



Elizabeth Smart testifies about '02 abduction

By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

Elizabeth Smart, who testified Thursday about her harrowing ordeal during a nine-month captivity, appears to have what trauma experts say such victims need most for recovery: a supportive family.

Her testimony came in a U.S. District Court hearing in Salt Lake City on accused kidnapper Brian David Mitchell's competency to stand trial.

Her parents, Ed and Lois, her grandmother and other relatives listened as she told of being abducted at knifepoint from her bedroom in the middle of the night in 2002, when she was 14.

Smart, now a 21-year-old college student, said Mitchell took her to a mountain camp and performed a ceremony to marry them.

"After that, he proceeded to rape me," she said, poised and composed throughout her nearly two-hour testimony. She said he raped her three or four times a day and threatened to kill her if she ever yelled out or tried to escape.

Sexually abused children are best able to recover emotionally if they have a supportive family that listens and believes their story, says Judith Cohen, child psychiatrist at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh.

Cohen says even loving parents may find abuse difficult to believe, especially if the accused is a relative or seemingly "normal" person. She says most abused children are victimized by people they know, and one of every four girls is sexually abused by age 18.

"Kids can survive the most horrific experiences" if they receive counseling so they don't feel shame or blame themselves and learn how to cope with bad memories, Cohen says.

If victims aren't believed and don't get treatment, they're more likely to suffer depression, abuse drugs or alcohol and contemplate suicide, says Jennifer Wilson of

the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, which runs a toll-free hotline (800-656-HOPE) for victims.

Even with help, Wilson says, "it's not an easy path. It's not something a victim ever forgets."

"For some, it's a life-long struggle," says Mitru Ciarlante of the National Center for Victims of Crime. She says some victims she has worked with return for help later in their lives, such as when they start dating or have a child.

For someone such as Smart who has a support system, says David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, the odds of recovery are good. "There's every reason to believe she'd have a good prognosis."