

# protect your children from sexual abuse

*Editor's note:* Claire Silva is a mother of a child who survived sexual abuse, about which she wrote a book. Here she talks about the book and how her family continues the process of recovery.



*"Parents are not taught what signs to look out for. We are not taught to scrutinize everyone around our children and to trust our instincts. Unfortunately, the way most parents learn what the warning signs (are), is when it is too late — and their*

*child has already been violated. I wrote A Child's Heart Speaks: Surviving Sexual Abuse, to give parents the ammunition they need. No child should ever experience the horror my children suffered," stresses Claire Silva.*

by Claire Silva

I spent years educating my kids about strangers, good touch and bad touch, and general safety. I thought my children were 'safe'. But I didn't know that a perpetrator could expand and use their fears against them. I could have never imagined the terror my children would eventually experience at the hands of a juvenile — their older stepbrother.

When he was 9 years old, Adam (Silva's stepson) was brought home to America by me and my husband Bob. Adam transitioned well from his life in Cape Verde and quickly learned English, did well in school, was active in sports, and fit into American society as a 'good kid'. But when Adam turned 13, his mask was unveiled. Five year old Joey disclosed what Adam had been doing to him each night as the whole family slept. The next day, Adam was removed from the home and my family was thrown into a whirlwind of legal, mental health, and social service issues.

*A Child's Heart Speaks: Surviving Sexual Abuse* is about my family's story and also incorporates national interviews with adult survivors. The perpetrators who committed the crimes against the people I interviewed were their mothers, fathers, neighbors or friends of the family, local priests, and other family members.

This work gives a voice to the many children who silently suffer in terror, isolation, and confusion. This is a must read

for any parent. It is never too early or too late to talk about sexual abuse with your children. Young children need the crime to stop. And children who are now adults still carry their hidden scars deep within — and they often wait for someone to reaffirm that what happened to them was wrong and they are never to blame.

Readers of *A Child's Heart Speaks: Surviving Sexual Abuse* will learn:

- How to prevent the crime
- Warning signs of adult and juvenile perpetrators
- Signs that a child may have been violated
- What to do if child abuse is suspected
- The stages survivors go through in their own healing process
- How to support survivors and their families

At this point, I am happy my children are able to be kids again. They survived complete terror and fear. Now they deserve to be free and have fun. They are involved in sports, music, and playing with friends. I love to see them laughing, climbing a tree or finding a frog to name — the stuff boys should be doing in their spare time. Any time we can spend together as a family is so valuable. For their future, I just want them to be happy, comfortable with themselves, and appreciate their own individuality. My boys are

wonderful. They have proven that children are extremely resilient when nurtured and protected. They know they are loved and understand what happened to them was horrible and wrong.

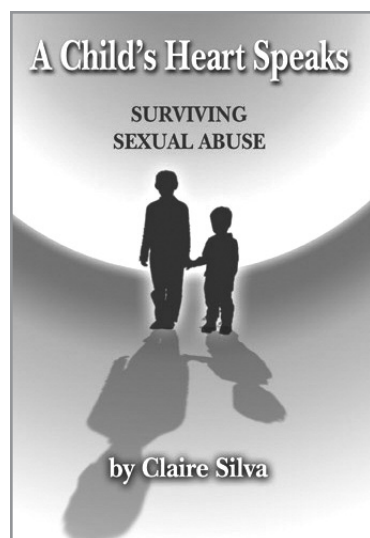
My husband and I are stronger together. It is a painful topic, but we manage to support each other the best we can. What is difficult for my husband is that he feels torn between his first-born child and our family. We know there can never be family reunification in our case, so for him (my husband), there is always going to be a part of the family that is missing. He still holds onto a lot of unnecessary guilt.

For me, the book has been a source of strength and cleansing. There were many times I broke down crying while writing and begged God for answers. Several times I screamed why! But, now that the book is done, it will be interesting to see how it can help others. Already several people have said they have learned from our experience and from the information in the book. The goal in writing the book was to help parents and survivors — and that is what it is doing, so it makes me feel fulfilled. I look at us now as a united family that supports each other. We are proof that there can be a happy life after abuse.

Since I've gone public with our story and the interviews with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, I often get comments from survivors who have read the book. Many of them lived quietly through their childhood trauma and remained silent as young adults. They grew up feeling isolated, vulnerable and lost. But when they read the book, they told me that they finally feel affirmed and empowered. They realize their feelings and thoughts are very normal for survivors and they no longer feel alone." ❦

Claire Silva has worked in the field of substance abuse and violence prevention for over 15 years. She has worked as a detoxification counselor, outreach worker, grants manager, task force coordinator, and became the executive director of YWCA Greater Rhode Island in June 2005.

Silva has provided lectures and book signings at: Salon Serenity in Coventry, the Other Tiger Bookstore in Westerly, Ye Ol' Bookshoppe in Providence, the North Smithfield Town Hall for the North Smithfield Substance Abuse Prevention Task Force, the Lincoln Public Library for the Lincoln Substance Abuse Prevention Task, and Tri-Town in Johnston. *A Child's Heart Speaks: Surviving Sexual Abuse* is available at [www.clairenilva.com](http://www.clairenilva.com). Photo provided by Claire Silva.



## To support the family of a survivor:

1. Be an ear to listen or a shoulder to cry on.
2. Never blame or find fault with the family. The parents/family members are usually blaming themselves already for not seeing the signs earlier.
3. Help them understand the mental health, legal and social service systems they will soon be thrown into.

4. Know that eventually they will re-gain their strength and continue to encourage them.

## To support a child who is a survivor:

1. Children need to be believed and supported immediately.
2. All connections with a perpetrator have to be broken for the child to feel safe again.
3. Open communication needs to

be welcomed and encouraged.

## To support an adult survivor:

1. Listen to the individual's story and empathize with his/her trauma.
2. Reaffirm that the guilt and blame always lies with the perpetrator.
3. Congratulate the person for surviving and telling their story.