

Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet



For Parents, Teachers, and Other Caregivers

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is any interaction between a child and an adult (or another child) in which the child is used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or an observer. Sexual abuse can include both touching and non-touching behaviors. Touching behaviors may involve touching of the vagina, penis, breasts or buttocks, oral-genital contact, or sexual intercourse. Non-touching behaviors can include voyeurism (trying to look at a child's naked body), exhibitionism, or exposing the child to pornography. **Abusers often do not use physical force, but may use play, deception, threats, or other forms of coercion to engage children and maintain their silence.** Abusers frequently employ persuasive and manipulative tactics to keep the child engaged. These tactics—referred to as “grooming”—may include buying gifts or arranging special activities, which can further confuse the victim.

Who is sexually abused?

Children of all ages, races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds are vulnerable to sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse affects both girls and boys in all kinds of neighborhoods and communities, and in countries around the world.

How can you tell if a child is being (or has been) sexually abused?

Children who have been sexually abused may display a range of emotional and behavioral reactions, many of which are characteristic of children who have experienced other types of trauma. These reactions include:

- An increase in nightmares and/or other sleeping difficulties
- Withdrawn behavior
- Angry outbursts
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Not wanting to be left alone with a particular individual(s)
- Sexual knowledge, language, and/or behaviors that are inappropriate for the child's age

Although many children who have experienced sexual abuse show behavioral and emotional changes, many others do not. It is therefore critical to focus not only on detection, but on prevention and communication—by teaching children about body safety and healthy body boundaries, and by encouraging open communication about sexual matters.

Why don't children tell about sexual abuse?

There are many reasons children do not disclose being sexually abused, including:

- Threats of bodily harm (to the child and/or the child's family)
- Fear of being removed from the home
- Fear of not being believed
- Shame or guilt

If the abuser is someone the child or the family cares about, the child may worry about getting that person in trouble. In addition, children often believe that the sexual abuse was their own fault and may not disclose for fear of getting in trouble themselves. Very young children may not have the language skills to communicate about the abuse or may not understand that the actions of the perpetrator are abusive, particularly if the sexual abuse is made into a game.



If a child discloses abuse, it is critical to stay calm, listen carefully, and NEVER blame the child.

What can you do if a child discloses that he or she is being (or has been) sexually abused?

If a child discloses abuse, it is critical to stay calm, listen carefully, and NEVER blame the child. Thank the child for telling you and reassure him or her of your support. Please remember to call for help immediately.

If you know or suspect that a child is being or has been sexually abused, please **call the Childhelp® National Child Abuse Hotline at 1.800.4.A.CHILD (1.800.422.4453)** or visit the federally funded Child Welfare Information Gateway at:

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding>.

If you need immediate assistance, call 911.

Many communities also have local Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) that offer coordinated support and services to victims of child abuse (including sexual abuse). For a state-by-state listing of accredited CACs, visit the website of the National Children's Alliance (http://www.nca-online.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=3999).

Child Sexual Abuse Myths and Facts

Myth: Child sexual abuse is a rare experience.

Fact: Child sexual abuse is not rare. Retrospective research indicates that **as many as 1 out of 4 girls and 1 out of 6 boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18.**¹ However, because child sexual abuse is by its very nature secretive, many of these cases are never reported.

Myth: A child is most likely to be sexually abused by a stranger.

Fact: **Children are most often sexually abused by someone they know and trust.** Approximately three quarters of reported cases of child sexual abuse are committed by family members or other individuals who are considered part of the victim's "circle of trust."²

Myth: Preschoolers do not need to know about child sexual abuse and would be frightened if educated about it.

Fact: Numerous educational programs are available to teach young children about body safety skills and the difference between "okay" and "not okay" touches. These **programs can help children develop basic safety skills in a way that is helpful rather than frightening.** For more information on educating young children, see *Let's talk about taking care of you: An educational book about body safety for young children*, available at www.hope4families.com/Lets_Talk_Book_Information.html.

Myth: Children who are sexually abused will never recover.

Fact: Many children are quite resilient, and with a combination of effective counseling and support from their parents or caregivers, **children can and do recover from such experiences.**

Myth: Child sexual abuse is always perpetrated by adults.

Fact: **Twenty-three percent of reported cases of child sexual abuse are perpetrated by individuals under the age of 18.**³ While some degree of sexual curiosity and exploration is to be expected between children of about the same age, when one child coerces another to engage in adult-like sexual activities, the behavior is unhealthy and abusive. Both the abuser and the victim can benefit from counseling.

Myth: Talking about sexual abuse with a child who has suffered such an experience will only make it worse.

Fact: Although children often choose not to talk about their abuse, **there is no evidence that encouraging children to talk about sexual abuse will make them feel worse.** On the contrary, treatment from a mental health professional can minimize the physical, emotional, and social problems of these children by allowing them to process their feelings and fears related to the abuse.



Tips to Help Protect Children from Sexual Abuse

1. Teach children accurate names of private body parts.
2. Avoid focusing exclusively on “stranger danger.” Keep in mind that most children are abused by someone they know and trust.
3. Teach children about body safety and the difference between “okay” and “not okay” touches.
4. Let children know that they have the right to make decisions about their bodies. Empower them to say no when they do not want to be touched, even in non-sexual ways (e.g., politely refusing hugs) and to say no to touching others.
5. Make sure children know that adults and older children never need help with their private body parts (e.g., bathing or going to the bathroom).
6. Teach children to take care of their own private parts (i.e., bathing, wiping after bathroom use) so they don’t have to rely on adults or older children for help.
7. Educate children about the difference between good secrets (like surprise parties—which are okay because they are not kept secret for long) and bad secrets (those that the child is supposed to keep secret forever, which are not okay).
8. Trust your instincts! If you feel uneasy about leaving a child with someone, don’t do it. If you’re concerned about possible sexual abuse, ask questions.



Children are most often sexually abused by someone they know and trust.

The best time to talk to your child about sexual abuse is NOW.

References

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2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. (2007). *Child Maltreatment 2005*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved January 12, 2009 from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm05/cm05.pdf>
3. Snyder, H. N. (2000). *Sexual assault of young children as reported to law enforcement: Victim, incident, and offender characteristics*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved January 12, 2009 from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/saycrle.pdf>

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