

Sexual Abuse Introduction

Incest and sexual abuse are at epidemic proportions. Current statistics suggest that one out of four females is sexually abused by the time she reaches the age of 18, with about 75 percent of the perpetrators being family members. One out of 5 males is sexually abused by age 18.

Incest is defined as sexual relations of any kind perpetrated by a biologically or non-biologically related person functioning in the role of a family member. Other trusted adults also sexually abuse children and teenagers; these include:

fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, stepparents, grandparents, coaches, baby sitters, clergy, and teachers.

It really happens... and not just to other people. Children of every race, religion and economic status are abused and or incested. What makes this problem even worse is that the effects of incest don't stop when the abuse stops. They stay with the child as he or she grows through adolescence and into adulthood. Self-hatred, alcoholism, drug addiction, depression, eating disorders, the inability to trust and suicide are common results of incest and sexual abuse.

What Kids Can't Say

A small percentage of kids who are being incested find the courage to tell someone. These disclosures can be as painful as the incest itself; the child believing he/she is telling on someone he/she loves and reliving the horrible experience. They don't want to cause problems; they just want it to stop. No one really knows what makes one child disclose and another not. We do know that it is incredibly important for a disclosure to be heard

respectfully and to be believed.

Often when a child discloses incest, he/she doesn't have words to answer all the questions adults ask. They simply don't understand what is happening. Adults who are already uncomfortable, get frustrated and the whole thing gets dismissed... the child was "making it up" or "fantasizing." Most likely, the child won't tell again. After all, he/she wasn't believed, so why bother. And regardless of when the incest stops, the effects on the survivor last for years.

Every child is vulnerable to sexual abuse. Since one out of four females is sexually abused by the time she reaches age 18 -- that could include you, or a friend, or a brother or sister of yours. Today's teenagers and children must face the possibility that someone may hurt or take advantage of them. Very young children, as well as older teenagers, are victimized. Almost all of these children will be abused by someone they know and trust: a relative, a family friend, or a caretaker. If you were ever sexually abused, even if it was years ago, it is okay to tell a trusted teacher, school nurse, guidance counselor or friend.

Sexual Abuse Can Be Physical, Verbal or Emotional

Sexual abuse includes:

sexual touching and fondling

exposing children to adult sexual activity, including pornographic movies and photographs
having children pose, undress or perform in a sexual fashion on film or in person
"peeping" into bathrooms or bedrooms to spy on a child
rape or attempted rape

Of course, this list goes on. Sexual abuse involves forcing, tricking, threatening, or pressuring a child into sexual awareness or activity. Sexual abuse occurs when an older or more knowledgeable child or an adult uses a child for sexual pleasure. The abuse often begins gradually and increases over time.

The use of physical force is rarely necessary to engage a child in sexual activity because children are trusting and dependent. They want to please others and gain love and approval. Children are taught not to question authority and they believe that adults are always right. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse know this and take advantage of these vulnerabilities in children. Sexual abuse is an abuse of power over a child and a violation of a child's right to normal, healthy, trusting relationships.

Signs of Sexual Abuse - Signs that often go unnoticed

Because most children cannot or do not tell about being sexually abused, it is up to concerned adults or friends to recognize signs of abuse. Physical evidence of abuse is rare. Therefore, we must look for behavior signs. Unfortunately, there is no one behavior alone that definitely determines a child has been sexually abused.

The following are general behavior changes that may occur in children and teens who have been sexually abused:

- Depression
- Eating Disorders
- Sleep disturbances
- Nightmares
- Physical complaints
- School problems
- Withdrawal from family, friends, or usual activities
- Excessive bathing or poor hygiene
- Anxiety
- Running away
- Passive or overly pleasing behavior
- Low self-esteem
- Self-destructive behavior
- Hostility or aggression
- Drug or alcohol problems
- Sexual activity or pregnancy at an early age; promiscuity
- Suicide attempts

Additional Symptoms

Children and teens who have been sexually abused frequently have more specific symptoms:

- Copying adult sexual behavior
- Sexual play with other children, themselves, toys or pets
- Displaying sexual knowledge, through language or behavior, that is beyond what is normal for their age
- Unexplained pain, swelling, bleeding or irritation of the mouth, genital or anal area; urinary infections; sexually transmitted diseases
- Hints, indirect comments or statements about the abuse

Sadly, some childhoods are lost forever.

The Silent Problem

Often children and teens do not tell anyone about sexual abuse because they:

- are too young to put what has happened into words
- were threatened or bribed by the abuser to keep the abuse a secret
- feel confused by the attention and feelings accompanying the abuse
- are afraid no one will believe them
- blame themselves or believe the abuse is punishment for being "bad"
- feel too ashamed or embarrassed to tell
- worry about getting into trouble or getting a loved one into trouble

Silence enables sexual abuse to continue. Silence protects sexual offenders and hurts children who are being abused. Sexual abuse is an extremely difficult and damaging experience. Today there are many resources to help victims and their families. Children no longer need to suffer in silence.

No one can ever regain the childhood years they lost to sexual abuse or incest.

Feelings:

Children and teens who have been sexually abused feel many different (and often overwhelming) emotions, including:

Fear

- of the abuser
- of causing trouble
- of losing adults important to them
- of being taken away from home
- of being "different"

Anger

at the abuser
at other adults around them who did not protect them
at themselves (feeling as if they caused trouble)
because “something is wrong with me”
because they feel alone in their experience
because they have trouble talking about the abuse

Sadness

about having something taken from them
about being betrayed by someone they trusted
about growing up too fast

Guilt

for not being able to stop the abuse
for believing they “consented” to the abuse
for “telling”—if they told
for keeping the secret—if they did not tell
about being involved in the experience
about their bodies’ response to the abuse (if they found it pleasurable)

Confusion

because they may still love or care about the abuser
because their feelings change all the time