

Types of Sexual Violence: Sexual Abuse

What is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse refers to forced or coerced sexual behavior that may occur more than once, often within a trusting relationship. **Most victims know their perpetrators.** Children cannot consent to sexual contact with adults or older youth, and sexual contact is considered abuse, regardless of whether it includes touching or not. Child sexual abuse is a persistent and hidden problem in our society that produces long-term and devastating effects on its victims and their families. **Sexual abuse of children is against the law and should be reported to law enforcement or to child protection authorities.**

Sexual abuse can involve a series of behaviors such as:

- A trusted adult or older family member spends time regularly with a child. The adult appears to be very caring and generous with his/her time and possibly gives the child extra attention or gifts.
- The adult may begin to test the child's boundaries by sexually touching him/her in ways that are non-threatening or may happen as part of a game.
- Over time, the touching becomes more involved and may result in masturbation or intercourse.
- The abuse may continue as long as the child likes the attention, believes the behavior is normal, does not feel hurt or threatened, or does not believe he/she will be believed if they tell. The child may, in some circumstances, even defend the perpetrator when asked if anything is "going on."

A child or youth may only become distressed about the sexual touching when they discover the behavior is wrong, they want to stop spending time with the adult, or the adult makes threats and increases demands for more sexual activity.

Sexual abusers may:

- Not let a child set his or her own limits regarding their own bodies;
- Offer hugs, kisses, tickles, wrestling, or touches to a child even when the child doesn't want the attention;

Preventing Child and Youth Sexual Harassment, Abuse, and Assault

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Fact:

The most common and upsetting examples of sexual abuse reported by children and youth at school:

- *Pulled off or down their clothing (74 percent).*
- *Forced them to do something sexual other than kissing (72 percent).*

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Facts:

An estimated 1 in 4 girls, and 1 in 6 boys will be the victims of sexual abuse before the age of 18.

The median age of these sexual abuse victims is nine years old.

- Be overly interested in the sexuality of the child/youth;
- Insist on having alone time with the child/youth;
- Prefer the company of children to their same-age peers;
- Buy expensive gifts or give money to children/youth for no apparent reason;
- Frequently walk in on a child or teen in the bathroom;
- Allow children to get away with inappropriate behaviors.

Most children or youth do not want to talk about the abuse directly. They may have been told that no one will believe them or that they will get into trouble. A child is more likely to say something like, “Janey’s brother is weird sometimes. I don’t like going over to their house.” They may not acknowledge the sexual abuse unless they are specifically asked or know that they will be believed.

Prevention Tips for Families

- Know with whom your child or youth spends time;
- Understand that an abuser could be someone you know and trust;
- Carefully screen babysitters and caregivers;
- Teach your children proper names for their private body parts;
- Allow children and youth to set their own boundaries and say “no” to touches they do not want;
- Sexual activity is something special that adults do when they are in a committed relationship. Reinforce with your children that no one should ever trick them into being touched;
- Encourage your child/youth to speak up and tell you or another trusted adult if it would ever happen to him or her.

Red Flags: What to look for as a family member if you suspect your child or youth is being sexually abused.

Does your child or youth:

- Have a loss of appetite or stomach ache with no discernible reason;
- Act more clingy or insecure;

- Appear withdrawn;
- Have difficulty sleeping, seem afraid of the dark, or have recurring nightmares;
- Show fear of certain people or places;
- Seem to act more “babyish” or behave in childish ways that are not typical;
- Lie more often about what they are doing or who they are with;
- Seem to have an unusual knowledge or interest in sexual matters for his/her age;
- Appear to express affection in inappropriate ways for his/her age;
- Have new words for body parts;
- Act more aggressive;
- Seem to act out sexuality with others or with their toys.

What to Do: If you suspect your child/youth is a victim of sexual abuse.

- Ask open-ended questions that provide you with more information than yes or no questions. Example: What happened next? Tell me about it.
- Listen and allow your child/youth to talk.
- Remain calm. If you become visibly upset, your child may think you are mad at him/her and may try to change his/her story to please you.
- Praise or support your child/youth for telling you about the abuse.
- Reassure your child/youth that the abuse was not his/her fault.
- Avoid placing blame on your child/youth for something the abuser is responsible for.
- Avoid questions/words that might influence the child’s story, such as “He made you touch him, didn’t he?”
- Take steps to prevent your child/youth from being alone with the suspected abuser.
- Seek help or counseling for your child/youth and others as needed.

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Fact:

In approximately 90 percent of child sexual abuse cases the child knows the abuser.

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- Contact the child abuse reporting hotline or the sexual abuse hotline to discuss what steps you may need to take to report the abuse.

What to Do: If you suspect your child/youth is abusing another child.

- Be informed about normal sexual development so you can tell the difference between “curiosity” and behaviors that may indicate sexual abuse.
- Approach your child in a calm, nonjudgmental manner to ask him/her about your suspicions — try to get a clear picture of the situation.
- Explain that it is wrong for them to make someone else touch them or to touch others in their private places until they are older — even if it may seem like a game.
- Don't let your child/youth be with other children unsupervised until you can be sure other children will not be touched inappropriately.
- Talk with your child's health care practitioner or to a counselor who may be familiar with these behaviors in children, so you can find out if more help is needed.

Don't leave a child/youth alone with someone you suspect is abusing them. Even if the suspected abuser is someone you know and you don't want to accuse them of something you aren't sure about — it is critical that your child or youth be safe from any further abuse. Don't just listen to the abuser's side of the story. Try to remain objective and talk with someone who can help you make the best decision for your child's safety. **Remember, sexual abuse of children is against the law and should be reported to law enforcement or to child protection authorities.**

For more information on sexual violence go to:

www.icyd.org