

FACING THE FACTS:

A Parent's Guide to the Understanding of Child Sexual Abuse

What is Sexual Abuse?

The sexual abuse of a child occurs whenever any person forces, tricks, or threatens a child in order to have sexual contact with him or her. This contact can include such "nontouching" behaviors as an adult exposing himself, or asking a child to look at pornographic material. It includes behaviors ranging from the sexual handling of a child (fondling), to actual genital contact, to intercourse to violent rape. In all instances of child sexual abuse, the child is being used as an object to satisfy the adult's sexual needs or desires.

"Candy is my best friend. I play at her house a lot. Today her daddy asked us to look at some pictures. They were nasty pictures of people with no clothes on. He said, 'Doesn't that look like fun?' I didn't think so, but I said, 'Yes.'"

Who Gets Sexually Abused?

Any child of any age is a potential victim of sexual abuse. Some important facts to keep in mind:

- Although the majority of adults do not sexually assault children, most sexual abuse occurs with an adult the child knows and trusts.
- Most sexual abuse goes unreported and undetected.
- Although we do not have exact numbers, some studies have found that one of every four girls and one out of every ten boys become victims of sexual abuse by the age of 18.
- Children often keep sexual abuse a secret.

"When Mommy goes to work, I stay at Mrs. Jenkins' house. I wish I didn't have to. Mommy says Mrs. Jenkins lady, but Mrs. Jenkins' son, Ralph, sometimes makes me do bad things. Yesterday he made me take off my underwear, and he put his finger in my 'privates.' He said 'You better not tell.'"

Children may keep a sexual assault a secret for many reasons. They may fear rejection, blame,

punishment, and abandonment; they may think people won't believe them. Boys are less likely to report abuse than girls. The closer the relationship of the offender to the child, the less likely it is that the child will report the incident.]

How Can You Determine if Sexual Abuse Has Taken Place?

First and foremost, if your children confide that they have been sexually assaulted, believe them! Children seldom lie about such a serious matter. Also, be aware that most sexual abuse does not result in the child being violently attacked or hurt physically. Often there is no physical evidence a child has been molested. Fondling, involvement in child pornography and oral sex usually present no physical signs of abuse. But, if a child has been physically harmed as a result of sexual abuse, the following may be signs of this occurrence:

- A discharge from the vaginal area or penis
- Injury to the genitals or anus
- Pain itching, or bleeding in the genital or anal area
- Discomfort in walking or sitting
- The discovery of a sexually transmitted disease

Children, especially very young children, are many times unable to verbalize that they have been molested. The following are some indicators that sexual assault may have taken place:

- Nightmares and sleep disturbances
- Bedwetting
- Fear of certain places or certain people (such as a day care center or a friend)
- Loss of appetite
- Clinging to a parent more than usual
- Behaving as a younger child (such as an older child sucking his or her thumb)
- Unexplained changes in behavior at school, day care, or in relations with peers
- Withdrawal

- Acting out the abuse with dolls, friends, or through drawings
- Excessive masturbation

Keep in mind that although these are the most common signs of sexual abuse, there may be other causes for these changes. However, sexual abuse should not be ruled out as a possibility.

What Can You Do to Prevent Sexual Abuse?

You teach your children many safety rules. You tell them to look both ways before crossing the street, what to do if they get hurt, not to talk to strangers and so on. Discussions relating to sexual abuse prevention can be included in this normal teaching process.

Your children need not be made afraid or suspicious of all adults in order to accomplish this. You don't even have to talk to very young children about sex if you don't want to: Simply make your children aware that if someone touches them or does anything that makes them feel uncomfortable, they should report it to you or another adult they trust. You can teach your children they have the right to say "NO" if asked to do something that makes them uncomfortable, even if the person who asks is a relative or close friend. Use words your children understand. Let them know they can come to you to talk about anything that is upsetting to them. Answer any questions your children may have and be calm and matter of fact.

Other Things Parents Can Do to Lessen the Risk of Sexual Abuse:

- Know where your children are and what they are doing.
- Know who is with your children. Get to know any adults or older children that have regular contact with your child.
- Check out fully any babysitters or day care providers. Ask for references and then check them. Do not use childcare settings which prohibit drop-in visiting. Visit a child's day care frequently and observe the daily activities.
- Talk with your children about the day's activities. Be observant of anything they say or

do that seems out of the ordinary.

Uncle Bill takes me lots of places and buys me ice cream and stuff. But sometimes I don't feel good when he makes me touch his "thing." I want to tell Mom, but I'm scared she'd get mad.

What If You Discover Your Child Has Been Sexually Abused?

Children's reactions to being sexually abused differ greatly from child to child because of the child's age, his or her personality, the nature of the offense, the offender's relationship to the child, and the adult reactions to the discovery of the abuse. Sometimes children do not appear overly upset by the abuse; often they are confused or frightened by what they have encountered. You, as a parent, play an important part in how the abuse will affect your child both in the short and long term.

The following are some suggestions if you discover your child has been sexually abused:

- Believe your child; reinforce the fact that he or she is not to blame for what happened.
- Immediately report the abuse to the proper authorities.
- Assure your child that you still love him or her.
- Allow your child to talk about the incident(s), but do not pressure him or her to do so.
- Let your child know that he or she will be protected from further assault. Protection of your child should be your first concern.
- Seek medical care if you suspect that any sexual abuse may be occurred. Although children are rarely seriously damaged physically by sex offenders, internal injury may have occurred and the risk of a sexually transmitted disease must be considered. Discuss all medical complications with your physician.
- Be aware of your own feelings concerning the abuse. Although you may have many feelings including shock, anger, and disbelief, make sure your child understands your feelings are not aimed at him or her.

Just Sexual Abuse?

Be aware of other forms of abuse, especially if your child is left in the care of others. Make it a habit to examine your child's body. (This can be done in a casual manner when dressing or bathing). Question any unusual marks, bruises, burns, welts, etc.

While everyone should report suspected child abuse and neglect, the California Penal Code provides that certain professionals and laypersons must report suspected abuse to the proper authorities. The mandated reporters include:

- Any Child Care Custodian (teachers, licensed day care workers, foster parents, social workers).
- Medical Practitioners (physicians, dentists, psychologists, nurses)
- Nonmedical Practitioners (public health employees, counselors, religious practitioners who treat children)
- Employees of child protective agencies (sheriff, probation officers, county welfare department employees).

Failure to report suspected abuse by a mandated reporter (listed above) within 36 hours is a misdemeanor punishable by 6 months in jail and/or a \$1,000 fine.

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