

Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse includes a wide range of sexual behaviors that take place between a child and an older person. These behaviors are meant to arouse the older person in a sexual way. In general, no thought is given to what effect the behavior may have on the child. For the most part, the abuser does not care about the reactions or choices of the child.

Child sexual abuse often involves body contact. This could include sexual kissing, touching, and oral, anal, or vaginal sex. Not all sexual abuse involves body contact, though. Showing private parts ("flashing"), forcing children to watch pornography, verbal pressure for sex, and exploiting children as prostitutes or for pornography can be sexual abuse as well. Researchers estimate that in our country about 1 out of 6 boys and 1 out of 4 girls are sexually abused.

Who commits child sexual abuse?

Under the child sexual abuse laws, the abuser must be older than the victim in most cases. Some states require the abuser to be at least five years older.

Most often, sexual abusers know the child they abuse but are not family. About 60% of abusers fall into that group. For example, the abuser might be a friend of the family, babysitter, or neighbor. About 30% of those who sexually abuse children are family members of the child. This includes fathers, uncles, or cousins. The abuser is a stranger in only about 10% of child sexual abuse cases.

Abusers are men in most cases, whether the victim is a boy or a girl. Women are the abusers in about 14% of cases reported against boys and about 6% of cases reported against girls. Child pornographers and other abusers who are strangers may make contact with children using the Internet.

What are the effects of childhood sexual abuse?

It is not always easy to tell whether a child has been sexually abused. Sexual abuse often occurs in secret, and there is not always physical proof of the abuse. For these reasons, child sexual abuse can be hard to detect.

Some child sexual abuse survivors may show symptoms of PTSD. They may behave in a nervous, upset way. Survivors may have bad dreams. They may act out aspects of the abuse in their play. They might show other fears and worries. Young children may lose skills they once learned and act younger than they are. For example, an abused child might start wetting the bed or sucking his or her thumb. Some sexual abuse survivors show out-of-place sexual behaviors that are not expected in a child. They may act seductive or they may not maintain safe limits with others. Children, especially boys, might "act out" with behavior problems. This could include being cruel to others and running away. Other children "act in" by becoming

running away. Other children react by becoming depressed. They may withdraw from friends or family. Older children or teens might try to hurt or even kill themselves.

Sexual abuse can be very confusing for children. For a child, it often involves being used or hurt by a trusted adult. The child might learn that the only way to get attention or love is to give something sexual or give up their self-respect. Some children believe the abuse is their fault somehow. They may think the abuser chose them because they must have wanted it or because there is something wrong with them. If the abuser was of the same sex, children (and parents) might wonder if that means they are "gay."

Almost every child sexual abuse victim describes the abuse as negative. Most children know it is wrong. They usually have feelings of fear, shock, anger, and disgust. A small number of abused children might not realize it is wrong, though. These children tend to be very young or have mental delays. Also some victims might enjoy the attention, closeness, or physical contact with the abuser. This is more likely if these basic needs are not met by a caregiver. All told, these reactions make the abuse very hard and confusing for children.

If childhood sexual abuse is not treated, long-term symptoms can go on through adulthood. These may include:

- PTSD and anxiety
- Depression and thoughts of suicide
- Sexual anxiety and disorders, including having too many or unsafe sexual partners
- Difficulty setting safe limits with others (e.g., saying no to people) and relationship problems
- Poor body image and low self-esteem
- Unhealthy behaviors, such as alcohol, drugs, self-harm, or eating problems. These behaviors are often used to try to hide painful emotions related to the abuse

If you were sexually abused as a child and have some of these symptoms, it is important for you to get help.

What can caregivers do to help keep children safe?

Although caregivers cannot protect their children 100% of the time, it is important to get to know the people that come around your child. You can find out whether someone has been charged with sexual abuse and find out where sexual abusers live in your area by going to the website FamilyWatchdog.com. Talk to others who know the people with whom your child comes in contact.

Talk to your children about the difference between safe touching and unsafe touching. Tell the child that if someone tries to touch his or her body in their private areas or do things that make the child feel unsafe, he should say NO to the person. He needs to tell you or a trusted adult about it

the person. He needs to tell you or a trusted adult about it right away. Let children know that their bodies are private and that they have the right not to allow others to touch their bodies in an unsafe way. Let them know that they do not have to do EVERYTHING the babysitter, family member, or group leader tells them to do. Alert your children that abusers may use the Internet. Watch over your child on the Internet. Most important, provide a safe, caring setting so children feel able to talk to you about sexual abuse.

What should you do if you think your child has been sexually abused?

If a child says she or he has been abused, try to stay calm. Reassure the child that what happened is not her fault, that you believe her, that you are proud of her for telling you (or another person), and that you are there to keep her safe. Take your child to a mental health and medical professional right away. Many cities have child advocacy centers where a child and her family can get help. These centers interview children and family members in a sensitive, warm place. They can help you report the abuse to legal authorities. They can help you find a medical examiner and therapist skilled in child sexual abuse. [The National Children's Alliance](#) website has more information and a listing of centers.

Children can recover from sexual abuse and go on to live good lives. The best predictor of recovery is support and love from their main caregiver. As a caregiver, you might also consider getting help for yourself. It is often very hard to accept that a child has been sexually abused. You will not be supporting your child, though, if you respond in certain unhelpful ways. For example, you will not be able to provide support if you are overwhelmed with your own emotions. Don't downplay the abuse ("it wasn't that bad"), but also try not to have extreme fears related to the abuse ("my child will never be safe again"). It will not help children if you force them to talk, or if you blame the child. Getting therapy for yourself can help you deal with your own feelings about the abuse. Then you might be better able to provide support to your child.

Please see our fact sheet: [PTSD in Children and Teens](#) to learn about treatment for children who have been sexually abused. Also, see our [Web Resources](#) section for recommended Internet resources.

Recommended books for child sexual abuse

My Body Is Private by Linda Walvoord Girard and Rodney Pate (1992)

Please Tell!: A Child's Story About Sexual Abuse by Jessie Ottenweller (1991)

Something Happened to Me by Phyllis E. Sweet (1985)

It Happens to Boys Too by Jane Satullo and Russell Bradway (1987)

The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child

Sexual Abuse (4th edition) by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis (2008)

Wounded Boys Heroic Men: A Man's Guide to Recovering from Child Abuse by Daniel Jay Sonkin and Lenore E. A. Walker (1998)

Sources

This is based on a more detailed version, located in the "For Providers and Researchers" section of our website: [Child Sexual Abuse](#).

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