

Facts About Child Sexual Abuse

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse is any sexual interaction between a child (0-18 years old) and an adult (over 18 years old), or another child with more physical or social power than them. It often involves touch, but can also involve non-touch activities such as showing private parts either of their own or in pornography, or trying to look at a child's private parts such as "walking in on them" in the shower.

As many children never tell anyone that they were sexually abused it's difficult to know the exact number of kids who are abused, but the best guess we have right now is that 1 out of 4 girls, and 1 out of 6 boys experience some sort of sexual abuse before they turn 18 years old.

Sexual abuse happens to children of all backgrounds, including White, Black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, multi-racial, straight, LGBTQ, gender non-binary, wealthy and those without financial means.

Children are most often abused by people they know and trust, such as family members, family friends, or professionals who have frequent contact with the child such as teachers, coaches, babysitters, etc. Studies have shown that more than 75% of abusers who hurt children belong to this "circle of trust", instead of strangers whom the child has never seen before.

Whose fault is sexual abuse?

It is never NEVER the child's fault that they were sexually abused. (Not even a tiny bit!) It is always the abuser's fault, as they knew what they were doing was wrong.

Common reasons why kids might blame themselves:

"I didn't say no or run away"

When something scary happens (we call this "trauma"), our brain has been programmed over thousands and thousands of years to either fight, flight (run away), or freeze. When the danger seems really big (like a grown up), our brain usually chooses freeze because it thinks "There's no way I can fight or run away from this". That's why a lot of times when kids are being sexually abused, their body and brain will "freeze" and they feel like they can't move their bodies or yell out even though they want to.

"I kept going to the person's house even though they had abused me"

Most of the time people who abuse kids are people that the child already knows, likes or even loves. Many times these people are those that their family trusts. That's why there are many reasons why a child might go over to that person's house even after an abuse happens, like they might hope that it was a one-time thing, that it won't happen again, or they may like or love that person and want to see them even if they had hurt them before. Or it just might be really

hard to tell a grownup about the sexual abuse and the grownup might want you to go over to that person's house.

"I liked parts of it"

This is a very very common thought and leads to very big feelings of shame, because kids think "there's something wrong with me". There are many reasons why a child might have liked parts of the sexual abuse experience. Abusers often give lots of attention to the child they are abusing, like spending more time with them, taking them on special trips, giving them gifts, telling them nice things. Any child would love these things. Also, when private parts are touched, it feels good to us-- whether we wanted these parts touched or not. There are many ways that our bodies react automatically, and we have no control-- just like how our eyes tear up when we cut an onion, or we get saliva in our mouths when we imagine a lemon, or we close our eyes when someone claps in front of our face!

What are my options and rights?

You can choose when, how, and to whom you can share this information with. It is often very helpful for children to share that they were sexually abused as soon as possible to an adult they trust, so that the adult can help make sure they are not abused again. If the adult is someone like a teacher, a doctor or a therapist, they are required to call CPS (Child Protective Services) about this information so that CPS can make sure you are safe. If you tell a family member, they can choose whether or not to call the police or CPS. CPS and/or the police will usually come out to talk to you, and you may do what's called an "MDI interview" where you will talk to someone who is trained on how to ask kids questions about abuse. Adults can also help connect you to therapy to help you with the big feelings that usually come after something scary like abuse.

Criminal Justice System Response

At the MDI interview there will usually be people listening to your interview behind a mirror (you can't see them but the interviewer will usually let you know who is behind the mirror!), and these people include police officers, CPS, lawyers, and victim advocates. After getting your story and collecting other evidence, the team of adults will then decide if they think they can arrest the abuser and try to prosecute them for the crime (which is a fancy word to mean they will take the person to court and try to figure out if they should have a punishment for what they did, which is usually jail time).

If it does go to court, you may be asked to be a witness and speak before the judge and a jury. A jury is 12 people who are everyday people who are asked to listen to all the evidence, and decide if there is enough evidence to say without any doubt that the person did in fact commit a crime. Being a witness often sounds very scary to kids, and can make kids feel anxious. If you are in therapy before this happens, your therapist will certainly work with you to help make these feelings get smaller, and come up with strategies so that you feel as relaxed as possible. Therapists can even come with you to the court if they are able. There is also someone called a Victim Advocate from the District Attorney's Office who works with kids and their families to support them during court as well, like showing you around the courtroom ahead of time, and

even sometimes getting you a special dog that you can sit with while you talk at court so you feel less nervous.

Whatever happens at court, it does not change the fact that what happened to you was wrong. Sometimes, the jury will decide that there was “not enough evidence” and find the abuser “not guilty”--meaning they do not have to go to jail. This usually feels terrible to kids and their families, because this might seem like the kids were not believed.

How will the sexual abuse affect me?

Each child is different, so there is no “one way” that a child can be affected by sexual abuse. But from our experience providing treatment to many sexually abused kids over the years, here are some things we have noticed in many kids who have been harmed in this way:

- changes in feelings and mood (feeling more irritable or “grumpy”, easily frustrated or angry, sadness or being “down”, being more nervous)
- changes in sleep (hard to fall asleep, scared of the dark, hard to sleep on their own, nightmares, waking up many times during the night, etc)
- changes in how safe they feel (being nervous about walking around outside, feeling like they have to be looking around, being easily scared or “jumpy”)
- having memories or thoughts of the abuse “pop” into their mind all the time
- spacing out especially when you are nervous or feel unsafe, sometimes “blinking out” and you can’t remember what you were doing or thinking
- feeling responsible for what happened, feeling “dirty” or ashamed that this happened
- changes in relationships with people around them, sometimes feeling like they can’t trust anybody anymore

Sometimes kids feel so bad about themselves or feel so sad that they start to have thoughts of hurting themselves, or even killing themselves. It is VERY important for you to reach out to a safe adult RIGHT AWAY if you are having any of these thoughts, because they will get better with help. You can also call a 24-hour support programs yourself, including:

- San Francisco Child Crisis hotline (415 970-3800), or
- National suicide hotline (1800-273-8255), or
- Text CONNECT to 741741

Reference: National Child Traumatic Stress Network (www.nctsn.org)