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Introduction

Welcome to the Donna Seebo Show. Donna is an international mental practitioner, psychic, award-winning author, counselor, speaker, teacher, and radio-television talk show personality. She brings to the airwaves talented people from around the world who share their insights and experiences with you, the listening audience. Now let's join Donna.

Donna Seebo

Hello. Good evening to you. Good day, wherever you are on this wonderful planet of ours. This show tonight is, in my view, covering a very, very sensitive subject. And to those of you listening to it you may say wow, why is it that you've decided to discuss this? What is it we're going to be discussing? We're going to be discussing incest. My guest is Risa Shaw. And her book is *Not Child's Play*. This is an anthology on brother-sister incest. This is not a subject that people are going to be having typically an open conversation about at the dinner table or at a party. No, this is not the case because this is a very sensitive subject. It is a very intense subject. And Risa is very brave in getting this out. This is her 2nd edition of this book. And in this book there are the poems and contents of those that have experienced the abuse. So, I share this with you and I want to now introduce you to Risa Shaw. And Risa, you have really stepped outside the box to discuss this. When did you first publish this book? Because this is your 2nd edition. When did you first publish *Not Child's Play: An Anthology on Brother Sister Incest* and why did you do it?

Risa Shaw

Well first, let me say thank you, Donna. I'm grateful to you having me on the show and to helping to get the discussion about brother-sister incest out into the public discourse. And I'll say hello to all of your listeners and viewers as well.

I first came up with the idea of wanting a book for myself. Because as a survivor I wanted to tell my story and I also wanted to hear the stories of the other women who had had the same experience of as me. And that was back in the mid to late 1980s. It then took me 13 years to put the first edition together. And in part it took me that long because it was such a labor of necessity and an emotional labor to put the book together. All of the contents of the original book – all of the poetry, prose, the visual art, which is both color and black and white, as well as the front matter – is in the 2nd edition. And the 2nd edition also has a new preface, a new introduction, and an afterward. It's just come out in the last few months. I put it out because the environment is very different than it was 25 years ago. With all of the movements and initiatives and speaking out and court cases the subject of incest is talked about a lot more. Obviously, sexual harassment and sexual abuse has talked about a lot more. But sibling incest is still a topic that rarely makes it into the media, into conversations, into other publications. And there are a lot of survivors. And we want to both have healing for people, and we also want to prevent more harm done to children if at all possible.

Donna Seebo

There in the preface of your book there are a couple of statements that you made about yourself. You said “I was removing the invisible hand that were strangling my voice. I was on my way to destroying the shame and blame that had kept me quiet and fearful. Incest was basically defined as sexual violence perpetuated against girls by male adult family members and ‘friends’. Brothers might be mentioned as a side comment.” How common, and that is going to sound a little bit strange to someone listening to it, with this situation with incest – how common is it among siblings and does it have anything to do with class status or whatever? I don't think it does, but that's my bias. What is it that makes it so difficult to talk about sibling incest?

Risa Shaw

Let me try to take some of your questions separately. One is, I think that it is extremely pervasive, and it is the least reported because people don't talk about it and people don't report it. So, we don't know how common it is other than by anecdotes. Everyone I talk to has some story of someone they know if they are not a survivor themselves.

OK, you asked a couple of other questions and I want to be able to respond to those. So, help me out.

Donna Seebo

Well, I will say this. You commented on how difficult it was for you to find a publisher back in the 1980s, which doesn't surprise me at all. And here we are in an era where people are self-publishing and there are publishers because of the change of openness in communication, that is something that they are not as timid about discussing. And this is something that for you had to have been really deeply affected after you've finished your first book. And then doing the 2nd edition, this must have been something that in a way was liberating because of the responses that you have gotten from different people. I was amazed about the 74-year-old woman and her 76-year-old sister. This is Dorothy and Marian. And this was just really something else. Because when you think of their age and the generation that they were in... my goodness! They would never have been able to open their mouths.

Risa Shaw

Right. Let me go back to one thing that I wanted to say at the beginning to you and to people who are listening. I want to say that there's no good language to talk about this. So I don't want get people to get stuck on, do we call it incest, do we call it sexual abuse, do we call it sibling, brother/sister... Don't get stuck on those. It's all the same thing. And it's about sexual abuse and control and power of one sibling to another sibling. The other thing I want to say about that is that even though I center women and girls in the book and in much of what I do that, this is not to minimize or dismiss at all when boys are the ones who are victimized. Boys are victimized. Boys are sexually abused. It does happen within the

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family as well as, as we know, in many other institutions. And I want to say that even though I often am talking about brothers who are sexually abusing their sisters.

The other thing you said, nobody would pick the book up [to publish] in the late 1990s and that's true. And because I wanted to get the book out very quickly again – we ran out of the 3000 copies of the original book many years ago. But in the last couple of/few years, people have been asking me for a copy a lot and we didn't have any copies left. So that's why I published the 2nd edition. It is again self-published, although I am looking for a publisher. I feel fairly confident that a publisher will pick it up this time because of the difference in the atmosphere and the environment.

Donna Seebo

And the culture of thinking. There is much more open discussion about this. Still, it's on a very conservative level. And there's many demeanors of attitude that has enabled this kind of behavior to go on and to be hidden. You talk about a 7-year-old who was in a family. And at a particular gathering she let everybody know what her brother was doing to her. Now the family was dead quiet. But it stopped. It stopped.

And again, there are so many aspects relative to this. It does not just affect one level of society. There are people who are going to say, “well, it wouldn't happen in this environment.” It happens in so many ways and it is so important that families be aware and have that trust of their children, where their children can have integrity. Sexual exploration is not unusual for children. But we need to not have a puritanical attitude about this. We need to be able to look at what is a very normal, natural amount of curiosity and be open about it. And that is something that with, my goodness how many generations and it's hundreds of generations that have been affected where sex really was a dirty word. A lot of it had to do with thinking of particular societal groups, and so everything went underground. This is something that is recorded history. That is where often the girls, and the boys, that were assaulted were not given the space. And they were often told it is your fault. But it's not a matter of fault. It's a matter of being open, a violation of the self, and this this really happens too often. One of the things that occurred during COVID, and you bring this out – actually it's Lynn Bonde who it brings it out – that sexual violence domestically, against women and children during COVID, escalated like crazy. And that was because of the lockdown. This is something that the details are still coming out about. It is amazing. And you talk about an organization called RAINN. That's the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network. I didn't even know about this organization. And they have a hotline, and they were getting all kinds of calls from minors. This is incredible.

Risa Shaw

Yes, it is. Being sexually abused is... part of that is... let me back up. You said this is not about sexual exploration and you are exactly right. This is not about sexual exploration. This is about abuse of power and control. And it's about sexually abusing someone. It is about using someone else for your own gratification and to have under your own control.

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Part of what being sexually abused means is that you do not matter – the victim, the person who's being victimized does not matter. And we're not supposed to speak out. When we do finally speak out, as you said, it's extraordinarily freeing. It means a whole lot of work. Healing from this and dealing with it is not an easy task. And to me, it's a really necessary task. For me, it was an absolutely necessary task. By refusing to keep the silence, we then take the power away from the silence, the bearing of the trauma, and bring the trauma out. Everyone in the family then needs to be involved. So, we need acknowledgement from the person who did the harm. The brother. We need acknowledgement from the family, and specifically the parents and the other adults. This is not about older kids having any responsibility to have taken care of the younger kids. That's the parents' job. In addition to acknowledgement, we need the ownership and the accountability to happen so that people are held accountable for the harm that they've done. In addition to that, we then need those people to speak up and be part of the conversation if what we want to happen is going to happen – that is prevention and putting an end to this type of sexual abuse and this type of trauma. We want to empower other survivors to do this, but we also want to empower the people who harmed and the other family members to be accountable and speak out so that they can help prevent it as well.

Donna Seebo

You cite a report, and this is something I was really impressed with. You have in your notes throughout the book reports that have been done by men and women, both, who have said this is what we are finding. There's one report about *Patriarchal Culture + Male Biology = Deadly Mix for Violence Against Women*. Now this goes around the world. There are interviews that I've done, conversations I've had with women from Africa, with women from Australia, women from native culture, women from Greece, Italy, Germany parts of Europe, the Asian environment. I mean you name it. I've heard the stories and talked one-on-one with people that have gone through absolutely hellish situations and just what you've described as male or female. But in this situation, here we're discussing familial incest, the brothers and the sisters. And this is, I think healthy to be able to talk about it and bring the attention out. Because they need to know, it's very important that parents need to know, that this is something that is a potential situation and they have to be wise enough to know how to pay attention and to have the trust and confidence of their children. Just like with that 7-year-old I mentioned. That they can speak up and speak out. That is so important. Secrecy creates what I call a monster. And it is not something that should be there. And yet those codes are silence, often the girls are intimidated by the older brothers in the situation, and you know that the other male members in the family. But regardless, what we're addressing here is the brothers-sisters incest. It is really quite powerful and [?] talks about it, and it's not the natural order of things. We read Egyptian history, brothers and sisters married each other, and it created an unhealthy dynamic in a physical sense with offspring. So this, but this was part of their culture. This is how power was kept. And the women had no choice in this whatsoever. But you go back into ancient history and there's always these stories that bring this out. And the attitude of “boys will be boys” and blah blah blah, all of that stuff. I could remember talking with a woman that was of a particular faith. She had had five sons. She said they are going to know that they have to

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respect women. She was adamant. She wouldn't have tolerated anything like that, under any circumstance. And she made sure that her sons knew, and her husband cooperated with her. So, this is something that is very, very significant. And you go into a lot of the studies that have been done. And the aspect of patriarchy today is still very, very, very strongly present in so many environments. And I think for many adults, it's something that they really don't know how to handle when they find out about it, they are just dumbfounded, many times. And they go "I don't understand I really don't understand." Healing from this, what helped you heal so that you could actually put this book together?

Risa Shaw

Well, I'll talk about healing from it in a minute. I want to go back to something that you said about how important it is for families to be aware of the possibility, the potential of sibling sexual abuse occurring in their homes, in their households. And like you said earlier, it cuts across economic class, race, geography, ability, education levels. No home, no family is immune from this. Parents need to pay attention. So, dismissing the possibility, avoiding attending to their kids and their behaviors can create a situation where it can happen because nobody is watching for it. So parents need to be aware of how toxic secrets are in families and how the secret of this sort, of incest, and any incest, causes ongoing harm. So we hope that the adults will really pay attention to any changes in behavior... withdrawal, angry outbursts, recklessness, rebelliousness, distance between siblings, any kind of change between the siblings or with any one of the kids. So that they can figure out what's going on. One of the things I always say to parents when I talk to them is don't give up. Figure out what's going on and don't give up. Because you're talking about prioritizing safety and healing in your family as opposed to allowing harm to go on.

And you asked about my own healing. It has been ongoing over a lot of years. I talk about in the book, in a couple of different places, how in 1984 I really felt like I was going to explode if I didn't talk to my family and tell my parents and my siblings that my brother had sexually abused me. That their son had sexually abused me. Doing that was huge. It was extraordinarily scary. It was not easy. And it was so important and key and essential for me to do for myself. It also, I think if I hadn't done it, I would not have been able to continue having relationships with any of those people in my family because I couldn't live with the secret that was in our family and the secret that was eating me up. Really it was creating more and more problems for me because of the consequences of what had happened to me, of being violated at such a young age by someone I was close to, by someone I trusted, and by someone who was in my family. Part of what happened, and I write about this in the book, is that my family's responses were devastating. There was a lot of inaction and there was no accountability even though everyone said, "Oh, we believe you." But believing is one act, and it's an important and essential act, but it's not the end. It's just the beginning. And the... I did research on brother-sister incest, on survivors having told someone in their family about the incest having happened. Part of what came out of that research and those narratives was that the devastation from the families' responses [and how they were] retraumatizing to the survivors. It was not something that stopped the survivors in continuing figuring out how to heal, how to shed the shame that wasn't theirs to begin with,

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how to find ways of trusting themselves, of trusting other people of, moving forward in building, and regaining a life for themselves. And, it was also extremely hurtful in a situation where the hurt just built upon the hurt. So, when I think about how to heal from this kind of horror and trauma it takes a lot of self-reflection. It takes a lot of conversation with yourself and with others. It takes... a really good therapist is worth their weight in gold. There are a lot of trauma-informed therapists out there these days who can get you the support that you really need if you're the survivor. Or if you're a family member, a parent, or if you're the brother and the person who harmed. So what I would say to people is don't give up and that there's no one way to do this. There are many ways to do it, and it's not a straight or linear path either.

Donna Seebo

Very well said. You bring up the fact, and this is relative to you, that you had a younger sister and she told you that you terrorized her. You were being abused at the time by your brother, and your parents had no clue about this. But she said – both of you are older when you have this conversation – that you exercised control over her, and you actually mimicked the control dynamics that operated between the brother and you. And this opened up a whole conversation between you and your younger sister, who had also gone through abuse. Also, there was the comment that there was the awareness of maybe that other family members had gone through this too. That there were experiences in their past that they would not speak of, but that they had gone through it as well. So, this creates almost like a vicious cycle. Because if they do not speak up and speak out, they're carrying a horrible burden... unless say the parents or certain family members observe something, it's like I don't want to speak evil, I don't want to hear evil... and they block it out. This is a very normal patterning for people that have been abused and will say, well, this keeps going on. Like the energizer bunny. And this is not anything but a real ugly picture to be able to look at and acknowledge. This is a very heavy psychological, not just physical, but a psychological burden that is not easy for people to deal with that affects them for all of their lives.

Risa Shaw

Yes, it does. I know as a survivor it affects survivors for all of our lives. I believe that that is true for any of the family members, including the person who did the actual harm. And that's part of why we want to get this, I want to get this [the book] back out into the public and to get this into conversations. You said you don't have these conversations at dinner parties and some places. I would just like to offer that there are so many opportunities for us to begin to have these conversations, and to bring the conversation into our lives in many different ways. One of those ways is by families really looking at how they think about the power dynamics in the family and who is allowed to do what in a family. Is that divided by gender? And is that actually something that needs to change? Because when we look at what you mentioned earlier, this is not about "boys will be boys," that is something that I've heard over and over again, that "well, boys will be boys." Well, no, that's not helping. And that actually allows this kind of abuse to be perpetuated. And as you say, carry on that cyclical nature.

One of the things I talk to people a lot about is consent and boundaries. Are we actually – consent is a big buzzword and so has boundaries these days – but do we actually learn about and model and explicitly teach consent and continually reinforce consent in our daily lives? That could be with our family members, our friends, our coworkers. Do we talk about what it means? Do we talk about what it doesn't mean, what consent doesn't mean? Do we talk about what the effects of it are, whether we get consent or we don't get consent? I've talked to some people who said I just don't even know where to start. And what I want to say to those people is there are lots of resources out there at this point about how to think, about model, and reinforce content consent, and also how to actually practice it. Role play it in your families. And teach it. We need to teach the girls, and also the boys, how to explicitly exercise their autonomy, how to recognize a lack of consent, how to accept nothing less than explicit consent and stop when consent is withdrawn. I do this in my daily life, “does somebody want to hug?” Do I grab that ball out of somebody's hand, or do I ask for it? Do I join a game, or do I ask if I can join as opposed to just step into something. There's so many ways of practicing this. And without the teaching and the practicing of this, then a kid is not going to have any hope of a chance if there is an abusive situation where someone is looking to violate them.

Donna Seebo

Mm-hmm. You have in your book, as you mentioned at the beginning, that there is art, there are a number of commentaries made by many different women, and they're women of all ages. One woman, Judy Stein, wrote a letter to the state judicial system. And I've heard this more than once from different people – the person that violated her was being given them permission to bring into their home another young girl. And that this person had violated other females more than once. It wasn't just one time. It was multiple times. And she wrote that you do not... you should be very, very thoughtful about giving custody to the person of another little girl. This is something that people, when they will take upon that openness and write a letter, and they will say, “be aware, this is someone that should not have this right because this is what they've done” and they list it out. That's not often done. For Judy Stein to do that? It is just... it's very, very powerful. This is something that some of the women have really been willing do with the siblings. And some of the siblings will say, “I don't remember doing anything. I don't remember any of this, that or the other.” “Well, I do because I was the person you did it to.”

So you've got all of these variables that are in your book. (Dog barking in the background). You've even got an image of women shipyard workers in Poland. The art and the stories and the information about the women that contributed... this is very, very powerful information. You also have resources at the back of the book. This, as I said at the very beginning, is not a subject that is easy to talk about. It really is not. Because you don't expect that these comments would be going on, but they have been going on for generations. This is something where the women often suffered and carried this burden of shame and blame.

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And it is very courageous of you, as far as I'm concerned, to even bring out the 2nd edition of *Not Child's Play: An Anthology on Brother-Sister Incest*. I just compliment you. It is well done. It is informative. But more than that, it shows that those that are abused can have a voice.

Now, Risa, you have a website, notchildplaybook.com. *Not Child's Play*, which is the title of the book itself, and then the word book, notchildplaybook.com. You also have an Instagram, [notchildsplayanthology](https://www.instagram.com/notchildsplayanthology).

I want to thank you, Risa, for being my guest. This is a tough subject to talk about. But it's good to be able to discuss it. Your courage in putting out the book, I think is admirable. And I would imagine that there are many people that are going to have all kinds of opinions. But that's what happens when start talking about what really goes on in the dark crevices of human experience. And I say dark crevices because it's hidden. It's not easily seen, nor is it easily discussed. Thank you for being my guest.

Risa Shaw

Donna, I want to thank you so much for having me. I want to also send out my gratitude to the contributors who are in the book and also to all of the other women who sent in contributions, for all of their courage and their bravery and the beauty and power in the heartbreaking stories that they've put on paper. And I want to thank you and thank everyone for listening, because no, it's not easy, but think about all of the lives that we can save.

Donna Seebo

Yes, and the lies that becomes transparent. That is so important because that's what so many of us claim that we want to have, is transparency so that we can liberate ourselves from those shackles of fear, shame, blame. And perhaps help someone that might be going through a situation right now to know that they're not alone and there is help available. And they have a voice. And they can speak up. And they can speak out.

Again, Risa Shaw, thank you for being my guest.

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