



# Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet

## For Parents, Teachers, and Other Caregivers

Developed by the NCTSN Child Sexual Abuse Committee

For more information, visit the  
National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) at [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org).

*Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.*

*This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the US Department of Health and Human Services. The views, policies and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.*

## **What is child sexual abuse?**

Child sexual abuse is any interaction between a child and an adult (or another child) in which the child is used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or an observer. Sexual abuse can include both touching and non-touching behaviors. Touching behaviors may involve touching of the vagina, penis, breasts or buttocks, oral-genital contact, or sexual intercourse. Non-touching behaviors can include voyeurism (trying to look at a child's naked body), exhibitionism, or exposure to pornography. Abusers often do not use physical force, but may use play, deception, threats, or other forms of coercion to engage children and maintain their silence. Abusers frequently employ persuasive and manipulative tactics—referred to as “grooming”—such as buying gifts or arranging special activities, which can further confuse the victim.

## **Who is sexually abused?**

Children of all ages, races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds are vulnerable to sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse affects both girls and boys across all neighborhoods, communities and countries around the world.

## **How can you tell if a child is being (or has been) sexually abused?**

Children who have been sexually abused may display a range of emotional and behavioral reactions characteristic of children who have experienced trauma. These reactions include:

- Increased occurrence of nightmares or other sleeping difficulties
- Withdrawn behavior
- Angry outbursts
- Anxiety
- Depression
- New words for private body parts
- Sexual activity with toys or other children
- Not wanting to be left alone with a particular individual(s)

Although many sexually abused children exhibit behavioral and emotional changes, many others do not. It is therefore critical to focus not only on detection, but on prevention and communication—by educating children about body safety, by teaching them about healthy body boundaries, and by encouraging open communication about sexual matters.

## **Why don't children tell about sexual abuse?**

There are many reasons children do not disclose being sexually abused, including:

- Threats of bodily harm (to the child and/or the child's family)
- Fear of being removed from the home
- Fear of not being believed
- Shame or guilt

If the abuser is someone the child or the family cares about, the child may worry about getting that person in trouble. In addition, children often believe that the sexual abuse was their own fault and may not disclose for fear of getting in trouble themselves. Very young children may not have the

language skills to communicate about the abuse or may not understand that the actions of that perpetrator are abusive, particularly if the sexual abuse is made into a game.

### **What can you do if a child discloses that he or she is being (or has been) sexually abused?**

If a child discloses abuse, it is critical to stay calm, listen carefully, and NEVER blame the child. Thank the child for telling you and reassure him or her of your support. Please remember to call for help immediately.

If you know or suspect that a child is being or has been sexually abused, please call the federally funded **Child Welfare Information Gateway** at **1.800.4.A.CHILD (1.800.422.4453)** or visit [www.childwelfare.gov/responding/how.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/how.cfm).

**If you need immediate assistance, call 911.**

### **Child Sexual Abuse Myths and Facts**

**Myth:** Child sexual abuse is a rare experience.

**Fact:** Child sexual abuse is not rare. Research indicates that as many as 1 out of 4 girls and 1 out of 6 boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18. However, because child sexual abuse is by its very nature secretive, many of these cases are never reported.

**Myth:** A child is most likely to be sexually abused by a stranger.

**Fact:** Children are most often sexually abused by someone they know and trust. Ninety-three percent of reported cases of child sexual abuse are committed by individuals who are considered part of the victim's "circle of trust."

**Myth:** Preschoolers do not need to know about child sexual abuse and would be frightened if educated about it.

**Fact:** Numerous educational programs are available to teach young children about the difference between healthy and unhealthy touches. These programs can help children develop basic safety skills in a way that is helpful rather than frightening. For more information on educating young children, see *Lets Talk About Taking Care of You: An Educational Book About Body Safety*, available at [www.hope4families.com/Lets\\_Talk\\_Book\\_Information.html](http://www.hope4families.com/Lets_Talk_Book_Information.html).

**Myth:** Children who are sexually abused will never recover.

**Fact:** Many children are quite resilient, and with a combination of support from their parents or caregivers and effective counseling, they can and do recover from such experiences.

**Myth:** Children are almost always sexually abused by adults.

**Fact:** Surveys indicate that up to one third of cases of child sexual abuse are perpetrated by individuals under the age of 18. While some degree of sexual curiosity and exploration is to be expected between children of about the same age, when one child coerces another to engage in adult-like sexual activities, the behavior is unhealthy and abusive. Both the abuser and the victim can benefit from counseling.

**Myth:** Talking about sexual abuse with a child who has suffered such an experience will only make it worse.

**Fact:** Although children often choose not to talk about their abuse, there is no evidence that encouraging children to talk about sexual abuse will make them feel worse. On the contrary, research shows that treatment from a mental health professional can minimize the physical, emotional, and social problems of abused children by allowing them to appropriately process their feelings and fears.

### **Tips To Help Protect Children From Sexual Abuse**

- Always teach children accurate names of private body parts.
- Avoid focusing exclusively on “stranger danger.” Keep in mind that most children are abused by someone they know and trust.
- Teach children about body safety and healthy body boundaries early (in preschool) and often.
- Teach children the difference between healthy and unhealthy touches.
- Reinforce the message that children always have the right to make decisions about their bodies. Empower them to say no when they do not want to be touched, even in non-sexual ways (e.g., politely refusing hugs) and to say no to touching others.
- Make sure children know that adults and older children never need help with their private body parts (e.g., bathing or going to the bathroom.)
- Educate children about the difference between good secrets (like surprise parties—which are okay because they are not kept secret for long) and bad secrets (those that the child is supposed to keep secret forever, which are not okay).
- Trust your instincts! If you feel uneasy leaving a child with someone, don’t do it. If you’re concerned about possible sexual abuse, ask questions.

For more information, visit the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) at [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org).

**THE BEST TIME TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE IS NOW.**