

# Understanding Sexual Abuse

Sexual Abuse occurs when a person forces a child to have any form of sexual contact or makes a child perform sexual acts. Sexual abuse may involve touching private parts (clothed or unclothed), penetration using an object or body part, forced sexual acts between children, or making the child view, read or participate in pornography. These acts are abuse even when offenders say they were gentle and did not hurt the child.

Sexual abuse is also known as molestation and exploitation. Sexual molestation does not always mean sexual intercourse. Sometimes older children molest younger or smaller children. Sexual acts between children become molestation when one child uses coercion, force, or violence to get the other child to do the acts. Young molesters should be reported so they can receive help.

Sexual abuse is overwhelming to children, especially when an adult is involved. Most children are taught to trust adults. They tend to believe what adults tell them is true rather than rely on their own feelings. This works against them in two ways. If the molester tells them that what is being done is okay, they may doubt their own feelings that it is not okay. If the parents' initial reaction when they hear the child's disclosure is "This can't be true!", the child may wonder if his or her own feelings are mistaken. More often, they fear that telling will make people angry with them.



**It is extremely difficult for children to report abuse.**

**It is very important to believe them.**

## Myths and Facts About Sexual Abuse

### MYTHS

- ❖ Child Sexual Abuse is usually committed by strangers.
- ❖ Offenders are dirty old men.
- ❖ Offenders are crazy, retarded, or homosexual.
- ❖ Victims are usually sexually provocative adolescents.
- ❖ Children often make up stories about sexual relations with adults.
- ❖ Children are rarely affected by "gentle" incest.
- ❖ If you were a victim as a child, then you will also offend.

### *FACTS: The Reality of the Problem*

- ❖ One out of three girls will experience some form of sexual abuse by the age of eighteen.
- ❖ At least one out of five boys will experience some form of sexual abuse by the age of eighteen.
- ❖ Many cases of child sexual abuse involve children under the age of five.
- ❖ Ninety percent of child victims know their sexual offenders.
- ❖ Sexual abuse within the family often begins in early childhood and may last several years.
  
- ❖ Many children do not tell anyone about their sexual abuse.

- ❖ Sexual offenders come from every profession and socio-economic group. They look like any normal person.
- ❖ Young children do not know enough about sex to describe sexual behaviors that have not occurred.

## How Parents Sometimes Feel When Abuse is Reported

When abuse is reported, parents sometimes feel as if they are on a roller coaster of emotions. This is normal. The report can affect your life in many ways, and it takes time to adjust. Here are some of the common thoughts and feelings parents have. You may feel one or more of these, or you may move from one to another.

**Denial.** Your first reaction may be to not want to believe or accept the possibility that the abuse really happened. Or you may believe it happened, but that no real harm was done. Parents often experience denial because it is too overwhelming to accept that the abuse occurred or to consider what will change in their life if they accept that it occurred. For some people, it takes time to overcome denial and face the realities of abuse.

**Anger.** At times, you may feel angry with yourself for not protecting the child. You may feel angry with the perpetrator for what he did. You may even feel angry with the child. Be honest about your feelings and share them with a trusted person or group. Keep your feelings separate from those of your child.

**Helplessness.** You probably do not know what to expect and may feel that things are out of your control. Some parents may fear their children will be taken away. The staff at the CAC will help you understand what to expect as you proceed through the system.

**Shock, numbness, repulsion.** You may have memories of being abused as a child, which may lead to shock, numbness, and repulsion for the situation you find yourself in. The CAC can provide, or refer you for counseling, to help you with these feelings.

**Guilt, self-blame.** You may feel it is your fault. The offender is responsible for the abuse, not you. The best thing you can do now is support your child and learn all you can about how to make things better. Reading this handbook is a good first step.

**Hurt and betrayal.** It is normal to feel hurt from the loss of your child's innocence. You may have also lost a spouse or partner if that person was the offender. You may even have lost friends. It is important to take time to grieve for these losses.

**Sexual inadequacy.** Some women believe that the offender turned to the child because their relationship was not adequate. It is important to learn the dynamics of abuse in order to realize that sexual relations with an adult partner do not affect a person's likelihood to abuse or not abuse children.

**Concern about money.** You may be worried about finances because of lost income. There are programs that may be able to help you. Don't be afraid to ask about what is available.

**Fear of violence.** In homes where violence is common, you may fear the offender will try to harm you or your children. Services are available to protect you and your children.

# How To Help Your Child

♥ **Believe and support your child.**

*The single most important thing you can do to help your child to recover from the abuse experience is to believe and support her. Show her, with words and actions, that you are glad she told and that you will protect her and help her to heal.*

♥ **Be ready to listen, but don't question your child about the abuse.**

It is important for your child to feel free to talk to you, but don't pry or pressure him to talk. It is also important not to coach or advise your child on how to act or what to say to professionals or investigators.

♥ **Return to a normal routine as soon as possible.**

Treat your child as usual.

Allow your child to be a child.

Don't change how you discipline your child because of what happened.

♥ **Help your child to feel safe.**

Avoid the suspect.

Give your child a sense of physical security.

Teach your child rules of personal safety.

Allow your child to have privacy and limit intrusions into their personal space.

♥ **Allow your child to express feelings.**

All children – both boys and girls – have a full range of feelings. Allow your child to show all feelings to you. Ask yourself if your child has been taught appropriate ways to show anger, fear, sadness, etc.

♥ **Your child needs to feel that they can count on you to be strong, so:**

Find help for yourself.

You don't have to do it all yourself.

Don't blame or punish yourself.

Consider healing wounds from your past.

♥ **Consider counseling for your child and yourself.**

***If you have torn loyalties between your child and the offender, please talk to someone to help you deal with these feelings.***

## **Some things you can say that will really help your child:**

- ♥ “I believe you”.
- ♥ “I know it’s not your fault”.
- ♥ “I’m glad I know about it”.
- ♥ “You were brave to tell”.
- ♥ “I’m sorry this happened to you”.
- ♥ “I will take care of you”.
- ♥ “I’m upset, but not with you. You may see me cry, but don’t worry; I’ll be able to take care of you.”
- ♥ “I’m not mad at you. I’m angry at the person who did this.”
- ♥ “Nothing YOU did made this happen. It has happened to other children, too.”
- ♥ “I don’t know why he did it. He has a problem”.
- ♥ “You can still love someone, but hate what they did to you.”



## **Feelings and Behaviors Sometimes Seen in Abused Children**

**Children may have some of the following symptoms as a result of abuse:**

- ❖ Nausea/upset stomach
- ❖ Crying
- ❖ Changes in sleep patterns
- ❖ Withdrawal from others
- ❖ Clinging to parents
- ❖ Change in school performance
- ❖ Sexually inappropriate behavior
- ❖ Change in appetite
- ❖ Nightmares
- ❖ Anger and mood changes
- ❖ Avoidance of school/friends
- ❖ Rebelliousness
- ❖ Fears and Phobias
- ❖ Attention-seeking behavior
- ❖ Drug or alcohol use/abuse to “self-medicate”.



Children react differently to abuse depending on age, the extent of the abuse, and their relationship to the abuser. These factors, combined with such things as how long the abuse went on and if there was any violence involved, contribute to the level of trauma that a child experiences.

**Child and Family Counseling of Tupelo** has counseling services to help children to heal from their trauma, but ***the single most important factor affecting a child’s recovery is the level of support from the mother or primary caregiver.***

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