

Sexual abuse - an overview

Sexual assault can be experienced by anyone. When a child experiences sexual assault it is commonly referred to as child sexual abuse. In recent years, female and male survivors of child sexual abuse have spoken out about their experiences. Increased openness and a willingness by adult survivors to discuss sexual abuse, as well as the development of service support networks, has led to greater community understanding of this issue. Healthcare professionals have also learned a great deal about child sexual abuse and its effects from these stories.

Childhood and sexual abuse

In telling their stories, many adult survivors have found common factors in their experiences:

- They were usually abused by someone they knew.
- The abuse often started when they were very young.
- The abuse was generally not an isolated one-off incident and happened over many months or years.
- The abuse was often accompanied by threats and verbal or emotional abuse and sometimes physical violence.

Fear stops sexually abused children from seeking help

Most women and men were too scared to report the abuse while they were children. Their reasons for being afraid included:

- Their abuser might have threatened to harm them and other family members if they told anyone about the abuse.
- They felt there was no one they could trust to talk to.
- They didn't think that anyone would believe them.
- They feared they would be taken away from home.
- They thought they might lose their mother or father if they knew.
- They thought the abuse was their fault.

Common misunderstandings of sexual abuse

There are many misunderstandings that surround the sexual abuse of girls and boys. Some of these include:

- **'Children fantasise and lie about sexual abuse'** – this is not true. Children rarely lie or imagine sexual abuse.
- **'Males who have been abused grow up to become abusers'** – the research does not show this to be true.
- **'Males will become homosexual because of the abuse'** – again, the research does not support this.
- **'It's only dirty old men or homosexual men who abuse'** – most abusers are heterosexual males from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Some abusers are female.
- **'Child sexual abuse is harmless'** – this is not true. Sexual abuse of children has the capacity to cause serious damage to a child's physical, social and emotional development and can cause withdrawal and emotional problems into adulthood. The longer the abuse goes on, the greater the long-term problems will be.
- **'Children provoke the abuse and enjoy it'** – this is not true. Abusers often tell this lie to their victims.

Possible signs of sexual abuse

The main message from survivors is about the importance of paying attention to children's behaviour. If children are being sexually abused, there may be physical signs such as bleeding from the vagina or anus (back passage), sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or poor hygiene. However, signs in a child's behaviour are more likely. These include:

- Significant changes in behaviour, aggressive behaviour or regression to an earlier stage of development (for example bedwetting)
- Sexual behaviour that is not appropriate to the child's age
- Depression or social withdrawal
- Getting into trouble at school (sometimes to avoid going home)
- Self-harming behaviours (for example self-mutilation, suicide attempts or prostitution).

Talking to children about sexual abuse

- If the child appears to be under stress, encourage them to talk. Children will often tell little bits of information at a time to test the reactions of adults. It can be distressing to discover or suspect a child has experienced sexual abuse. Most people feel a range of emotions including anger, sadness, shock, disbelief, disgust and helplessness. It is important to stay calm and not convey these feelings to the child as this may prevent the child from making further disclosures.
- The child's feelings about themselves may be influenced by your initial reaction to the abuse. If the child senses a horrified response, this may reinforce and perpetuate a child's feelings of guilt and shame.
- Be supportive and tell them you believe them.
- Reassure them that whatever has happened, it is not their fault.
- Reassure the child that they did the right thing in telling you. Many abusers threaten the child to prevent disclosure.
- Tell the child that some adults do wrong things and that the abuser is responsible for the abuse.
- Do everything possible to comfort and reassure the child. Explain what action you will take next. Do not make promises that you will not be able to keep, nor promise the child confidentiality. The child has enough secrets and needs someone to act on their behalf to stop the abuse.

If you believe the child may be being sexually abused, report your concerns immediately to the appropriate person in your own organisation and the Child Protection Service.

Reporting your concerns of sexual abuse

Taking action to help protect a child can be scary. You do not need proof that a child is being sexually abused to report your concerns, only a reasonable belief that a child or young person is being harmed or is at risk of harm. Remember, you may be the only person who can help stop the abuse by reporting your concerns.

Recovering from sexual abuse

Survivors of sexual abuse usually need professional help to recover.

- Centres Against Sexual Abuse (CASA) provide specialist counselling and advocacy and also support family members.
- Support groups are very valuable.

Where to get help

- Child Protection Service – to report child abuse. Contact your local Department of Human Services (DHS) office or the DHS Child Protection Crisis Line on Tel. 131 278
- Police – to report the adult abuser
- Centres Against Sexual Assault Tel. 1800 806 292 (24/7) – for support and counselling
- Domestic Violence Resource Centre Tel. (03) 9486 9866 (BH) – for support

Things to remember

- Children are not responsible for sexual abuse.
- Sexual abuse is a crime.
- Children often talk about the abuse a little at a time.
- It is very common for survivors to repress memories of abuse.
- Sexual abuse is experienced by girls and boys.
- Children cannot stop sexual abuse.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DHS - Children Youth & Families

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