engaging parents/guardians in the healing journey alongside teens exponentially increases the amount of support teens are getting.

Navigating advocacy with teen survivors and parents/guardians is further complicated when the person who sexually abused the teen is a family member. Great care needs to be given in determining the support and education provided to both the teen and the parent/guardian. The whole family will likely be impacted by this trauma so it may take the work of your entire program to provide advocacy services. Don't make assumptions about how the teen or parent/guardian feels or how they want to move forward. Instead always prioritize listening as together you can navigate the shifting emotions, needs, and family structure. Depending on the state or territorial laws, it is possible that the family will be involved with the legal and/or child welfare system. Advocates can provide education and help families understanding these systems. Your role as the advocate is to continue to help place the focus on the teen survivor.

### **Welcome Parents/Guardians to the Process**

A warm and intentional welcome in to services sets the tone for the rest of our program's relationship with a survivor or their support system. As part of intake we can ask teens, *who are your people? Who supports you, nourishes you, makes you feel good about yourself, takes care of you, talks with you about difficult things, or brings you joy? What connections with people or organizations makes you feel safe and inspires you?* These questions help teens tell us where support is and where it's missing.



We trust teen survivors when they tell us who is and isn't a safe person in their life, and we help teens navigate the barriers caused by lack of support. Serving teens generally means serving or interacting with their parents/guardians as well. Most parents/guardians are used to being involved in or managing any serious issues in their child's life. It can be surprising or unfamiliar to them to be asked to not participate in advocacy or counseling appointments.

Advocacy appointments are an opportunity to provide a safe space for teens to process feelings of fear, distrust, anger, and resentment towards unsupportive family. We can also help teens envision the healthy and loving relationships they will build in the future. As wonderful as parental involvement can be for some teens, for others it can be devastating. Adamantly encouraging teens to involve unsupportive parents/guardians can ruin any trust that has been built.

The laws that govern teens' rights to seek advocacy services and confidential services differ across the states, tribes, and territories. With the help of your coalition, research the laws or tribal codes that govern services to determine whether and when teens can consent to services without parental permission. Also look in to what the law says about teens' confidentiality rights. In some jurisdictions, for instance, teens must get parental consent to services, but the

services are still confidential. For more information about teen's confidentiality rights, check out the Victim Rights Law Center's [Jurisdiction-Specific Guides: Privacy Laws Impacting Survivors](#).

Just as we have an intake process for the teen survivor, we should also have a separate intake process for parents/guardians, ideally with a separate advocate. The intake process orients parents/guardians to our program and allows them to share their needs, fears, strengths, and resources. Being transparent about confidentiality, and how much your program intends to share what the teen discloses sets boundaries from the start. Consider including a letter to parents/guardians in the intake process. A letter from your program can be a tangible way to remind parents/guardians of your program's continued support and services. For an example of an intake letter, check out [A Welcoming Introduction to Services](#).

### **Advocacy Services for Parents/Guardians**

Actively supporting parents/guardians as the support system of survivors of sexual violence can be helpful to teens and parents/guardians alike. As we move forward past the intake process, we can offer information, answer questions, and provide a continued space for them to process their emotions away from the teen. The teenager experiencing sexual violence may have been the reason for initially seeking services, but parents/guardians may also be survivors themselves. When beginning work with a parent/guardian, be prepared to help navigate the traumas of both parent/guardian and teen.

Support groups specifically for parents/guardians can assist families in not feeling so alone and increases their support network. As parents/guardians share and care for one another, community is built. Hearing the same guilt, fear, and shame from other folks in the support group helps parents/guardians hear their own words in a new light. Having the opportunity to show compassion to others can facilitate compassion for themselves. In addition to peer support, a psycho-educational approach to support groups can be particularly useful for parents/guardians. Adolescence is a confusing and erratic time even before sexual trauma, so adding an educational component to the support group can provide a lot of much needed context. Often trauma symptoms, such as getting bad grades, a disinterest in school or social activities, or sleeping at unusual times of the day,

are seen by parents/guardians as behavioral issues. Reframing these as symptoms of trauma can alleviate parental frustrations and help them provide appropriate support to their child instead of punishment. To check out a parent/guardian support group curriculum, click [here](#).

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Navigating the trauma of sexual violence is difficult for all survivors. The intertwined relationships that teen survivors have with their parents/guardians can complicate services and the healing journey. However, it can also be the key to deep healing and a path forward. Parents/guardians who receive advocacy services alongside teenagers will be better educated and more equipped to understand and compassionately respond to their child's trauma. Advocacy services allow parents/guardians the space to process emotions that may be harmful to share in front of their teen; receive education about sexual violence and trauma; participate in peer level support with other parents; and to have assistance in navigating complex systems. Parental advocacy services also give parents/guardians a glimpse into the trauma informed advocacy services their teen is participating in.



Providing both the teen survivor and the parent/guardian with strong sexual violence advocacy services helps to restore a sense of control for the whole family. With the support of your agency and their family teen survivors can take a steady step forward down the path of healing.

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