

## FAQ: child sexual abuse

### What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is the improper exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity or behavior. It includes:

- Oral contact
- Fondling
- Oral-genital contact
- Masturbation
- Vaginal or anal penetration
- Display of genitalia or pornographic material
- Speaking or compelling a child to speak in a sexual manner
- Involving a child or youth in prostitution

Child sexual abuse involves an adult or adolescent's use of a child to satisfy their own needs for control, domination, power or gratification. It completely disregards the child's needs and sends a strong message that the child's wishes about their own body aren't important. The offender may use emotional manipulation, force, bribery, threats or trickery to make the child participate in sexual activity.

### How often does child sexual abuse happen?

Statistics do suggest that girls are more frequently abused than boys (as high as one out of four girls versus one in nine boys), but this may only reflect the reality that sexual abuse involving males of any age is reported much less frequently than sexual abuse involving females.

In an extensive 1988 Canadian study, a shocking 53% of women and 31% of men indicated they had experienced some form of child sexual abuse. In 2003, 61% of all reported sexual assault survivors in Canada were under 18 years of age.

However, the large majority of children who experience sexual abuse do not tell anyone about it before they reach adulthood.

### Who would sexually abuse a child?

Most of us tend to think that child sexual abuse is committed by people who aren't like us. The reality is that there are no boundaries in today's society that the trauma of child sexual abuse hasn't crossed. Child sexual abuse occurs in rural, remote and urban communities. It's perpetrated largely by males but also by females, and it occurs in every race, cultural, social and economic category. There is no such thing as an identifiable, stereotypical child sexual offender.

Canadian statistics (reported child sexual abuse cases, from 2001) indicate this breakdown of child-offender relationships:

- 28% Non-parental relatives
- 15% Biological fathers
- 9% Stepfathers
- 5% Biological mothers
- 28% Acquaintance of child/family
- 15% Stranger to child/family

The vast majority of offenders who sexually abuse children identify themselves as heterosexual. Many of them have ongoing sexual relationships with other adults.

## **Why would someone sexually abuse a child?**

There is no simple explanation. Since such a wide demographic range of adults commit child sexual abuse, it's almost impossible to develop an accurate "profile" of typical characteristics or behaviours. However, certain general factors seem to be present among many child abusers:

- Low self-esteem
- Feelings of extreme powerlessness
- Tendency to relate more to children than adults
- Very limited ability to understand another person's feelings (empathy)
- Strong projections of accountability onto others (it's always someone else's fault)

Current research indicates that only one-third of abusers experienced sexual abuse themselves as children.

Child sexual abuse is about an adult's need for control, domination, power or gratification. It can happen simply because of opportunity; children are generally much easier to deceive and dominate than adults.

## **Shouldn't I be able to tell if someone I know is sexually abusing kids?**

Most of us think we'd be able to tell if someone we knew was sexually abusing children. This belief is often rooted in stereotypical images of sex offenders as creepy men in trench coats hanging around playgrounds, or seriously dysfunctional males unable to form adult relationships – not at all similar to the people we know and like.

The truth is that most child sexual offenders act just like everybody else does: seemingly friendly, responsible people who may in fact love and otherwise protect the children around them. Offenders are usually skilled at concealing their actions, and effectively manage to emotionally manipulate, frighten or threaten their child victims into silence.

There aren't many definitive ways to detect child sexual abuse. All children will display behavioural changes as part of their growing process, and it's difficult to tell what's normal and what may actually be a signal of some form of trauma.

The key is to be alert for "clustering" of several symptoms at one time. Collectively, such non-verbal cues may be the child's only way of disclosing abuse. These indicators may include:

- Expressions that their body is "dirty"
- Notable changes in personality (from outgoing to introverted or vice versa)
- Nightmares
- Sleep pattern changes
- Refusing to stay in their own bed or room
- Withdrawal from physical contact
- "Acting out" of a sexual nature
- Fears/phobias/anxiety
- Unexplained crying
- Depression
- Secretiveness
- Loss of appetite
- Change in school performance or attendance
- Desire to change school
- Lack of interest in usual activities
- Regression to earlier childhood development (bed-wetting, thumb-sucking)
- Fear of being left alone
- Avoidance of being alone with a particular person

- Recurring medical problems (e.g. throat infections, problems in genital or rectal area such as soreness or infections)
- Nausea or stomach aches
- Unexplained scratches or bruises

### **What effect does sexual abuse have on children?**

Child sexual abuse can cause deep and lasting effects. There are many possible physical and emotional impacts, ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder to fear, confusion, anger, betrayal, fear of close contact and low self-esteem. A child's sense of personal safety and security is heavily damaged by sexual abuse, and difficulties with personal boundaries are a common result. As each survivor grows up, they will develop their own unique set of coping responses to their traumatic experience.

The immediate trauma of the event will subside over time, but longer-term psychological consequences can emerge whether a child is very young, a teenager or has grown to adulthood: low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, flashbacks, and issues with trust, fear, guilt, shame, sexuality or intimacy can develop.

Healing frequently occurs over time, but symptoms are often activated or re-activated by stressors, life changes, development and growth. Healing is possible because children are resilient and can be very creative in their responses and coping strategies.

Survivors of child sexual abuse sometimes create coping mechanisms as children that are carried forward into adulthood, where they no longer work well and can even cause new problems to develop. Many survivors have reported higher use of "numbing" substances such as alcohol and drugs.

In more than 90% of reported cases, offenders and survivors share a close personal relationship before child sexual abuse occurs. Because of this, many people are very reluctant to report the abuse, and most cases never enter the legal system.

Reporting sexual abuse is an option at any age, however, as there is no statute of limitations for such crimes. If an adult is interested in reporting sexual abuse they endured as a child, it may be helpful for them to seek information and support from their local sexual assault service.

### **Do children lie about child sexual abuse?**

It's commonly believed that children make up stories or lie about sexual abuse, but this is extremely rare. Young children usually don't have the knowledge or language skills to misinterpret adult behavior or to invent such stories.

It's much more common for sexually abused children to minimize what's happened to them - or to recant their stories after disclosure - than it is for non-abused children to lie about sexual abuse (Health Canada, 1997).

In fact, the majority of children who are sexually abused don't tell anyone that it has happened to them.

### **Why don't sexually abused children just tell someone about it?**

Many children don't disclose their traumatic experience for one or several of these reasons:

- They've been threatened with harm, either to themselves or someone else.
- They're afraid they won't be believed.
- They think they're responsible for causing the abuse.
- They're trying to protect their family, or maybe even the abuser.
- They're unable to understand or communicate their experience.

No child can ever be held responsible for sexual abuse. A child can't consent to an act they're unable to understand, or were manipulated or forced to participate in. Total responsibility – and accountability – lies with the offender. Sexual abuse is never, ever the child's fault.

### **Why doesn't the legal system take care of this problem?**

Canada already has laws that prohibit child sexual abuse, and so do most other countries. But these laws actually do little to prevent children from being abused simply because they're applied after the damage is done.

Most cases of child sexual abuse involve an adult who has a close relationship with a child and are never reported, keeping them out of the legal system entirely.

### **What does child sexual abuse have to do with me?**

It's difficult for many people to know what society should do about a serious issue like child sexual abuse. Historically, our society (communities, families, media, etc.) hasn't invested much time or resources on educating parents, children or even professionals about this topic. As a result, many people still believe that it won't happen to someone in their family or their community.

Based on the high number of victims, the overwhelming odds are that each of us unwittingly knows someone whose life has been directly impacted by child sexual abuse. We're all likely to work with, play sports with, worship with or attend class with a survivor of child sexual abuse who has chosen to keep it a secret. We're equally likely to have a friend, colleague or classmate who is an undiscovered offender.

And that makes child sexual abuse everyone's problem.

Adults need to educate themselves on this issue, educate their children and support educational programs in Alberta's schools. They need to pay attention to the signs and symptoms of potential abuse in children and teens, learn about their lawful reporting obligations in Alberta, and how to respond properly to a disclosure of abuse from a child.

All of these actions will contribute to early intervention in child sexual abuse, and, in time, the prevention of this violent act.