

Child Sexual Abuse: What It Is and How To Prevent It



Sexual abuse of children is more common than most people realize. At least 1 out of 5 adult women and 1 out of 10 adult men report having been sexually abused in childhood. By educating yourself and your children about sexual abuse, you can help prevent it from happening to your children and better cope with it if it does.

What is child sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is when an adult or an older child forces sexual contact on a younger child. The abuser may use physical abuse, bribery, threats, tricks, or take advantage of a younger child's lack of knowledge. Any of the following acts by an adult or older child are sexual abuse:

- Fondling a child's genitals
- Getting a child to fondle their genitals
- Mouth to genital contact with a child
- Rubbing their genitals on a child
- Penetrating a child's vagina or anus
- Showing their genitals to a child
- Showing pornographic or "dirty" pictures or videotapes to a child
- Using a child as a model to make pornographic materials

Could my child be sexually abused? By whom?

Children are abused most often by adults or older children whom they know and who can influence their behavior by exerting power over them. In 8 out of 10 reported cases, the abuser is someone the child knows. The abuser is often an authority figure whom the child trusts or loves.

How would I know if my child is being sexually abused?

Many parents expect their son or daughter to tell them or another trusted adult about being sexually abused. Abusers often threaten or convince the child not to tell anyone about it. The child may believe that the abuse is his fault and that he will be punished if someone finds out. A child's first statements about abuse may be vague and incomplete. He may just hint about the problem to see if he would get in trouble. Abused children may tell a friend about it. The friend may then tell an adult. Children may tell about abuse after a personal safety program at their school. Parents may suspect abuse because of the child's behavior. You should be aware of the following behavioral changes in your child that may be symptoms of sexual abuse:

- Noticeable, new fear of a person (even a parent) or certain places
- Unusual or unexpected response from the child when asked if she was touched by someone
- Drawings that show sexual acts
- Abrupt changes in behavior, such as bed-wetting or loss of bowel control
- Sudden awareness of genitals
- Sexual acts and words shared with other children or animals

- Questions about sexual activity that are beyond the child's development
- Changes in sleep habits, such as nightmares in young children
- Constipation, or refusal to have bowel movements

Physical signs of abuse may include the following:

- Anal or genital redness, pain, or bleeding
- Unusual discharge from the anus or vagina
- Sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, or genital warts
- Repeated urinary tract infections in females
- Pregnancy, in older females

What should I do if my child reveals sexual abuse to me?

Children tend to ignore things that make them feel uncomfortable, rather than recognize them as warning signs. If your child talks about abuse, listen carefully and take it very seriously. When a child's plea for help is ignored, not believed, or punished, she may not risk telling again. As a result, the child could remain a victim of abuse for months or years. Teach your child that it is OK to talk about uncomfortable feelings.

If your child reveals abuse, you should take the following steps:

- 1) **Face the issue.** Listen to your child's reasons for revealing the abuse. Tell your child the abuse is not her fault. Give her extra love, comfort, and reassurance. If you are angry, make sure she knows you are not angry with her, and you will help her. Let your child know how brave she is to tell you and that you understand how scared she feels. This is even more important if the child has been abused by a close and trusted relative or family friend.
- 2) **Take charge of the situation.** Protect the child from further abuse.
- 3) **Discuss the problem** with a pediatrician and a counselor who can provide support.
- 4) **Report abuse to the police or local child protection service agency.** Ask about crisis support help.

Can I deal with sexual abuse in my family without contacting the authorities?

Parents should not try to stop or treat sexual abuse themselves. If abuse is suspected, parents should follow the steps above and get help.

What will happen to the child and to the abuser if sexual abuse is reported?

Sexual abuse is against the law. It is a crime, no matter who the abuser is. Cases are investigated by the police, a social service agency, or both. With the help of a doctor, they will decide whether sexual abuse took place. Depending on the circumstances, the police may let social services manage the case, especially if the child is very young, shows no signs of physical injury, or the

abuser is young or a family member. When a child is abused by a nonfamily member, the matter must be handled by the police.

After sexual abuse is reported, what happens next depends on the circumstances of the case. Preventing further abuse of the child is the first concern of the authorities. The abuser may be referred for treatment. The child and the entire family may also be referred to a treatment program. If the suspected abuser lives in the home and faces criminal charges, authorities will recommend that the suspected abuser leave the home. In any case, the child can usually stay in the home as long as her family will take the necessary steps to protect her from further abuse by asking the abuser to leave the home while the problem is investigated. Whatever the circumstances, the child and family will need a lot of support from relatives and friends.

What parents can do to prevent sexual abuse

The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages you to take the following steps:

- **Talk** to your child about sexual abuse. If your child's school sponsors a sexual abuse program, discuss what he learned.
- **Teach** your child which body parts are private (parts covered by a bathing suit) and the proper names of those parts. Let him know that his body belongs to him. Tell him to yell "no" or "stop" to anyone who may threaten him sexually.
- **Listen** when your child tries to tell you something, especially when it seems hard for him to talk about it. Make sure your child knows it's OK to tell you about any attempt to molest him or touch him in a way that made him feel uncomfortable, no matter who the abuser may be. Let him know he can trust you and that you will not be angry with him if he tells you.
- **Give** your child enough time and attention. Weekly family meetings can be used to talk about all good and bad experiences.
- **Know** the adults and children with whom your child is spending time. Be careful about allowing your child to spend time alone or in out-of-the-way places with other adults or older children. Make visits to your child's caregiver without notice. Ask your child about his visits to the caregiver or with child sitters.
- **Never** let your child enter a stranger's home without a parent or trusted adult. Door-to-door fund-raising is particularly risky for unsupervised children.
- **Check** to see if your child's school has an abuse prevention program for the teachers and children. If it doesn't, start one.
- **Tell** someone in authority if you suspect that your child or someone else's child is being abused.

Your child's teacher or school counselor can help you teach your child to avoid or report sexual abuse. They know how this can be done without upsetting or scaring your child. Your pediatrician also understands the importance of communication between parents and children. He or she is trained to detect the signs of child sexual abuse and is familiar with resources in the community. Ask your pediatrician for advice on how to protect your children.

For further information on child sexual abuse or other forms of abuse, please contact:

Prevent Child Abuse America
PO Box 2866
Chicago, IL 60690-9950
800/556-2722
Web site: <http://www.childabuse.org>

Talking with your child

Measures to protect your children from sexual abuse should begin early, since many child abuse cases involve preschoolers. The guidelines below offer topics to discuss with your children depending on their ages.

Age

18 months–3 years

3–5 years

5–8 years

8–12 years

12–18 years

Prevention Plan

Teach your child the proper names for body parts.

Teach your child about private parts of the body (parts covered by a bathing suit) and how to yell "no" to sexual advances. Use coloring books or reading books with examples. Give simple, easy-to-understand answers to questions about sex. Play the "What if...?" game. Ask your child what she would do in certain situations.

Discuss safety away from home and the difference between being touched in private parts of the body and other touching. Encourage your child to talk about scary experiences, including requests to touch someone else's private parts or look at pornography. Play the "What if...?" game. Ask your child what she would do in certain situations.

Stress personal safety and give examples of possible problem areas, such as video arcades, malls, locker rooms, and out-of-the-way places outdoors. Start to discuss rules of sexual conduct that are accepted by the family. Discuss basic facts about human reproduction.

Continue to stress personal safety and potential problem areas. Discuss the prevention of rape, date rape, sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancy. Talk about the effects of drugs and alcohol on sexual behavior.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

American Academy
of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 57,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

American Academy of Pediatrics
PO Box 747
Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0747
Web site — <http://www.aap.org>

Copyright ©1990, Updated 8/99
American Academy of Pediatrics