

Child Sexual Exploitation

Because there is a distinct relationship between sexual exploitation and abduction, it is important that instructors be familiar with basic sexual exploitation information. Reading the following information can assist even the best instructor to be more prepared to handle a suspicion or disclosure of sexual exploitation that may result from positive and empowering prevention education.

Why don't children tell about abuse?

Many people wonder why so many children keep abuse a secret, particularly if it occurs when they are old enough to realize that abuse is "wrong". It is extremely difficult for a child to tell even a trusted adult. Before talking to someone, he or she must climb a mountain of overwhelming feelings. A child may:

- Not recognize the activity is inappropriate, or only realize it later.
- Feel guilty, ashamed, or think "it's my fault" or "I deserved it".
- Be afraid of threats, especially if the abuser has threatened to hurt a family member or pet.
- Love the abuser or have confused feelings about him or her.
- Not want to get the abuser in trouble or lose the abuser's love and care.
- Be unsure what will happen.
- Think that no one will believe him or her.
- Be afraid of getting into trouble. Teenagers may fear that their parents will "tighten the reins" if the abuse occurred while they were out on their own or if they used bad judgment.
- Be afraid of what other people will say. Teenagers and preteens are particularly sensitive to peer pressure and fear having their friends find out. They may fear being called "slut" or "homosexual".

What are the effects of abduction or sexual abuse on the victim?

The effects of abduction and sexual abuse on a child can vary widely. In abductions, it will depend on the events of the abduction, how long the child was gone how the child was treated, what the child understood or believed about the abduction, and other factors. For instance, where children have been gone for a long time, they may no longer remember their parent/guardian or may have believed that a parent/guardian was dead. Some children may show signs of upset or trauma for a long time afterward. When children are found, professionals in law enforcement, counseling and child welfare can often help families and children cope with the aftereffects¹.

¹ Kathryn M. Turman (Ed.),
Recovery and Reunifications of Missing Children: A Team Approach.
Arlington, CA: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, March 1995

Sexual abuse also can have very negative psychological effects on the child. Children may suffer from:

- Fear
- Anxiety
- Difficult concentrating
- Feelings of helplessness
- Low self esteem
- Self-blame
- Depression
- Anger

The reactions can be very long lasting. In later life, some victims may suffer chronic depression, may abuse alcohol or drugs, or have trouble developing close relationships.

However, some victims of child abuse suffer no obvious aftereffects at all. It may depend on the type of abuse that occurred, who was involved, and the personality of the child. For example, one incident involving a casual acquaintance might not be as traumatic as repeated abuse by a close family member. The way that parents react to the abuse can be very important.² Most experts recommend that every abused child be assessed by a qualified mental health professional that can advise parents whether any treatment is needed.³

Sexual abuse in childhood does not mean that a child will grow up to be a sexual abuser. Although many child molesters report a history of sexual abuse, most child victims do not become child molesters.⁴ Nor does sexual abuse by a person of the same sex mean that a child will grow up to be a homosexual.

² John N. Briere and Diana M. Elliott,
"The Immediate and Long Term Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse,"
The Future of Children: Sexual Abuse of Children, Vol. 4, No. 2, Summer/Fall 1994.

³ "Sexual Abuse of Children: Recommendations and Analysis,"
The Future of Children: Sexual Abuse of Children, Vol.4, No 2, Summer/Fall 1994.

⁴ Cathy Spatz Widom,
Victims of Child Sexual Abuse – Later Criminal Consequences.
Washington, CD: National Institute of Justice, March 1995.

Recognizing the Signs of Child Exploitation and Abuse

To be a proactive protector or partner in prevention, you need to know some of the signs that indicate a child is being abused. Kids and Company: Together for Safety[®] focuses specifically on child sexual abuse, this section also provides guidance on signs of physical abuse. For further information, you may also check with your local child protective agency.

Sometimes, children are unable to tell adults that they have been abused because they are shy, embarrassed, or afraid. Here are some possible warning signs of abuse. No one of these actions alone necessarily means there has been abuse. They are provided to help you become aware of the most common signs and are not intended to be proof.

Many of these behaviors are signs of some type of psychological stress that the child may be feeling. No matter what the cause, they are warning signals that alert us that something distressful is occurring in the child's life. The source of the problem needs to be explored and the child needs help and support.

Behaviors that May Indicate Sexual Abuse:

- Bizarre, sophisticated, seductive, promiscuous, or otherwise unusual sexual behavior or knowledge
- Sudden changes in behavior, extreme mood swings, withdrawal, fantasy, fearfulness, excessive crying or infantile behavior
- Fear of certain places, people or activities; especially fear of being alone with a particular person
- Sudden acting out of feelings, or aggressive or rebellious behavior
- Suddenly starts doing poorly on school work or has difficulty concentrating
- Unwillingness to change for gym or participate in physical education class
- Extreme fear of being touched or unwillingness to submit to physical examination
- Sudden excessive weight gain or loss
- Poor peer relationships
- Delinquency, truancy or running away
- Forcing sexual acts on other children
- Brothers or sisters who complain of sexual or physical mistreatment
- Reports sexual assault by caretaker or other person
- Self-injurious behavior, including suicide attempts
- Prostitution

Physical Indicators of Sexual Abuse:

- Difficulty in walking or sitting
- Torn, stained or bloody underclothing
- Complaints of pain or itching in genital area (between legs)

- Bruises, bleeding, swelling or cuts in between legs, front or back
- Venereal disease
- Bruising around the mouth on infants
- Bruises or cuts on penis, in area between penis and anus; area between vagina and anus; open sore in these areas; vaginal discharge
- Difficulty in urination
- Complaints of pain when there seem to be no reason for the pain, such as stomachaches, backaches, and headaches

Sex Play Between Children:

People are often uncertain about what is normal sexual behavior among children. Typically, young children are curious about their own body parts and may compare them with their friends. It is also quite common for young children to masturbate – to touch their own genitals - in front of other people or in public. Around age 6 or 7, children tend to become more modest, although they may continue to show sexual curiosity and play sexual games with children of the same or opposite sex. Children’s knowledge of sexual behavior also tends to be very limited until around age 10 or older. By the early teens, some children are becoming sexually active. However, anytime children are involved in sexual activity in which there is an unequal distribution of power, or if an element of force or bribery is involved, that activity needs to be viewed as potentially abusive. Power may be unequal if one of the children involved:⁵

- is much larger than the other
- is more than 3 years older
- has greater mental, emotional, or physical ability
- has a greater status (such as group leader or babysitter)

⁵ STOP IT NOW!, *Because There Is a Way to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse: Facts About Abuse and Those Who Might Commit It*
 Brandon, VT: The Safer Society Press, 1998.