



The Children's Assessment Center

TURNING THE T-SHIRTS INSIDE OUT

By Mary Ellen Sherrill, LCSW

T- Shirts...they are everywhere. They are in our drawers and closets. They are in stores and restaurants all over the world. And now, they are even hanging at The Children's Assessment Center.

What is a T-Shirt? Some think of them as being comfortable and familiar. Some think of them as representing a place traveled to or an accomplishment attempted, and sometimes won. Literally, a shirt is protection; and metaphorically, it is something given of oneself to help someone in need.

But what are these children's T-Shirts about? They are, simply put, portrayals of sexual abuse. These shirts may illustrate something that is familiar, but definitely not comfortable. Their messages represent places they were forced to go, not where they have traveled to willingly. They tell of what has been lost, not of what has been won. And rather than cover and protect, they uncover and expose. Their empty forms are reminiscent of the child that has been hollowed out on the inside. They expose the secrets held in for so long and buried so deeply, because they finally feel safe enough to do so. They expose the thoughts and feelings that they were conditioned to believe didn't matter. But yes, they also expose the healing that can take and is taking place, when help is given.

As therapists, my co-workers and I were privileged to be present with these children as they created their shirts. Our work involved explaining the project, giving them the choice of participating, and providing them with a therapeutic and emotionally safe place to work. The therapists' experiences were as varied as the children themselves. But I would like to take you further into the story of one such shirt, one such child. She came into her individual therapy session one day and told me that she identifies with a baby sea turtle. Elaborating, she recounted having learned that the mother turtle lays her eggs in the sand and buries them before returning to sea, thus leaving them to be born and face the world alone. Continuing on, she described the birth of the baby turtles, how they struggle to climb out of the sand only to find a long and dangerous journey to the ocean. This journey is at a time when they are simply trying to start their lives. The danger lies in attacks from predators, either while trusting that all is well or while being instinctually on constant alert. Living a life of sexual abuse, these children are often trapped between trust and hyper-vigilance. She is also keenly aware of their realization that the turtles are alone in the journey, and many don't make it. She relates this aspect of a sea turtle's life to sexual abuse, because too often the mothers are unable or unavailable to protect their children, as was her own experience of abandonment and rejection. The next week, she brought with her a handwritten poem, accompanied by illustrations of sea turtles. She expressed her

amazement with how the words had seemingly flowed from her innermost self through the pen and onto the paper. She felt that through her writing, she had captured the tragedy of her life from the actual sexual abuse to the lack of maternal and familial love and protection. However, she emphasized that it also conveys her hope and will to survive. Then she realized something else about the turtles. She remembered that when they return to the sea, they imprint a message in the sand: a message that leaves behind for them a sense of direction, of home and of survival. When asked to imagine what the turtle feels like once it reaches its destination, she said it likely feels free and powerful. She made a decision at that moment that she would like to participate in community education and to share her experiences with others who have been sexually abused so that she too is leaving a message behind for those who need direction. When the T-Shirt project was implemented, she knew immediately that she wanted to portray the sea turtle on her shirt. Here is the poem she wrote with her shirt:

ALONE

Going away to sea to let me be
To find my journey alone
For mother not to come back home
Alone in the wild only a child
Trying to survive, strive, and stay alive
No one to go to, no one to help
Love ones have set me aside as if I had my last breath
Am I alone in the world? I ask myself
Or is there another little girl who's been battered, abused and left?
You're not alone someone say
And each sunrise is a new day
I'm gonna make it, my Father says so
If I don't, all I want you to know
When I'm gone, stay strong and you're not alone

For all of the children whose T-Shirts are displayed at The CAC, it was a way to tell you what it was like to be sexually abused. While making their shirts, some were releasing thoughts and feelings for the very first time. Some were recalling distant memories, while others were redirecting constant intrusive thoughts. They were also saying that what often is difficult to express verbally can be heard if you listen to their art, their play, their movement, their writing. All were engaging in acts of bravery. And all are saying to the adults of the world...it is your job and responsibility to stop sexual abuse.

So what is a T-Shirt? Hopefully through this project, exposing their secrets is becoming more familiar and comfortable to them; winning is gaining ground over what has been lost; deserved protection is becoming a reality; and help is being both given and received.