

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Sometimes the terms “sexual assault” and “sexual violence” are used by the government, media and other people.

What you need to know about child sexual abuse:

- The child is **never** at fault.
- Usually sexual abuse happens in the child’s own home or in another place where the child has felt safe.
- It can **happen at any time**, even if other adults are nearby.
- Children usually keep the abuse a secret, but **nearly always tell the truth** when they do talk about abuse.



Child sexual abuse can include:

- Sexual touching by another person that causes a child to feel upset or confused.
- Showing genitals or forcing a child to touch those private parts.
- Forcing a child to pose, undress or do sexual acts on camera or in person.
- Threats or tricks or blackmail.
- Sexual insults, sexual names and bad words.
- Making a child look at photos or films of sex acts, often on the internet.
- Comments about a child’s body or sex acts.

Who are the offenders?

- The person may be a family member, friend, carer, or another adult or child with power over them.
- Very often sexual abusers are known to the child.
- Most, but not all, sexual abusers are heterosexual men.
- Offenders may be rich or poor and from all cultures in the community. They do not look different.

How does sexual abuse happen?

- The abuser makes the child and often other adults think the abuser is caring and honest.
- “Grooming” is tactics to trap children into abuse.
- Often the adult “grooms” the child before the abuse starts.
- Offenders “condition” the child’s understanding, feelings and acts.
- The abuser traps the child with tricks, bribes and/or threats (looks, physical and blackmail).
- The abuser may make the child like them by spending a lot of time with them instead of with other adults. The abuser may play, share interests, give money and other gifts, take them out and talk with them.
- The abuser may isolate the child from others by sharing secrets.
- There may be “accidental” touching.
- The abuser may blame the child and/or others or say the actions are caring not harmful.



When children tell...

- Do all you can to comfort the child.
- Tell them it is not their fault and you believe them!
- Tell them that you know how hard it is to tell but they have done what is right.

Rights

Children have the right to feel safe all of the time. They have the right to privacy, dignity, safety and wellbeing. All children (including those with intellectual disabilities) should be kept informed and asked their opinions.

Child Sexual Abuse Myths and Facts

A child says they have been sexually abused, and then later says they were not, was not truthful when earlier saying they were abused.

FALSE Children may be scared of trouble and hope the abuse may stop if they say it did not happen, but do trust when the child says they have been abused.

Often what the child says about sexual abuse is untrue.

FALSE Children rarely lie about sexual abuse. Children who report sexual abuse often describe details they would probably not know if their stories were not true.



People who abuse their own children are not a danger to other people's children.

FALSE Often an abuser repeats abuse and may abuse their children's friends and others.

The child may be at fault for encouraging the sexual activity.

FALSE A child is not to blame.

Females do not commit sexual offences against children.

FALSE Women commit less often than men but do also abuse.

If a child does not tell about being sexually abused, it is because they have a bad relationship with their parents or carers.

FALSE It is very hard for a child who is being abused to tell even when they have very good parents or carers.

All professional persons who work with children must, by law, report any suspicion of child sexual abuse or other forms of abuse.

TRUE Most people who work with children (teachers, doctors, counsellors) must report suspicions of abuse to the Department of Family & Community Services.



You can't do anything to protect children when they are out of your sight.

FALSE You can teach safety skills and tell children to tell if bad things happen. Listen even if your child cannot explain well.

If the child does not complain or show distress during the sexual activity, then it is not really abuse.

FALSE Even if a child does not really understand, abuse is bad.

People close to a child should know that sexual abuse is happening.

FALSE An abuser works hard to manipulate the victim and others so that even people close to the child do not suspect the abuse.

Effects of Child Sexual Abuse

Physical Effects

Clear physical signs suggesting sexual abuse are rare but may include with unknown reasons;

- Private parts pain, bleeding or discharge (genital or anal areas).
- Scratches, bruises, rashes, redness or swelling, particularly in the genital or anal area.
- Pain going to the toilet.
- Headaches or stomach aches.
- Pain sitting or walking.
- Torn clothing.
- Change in appetite, weight gain or loss.
- Not sleeping well or nightmares.

Effects on Behaviour

No behaviour proves sexual abuse and there may be no clear signs. If there are changes, talk to your child and/or speak to a professional. Your child may;

- Be suddenly or often upset or angry or have a panic attack.
- Act younger (for example thumb sucking, bedwetting, or using baby talk).
- Be afraid of being alone or in the dark.
- Be sad (cry), anxious or quiet.
- Focus on sexual things in play, drawings and language.
- Touch adults or children inappropriately.
- Not want to go out or be with people.
- Not want to bath, shower or go to the toilet.
- Stop being interested in activities.
- Bang their head, scratch, hit, bite or rock.
- Touching themselves excessively.



Children and young people who have been sexually abused must be given the right to communicate in words or in other ways (eg drawings, gestures). We must help them feel safe and not alone.

Children are helped by parents, carers and others believing, protecting and supporting. Time, patience and care will help children to cope.

Emotional Impact

Children will have many different reactions. Children may be very confused and uncertain as to how they feel. Your child may feel;

- Angry at the person who abused them.
- Angry at people they think should keep them safe.
- Angry for not being able to stop abuse.
- Fear that people will be angry or disappointed.
- Fear that the abuser will hurt them or their family for telling or be in trouble.
- Fear that they may be taken away from home.
- Sad that someone they trusted hurt them.
- Guilty because they think they did something wrong to cause this to happen.
- Fear that their friends and peers will find out and think they are bad.
- Guilty that the abuse went on for so long and they said nothing.
- Confused that they may still like the person who abused them and want to see them (but you must say "no.")
- Uncomfortable with other physical contact.
- Alone for thinking this has happened to nobody else.
- Worthless that something is wrong with them because of what has happened.



A child or young person with a disability may have the impacts of sexual abuse misunderstood as being due to their disability rather than the impact of abuse.

You should think about if signs are because of abuse or other reasons for which the child needs help.

Coping as a parent and looking after yourself

When you discover that your child has been sexually abused, you will have many perhaps unexpected emotions and need to look after yourself to be OK to look after your child. Do not feel guilty and know that you are a good parent as you support your child.

Parent emotions may include:

- **Shock, disbelief and feeling out of control:** You may find it hard to believe what you have been told and want to believe myths to cope with the bad reality because you cannot stop the pain.
- **Outrage:** You may feel strong anger. Your body may feel weak.
- **Guilt and shame:** You may feel very bad for not keeping your child safe and not knowing or guessing about the abuse. You may worry other people will think you are a bad parent.
- **Frustration:** You and your child cannot escape from the crime, but others may walk away and you may want more help. You may want to talk but also keep private what has happened.
- **Fear:** You may worry that you will see the abuser or the abuser will try to find you or that the abuse may be repeated.
- **Grief:** For the loss of the innocence of your child.



Handling emotions in front of children

- No matter what emotions you feel, be calm when in front of your child and do not constantly talk about the abuse.
- Tell your child you are not upset with them, and will help and protect them.
- Do not make promises you cannot keep, such as to keep secret the abuse.
- Listen when your child wants to talk, but do not ask questions such as "Why didn't you tell me?" or "Why did you let it happen?" or pressure them to give more details.
- Try to answer their questions. Be careful and consider what they need to know. Do check if you have other children if they may also have been abused and that they are not feeling guilty.

Look after yourself

- Know your body signs as emotions build up. Do something before emotions take over. Get some space for yourself, even for a short time. Don't stay isolated and alone. Visit a friend or a relative or a neighbour. Use the phone or go for a walk or do an activity.
- Unless there are safety issues, keep routines for yourself and your child as normal as possible (going to school, seeing friends, mealtimes etc), but keep plans short and simple.
- If people don't need to know what happened, don't tell them, but if people know, tell them what you need, they may be able to help you.
- Talk about the impact of the abuse on you to loved ones or strangers so in time you do not blame yourself. Other parents of abused children will understand.



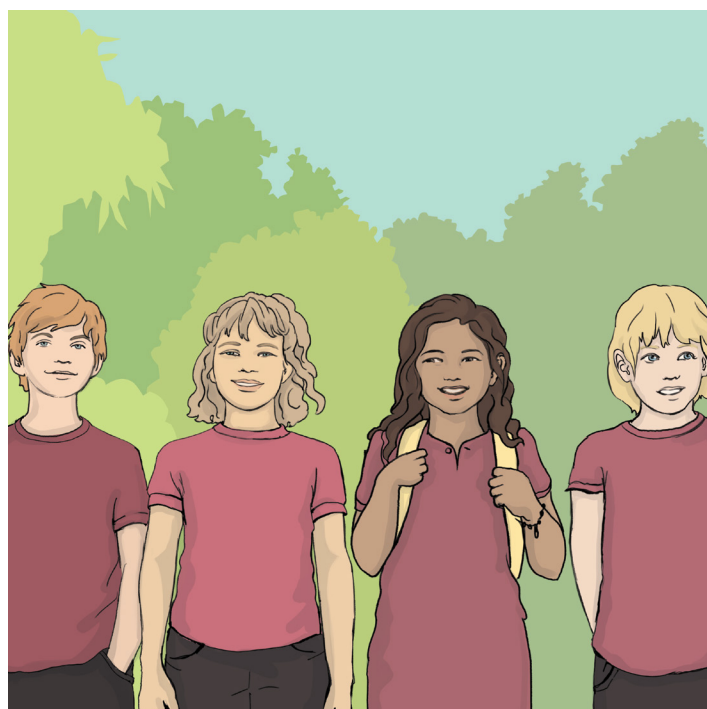
The World Health Organization (WHO 1999) says:

“Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violate[s] the laws or social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by an activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person”.

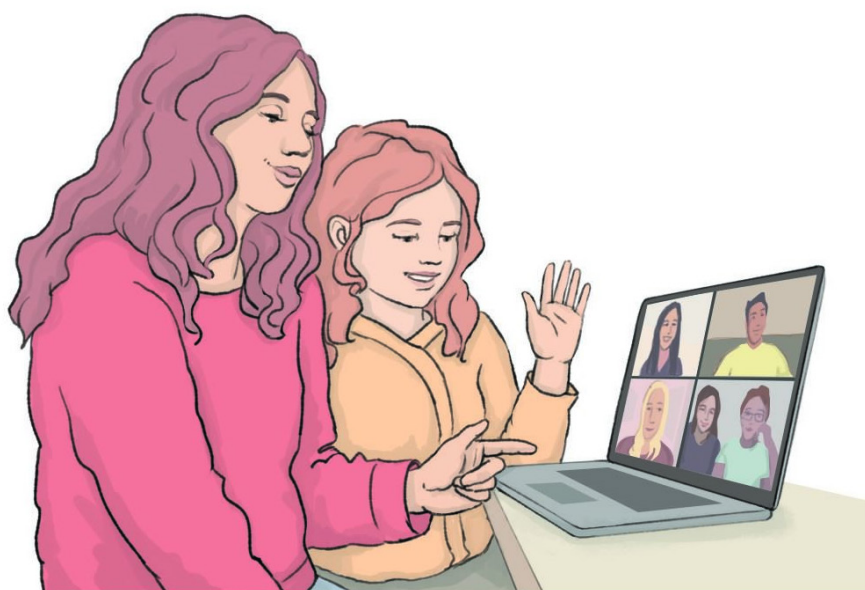
Teaching Safety Skills

We cannot completely protect children from sexual abuse, but it is important to:

- Increase the child's body knowledge with proper body names, including private parts.
- Teach which touching is good and bad, safe and unsafe, public and private.
- Help your child feel OK to talk with you about feelings and secrets.
- Teach your child that sometimes adults will make children do things that are bad.
- Explain that secrets are not always to be kept.
- Teach your child to tell you or another trusted person if a person has hurt them or made them feel bad (such as by touching them or asking the child to touch the person or asking them to undress or rub cream on them). Tell them they will never be in trouble.
- Learn how to use the internet sites your child is using (games, chat rooms, social media).
- Give rules about internet use including about never giving name, address or phone number without asking you, and then only with, for example, family, friends and school.
- Ask your child to check with you before opening attachments and clicking on links in emails.



- Do not allow your child to email or post a photo of themselves or say where they go to school and about outings except if you say yes (for example emailing grandparents).
- Perhaps limit internet use to the living room or kitchen rather than bedrooms.
- Perhaps set a timer.
- Perhaps install software that seeks to block access to bad content.
- Tell your child to tell you if they see something bad or someone says something unkind to them.
- Block emails from people who are abusive.
- Perhaps share an email address with your young children.
- Tell your child that some people on the internet pretend to be children but are not. With AI (artificial intelligence) this can be voice as well as written words.
- Ensure that your child uses long passwords that are easy to remember but hard for others to guess. Never give passwords to anyone, even if they say they are internet providers.
- Use screen names different from their email address in chat rooms.
- Remind your child not to put in an email or chat anything they do not want public.



“A child is never without adult company for very long and the purpose of that company is to hold them, guide them, teach them and protect them. Safe adults in a child’s life are as important as the air they breathe.”

Catch A Falling Star. Rosie’s Place Pub. 2003.