



Protecting Your Children

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse usually begins with a sex offender gaining a child's trust and friendship. The offender then begins "testing" the child's ability to protect themselves by telling sexual jokes, engaging in horseplay, back rubs, kissing or sexual games. If the child appears comfortable with or curious about this type of behavior – and most healthy, normal children are – the offender will slowly increase the amount and type of touching to include more direct sexual touching. This is called "grooming." Child sexual abuse may include exposing, fondling, masturbation, oral sex, intercourse and pornography. Many children do not understand that what is happening is sexual or wrong. Most offenders know that if they physically harm a child while sexually abusing them, the child is more likely to tell. They are also clever enough to set the child to feel as if they are equally responsible for the contact. Children feel trapped and are unable to tell anyone what is happening.

Possible indications that a child is being sexually abused

Because each child is unique, symptoms of sexual abuse vary and can be hard to identify in some cases. Here are some things to watch for:

- Some children may not demonstrate any change in behavior. Some offenders are able to "groom" children for abuse in a manner that encourages the child to feel comfortable, close to and even protective of the offenders.
- Behavior symptoms can include a change in modesty, ranging from becoming overly concerned about their body to engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviors.
- Physical symptoms can include genital pain, itching, discharge and bleeding. Children may also develop stomachaches, headaches and a variety of other physical complaints.
- Children who are being abused sometimes try to deal with their problems by engaging in "escape" behavior, such as running away, drug or alcohol use, daydreaming or becoming more isolated.
- Other changes can include sleep disturbances, bed-wetting, unexplained fears or refusal to go certain places or be with certain people. School problems, difficulties with peers, excessive crying or depression, clinginess, aggressiveness or secretiveness are also common.

Remember, if your child demonstrates any abrupt change in behavior, he or she may have something they need to talk about.

Who are child sexual abusers?

Most children are sexually abused by someone they are related to, or know very well, like relatives, neighbors, or family friends. Most offenders are able to "get away with" sexually abusing children for years before they are reported to law enforcement. Research indicates that 10% of children are sexually abused prior to their 18th birthday.

What these facts tell us is that all parents, caretakers and community members must educate themselves about sexual abuse and those who abuse children in order to improve their ability to protect children. It is important for people to understand how "normal" child sexual abusers look and how easily they can gain access to children.

Adult offender Traits

- Adults who seem to engage in contact with children, i.e., casual touching, wrestling, tickling, or having children sit in their lap.
- Adults who act like children with children or who allow children to do questionable or inappropriate things.
- Adults who want to take your children on special outings too frequently or plan activities that would include being alone with your child.
- Adults who are always available to watch your kids and seem able to infiltrate family/social functions.
- Adults who work with children and also frequently spend their free time doing special things with kids.
- Adults who spend time volunteering with youth groups who do not have children in those groups.
- Adults who do not have children and seem to know too much about the current fads or music popular with children.
-

Not all offenders will demonstrate these characteristics. Offenders can be anyone: a man or a woman; married or single; a child, adolescent, or adult; of any race, religion, or sexual orientation. They are likely to be stable, employed and a respected member of the community.

Prevention

Research has demonstrated that most of our school based child abuse prevention programs do not prevent children from being abused and have little impact on reporting. The reason for the lack of impact on abuse is that children are not in a good position to protect themselves from adults, especially if the adult offender is a parent or caretaker. Given the way child sexual abusers operate, it is imperative that adults, not children become educated about child abuse, supervise their children more closely and take immediate action if they suspect someone of abusing a child. Parents, schools, churches and community groups must also work together to develop prevention programs that incorporate parent training into prevention programs and encourage reporting.

Talking to your children about sexual abuse

- Talk openly with your children about sexual development, behavior, and abuse.
- Use proper names for body parts.
- Tell your children that, if anyone touches or tries to see their private parts, tries to get them to touch or look at another person's private parts, shows them pictures of or tries to take pictures of their private parts, talks to them about sex, walks in on them in the bathroom or does anything that makes them feel uncomfortable to tell you or another safe person as soon as they can.
- Tell your children that some children and adults have touching problems. These people can make secret touching look accidental and they should still tell you even if they think it might have been an accident.
- Tell your children that some people try to trick kids into keeping the touching a secret. Tell your children, "We don't want those kinds of secrets in our family."
- Give your children examples of things that someone might use to try to get them to keep it a secret; candy, money, special privileges, threats, subtle fear of loss, separation or punishment, etc.

- Tell your children that touching other people's private parts is not ok for children to do or for adults to do to children. Tell them you do not want them to do secret touching with other people but that you will not be mad at them if they come and tell you it has happened, even if it has been happening a lot.
- Talk to your children about safety issues at least two or three times a year. Develop a family plan for answering the phone, fires, getting lost, and secret touching. Discuss "what if" scenarios with them on a regular basis.
- Make sure they have support people they can talk to at home, at school, in their extended family, neighborhood or children. Help them pick out three people and tell you who they are. Tell them that, if for any reason, they cannot talk to you, that they should call or go see another support person.

Safety tips for supervision of children

- Be cautious about who you allow to babysit or spend time alone with your children. Get references. Consider ways to encourage children to mind the babysitter, while giving them options to trust their feelings to stay safe.
- Try to bathe and dress your own children.
- Routinely ask your children about what happens while you are gone. Ask questions like "What did you do that was fun?" or "Was there anything that happened that worried you or that I should know about?"
- Get to know the people and homes where your children play.
- Closely supervise all Internet activities.
- Don't expect your child to be able to protect themselves or assume they will be able to tell you on their own.
- Listen, believe, and trust what your child tells you. Children rarely lie about sexual abuse.
- Teach your child healthy values about sexuality. If you don't teach your child, someone else might.
- Remind your child that "secret touching" is never the child's fault. Talk to your child about the ways someone might try to "trick" them into going along with the touching or not telling you that it is happening to them.
- Get to know your child's friends and the homes in which your child plays.
- Be wary of older children or adults who want to spend a lot of time alone with your child.
- Trust your intuition: if you feel something is not right in your child's relationships, act on it.
- Let them know that people who touch children's private parts need help because they have a problem with touching.
- Don't let young male children go into a men's public restroom by themselves.
- Learn about the prevention program that your school uses and discuss it with your children. Have safety talks with your children several times a year. Include information about the risk of encountering sexually explicit materials and adult offenders in the community and on the Internet.

Adapted from information from Center for Behavioral Intervention, 4345 SW 109th, Beaverton, OR 97005; established in 1982 by Steven H. Jensen. CBI provides comprehensive treatment for sex offenders mandated to receive treatment within a community setting.