

You Can Protect the Ones You Love: **Important Information about Child Sexual Abuse**

Definition of Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is any form of sexual activity imposed upon a child by an adult or other child in a position of power, authority, or influence.

Child sexual abuse can involve touching the intimate parts of a child's body, enticing or forcing the child to have sexual relations, or participating in non-touching offenses such as obscene phone calls or taking pornographic photos.

The Perpetrator of Child Sexual Abuse:

- is often a family member or someone who knows the child and family;
- may be male or female;
- may come from any socio-economic background, ethnic, or religious group; and
- may begin abusing others as a child or teenager.

The Child Victim:

- may be a boy or girl;
- in most cases knows and trusts the abuser;
- may be an infant, toddler, pre-school, or school aged child up to age 18;
- may come from any socio-economic background, ethnic, or religious group;
- is usually afraid to tell about the sexual abuse for fear of being blamed or punished; and
- rarely is abused by a stranger.

(Created for this curriculum by the Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc.)

Listen and Talk With Children

Perhaps the best way to prevent child sexual abuse is for parents to communicate with their children. This is also a responsibility for other adults who have contact with children or adolescents. You may want to:

- Talk to children and take time to listen and observe. Learn as many details as you can about their activities and feelings. Encourage them to share concerns and problems with you;
- Explain that their bodies belong only to them and that they should tell you if someone wants to touch them in places that are not okay;
- Tell children that some people may try to hurt them and make them do things they do not feel comfortable doing. Tell them to say no, get away, and go tell someone;
- Explain about secrets. Some abusers tell children to keep the sexual activity a secret. Some abusers may even threaten children that their parents may be hurt or killed if the secret is shared. Explain that this is a secret not to be kept, one that should be told to someone they trust; and
- Tell children that people whom they know, trust, or love, like a parent, relative, babysitter, or even a teacher or member of the clergy, might try to do something like this.

Make sure children know that if someone does something confusing to them, you want to know about it. Reassure them and explain that they will not be blamed for whatever has happened. You also want to be told if they have seen something that disturbs them.

Try not to scare children—emphasize that the majority of people never do this and that most adults are deeply concerned about protecting children from harm.

You may be reminded of experiences you have had. There is help available if you would like to talk to someone about it.

Physical and Behavioral Signs

Children who may be too frightened to talk about sexual molestation may give no indication of it or may exhibit a variety of physical and behavioral signs. Any or several of these signs may be significant; they may also suggest problems other than sexual abuse. Adults should be alert to such symptoms, including:

- Extreme changes in behavior, such as loss of appetite;
- Fear of the dark or sleep disturbances—nightmares, bed-wetting, fear of sleeping alone, or loss of sleep;
- Regression to more infantile behavior such as thumb sucking or excessive crying;
- Expressing affection in ways inappropriate for a child of that age, unusual interest in or knowledge of sexual matters, or excessive masturbation;
- Vaginal or rectal bleeding, pain itching, swollen genitals, vaginal discharge, or sexually transmitted diseases;
- Fear or intense dislike of a particular person, or being left in a particular place;
- Change in school patterns; specifically, reduced attendance, inability to concentrate, excessive daydreaming, sudden changes in grades;
- Teenage pregnancy, prostitution;
- Suicide attempts, alcohol or drug use;
- Other behavioral signals, such as aggressive or disruptive behavior, withdrawal, running away, or delinquent behavior.

If You Think Sexual Abuse has Occurred

- Believe the child. Children rarely lie about sexual abuse.
- Praise the child for telling you about the experience.
- Show your support for the child. Children's greatest fear is that they are at fault and responsible for the incident. Reinforce the fact that the child is not at fault.
- Remain calm. Recognize that your attitude and acceptance are important signals to the child.

- Report the abuse to your Department of Children and Families, a state or local police department, or the local infoline number. Reporting is especially important for the protection of your children and other youngsters.
- Get help. Contact your community clinic, hospital emergency room or doctor, sexual assault crisis service, or social service agency to assist you.
- Do not blame yourself. Sexual abuse is a fact in our society. Many abusers choose work or community activities that give them access to children. Most abuse occurs in situations where children know and trust the abuser. Reporting may prevent further incidents.

What Will Happen Then?

A social worker from your Department of Children and Families and/or police officer will contact you about the report. He or she will talk to you and your child and ask questions about what happened. Depending on the circumstances, you may be asked to have your child examined by a physician if you have not already done so. The social worker may refer you to available services to help you and your child, and will continue to assist and support you if necessary.

Remember that child sexual abuse is an individual and community problem. It can be overcome. We must work together to protect and support our children.