



Center for Human Dignity at Family Research Council

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: RAPE AND INCEST

Questions about how pro-life protections for the unborn can apply in tragic circumstances such as rape and incest are unavoidable in post-*Roe* America. Even though these types of cases are rare, it is nevertheless true that having a pregnancy brought about by an affront to human dignity, such as rape or incest, brings with it a unique set of physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual challenges. Mothers who overcome the unjust actions perpetrated against them in order to protect the lives of their unborn children display courage and strength that are nothing short of heroic.

When discussing the topic of exceptions for abortion in cases of rape or incest, it is important to emphasize that these exceptions discriminate against children based on the crimes of their fathers punishing the innocent rather than the guilty. Furthermore, these exceptions only augment the suffering that the mother has experienced by subjecting her to the trauma of abortion.

TIPS TO REMEMBER WHEN HAVING A CONVERSATION ABOUT RAPE AND INCEST

1. Pray before speaking. When having a difficult conversation, the best first step is always to ask the Holy Spirit to guide your words.
2. Listen first. When two people discuss a hard topic like rape or incest, it is easy to talk past one another. Take care that you are actually listening to your conversation partner.
3. Be compassionate. The person with whom you are speaking might have experienced rape or incest or have a loved one who did. Speak with empathy and gentleness.

IMPORTANT TERMS TO KNOW

Rape: according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Report, rape is "[t]he penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim."¹ According to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in five women and one in 38 men have experienced attempted or completed rape.²

Statutory rape: a form of sexual assault that occurs when an adult engages in sexual intercourse with a minor; it is considered a form of rape because minors are legally unable to consent to sexual intercourse until they have reached a designated age of consent,³ which varies between states and is typically between the ages of 16 and 18.⁴ Statutory rape is considered a form of sexual assault even if the minor feels that they consented to engage in the sexual activity.

Childhood sexual abuse: occurs when an adult or older adolescent engages in sexual activity with a child. According to CDC statistics, one in three female and one in four male rape victims suffered it for the first time when they were between the ages of 11 and 17 years old. Of all childhood sexual abuse victims, one in eight females and one in four males were raped before the age of 10.⁵

Incest: generally refers to sexual activity between family members who are closely related. It takes on a different connotation in the context of sexual assault, referring more specifically to instances of incest that are nonconsensual, often being committed against a minor.⁶

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION TO KNOW

Following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (1973) in the U.S. Supreme Court case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), U.S. states are increasingly seeking to protect the lives of their unborn citizens by establishing laws that defend them from abortion.

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Some of the most protective laws do not include exceptions for cases of rape and incest, further intensifying the national conversation surrounding abortion. The abortion industry exploits the trauma of rape and incest victims by upholding their stories as instances when abortion is surely the only good option that a woman could have.

According to the pro-abortion Guttmacher Institute, only about one percent of all abortions are committed against babies who were conceived from rape, and less than 0.5 percent of abortions are committed in cases of incest.⁷ Based on a *New York Times* article from 1989, this statistic has remained almost exactly the same for decades.⁸ Even though these types of cases are rare, it is still essential for pro-lifers to be prepared to explain with compassion why abortion is not justified even in these difficult circumstances.

HOW TO HAVE A PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATION ABOUT ABORTION IN CASES OF RAPE AND INCEST

1. Begin by unequivocally condemning the act of rape as a heinous assault on human dignity. Affirm that all responsibility for the rape rests solely on the rapist and that the victim does not bear any blame for the crime that occurred.
2. When discussing cases of incest, equally assert that this is a crime against human dignity and a complete violation of the safety and respect that the woman ought to have been able to have with a member of her family.
3. Pivot the conversation toward the unborn child conceived by rape and/or incest. Highlight that this child is an innocent third party to the crime that occurred and that aborting the child punishes him or her for another person's wrongdoing.
4. If your conversation partner accuses you of lacking compassion for the mother and only caring about the wellbeing of the baby, respond with information about the additional trauma that abortion inflicts on women, both mentally and physically. Point your conversation partner to resources explaining Post Abortion Stress Syndrome⁹ and highlight the lived testimonies of women who have been haunted by their abortion.¹⁰
5. Tell your conversation partner that abortion does not heal the wounds inflicted by rape and incest; rather, it adds further trauma from which the mother will have to heal.
6. Your conversation partner might name any number of potential scenarios in which they think that abortion is especially justifiable (*e.g.*, the scenario of a minor becoming pregnant from rape). Respond that no matter the circumstances, it does not change the fact that the unborn child is also an innocent human being and does not deserve to die. Explain that forcing the trauma of abortion on a minor is not compassionate and could cause her a lifetime of distress and guilt.
7. Point your conversation partner to the options and resources that are available to victims of rape and incest who choose life for their babies. Women who carry their babies to term can always place them for adoption if they decide not to parent the child themselves. If a mother does choose to parent her child, pregnancy resource centers around the nation stand ready to assist with free material resources, counseling, and support.
8. Explain that abortion exceptions send the message to people conceived by rape and/or incest that their lives are less valuable than those who were not conceived in difficult circumstances and that they would have been better off aborted than born. Highlight the stories of individuals who were conceived by rape and/or incest but are grateful that their mothers chose life.



TESTIMONIES FROM REAL PEOPLE CONCEIVED BY RAPE OR INCEST

Kathy Barnette's story

Kathy, a politician who previously ran for Senate in Pennsylvania in 2022, first began speaking out in 2019 about how she was conceived. “Before that, I would only mention it to a couple of friends when we were in conversation. I have always been pro-life, but nobody knew why,” she recalled. “I made the case based on morality and the Bible. After I started sharing my story with friends, I saw the power in it.”

Kathy has shared that her mother became pregnant with her at the age of 11 after being raped by an adult man. “Sin is ugly, and we live in a sinful world,” Kathy said. “But it was beauty that came alongside my 11-year-old mother. She saw value in me. I am so grateful for that.”

As a result of speaking up about the circumstances of her conception, Kathy has not always been received with respect. “When I went public with my story, I felt shamed,” she explained. “The victim takes on the shame of the victimizer. But after talking to my mom, I realized that I had nothing to do with what happened to her, and that shame is not mine to carry.”

Kathy and her mother share a tight bond that Kathy says has formed a beautiful support system; “Aborting me would not have corrected the great injustice inflicted upon her. What aborting me would have done is make sure that there was no one here to catch my mom. I am able to be here as a net for my mother, catching her in her low moments.”

Kathy added that her faith in God affirms the value of her own life in Scripture. “When I read the Bible, I read it differently than others might when it comes to certain passages,” Kathy shared. “When it says, ‘You created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother’s womb,’ I take that very personally.”

Although many pro-lifers are hesitant to discuss rape exceptions for fear of coming across as lacking compassion, Kathy does not think the conversation needs to be that complicated. “It’s not a complicated topic for me [...] It’s a no-brainer to me because it was how I was conceived. I am a human today—most people would attest to that—but I was also a human then, in my mother’s womb.” Likewise, to those who would create rape exceptions to pro-life protections for the unborn, Kathy says, “How we treat the most innocent people in our society is a reflection on us as a nation. We cannot become callous to how we treat [the unborn] and think that doesn’t translate to other aspects of society.”

Today, Kathy celebrates the life that her mother chose to give her. She says, “I look at my husband and the life we have created together. I look at my children and how awesome they are. I am so grateful. I see the purpose that God has for me. I am unapologetic about being here.”

Kristi Hofferber's story

After Kristi was placed for a closed adoption at birth, it was not until 13 years later that her adoptive parents learned through a local newspaper that her birth mother was prosecuting her own father for sexual abuse that she had suffered for over 20 years. “Can you imagine their surprise to learn that my biological mother was prosecuting not just for my conception but the conception of five other siblings due to the abuse over a 20-plus year period? I was the only survivor, as he had forced her to miscarry one and forced her to abort four others,” Kristi explained.

Kristi grew up knowing nothing about the circumstances of her birth until, as an adult, she reached out to her adoptive parents for assistance in tracking down her biological mother. “They shared everything that they had learned, and I am grateful that they did. From here, it took me a week to decide if I should pursue a search for my biological mom,” Kristi recalled. “I wanted to reach out to her, to share how thankful that I was to be alive, and how sorry I was that she endured so much from someone who she should be able to trust with anything.”

After connecting with her biological mother, Kristi said that “there was an instant bond.” “Most importantly, she was not disturbed by my presence despite who my biological father was. She actually stated that, rather, she found peace with our reunion.”



The blessing of reconnecting with her biological family continued when, nine years after reuniting with her birth mother, Kristi and her husband were approached by a biological relative who was facing an unexpected pregnancy and felt that she could not raise the child. Kristi and her husband, who were both adopted and had already adopted a child previously, were immediately willing to adopt her biological relative's baby.

"Without hesitation, I said, 'Absolutely!'" Kristi remembered. "God is so good. You see, my husband and I found out shortly before we were married that we would never be able to have children of our own. Initially, this was tough news to hear, but we knew that adoption was an option that we would both consider. All four of us are adopted. It is what makes our family unique."

Kristi is now a social worker who helps educate women and provides hope and help to mothers who are facing unplanned pregnancies—no matter how the child is conceived. "We cannot let our compassion stop with the mother," Kristi asserted. "Yes, she has been through something extremely traumatic, but what does putting her through an abortion do in this situation? It does not take away the incident(s) that happened. Statistically, it brings on further trauma."

Kristi added, "Laws are passed with these exceptions as if to offer compassion for the mother, but we cannot stop there when an innocent life is involved as well. And I question the 'compassion' of someone offering a woman the option to take the life of her own child."

When considering pro-life protections for the unborn that create exceptions in cases of rape and incest, Kristi said, "Leaving this window for exceptions allows the criminal to get away with the crime [...] he can force or coerce her to have an abortion which destroys the evidence. I share this from my own birth mother's experiences. She endured over 20 years of abuse because he got away with the crime." She asked, "Why are we protecting the criminals and not getting the woman and child they help that they need to overcome the situation?"

Kristi encouraged mothers facing the same situation that her mother did "to know that they themselves have immense value, they have support no matter what they are facing, and they have an opportunity to be this child's hero."

Endnotes

- 1 "An Updated Definition of Rape," U.S. Department of Justice Archives, January 6, 2012, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/blog/updated-definition-rape>.
- 2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Preventing Sexual Violence," fact sheet, 2022, accessed October 17, 2022, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sv/SV-factsheet_2022.pdf?bcs-agent-scanner=c84b4d91-0621-d940-a777-c100dc316660.
- 3 "Statutory rape," Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute, last updated November 2021, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/statutory_rape.
- 4 American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, "Sexual assault. ACOG Committee Opinion No. 777," *Obstetrics & Gynecology* 133, no. 4, (April 2019): e297, <https://www.acog.org/clinical/clinical-guidance/committee-opinion/articles/2019/04/sexual-assault>.
- 5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Preventing Sexual Violence."
- 6 American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, "Sexual assault. ACOG Committee Opinion No. 777," e296-97.
- 7 Alia E. Dastagir, "Rape and incest account for hardly any abortions. So why are they now a focus?," *USA Today*, May 24, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/05/24/rape-and-incest-account-few-abortions-so-why-all-attention/1211175001/>.
- 8 Tamar Lewin, "Rape and Incest: Just 1% of All Abortions," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1989, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/10/13/us/rape-and-incest-just-1-of-all-abortions.html>.
- 9 For example, see Family Research Council's resource "How to Find Healing After Abortion," available at <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF22G67.pdf>.
- 10 "Your Stories," Project Rachel Ministry, accessed October 17, 2022, https://hopeafterabortion.com/?page_id=18.

