

Don't dismiss abused kids as 'ruined'

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If your son had pneumonia, would you write him off as a hopeless case?

If your daughter had been hurt in a car wreck, would you skip the therapy and rehab because she was too "ruined" to recover?

Good grief, no.

You'd do everything in your power to help them get better. You'd make sure they had treatment, support and comfort. You wouldn't treat a vulnerable kid like a piece of broken furniture.

Yet that's what an awful lot of decent, well-intended people do when they assume victims of child abuse are "ruined" or "permanently damaged." They mentally throw in the towel on kids who need help.

This was the central message of a story that ran in our paper Wednesday about area children's advocacy centers that work with abuse victims.

"Their recovery prospects are actually very good," said Ashley Lind, chief program officer at the Dallas Children's Advocacy Center.

Yet too many people persist in believing that these kids are no-hope cases.

Earlier this week, after we wrote about the grotesque case of a Dallas woman who had sex with a parade of men while forcing her 6-year-old daughter to capture the action on a video camera, readers were justifiably appalled.

Among the comments they posted were: "This little girl will never be the same"; "Likely too late to do anything for this girl's emotional health"; "This child's innocence has been destroyed."

That's an honest reaction to the cruelty of abuse, an expression of fury toward the perpetrators. It's hard to imagine "getting over" something so destructive and so painful.

Yet children do get over it — at least, they can, said Beverly Levy, director of Dallas Court Appointed Special Advocates, a program that trains volunteers to act as advocates for children in foster care.

"When they get put into safe homes, where they're loved and they're nurtured, they thrive," Levy said. "They're incredibly resilient, but they don't do well unless they have help."

The help they need is pretty much what all children require — security, love, support, hope.

They need to be certain they'll be safe and protected. Yes, abuse is traumatic, and its consequences can be lifelong — but to dismiss a victimized child as irredeemably "broken" is an especially sad piece of pessimism.

Even sadder is the cynical assumption that victims are automatically fated to become perpetrators themselves.

"You can bet what will happen in later years," one commenter darkly predicted — about a 6-year-old child! — adding, "Like mom, like daughter."

The "cycle of sexual abuse" is a pop-psych truism, but it's at best a gross oversimplification. At worst, it's just a bogus and destructive myth.

A 1996 Government Accounting Office report to a House judicial subcommittee concluded that "the existence of a cycle of sexual abuse was not established" by available research studies.

"These studies offered insufficient evidence that being sexually abused as a child led directly to the victim becoming an adult sex offender," the report said.

"The vast majority of kids — be they boys or girls — who were sexually abused do not go on to become abusers," Robert Prentky, research director for the Boston-based Justice Resource Institute, said in a 2006 *Newsday* story.

Instead, Prentky said, a "multitude of lifetime experiences" affect the way children ultimately respond to victimization.

And according to a 2001 report published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, "There is widespread belief in a 'cycle' of child sexual abuse, but little empirical evidence for this belief."

So let's stop believing it. Decent people don't hurt children — and they don't give up on them, either.

