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Opinion

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Guest opinion

By Nancy Larkin Taylor

During the last three years, I and others have worked long hours to pass Pennsylvania Senate Bill 896. It will allow survivors of childhood sexual abuse to file suit against their abusers up to the age of 30, or at any age, up to three years after discovering the link between adult problems and childhood abuse.

This extends by 10 years the current off and offers additional time with the three-year window for filing.

Why do I think this bill is worth every effort to effect its passage into law?

Because I've seen so many clients suffering from the adult fallout of childhood incest or sexual abuse, and their lives are often all but ruined by it.

What happens when a 6-year-old girl is fondled each night, or a second-grader is forced to perform oral sex on his grandfather? These children develop coping mechanisms. Most often, this means some type of amnesia to block the unbearable memories.

In adulthood, those repressed memories can cause acting-out behavior. The shame, fear and anger become internalized and turned on themselves rather

than their abuser. To be angry at the parent or family member who abused them requires remembering the horrifying events. That is too shattering to the child each was — a child, in most cases, dependent on the abuser for survival.

Many will spend their 20s drinking, doing drugs or committing other self-destructive acts as a way of expressing the intense internal pressure of unresolved sexual abuse.

One client of mine, just 20, cut pieces from her leg and wrist with a steak knife. She showed me the scars. Ironically, her emotional scarring, as it surfaces, will be much worse. She is a survivor of incest committed by her father.

Another client, also an incest survivor, developed multiple personality disorder as a way of coping with her abuse. When I spoke to her recently by phone, her voice suddenly changed to that of a 6-year-old telling me excitedly about her new "Magna Doodle," a new version of the Etch-a-Sketch children's toy. I asked to speak to the adult, and did, but before hanging up I again chatted with the little girl.

The adult survivor deserves compensation for the cost of psychological treat-

ment, insurance, medication, institutionalization and lost wages.

Allowing these civil actions a larger time frame should increase their numbers, which will enhance public awareness of the problem and help destroy the secrecy that allows childhood sexual abuse to continue.

As successful suits accumulate, they will create a collectively strong societal deterrent for perpetrators. Childhood sexual abuse conceivably could die out, as previously condoned abusive behaviors have faded in an atmosphere of negative public opinion.

The reason the larger time frame is so crucial is because of the unique nature of childhood sexual abuse itself. In May, during a Pennsylvania Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, survivors, psychologists, counselors and an attorney testified about the broad range of psychological reactions that deter survivors from understanding the impact of childhood molestation until mid-adulthood — often not until their 30s or 40s.

This abuse is so secretive, so humiliating, so devastating, that the shattered psyche defends itself by blocking memory of the event. In adulthood, the difficulties a survivor has in coping with life

in general usually lead to seeking psychological treatment. It is then the memories return.

Healing from abuse is a long — in fact, lifelong — process. Connecting present dysfunction with childhood events takes time. The wounded adult needs to proceed slowly enough not to damage further an already compromised ego structure. It is unreasonable to expect a survivor to be capable of filing suit before the age of 20.

The survivor also must be strong enough to go against his or her family. To rupture the family secrecy and denial requires great courage. It is not a lawsuit undertaken simply for monetary gain but to restore the shattered adult's sense of self-dignity. It is a consummate act of integrity by the survivor, because it demands so much from him or her in the courtroom, and out of it.

It is time for to stop condoning childhood sexual abuse, by being deaf and blind to innocent children who suffer this crime in childhood — and suffer the consequences again and again in adulthood. SB 896 gives us all hope for a future free of this horrendous, covert poisoner of so many lives.



Nancy Larkin Taylor, an attorney in Doylestown, was president of the Advisory Board of Bucks County Children and Youth and is founder of Bucks County, Children Inc. She has been public defender and solicitor for Bucks County Family Court.