



About Child Sexual Abuse: information for parents, carers and family members

This fact sheet provides information for parents, carers and family members of a child or young person who has experienced any form of sexual harm. It covers the effects of child sexual abuse, answers some frequently asked questions, and provides guidance about how to respond to a disclosure of sexual abuse.

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse is where a child is involved in sexual activity they do not fully comprehend, that they are unable to give informed consent to, where there is a significant age difference or they are developmentally or cognitively unprepared.

Child sexual abuse does not necessarily involve penetration, force, pain, or even touching. If an adult engages in any sexual behaviour with a child it is sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse includes:

- Sexual touching, fondling or kissing (whether clothed or not).
- Being forced or encouraged to perform sexual acts, participate in masturbation, or touch another person.
- Rape or attempted rape, including penetration of the anus, vagina or mouth using a body part or an object.
- Being forced to look at pornography or pose for pictures/videos.
- Exposure ('flashing') of genitals, or making a child expose their body.
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- Exposing a child to sexual acts.
- Forcing a child to make and/or share sexual images or videos.

The abuser could be anyone and is more often someone the child knows including a family member, friend, or trusted adult. It can also be a stranger.

The abuser may use manipulative methods of pressure such as grooming, play, deception or threats.

What emotions or behaviours might my child experience from being sexually abused?

Children who have been exposed to sexual harm may display a range of emotional and behavioural reactions, including:

- Nightmares or sleeping difficulties
- Wetting or soiling the bed
- Withdrawn behaviour
- Anger outbursts or aggression
- Anxiety and/or depression
- Change in eating habits
- Alcohol or drug use
- Fear of certain people or places
- Sexual knowledge, language, or behaviours that are inappropriate for their age, or are even abusive towards other children
- 'Phantom' or persistent pains
- Clinginess

- Poor concentration, spacing or zoning out easily
- Suicidal Ideation or self-harm

It is important to remember that responses to sexual harm vary and children may show some of these emotional and behavioural reactions, or they may show no outward reaction at all.

What are some of the effects that my family might experience?

When a child has been sexually abused it can affect the whole family; it is common for parents to become very protective of all their children. This is a completely normal reaction. It is important to find a balance between reasonable concern and being overprotective.

Other siblings may also be feeling worried and confused about what is happening. You might need to talk to them about what has happened, even though this can be very confronting to do.

After the sexual abuse of a child, there may be some tension and strain on the relationship between parents. It is likely to be a confusing time, which can affect the parent's communication, sexual relationship and level of intimacy. These strains are normal. Counselling and support can be a big help.

What are some of the effects that I might experience as a parent or carer?

After hearing that your child has experienced sexual harm, it is likely that you will feel a range of emotions, including;

- Shock and confusion – you might feel that you can't understand what has happened and you don't know how to make sense of it.
- Disbelief and numbness.
- Responsibility and guilt – it is normal to feel like you have failed to keep your child safe. You may also feel guilty that you didn't know what was happening to your child.
- Betrayal – particularly if the abuser is/was a friend, family member or someone you knew.
- Fear and distrust - you might worry that this could happen again to any of your children, and you might feel like you can't trust people because of what has happened.
- Anger at the abuser.
- Anger at yourself for not knowing, or not being able to stop the abuse.
- Worry about how this will affect your child and your family.
- Anger or disappointment at your child for not telling you.

- Worry about what other people will think.
- Disgust – you might feel that what has happened is absolutely disgusting.

Feeling any or all of these emotions is completely normal. You may want to know exactly what happened, or you may not want to hear about it at all. Child sexual abuse can provoke many different reactions and feelings.

Common questions: Why didn't I notice? Why didn't I know about it?

These are some of the questions that may come up in your mind after you find out about the abuse. You might have noticed that things were not quite right at home or that your child had been acting a little differently - or you might not have noticed anything at all.

Some people talk about having a 'gut feeling' that something was wrong. At the time they usually found a reasonable explanation for this feeling. Looking back, it might be clear to see what was actually going on, but sexual abuse is not something that parents or carers think will happen to their child.

It's not your fault that you were not aware of it sooner, and it's not your fault that it happened.

Common questions: Was I responsible for it happening?

You are not responsible for your child being abused, even if you were:

- trusting of the perpetrator;
- sick, away or working long hours;
- unhappy, frightened of the perpetrator or preoccupied at the time; or
- no longer interested in your partner sexually (if the abuser was your partner).

The only person responsible for the sexual abuse is the abuser.

Most abusers take great care to manipulate and carry out the abuse in secret. Often they arrange the situation so that no-one else will be present and no-one will find out what is happening. They often threaten to harm the child or others to stop them from telling.

What can I do if my child discloses sexual abuse?

It is also important to remember that this is likely to be a difficult time for you, your child and your family. It may be difficult to talk to your child about sexual abuse, but talking about it will not make it worse for them.

Here are some ways that you can support your child:

- Tell them that you believe them
- Listen carefully to what they are telling you
- Reassure them they have done the right thing in telling you
- Let them know it's not their fault
- Tell them that you will do all you can to keep them safe from now on
- Let them know that you still love them
- Do not confront the abuser
- Give your child time to talk to you when they are ready, and be ready to talk at their pace
- Be open and clear with them
- Provide appropriate, easy-to-understand information about what you will do next
- Report what the child has told you as soon as possible
- Try to understand as much as you can about the effects of child sexual abuse so that you can best support yourself, your child and your family
- Seek professional support for your child, for yourself and for any other family members (like siblings) who may need it

Remember, even though child sexual abuse can have severe impacts, children are generally very resilient.

With the combination of effective counselling and support and love from their parents or carers, children can and do recover from these experiences.

In developing this fact sheet, SASS has accessed the following resources:

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2009). Caring for Kids: What Parents Need to Know about Sexual Abuse. Funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: US Department of Health and Human Services.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013). Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents. Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC.
- Department of Health and Human Services. (2017). You and Your Child: for parents of children who have been sexually abused. State of Victoria, Melbourne.
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). (2020) <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/child-sexual-abuse/>
- World Health Organisation (2006). Preventing child maltreatment: a guide to taking action and generating evidence. Written in collaboration with the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect

Sexual Assault Support Service

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24 hour sexual assault response and

counselling service: **1800 MYSUPPORT**

1800 697 877

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