

Sometimes parents have to face issues they would rather avoid.

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 "non-touching" 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 out of every four girls and one of every ten boys become victims of child sexual abuse by the age of eighteen.
- ☐ 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 is a real nice lady, but Mrs. Jenkins son Ralph sometimes makes me do bad things. Yesterday he made me take off my underwear and he put his fingers 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, or abandonment; they may think people won't believe them. Boys are less likely to report an abuse than girls.

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 very 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 genital 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 young 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 displays of sexual abuse, there may be others.

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. Discussion relating to sexual abuse prevention can also be included in this normal teaching process. Your children need not 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 uncomfortable, they should report it to you or an 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 and talk about anything that's 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 that prohibit drop-in visiting. Visit your child's day care facility 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.